

# *Beyond 'Happily Ever After':*

## *Making a Match between Singapore Grooms and Foreign Brides*



# BEYOND ‘HAPPILY EVER AFTER’: MAKING A MATCH BETWEEN SINGAPORE GROOMS AND FOREIGN BRIDES

An AWARE Position Paper

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## **Contents**

Acknowledgements	ii
Foreword	iii
Preface	iv
Executive Summary	vi
Recommendations	vii
1. Background	
1.1. The Foreign Bride Phenomenon	1
1.2. Aims and Objectives	3
2. Profile of Actors in the Foreign Bride Trade	
2.1. Methodology	4
2.2. Profile of Consumer - Husbands	5
2.3. Profile of Foreign Brides	5
2.4. Profile of Foreign Bride Matchmaking Agencies	7
3. Legislation	
3.1. Legislation Relevant to the Foreign Bride Trade	12
3.2. Legislation Pertaining to Immigration	13
3.3. Legislation Pertaining to Business	14
3.4. Legislation Pertaining to Contracts	15
3.5. Legislation Pertaining to the Family	15
4. Concerns and Recommendations	
4.1. Lack of Governance and Inadequate Legislation	17
4.2. Unequal Relationships and Stereotypes of Women	23
5. Limitations and Conclusion	
5.1. Limitations	27
5.2. Conclusion	27
6. Appendices	
6.1. Foreign Bride Matchmaking Agencies	29
7. References	38

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**Foreword by President of AWARE**

There are increasing numbers of women from our neighbouring countries coming to Singapore in search of a husband, and a better life. However, it also appears that increasing numbers are being exploited and left stranded with limited access to help. We need to look at how we can prevent this from happening: to have greater protection for the women, improved guidelines for the match-making industry and punitive measures to deter agencies that also contribute to the exploitation.

It is with this approach in mind that this working group got together under Braema's guidance and Adelyn Lim's co-ordination to get this report done. I thank both of them and all the volunteers who did the research and looked into match-making agencies. A special thank you goes to Adelyn who coordinated and completed this project from Australia while doing her PhD.

It is AWARE's hope that this report highlights the need for policy changes as well as more research and discussion.

Thank you.

Tan Joo Hymn,  
President  
AWARE

## **Preface**

The work for this report began with a sense of outrage that a Singapore married man could so very easily pretend to be a groom looking for a match among the Vietnamese women at a matchmaking agency and subsequently go on to secure her as a potential wife and exploit the situation. He was given the opportunity to “try her out” (that is, have sex with her) and then he literally dumped her at the agency. That single act motivated a few of us to come together to look at how we could put forward something constructive in a short space of time.

The matchmaking business in its entirety deserves more in-depth work as we need to address the process of recruitment, the training of potential wives from different countries and the process of choosing grooms and brides for a lifelong commitment through marriage. Much has been written about the Filipino mail-order bride phenomenon that prevailed more than a decade ago. Today the Vietnamese women are leaving their homes to become brides to men in Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the United States. As always actual figures are hard to come by and even the exact number of agencies in this business is elusive as some businesses may not have matchmaking as their core business portfolio.

As such our aim here is modest – we are just keen to assess what safeguards are in place to protect the potential brides from exploitation. We were also interested in how the women were marketed by the agencies to potential grooms. This report covers the findings from our small study and also makes recommendations on improvements that can be made.

While this is a very small exercise, we would like to draw attention to the increasing vulnerability of poor women who come to Singapore hoping to improve the living standards of their own families back in their home country through marriage. We would also like to raise awareness to the local situation of men who do prefer foreigners as their

wives as they secure a domestic worker, a mother, a caregiver, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a logistics operations manager, all at minimum cost. These motivations, though not wrong, need further study and thought on how our society is evolving in reality where gender relations, marriage and family life are concerned.

We hope this will trigger more research to be carried out and also become a platform for further discussions. This report will not have been possible without the help of all the volunteers involved – Eileen Chua, Lim Yufeng, Lydia Lok, Karen Low, Quek Shuyang, Algernon Tie and Yao Shuohan – who even went under cover to find out what was happening in certain matchmaking agencies, and to Patricia Gauthier for all the research. And lastly to Braema Mathi for initiating this project and seeing it through with me.

It has been my pleasure to have worked on this project.

Thank you.

Adelyn LIM  
Coordinator,  
Foreign Brides Report  
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## **Executive Summary**

This report examines the existing practices of foreign bride matchmaking agencies in Singapore. Our aim is to advocate for an improvement in the governance of this industry through legislation and regulation, so as to provide the women involved with complete access to measures necessary for prevention and protection. First, we present a profile of the actors involved in the foreign bride trade in Singapore, including the consumer-husbands, foreign brides and matchmaking agencies. Second, we provide an analysis of the legislation relevant to the foreign bride trade, taking into account laws pertaining to business, contracts, immigration, and the family. Third, we discuss our concerns about the foreign bride trade, including the lack of governance and inadequate legislation as well as unequal relationships and the promotion of stereotypes of women. Corresponding to these concerns, we make several recommendations entailing an improvement in business governance, legal reform and the dissemination of information.



## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendation 1**

We recommend the adoption of a Bill that would address the regulation of the foreign bride trade and the business of matchmaking agencies.

### **Recommendation 2**

We recommend that a government authority be appointed by law to be responsible for the relevance and implementation of the Bill.

### **Recommendation 3**

We recommend that a legal duty be imposed on matchmaking agencies to make all necessary verifications pertaining to the consumer-husband.

### **Recommendation 4**

We recommend that a legally-binding contract be drafted between the matchmaking agency and the consumer-husband upon registration to ensure that the consumer-husband provides the relevant verifications.

### **Recommendation 5**

We recommend that a legally-binding contract be drafted between the matchmaking agency and the foreign bride upon registration to ensure that the foreign bride has acknowledged the relevant terms and conditions.

### **Recommendation 6**

We recommend that all women newcomers, before they enter Singapore and on a regular basis during the first months after their arrival, be informed about the Constitution of Singapore, the Women's Charter, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and any forms of legislation and/or regulation that are relevant to the bride, as well as the couple.

**Recommendation 7**

We recommend that the appropriate government authority fund empirical studies of the foreign bride trade in Singapore. The purpose of such studies should be to identify the number of foreign brides and consumer-husbands involved in this trade, the identity and number of foreign bride matchmaking agencies, the fees they charge, and the profits they generate.

**Recommendation 8**

We recommend that family service centres and/or voluntary welfare organizations be granted the necessary funding to help foreign brides as well as the couples by providing them with acclimatization courses, conflict management courses, language courses, and information about services to women in need.

## **1. Background**

### **1.1 The Foreign Bride Phenomenon**

The “foreign bride” phenomenon is based on introducing men and women from different countries through matchmaking agencies. The objectives of the intercultural marriage are compatibility and partnership, but it often results in the migration of the foreign bride as well. The wide-ranging quest for romance has been made possible by the growing accessibility of information technology networks and international travel. Today this phenomenon has assumed global proportions as it is a lucrative and unregulated business. It is a “trade” or “business” because when we analyze the foreign bride phenomenon, we find it involves buying, selling and the exchange of goods. To a certain extent, the foreign bride phenomenon also appears to be a reaction to changes in gender roles in recent decades. In looking for brides, consumer-husbands are trying to replace the assertive and confident women in their own countries by docile and submissive wives from developing countries. Furthermore, the growing economic disparity between developed and developing countries only serves to accelerate this phenomenon.

The foreign bride phenomenon is becoming increasingly common in Singapore. According to the Singapore Department of Statistics, there have been more inter-ethnic group marriages than before.<sup>1</sup> Of the 1,723 non-Muslim inter-ethnic marriages registered in 2004, 42 per cent were between Singapore men and foreign women (non-resident women).<sup>2</sup> Those contracted between Singapore Chinese men and foreign women formed the single largest combination of 33 per cent.<sup>3</sup> In Singapore law, there is no specific legislation governing the foreign bride trade. The various legal transactions involved in

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<sup>1</sup> Singapore Department of Statistics. 2004. *Statistics on Marriages and Divorces, 2004*. Hyperlink. <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/keystats/annual/smd/a19.pdf>. Accessed: 6 December 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Muslim inter-ethnic group marriages were mostly between Malays and Indians.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the selection process of inter-ethnic group marriages does not necessarily involve matchmaking agencies.

this phenomenon fall within several different areas of the law, including business, contracts, immigration, and family laws, among others. Moreover, international law regularly enters into any legal analysis as the bride is a foreign national.

The practices of foreign bride matchmaking agencies in Singapore, as represented in the media, are of particular concern in this report. Matchmaking agencies, as profit-driven entities, may not conduct the necessary checks on their clients, leaving prospective foreign brides in a vulnerable position. In December 2005, a Singaporean man was convicted of deceiving a foreign bride matchmaking agency and a prospective foreign bride.<sup>4</sup> The 64-year-old cobbler lied about his marital status and income and gave a faulty cheque to the matchmaking agency. The agency failed to verify his marital status and income, which resulted in the man having sexual intercourse with the prospective bride at a hotel before leaving her at the agency and refusing to marry her. The profit-driven characteristic has also resulted in numerous complaints made against foreign bride matchmaking agencies in the past year. In April 2005, it was reported that the Consumers Association of Singapore (CASE) had received 32 complaints about “pressure selling” against matchmaking agencies, the majority of which seek foreign brides for Singaporean men.<sup>5</sup> In a related report, a Chinese Singaporean man paid a foreign bride matchmaking agency S\$10,000 and went on an eight-day bride tour to Kalimantan, Indonesia.<sup>6</sup> He claimed that he was “pressurized” by the matchmaking agency to choose a bride on the sixth day. Consequently, he was “unhappy” with his choice after five days of meeting the foreign bride and wanted to return her. He has lodged a complaint with CASE demanding a refund. In May 2006, CASE revealed that the most common complaints against foreign bride matchmaking agencies include “misrepresentation” and “unsatisfactory service”.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The Straits Times. 2005. “Cobbler jailed for despicable act.” 31 December.

<sup>5</sup> The New Paper. 2005. “Other complaints made against matchmaking agencies.” 14 April.

<sup>6</sup> The New Paper. 2005. “Kalimantan wife unsuitable, I want refund.” 14 April.

<sup>7</sup> The Straits Times. 2006. “Buyer Beware.” 12 May.

This report is also concerned about the “marketing” practices of foreign bride matchmaking agencies in Singapore. In March 2005, a foreign bride matchmaking agency displayed 2 “ready” Vietnamese brides in a booth at the *Shin Min* Daily News Record-Setting Carnival at Suntec City Mall.<sup>8</sup> The matchmaking agency maintained that this was to attract potential clients to their matchmaking services and to show “how Vietnamese girls look”. In another media report, a Singaporean man was seen distributing brochures to passer-bys, promoting luxury cruise packages at the cost of S\$13,800.<sup>9</sup> For an extra S\$9,800, a single man can choose a foreign bride “on the spot” to accompany him on his trip. These sexist practices contribute to the impression that women are consumer products whose characteristics can be chosen in the hope of finding one that is “made-to-measure”. Moreover, sexist advertising encourages men to treat women as passive sex objects.

## **1.2 Aims and Objectives**

This report examines the existing practices of foreign bride matchmaking agencies in Singapore. Our aim is to advocate for an improvement in the governance of this industry through legislation and regulation, so as to provide the women involved with complete access to measures necessary for prevention and protection. The rest of the report is divided into three main parts. Part 2 presents a profile of the actors involved in the foreign bride trade in Singapore, including the consumer-husbands, foreign brides and matchmaking agencies. In Part 3, we provide an analysis of the legislation relevant to the foreign bride trade, including laws pertaining to business, contracts, immigration, and the family. We discuss our concerns about the foreign bride trade in Singapore, and corresponding to these concerns, we make several recommendations in Part 4.

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<sup>8</sup> Today. 2005. “Viet brides in booth raise eyebrows.” 14 March.

<sup>9</sup> Inter Press Service. 2005. “Vietnam: Display of brides for ‘instance marriages’ sparks furore.” 31 March.

## **2. Profile of Actors in the Foreign Bride Trade**

### **2.1 Methodology**

It is very difficult to obtain accurate data about the foreign bride trade in Singapore. The absence of empirical studies and statistics on the subject prevents us from finding out the number of consumer-husbands and foreign bride matchmaking agencies involved in this trade or the amounts of money generated by this trade. The number of women who immigrate to Singapore every year through this trade remains inaccessible, and marriage statistics do not make any distinctions between the nationalities of foreign spouses. Despite the lack of data, media coverage has shown that this phenomenon has skyrocketed in recent years.

In order to create a succinct portrait of the operations of the foreign bride trade, we had both female and male volunteers visit several foreign bride matchmaking agencies. The female volunteers identified themselves as AWARE members and conducted structured in-depth interviews with the owners of the agencies. The male volunteers visited the agencies on the pretext of looking for a foreign bride. The narratives of their visits can be found in the Appendixes.<sup>10</sup> We also drew on anecdotes from volunteers of the AWARE Helpline and lawyers from the AWARE Legal Clinic who have personally assisted the foreign brides and/or couples. Extensive media coverage in recent years has also been informative and invaluable. Hence, the following profile of actors involved in the foreign bride trade is impressionistic, but necessary, in order to understand the real issues involved in this trade.

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<sup>10</sup> Refer to the appendixes in 6.1.

## **2.2 Profile of Consumer-Husbands**

Consumer-husbands who take part in the foreign bride trade are single, low-income earners and not well-educated, although some of them hold management or professional positions.<sup>11</sup> They are mainly Chinese. While the average consumer-husband is in his 40s, many anecdotes and newspaper articles indicate that these men are generally older.<sup>12</sup> Some of them have been married once before and have grown children. The majority, nonetheless, express the desire to have children with the bride. They reject women of their own nationality as wives because they believe these women are too ambitious professionally, make excessive demands in marriage, and have expectations of equality with their husbands. The foreign bride trade provides an incentive for meeting an obedient, submissive and subordinate bride as the ideal model wife for a “traditional” marriage. Moreover, it has been observed that some consumer-husbands are using the foreign bride trade to fill their need for personal care, due to either chronic health problems or old age. The owner of one agency recalled having a client who was 78 years old when he approached the agency for a bride. The elderly client needed someone to assist him in moving around the home, but employing a foreign domestic worker was “not too convenient”.<sup>13</sup> In this case, the bride plays the role of an employee rather than a spouse.

## **2.3 Profile of Foreign Brides**

The brides are not a homogeneous group of women. However, we shall present a range of common characteristics and underline certain significant distinctions. The foreign bride matchmaking agencies distinguish between brides from different parts of the world, including brides from China, Malaysia and Vietnam. The general factors leading brides to

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<sup>11</sup> Refer to 6.1.4.

<sup>12</sup> However, one agency claims that it has been assisting more men in their late 20s in recent years. Refer to 6.1.2.

<sup>13</sup> Refer to 6.1.5.

get involved in the foreign bride trade differ from place to place. Brides may emigrate because of poverty, deteriorating living conditions, high unemployment and uncertainty about the future. According to the owner of one agency, the “women’s protection law” in Vietnam is the main reason Vietnamese women seek an alternative life in developed countries. After assaulting his wife, for example, a man can “happily walk out of the police station without being charged or paying a fine”.<sup>14</sup> The brides vary in age and education. Agencies offer brides who range in age from their late teens to early thirties, although they are generally between 18 and 25 years old. As a result, their educational levels also vary, with older women being more educated than their younger counterparts. Nevertheless, the majority of the brides have basic education and some have been known to have tertiary education. The brides generally embrace the “traditional” values of family, fidelity and devotion. Consequently, they will exert every effort to avoid the failure of their marriage and the humiliation flowing from divorce.

One of the reasons brides decide to enter the foreign bride trade is to try to improve their living conditions. Prosperity in Singapore is a great attraction for women who experience serious difficulties meeting their basic needs and supporting their families in their countries of origin. In such circumstances, marriage to a prosperous consumer-husband in a developed country is one way of guaranteeing the survival of their families. Indeed, after immigrating to Singapore, they send money home to their close relatives. However, we cannot overlook the search for marital relations based on love and romance as a partial motivation. Like the consumer-husbands who reject women of their own nationality, the brides complain about the men in their countries. Instead, they idealize the Singapore man as husband and father. From him they expect love, attention, a sense of responsibility, fidelity and sincerity. One bride we spoke to revealed that her reason for coming to Singapore in search of a partner is to have “a better living”. She claimed that Vietnamese men would not be able to provide her with “stable living”.<sup>15</sup> It is also

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<sup>14</sup> Refer to 6.1.5.

<sup>15</sup> Refer to 6.1.5.



probable that the aggressive actions of agencies in search of women to offer to their clients encourage the brides to join the trade.

## **2.4 Profile of Foreign Bride Matchmaking Agencies**

Based on the Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority, we estimate that there are up to 70 foreign bride matchmaking agencies in Singapore.<sup>16</sup> The majority are established by husband-and-wife teams, some being founded by people who themselves had been involved in this type of marriage.<sup>17</sup> The motivation for starting up this foreign bride business seems to have been the desire to “ensure that sincere single Singapore men and male permanent residents are able to meet and marry compatible, attractive and virtuous single ladies...safely, scam-free and with a peace of mind”.<sup>18</sup> However, in recent years profit has undoubtedly become a motivation for starting up new agencies. In terms of ideology, agencies share the view of consumer-husbands in that they support “traditional” family values. Agencies also play on stereotypical images to sell their “products.” They appear to be sympathetic to men frustrated with Singapore women and they laud the merits of foreign women who are attractive, submissive, devoted to their men, eager to please, and even exotic.

### **2.4.1 Services**

Foreign bride matchmaking agencies operate from offices, with a considerable number in the Chinatown area. Agencies offer at least one of several types of services. A popular service is the organized prenuptial tours. The consumer-husband participates in a “bridal

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<sup>16</sup> Accounting & Corporate Regulate Authority. 2004. Hyperlink. <http://www.acra.gov.sg/> Accessed: 16 January 2006.

<sup>17</sup> The Straits Times. 2006. “Are China brides less desirable?” 19 February. [Sandra Leong]

<sup>18</sup> Blissful Marriage Consultants. 2006. Hyperlink. <http://www.blissfulmarriage.com/> Accessed: 28 March 2006.

tour” which consists of going to a particular country to meet women ready to marry. During the tour, he “courts” several women. First, he selects two or three women who conform to his requirements, and then he “dates” them over the course of a few days. After choosing the bride who seems most compatible, he can decide to go and meet her family.<sup>19</sup>

A more recent service is where agencies offer a “local selection” of brides. These agencies have intermediaries in particular countries to source for suitable women. The selection is based on criteria set by the respective agencies. Agencies will then assist the women in coming to Singapore, some going as far as funding the airfare to and accommodation in Singapore. The brides can remain in Singapore for 14 days without having to formally apply for a social visit pass. In other words, a bride has 14 days in which to be chosen by a consumer-husband of a respective agency.<sup>20</sup>

Possibly the most traditional type of service is the provision of photo-catalogues. Photo-catalogues generally include at least one photograph of the bride’s face, as well as a full-length photograph. The consumer-husband informs the agency of his prerequisites, including his preference for age, interests, personality traits and qualifications of the bride. The agency shows him the photographs of the brides who conform to his requirements, after which he selects four or five of the most promising women. Once the brides are contacted and mutual interest is established, the agency will arrange for him to meet them in person in their home country or in Singapore.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to matchmaking brides and consumer-husbands, some agencies also supply a variety of services to the bride and consumer-husband, as well as to the couple after marriage. They offer the services of travel agents to make arrangements for the bride’s

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<sup>19</sup> Refer to 6.1.3 and 6.1.4.

<sup>20</sup> Refer to 6.1.2.

<sup>21</sup> Refer to 6.1.1.

and the consumer-husband's trips. To the bride, they provide information about the socio-cultural lifestyle in Singapore. For example, one agency has a "network" of Chinese women who have been married to Singaporean men for three years or more to share with the bride about interacting with her future in-laws and adjusting to her new living conditions.<sup>22</sup> For agencies which provide a local selection of brides, some teach the brides how to use make-up and select clothing that make them look "appealing but not too sexy".<sup>23</sup> Others even go to the extent of teaching brides basic Mandarin to enable them to communicate with potential consumer-husbands.<sup>24</sup> To the consumer-husband, they give advice about the customs and traditions of the bride's country, immigration procedures and visas. Some agencies also provide the consumer-husband with the services of doctors for assessing a potential bride. Such services are designed to ensure that the bride is in good mental and physical health, and in some cases, if she is still a virgin.<sup>25</sup> Once the consumer-husband has chosen the bride who seems most compatible, agencies assist the couple in planning the wedding and applying for the immigration of the bride.<sup>26</sup> After marriage, some agencies claim to "call and check up on how the bride is doing in Singapore" and/or provide "lifelong marriage counselling" for the couple.<sup>27</sup>

#### **2.4.2 Costs and Profits**

The enormous costs and profits involved in the foreign bride trade are difficult to estimate. The costs affect the consumer-husbands and sometimes the brides. The costs to a consumer-husband depend on the type of service provided by the agency, but are generally high. The costs may include long-distance telephone calls, airfare,

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<sup>22</sup> Refer to 6.1.1.

<sup>23</sup> The Straits Times. 2005. "Vietnam brides' huge gamble," 27 November. [Arti Mulchand]

<sup>24</sup> Refer to 6.1.2.

<sup>25</sup> Refer to 6.1.2, 6.1.3 and 6.1.5.

<sup>26</sup> Refer to 6.1.1 and 6.1.2.

<sup>27</sup> Refer to 6.1.1, 6.1.2 and 6.1.3.

accommodation, the services of translators, interpreters, and doctors, presents for the bride and her family, engagement and wedding celebrations, as well as the costs of immigration. It is estimated that an organized prenuptial tour costs between S\$15,000 to S\$20,000 while choosing a bride from a local selection costs between S\$10,000 to S\$15,000. Moreover, after marriage, the consumer-husband must pay the fees associated with immigration procedures, in particular the fees for the extension of the bride's social visit pass and permanent residence. Foreign bride matchmaking agencies sometimes require brides to pay a fee for finding them a husband from Singapore.<sup>28</sup> The various costs involved make the industry lucrative for agencies.

#### **2.4.3 Steps After a Bride is Chosen**

Once the choice of bride has been made, the consumer-husband, often with assistance from the foreign bride matchmaking agency, must initiate the immigration process. This requires that the bride obtain a social visit pass and that the consumer-husband submit a sponsorship undertaking. The granting of social visit passes to visitors is determined by the Immigration & Checkpoints Authority (ICA). The social visit pass is conditional upon their marriage, and upon the couple providing proof to the ICA that this condition has been fulfilled. If the application of the bride, now the wife, is accepted, she may join her consumer-husband in Singapore. The consumer-husband will then proceed to apply for permanent residence for his wife.<sup>29</sup>

#### **2.4.4 The Bride's Situation in Singapore**

Several possible scenarios await the bride once she arrives in Singapore. First, she may find that she has a satisfying marital relationship with her consumer-husband. In some cases, however, he may try to keep his bride in a state of dependence and vulnerability.

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<sup>28</sup> Refer to 6.1.4.

<sup>29</sup> Immigration & Checkpoints Authority. 2003. Hyperlink. <http://app.ica.gov.sg/index.asp> Accessed: 3 February 2006.

For example, he does not allow her to find employment, learn to drive or participate in social activities. Her cultural and linguistic isolation, lack of a social network, economic dependence, and fear of deportation are all factors causing her to stay in the relationship with the consumer-husband. The stigma attached to a failed marriage may even force her to stay in the marriage when the relationship is abusive. In cases where the marriage fails or does not take place, returning to her home country often puts the bride in a humiliating and painful position. She is ostracized and her community condemns her for having lost her virginity.

### **3. Legislation**

#### **3.1 Legislation relevant to the Foreign Bride Trade**

In this report, we have chosen to take a broad view of the law applicable to the foreign bride trade.<sup>30</sup> As mentioned before, the foreign bride trade is complex and involves several legislative aspects that must be analyzed together to assess the current protection provided by the law. We analyzed laws pertaining to immigration, business, contracts and the family to evaluate the existing legislation that regulates the foreign bride trade in its larger sense and foreign bride matchmaking agencies.<sup>31</sup> It is apparent that not many aspects of business, contracts and family law apply to the foreign bride trade, and as a result, it has evolved and been unregulated to a great extent.

We conclude that foreign brides immigrating to Singapore to marry in the hope of a better life have little protection and recourse in the event that things turn out to be different from what matchmaking agencies have represented to them. It is with the objective of preventing abusive situations and protecting vulnerable women, as well as regulating the growing business of foreign bride matchmaking agencies, that we would suggest filling the legislative gaps in the fields of business, contracts, and family laws.

The following is our analysis of the existing legislation that may be relevant to the present issue. We deem it necessary to summarize our findings in each legal field to show that very little existing legal provisions are applied to the foreign bride trade and to point out the legal gaps that should be filled by new relevant legislation.

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<sup>30</sup> A broad analysis of the existing legislation applicable to the foreign bride trade in Singapore has been taken in this paper. While the legal research was performed to the best of our knowledge, this section on legislation should not at all be considered as a legal opinion.

<sup>31</sup> Singapore Statutes Online: Attorney General's Chamber. Hyperlink. <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/>. Accessed: 5 April 2006.

### 3.2 Legislation Pertaining to Immigration

According to the Immigration Act (Chapter 133)<sup>32</sup>, a foreign bride-to-be would need to obtain a valid entry permit or a valid pass to enter Singapore, unless exempted by the Minister.<sup>33</sup> According to the definition of “prohibited immigrants” which includes at 8(a) *“any person who is unable to show that he has the means of supporting himself and his dependants (if any) or that he has definite employment awaiting him, or who is likely to become a pauper or a charge on the public;”*<sup>34</sup> we conclude that marrying a Singaporean citizen constitutes for foreign women, especially those from developing countries, a “way” of immigrating to Singapore. Without marriage, these women have very little chance to enter and remain in Singapore, and consequently, to gain a better life.

We also conclude that the consumer-husband will need to sponsor his foreign bride in order for her to obtain a Long Term Social Visit Pass (LTSVP), which will allow her to remain in Singapore after marriage. This is the only form of control or investigation that is made about the husband as in order to obtain the LTSVP, the bride and her sponsoring husband will need to provide the following: Forms 14 and V39 duly filled, applicant's marriage certificate, Sponsor's identity card; Sponsor's and applicant's highest educational certificate; Sponsor's letter of employment stating the date of commencement, designation and salary per month, Sponsor's Income Tax Notice of Assessment for the last 3 years, Sponsor's CPF Statement showing monthly CPF contribution for the last 12 months and Applicant's valid travel document.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Singapore Statutes Online: Attorney General's Chamber. Hyperlink. <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/>. Accessed: 5 April 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Immigration Act (Chapter 133), articles 6, 10, 11 and 56. Singapore Statutes Online: Attorney General's Chamber. Hyperlink. <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/>. Accessed: 5 April 2006.

<sup>34</sup> Immigration Act (Chapter 133), article 8. Singapore Statutes Online: Attorney General's Chamber. Hyperlink. <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/>. Accessed: 5 April 2006.

<sup>35</sup> Social Visitor whose Spouse is a Singapore Citizen or Singapore Permanent Resident. Immigration Checkpoints Authority. 2003. Hyperlink. [http://app.ica.gov.sg/serv\\_visitor/social\\_visit/application\\_types.asp](http://app.ica.gov.sg/serv_visitor/social_visit/application_types.asp). Accessed: 6 April 2006.

Although the Immigration Act (Chapter 133) provides some form of protection to the brides by ensuring that the sponsoring husband has the financial means to support her stay in Singapore, this information comes too late in the process and more importantly after the marriage has been officialized. This constitutes a significant gap in the regulation and we would therefore suggest that the husband has a legal duty to provide most of the above information when he registers with a matchmaking agency.

### **3.3 Legislation Pertaining to Business**

Based on the definition contained in the Business Registration Act (2004) (Chapter 32)<sup>36</sup> which provides that: *“business” includes every form of trade, commerce, craftsmanship, calling, profession and any activity carried on for the purposes of gain but does not include any office, employment or occupation, or any of the businesses specified in the First Schedule;*<sup>37</sup> we conclude that the Act referred to above applies to foreign brides matchmaking agencies. However, it only pertains to the registration of a business.

When registering, a business must provide the Registrar with the information relating to the “general nature of the Business”.<sup>38</sup> We found nothing in the Singapore legislation prohibiting the business purpose of matchmaking agencies involved in the foreign bride trade, therefore registration will not be refused for reasons of unlawful or prejudicial purposes to the society in application of section 9 of the Business Registration Act (2004) (Chapter 32). Once a Business is registered, it can carry its business as it chooses to (as long as it does not contravene to the law), and nothing in the above mentioned law or any other corporate law provides any corporate or ethical guidance or governance rules as to how a matchmaking agency should conduct its business activities.

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<sup>36</sup> Business Registration Act (2004) (Chapter 32). Singapore Statutes Online: Attorney General’s Chamber. Hyperlink. <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/>. Accessed: 5 April 2006.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, article 2.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, articles 5 and 6.



### 3.4 Legislation Pertaining to Contracts

Several Acts pertaining to Contracts were analysed<sup>39</sup> and only one disposition of The Civil Law Act (Chapter 43)<sup>40</sup> appeared relevant to the contractual relations involved in the foreign bride trade. Article 6 of The Civil Law Act provides that:

*“No action shall be brought against — [...]*

*(c) any person upon any agreement made upon consideration of marriage; [...]*

*unless the promise or agreement upon which such action is brought, or some memorandum or note thereof, is in writing and signed by the party to be charged therewith or some other person lawfully authorised by him.”*

*[Cf. 29 Charles II c. 3 (Statute of Frauds 1677, s. 4) Law of Property Act 1925, s. 40]*

This provision appears to suggest that a written contract should govern the contractual relationship between both the matchmaking agency and the consumer-husband, as well as the matchmaking agency and the foreign bride, in order to allow any of these parties to have and take legal recourse against the other in case of breach of agreement or in the event that any party is in default. We would suggest that such provision be enforced to ensure that matchmaking agencies have a detailed written contract signed by the parties, which would contain all representations it made and all terms and conditions of the agreement made upon consideration of marriage.

### 3.5 Legislation Pertaining to the Family

The Women’s Charter (Chapter 353)<sup>41</sup> notably regulates marriages, maintenance of wife and children, divorce, rights and duties of husband and wife, etc., and is the pillar of

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<sup>39</sup> Notably the Unfair Contract Terms Act (Chapter 396), Frustrated Contract Act (Chapter 115) and the Limitation Act (Chapter 163). Singapore Statutes Online: Attorney General’s Chamber. Hyperlink. <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/>. Accessed: 5 April 2006.

<sup>40</sup> Singapore Statutes Online: Attorney General’s Chamber. Hyperlink. <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/>. Accessed: 5 April 2006.

<sup>41</sup> Singapore Statutes Online: Attorney General’s Chamber. Hyperlink. <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/>. Accessed: 5 April 2006.

Family Law. Nonetheless, very few of its provisions apply to the foreign bride trade and it therefore offers very little protection to foreign brides. The only provision that could be relevant to the foreign bride trade is article 17, which in summary stipulates that the Registrar will issue a marriage licence only upon proof of conditions by statutory declaration is made, notably that:

*“[...] each of the parties is 21 years of age or above [...] or [...] if either party is a minor who has not been previously married — the consent of the appropriate person[...] has been given in writing, or has been dispensed with, or the consent of the High Court has been given [...], that neither party is below the age of 18 years,[...] that there is no lawful impediment to the marriage; and that neither of the parties to the intended marriage is married under any law, religion, custom or usage to any person other than the person with whom such marriage is proposed to be contracted.”<sup>42</sup>*

This article implies that the marital situation of the husband will be verified and the Registrar of Marriage will ensure that both parties legally give their consent to the marriage. Again these verifications are made too late in the process and allude to a significant gap in the legislation.

We would suggest that foreign bride matchmaking agencies be compelled to make the necessary verifications about the marital situation of the husband as early as when he registers. Unfortunately, no other disposition from the Women's Charter appears to apply to the foreign bride trade and to offer some protection to women seeking to marry a Singaporean in hope of a better life.

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<sup>42</sup> Women's Charter (Chapter 353), article 17. Singapore Statutes Online: Attorney General's Chamber. Hyperlink. <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/>. Accessed: 5 April 2006.

## **4. Concerns and Recommendations**

### **4.1 Lack of Governance and Inadequate Legislation**

There is a significant lack of governance over the foreign bride trade and the industry of matchmaking agencies in Singapore. At present, the industry has evolved largely unmonitored and unregulated. The only form of control over this practice is indirect, through immigration law. Immigration admission criteria, based mainly on educational and financial qualifications, make it difficult, if not impossible, for people from developing countries to acquire residence, and then citizenship, in developed countries. In this context, agencies use the institution of marriage as an opportunity to immigrate to Singapore, without which it would be impossible for these foreign brides to gain access. However, while immigration law affects the brides, and subjects them to procedures that will affect their futures, it has minimal control over agencies or consumer-husbands.

The corporate aspects of this phenomenon, i.e. legal duties, governance and ethical rules applicable to matchmaking agencies is totally unregulated, leaving matchmaking agencies free to conduct their activities as they wish. The matchmaking agency is the intermediary between the foreign bride and the consumer-husband. It is the entity in which the foreign bride will place her confidence, and the way it conducts its business has a significant impact on the couple, and in particular, the foreign bride. It is also an area where it would be easier to intervene without interfering with individual freedom and private life. Most importantly, we wish to point out the absence of preventive, protective and guiding provisions in Contracts and Family Law which are inherent aspects of the relations governing the parties involved in the foreign bride trade. Additional provisions related to Contracts Law would benefit the foreign brides as it would give them legal recourse if need be and it would also limit the uncertainty governing the existing contractual relationship. Additions to Family Law would ensure some assistance and support to foreign brides, and it would give formal

acknowledgement to the growing concerns related to the foreign bride trade and the protection of these women's rights.

#### **4.1.1 “Bill” Addressing the Regulation of the Foreign Bride Trade in Singapore**

In order to bridge the gaps discussed above, we would suggest the adoption of a “Bill” that would address the regulation of the foreign bride trade and the business of matchmaking agencies. In particular, the new legislation to be adopted should aim at establishing clear basic guidelines to be followed by agencies, governing the contractual relation between all parties and incorporating some provisions dealing with Family Law matters. This “Bill” should aim at covering the main areas that are not actually being covered by the existing legislation as mentioned above and should include some or all of the suggestions discussed in the following paragraphs. To ensure the relevance and implementation of the suggested “Bill”, an authority should be appointed by law to be responsible for it. We can logically see the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports or one of its sub-committees (such as the Committee on the Family) being appointed to ensure that all available means are being taken to apply the Bill and also provide assistance to the couples and/or the foreign brides.

##### **Recommendation 1**

We recommend the adoption of a Bill that would address the regulation of the foreign bride trade and the business of matchmaking agencies.

##### **Recommendation 2**

We recommend that a government authority be appointed by law to be responsible for the relevance and implementation of the Bill.

#### **4.1.2 Legal Duty on Foreign Bride Matchmaking Agencies**

A first significant step would be to impose a legal duty to matchmaking agencies to make all necessary verifications pertaining to the consumer-husband, including his financial means, health, marital status, maintenance obligations and criminal records, when he registers and before he meets any potential foreign bride. As we saw earlier, agencies provide services designed to ensure that the bride is in good mental and physical health, has no criminal record, and is telling the truth. However, the consumer-husband is subjected to little or no investigation. Instead agencies appear to rely on intuition. If the male client claims he is single, for example, they take it at face value and do not check the Registry of Marriages (ROM) for his current marital status.<sup>43</sup> The bride has no way of finding out whether he has a criminal record or knowing anything about his family background, such as incidents of domestic violence, or of checking the veracity of his statements about his living conditions and income in Singapore.<sup>44</sup> We had a male volunteer who “pretended” he forgot to bring his Identity Card (IC), yet the owner suggested he take the bride out for the night to see if she was “suitable”.<sup>45</sup> In fact, if the consumer-husband does not have the financial resources, or has not fulfilled his maintenance obligations to a previous wife and children, or that his previous marriage, when applicable, has not yet been legally dissolved, he should be required to remedy the situation before initiating the matchmaking process. In addition, if a medical test reveals anything significant or a verification of his criminal records shows antecedents of violence, he could be refused the right to enter into the matchmaking process depending upon the circumstances. The authority appointed should be in charge of deciding upon these special circumstances. No matchmaking agency should be legally allowed to introduce a potential bride to a consumer-husband unless all the above verifications prove to be satisfactory.

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<sup>43</sup> Refer to 6.1.2 and 6.1.4.

<sup>44</sup> Refer to 6.1.2 and 6.1.3.

<sup>45</sup> Refer to 6.1.6.

### **Recommendation 3**

We recommend that a legal duty be imposed on matchmaking agencies to make all necessary verifications pertaining to the consumer-husband.

#### **4.1.3 Contract between Foreign Bride Matchmaking Agency and Consumer-Husband**

Considering that the relation between the consumer-husband and the matchmaking agency is contractual by nature, the suggested “Bill” should stipulate a legal requirement that the terms and conditions of this agreement be put in writing and signed by both parties. At the time of registration, it should legally be required that such a contract provide the later furnished proof: the consumer-husband successfully underwent a medical check-up, has no criminal record, has the sufficient financial means to maintain a family (i.e. by providing his Tax Notice of Assessment and CPF Statement for the past 12 months), and if previously married, proof that he has been fulfilling his maintenance duties towards his previous wife and children and proof that such previous marriage has dissolved. This would give some guarantee to the foreign bride about the person she intends to marry before she actually has any encounter with her potential husband.

### **Recommendation 4**

We recommend that a legally-binding contract be drafted between the matchmaking agency and the consumer-husband upon registration to ensure that the consumer-husband provides the verifications as stated above.

#### **4.1.4 Contract between Foreign Bride Matchmaking Agency and Foreign Bride**

In addition, agencies generally have “verbal agreements” but no written contracts with the women or their families.<sup>46</sup> This suggested “Bill” should also provide that the contract

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<sup>46</sup> Refer to 6.1.2.

between the matchmaking agency and the foreign bride as well as her family, when applicable, be put in writing to give the latter recourse against the agency if it fails to meet its contractual obligations. Such a written contract should address the following terms and conditions: payment of fees involved from one part or the other, the description of the services that the agency will give to the foreign bride before and after marriage, the medical examination she will need to undergo and who will pay for it, all the representations made to the foreign bride pertaining to her potential husband and the matchmaking process, the undertaking that she has the right to refuse a proposed potential husband and the undertaking that the agency will provide proof of adequate verifications made of the consumer-husband.

#### **Recommendation 5**

We recommend that a legally-binding contract be drafted between the matchmaking agency and the foreign bride upon registration to ensure that the foreign bride has acknowledged the terms and conditions as stated above.

#### **4.1.5 Dissemination of Relevant Information**

Finally, this proposed “Bill” should incorporate provisions to the effect that all foreign brides marrying a Singaporean will have access to assistance from the appointed authority. The foreign bride should be encouraged to attend an information session before marriage in order to be fully informed of her rights and obligations in Singapore, her future husband’s marital obligations and duties, her rights and duties regarding their future children and their maintenance, the immigration process and any relevant cultural or social issues. The conclusion of a prenuptial agreement between the two spouses providing the undertakings of each party in their marital relationship could also be recommended as it would give additional recourse and it would more importantly set clearly the expectations and undertakings of each spouse toward the other.

### **Recommendation 6**

We recommend that all women newcomers, before they enter Singapore and on a regular basis during the first months after their arrival, be informed about the Constitution of Singapore, the Women's Charter, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and any forms of legislation and/or regulation that are relevant to the bride, as well as the couple.<sup>47</sup>

#### **4.1.6 Research on Foreign Bride Trade in Singapore**

We should also note that the foreign bride trade may be a cover for other activities. The foreign bride phenomenon refers to the process by which a consumer-husband looks for and finds a bride, with the aim of establishing a marital relationship. However, there have been reported cases of “marriage[s] of convenience” between foreign brides and consumer-husbands. The foreign bride can use their marriage certificate to apply for permanent residence in Singapore, and in return, the consumer-husband receives a sum of money for playing the role of her “husband”.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the foreign bride trade may also be a front for sex tourism activities. There have also been reported cases of “fake marriages” between multiple foreign brides and one consumer-husband. The consumer-husband becomes “husband” and “sponsor” of the foreign bride for immigration purposes. The foreign bride remains illegally in Singapore and becomes involved in the sex tourism trade. The consumer-husband then seeks another foreign bride, who suffers the same fate.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> This includes contract law, immigration law, marriage law, etc.

<sup>48</sup> The Straits Times. 2006. “Cabby jailed for fixing sham marriage for China woman,” 8 March. [Elena Chong]

<sup>49</sup> The Straits Times. 2006. “Batam brides man “unaware” of scam,” 17 February. [Arlina Arshad]



### **Recommendation 7**

We recommend that the appropriate government authority fund empirical studies of the foreign bride trade in Singapore. The purpose of such studies should be to identify the number of foreign brides and consumer-husbands involved in this trade, the identity and number of foreign bride matchmaking agencies, the fees they charge, and the profits they generate.

In conclusion, without additional legislation applying to the foreign bride trade, the business of matchmaking agencies will continue to evolve completely unregulated. In addition, without the enforcement of legal dispositions ensuring minimal verifications on the consumer-husband and requiring written contracts, there would be little protection of the foreign brides' rights and dignity. Such legislative modifications are therefore essential to ensure that foreign brides are not kept in a state of vulnerability and in unequal relationships.

### **4.2 Unequal Relationships and Stereotypes of Women**

Foreign bride agencies justify themselves as intermediaries for consenting adults. This assertion, however, fails to take into consideration the various levels of inequality between the foreign bride and the consumer-husband, as well as the exploitation of cultural and ethnic stereotypes of women. This phenomenon thus fosters subordination based on ethnic, economic, educational and generational differences between individuals. These forms of subordination, which are closely interconnected, contribute to the isolation and vulnerability of the brides when they enter Singapore. The precarious status of the bride places her in a situation of dependence on a consumer-husband who keeps her in fear of deportation and the humiliation of a failed marriage.

First, the economic dependence of the bride keeps her extremely vulnerable. As we have seen, the consumer-husband completely finances all the steps leading to immigration by the bride. In Singapore, he generally controls the family income and expenditures. The

bride often remains the sole economic support of her family in her home country. She is also the means in which family members remaining in the developing country can immigrate. Hence the consumer-husband has sole control of the resources to assist the bride's family. Along with substantial differences in age and educational backgrounds, economic dependence keeps the bride in an unhealthy situation of dependence and vulnerability. On the other hand, brides may also be given the impression that Singaporean consumer-husbands are affluent and wealthy. One consumer-husband we spoke to revealed that a disagreement between his wife and himself made her return to her village only after two months into the marriage. She was "surly and physically abusive" toward him and "demanded to go back to her parents". She expected a monthly allowance of S\$1,000 from him but he claims he is only earning S\$1,700.<sup>50</sup> Unrealistic expectations can have serious repercussions since the bride is leaving her country, family and culture to immigrate into a situation that she has no way of foreseeing.

Second, there are potential communication problems between the parties. There is the expectation on the part of the consumer-husband that the bride learn his language. Although it is appropriate for a woman who is preparing to immigrate to Singapore to learn the language of her new country, it is difficult to understand why there is usually little effort on the part of the consumer-husband to learn the basics of his wife's language. This communication problem is exacerbated by the fact that, in the majority of cases, the bride may not have any contact with people who belong to her culture and with whom she can communicate in her mother tongue. The bride, even if she has permanent residence, must also cope with problems of adjustment associated with being an immigrant in a new country.

Third, foreign bride matchmaking agencies use crude stereotypes to promote women as merchandise. Agencies often promote the brides as pretty, obedient, traditional and even erotic women. According to one agency, for example, Chinese women are "down-to-

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<sup>50</sup> Refer to 6.1.5.

earth, family-oriented and faithful”.<sup>51</sup> Another agency “specializes” in “real virgins” who are “gentle, attractive, young Vietnamese”.<sup>52</sup> However, brides who decide to try their luck in developed countries through agencies exhibit courage and determination to a certain extent. Will they be the docile, submissive, obedient, and traditional women whom the consumer-husbands wish to control? These cultural and ethnic stereotypes fed by agencies to consumer-husbands again contribute to situations of frustration provoked by unrealistic expectations. Reinforcing cultural and ethnic stereotypes also encourages consumer-husbands to treat their wives as passive sex objects.

Finally, giving foreign brides the option of living in Singapore, without equipping them with full knowledge and rights is injurious to the fundamental dignity and worth of these women as human beings. This fundamental dignity needs to be recognized. This lack of recognition leads to the very real threat of abuse as these women appear to be disposable and a “cheap” alternative to Singaporean women. This lack of recognition also implies that these women have no security, and as such, are dependent and vulnerable. In November 2005, Channel News Asia reported that the husband of a foreign bride was charged for her murder.<sup>53</sup> During the ten-year marriage, she suffered emotional and physical abuse. She moved to a women’s shelter but was murdered when she returned home. The media report also revealed that 17 cases of abuse against foreign wives were reported to AWARE in 2005. Foreign brides are unlikely to report abuse due to the fear of not attaining permanent residency and the lack of family support. These women need to be weaved into Singapore’s social fabric and given basic rights.

### **Recommendation 8**

We recommend that family service centres and/or voluntary welfare organizations be granted the necessary funding to help foreign brides as well

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<sup>51</sup> Refer to 6.1.1.

<sup>52</sup> Refer to 6.1.2.

<sup>53</sup> Channel News Asia. 2005. “AWARE believes foreign brides mum on spousal abuse.” 13 November.

as the couples by providing them with acclimatization courses, conflict management courses, language courses, and information about services to women in need.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> This includes contact details of and information about the Child Protection and Welfare Service, the Family Court, the National Pregnancy Helpline, crisis shelters, etc.

## **5. Limitations and Conclusion**

### **5.1 Limitations**

Although we had volunteers to visit several foreign bride matchmaking agencies in Singapore, we did not verify our findings with the relevant matchmaking agencies. Hence, it should be noted that our discussion of the foreign bride trade in Singapore is generalized in nature. In addition, a broad analysis of the existing legislation applicable to the foreign bride trade in Singapore has been taken in this paper. While the legal research was performed to the best of our knowledge, the section on legislation should not at all be considered as a legal opinion.

### **5.2 Conclusion**

In the last decade, the foreign bride trade has become a flourishing and lucrative industry in Singapore. Through foreign bride matchmaking agencies, a consumer-husband is given the opportunity to select a spouse from a developing country. This usually results in the immigration of the spouse to Singapore. However, the ethnic, economic, educational and generational inequalities characteristic of the marital relationships created by the foreign bride phenomenon lead often to dependence and subordination and sometimes to spousal abuse and violence. In Singapore, therefore, it is important to adopt measures to provide protection and legal recourse for the bride, in order to reduce her state of dependence on her consumer-husband. However, foreign bride matchmaking agencies are not subjected to any form of legislation and regulation in Singapore. It should not be a matter of infringing on the fundamental rights of Singapore nationals in search of spouses from abroad. On the other hand, newly arrived brides too often find themselves in unacceptable situations of subordination and abuse. It seems preferable to us that Singapore adopt an approach of opening its borders in a regulated and controlled way.

At the risk of being accused of exaggerating the situation of foreign brides who immigrate to Singapore, it should be noted that a considerable number of brides marry consumer-husbands in good faith, and that the latter provide them with the traditional marital relationships many of them are seeking. We must therefore keep an open mind about these situations. Nevertheless, we should provide protection to women who immigrate to Singapore in this way, in order that we may assess whether their circumstances continue to be acceptable throughout their marital relationships with their consumer-husbands. Indeed, the solutions to the various aspects of the foreign bride trade are varied. They must aim at business governance, legal reform and improved dissemination of information.

## **6 Appendices**

### **6.1 Foreign Bride Matchmaking Agencies**

#### **6.1.1 Matchmaking Agency A**

Matchmaking Agency A is managed by a husband-and-wife team. The agency has an office in an old and small shopping centre. The office is divided into two work areas, and compared to the façade of the building, the furnishings are surprisingly modern. On one side, there is a work desk, a computer desk and a couch. On the other side is a small conference table with teleconferencing equipment. The office is simply decorated. There are no photos of foreign brides on display; photos of the brides can be found in their photo-catalogues and these are stored away neatly in cabinets. Their services include introducing and matchmaking single Singaporean men with “compatible, attractive and virtuous Chinese ladies”.

They have a local agency in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). They personally search and select the women based on “character, sincerity, beauty and education”. They conduct stringent and personal interviews to verify that the women are “honest, sincere and marriage-minded”. They will verify the personal background information of the women, including family, education, work, interests, lifestyle and finance. Those who are suspicious will be rejected. According to them, Chinese women are “down-to-earth, family-oriented and faithful”. They are not “poverty-stricken”, but looking for “kind, responsible family men”. They also prefer to marry a man who is 10 to 15 years older than themselves as they view older men as “more mature, serious, responsible and stable”. There was no mention of “virginity”, rather the agency emphasizes “similar goals and family values and desirable character traits”.

They will schedule a personal interview session with the client to understand his personal background (refer to above paragraph) and his requirements for a potential marriage

partner. They will then recommend two to three compatible potential marriage partners who meet his requirements through detailed personal profiles, as well as personal photos and videos. When he is satisfied that the recommended women meet his requirements, they will contact these women on his behalf and find out if he is the type of marriage partner they are looking for through his detailed personal profile, as well as personal photos and videos. When there is mutual interest between him and the recommended women, they will arrange for him to meet them in person in the PRC or in Singapore. If he prefers to visit the PRC, the corresponding matchmaking fee will cover his airfare, accommodation, meals for eight days and seven nights, as well as his selected partner's airfare and accommodation when she comes to Singapore. If he prefers for the potential partners to visit Singapore, the corresponding matchmaking fee will cover their airfare, accommodation and meals for two weeks.

A two-week program will be organized for the man's potential marriage partner to help her adjust to life in Singapore. Their network of Chinese women who have been married to Singaporean men for three years or more will share with her on how to interact with her future in-laws and adjust to her new living conditions in Singapore. After the two-week period, if the relationship between the man and the woman is successful and there is mutual agreements by both parties that they are ready for marriage, assistance is provided for the registration of marriage, as well as the application of extension of social visit pass and permanent residence in Singapore. They also provide lifelong marriage counselling.

#### **6.1.2 Matchmaking Agency B**

Matchmaking Agency B is managed by a husband-and-wife team. There are photographs of Vietnamese brides and successfully married couples covering the glass doors of the small agency. On the day of my visit, there were two Vietnamese brides at the agency and they were watching a Mandarin movie. Their services include matchmaking and marriage tours in Vietnam as well as a local selection of Vietnamese brides. According to the website, they specialized in "virgin Vietnamese brides" who are "gentle, attractive,



young Vietnamese”. The director himself did not fail to emphasize to me that they provide “real virgins”.

The agency employs intermediaries in Vietnam. They go to the “countryside” to source for brides and they use a questionnaire to shortlist potential brides. The director himself will travel to Vietnam once or twice a month to interview the potential brides and select a few to come to Singapore (The frequency with which he travels to Vietnam is dependent on the demand). In Vietnam, the brides undergo medical tests for sexual diseases and virginity, as well as an X-ray. There are verbal agreements but no written contracts with the women or their families. In general, the Vietnamese can visit Singapore for 14 days without having to formally apply for a social visit pass. The agency funds the travel to Singapore and the brides stay in the director’s home. They provide everything for the brides, including the buying of clothes, lingerie and make-up, as well as paying for hair services. The wife of the director teaches the brides how to use make-up and select clothing that make them look “appealing but not too sexy”. As they await selection, they are informed about the socio-cultural aspects of living in Singapore. For example, a couple can only apply for public housing when they have registered their marriage. They also learn basic Mandarin through the wife of the director or language DVDs.

The agency will check a client’s IC when he requests for a bride. There is an age limit of 50 as their brides tend to be in their late teens to early 20s. They also require that he undergoes medical tests for sexual diseases. However, they do not check the ROM for his marital status if he claims to be single or that he has fulfilled his obligations to his ex-wife and children if he is divorced. The director justified that no client would pay a “premium” unless they are serious about marriage. Moreover, the application for extension of a social visit pass (for the bride) requires that he produce his income tax notice of assessment and CPF contribution history. This will provide evidence of his current financial capability. After matchmaking, he needs to pay a deposit to “reserve” the bride. After which the director or his wife will accompany them whenever they wish to go out. He can only bring her home after he produces the results of the medical tests

and pays the remainder. The agency will apply for a wedding date at the ROM and extension of her social visit pass (1 year). They will not give a refund if the client changes his mind.

After the marriage, the agency will give the bride's family a sum of money. They also provide "counselling" for the couple so that both parties understand the "expectations of marriage". Some clients will bring their wives to the agency so that she can make new friends. Others will cut themselves off from the agency. If a bride is not selected for marriage, the agency will fund the travel home and this will incur a loss of a few thousand dollars. However, the director claims that he has a "100 per cent success rate". He has not sent any brides home because he is "choosy". He will reject both potential clients and brides if he thinks it is unlikely for either of them to find a partner. There is also a misconception that consumer-husbands are "unwanted" men. He claims that he has had clients who are degree holders and that his clients are becoming younger. In the past, his clients were mainly in their 30s and 40s, but now he has clients who are in their late 20s.

### **6.1.3 Matchmaking Agency C**

According to Matchmaking Agency C, the foreign brides are from the "countryside" in Vietnam. Their ages range from 18 to 25 and they know basic Mandarin. The bride undertakes health check-ups for Hepatitis A and B and HIV. She will also be checked to see if she is a virgin. If she is not, the agency will be "frank about it and explain why". The bride is given the client's background, including his age and job, but not his financial status. This prevents her from "marrying for the money". She then decides whether she is willing to marry him after being informed of his background. Before marriage, a medical test will again be carried out to confirm if she is a virgin.

As for the client, the agency will check his current financial status after a deposit of \$3,000 is paid. If it is found that he does not have the means to support a wife, they will

“reject” him as a client. The client can select a bride locally for S\$10,000. He can also travel to Vietnam to select a bride for S\$13,888. The 6-day organized prenuptial tour includes administration, airfare, accommodation and food. He will also have more brides to select from if he goes to Vietnam. The brides will enter a room to meet him and he can tell them to turn around, stand or sit while he makes his selection. He can select a maximum of three brides, whom he dates on the first two days of his trip. He can take them for a meal or a stroll, but there can be no physical contact between them. After the first two days, he will select a bride for marriage. The marriage ceremony and banquet will be held on the third day in Vietnam. After the marriage is “consummated”, she will accompany him to Singapore where they will register their marriage at the ROM. She will also learn “cooking, household chores and Mandarin” at the agency for about a month. The agency claims to “call and check up on how the bride is doing in Singapore” for a period of up to 3 years.

#### **6.1.4 Matchmaking Agency D**

Matchmaking Agency D was set up in 1997, initially offering organized prenuptial tours to China. They now focus on organizing tours to Malaysia and Vietnam as China brides have been able to come “on their own” in recent years. It is also difficult to arrange marriages between Singaporean men and Chinese women as the Chinese government does not favour marriages between China nationals and foreigners.

The ages of their brides range from 19 to 30. Unless the client is “very particular” and insists on the knowledge, the agency discourages the testing of virginity as it is more “important” that they can “get along and live happily”. According to the owner, the testing of virginity is also a “sensitive” issue to the bride. The ages of their clients range from 20 to 60. They are mainly “hawkers, taxi-drivers or involved in some lower-level jobs” but some are “educated”. Most of them prefer to remain “anonymous”, but the agency will ask for his reason in wanting a foreign bride and whether he has any illnesses. The agency will occasionally visit his house to understand his background

better. It does not, however, check his financial capability, whether he has ever been married or has a criminal record. This information is based on “what he tells them”. The owner justified that it is impossible for him to lie about his marital status, for example, as it can be verified with the ROM. The agency will also advise him about the financial requirement of having a wife. If he claims to have S\$5,000 in his bank account, for example, the agency will discourage him.

The brides pay a non-refundable membership fee of S\$300-400 and sign a membership agreement which guarantees the introduction of Singaporean men to them until they get married. Their photos are then made available to the clients. The client can select a maximum of four brides and the agency will organize a trip to Vietnam to meet these brides. The 6-day organized prenuptial tour costs around S\$16,000, including airfare, accommodation, food, medical check-ups, the bride’s dowry and expenses associated with the wedding ceremony. On the first two days, the agency will arrange for the brides to meet up with him. He will then “date” the brides to find out whether they can “get along”. After the first two days, he will select a bride for marriage and the agency will organize the wedding ceremony before the end of the trip. He can request for an extension of the trip after the marriage, after which he would stay in his wife’s home.

#### **6.1.5 Matchmaking Agency E**

The owner of Matchmaking Agency E is a married, middle-aged man. He has a small office with a work desk and three chairs for potential clients. According to the owner, he has successfully match-made more than 100 couples and he has a success rate of 100 per cent. He revealed that the brides seek a life in Singapore mainly because of the “women’s protection law” in Vietnam. After assaulting his wife, a man can “happily walk out of the police station without being charged or paying a fine”. The agency offers a “local selection” of Vietnamese brides. The owner “promises” the bride that she will find a husband during her 14 days in Singapore and he pays for her dowry, airfare, accommodation and food. Before their departure, the brides undergo medical tests for

sexual diseases and virginity. The owner claims that most of his clients are “very particular” about this and the brides undergo a second test when they have been selected for marriage.

His clients are mainly in their 30s and 40s, although he has had some younger clients. He recalled having a client who was 78 years old when he approached the agency for a bride. The elderly client needed someone to assist him in moving around the home, but employing a foreign domestic worker was “not too convenient”. The consumer-husband must have a minimum monthly income of S\$1,200 before he can become a client. The client can select a bride locally for S\$5,000. He then has the option of conducting a wedding ceremony in Vietnam for an additional S\$1,500. This includes the bride’s wedding gown, a wedding car, transport for her relatives, a wedding banquet, two tables for her relatives, and a photographer. The client would usually include four pieces of jewellery as dowry for the bride. The client also has the option of visiting Vietnam to select a bride if he is not interested in those in Singapore.

When I was there, there were five Vietnamese brides from ages 22 to 33. They were sitting and chatting happily outside the office, as there was little space inside. They were dressed discreetly in a round neck t-shirt and jeans, except for one with long, straight hair which has been dyed blond and who was wearing a halter-top. She was the most talkative as she could speak fair Mandarin. She told me she was 27 years old and her reason for coming to Singapore in search of a partner is to have “a better living”. She claimed that Vietnamese men would not be able to provide her with “stable living”.

A stout, 28-year-old Singaporean man had also come to see the owner. He met his wife through another agency at the People’s Park Centre. Apparently, the owner was once a partner in that agency but has since voided his agreement. The consumer-husband married a “beautiful” 22-year-old bride last year. Only after two months into the marriage, however, a scuffle between them made her return back to her village. According to him, she was “surly and physically abusive” toward him and “demanded to

go back to her parents”. She is demanding a monthly allowance of S\$1,000 from him but he claims he is only earning S\$1,700. He was at the agency to request help from the owner in assisting him to bring his wife back to Singapore. The owner suggested a monthly allowance of S\$200 would be adequate in bringing her back.

#### **6.1.6 Matchmaking Agency F**

Matchmaking Agency F is located on the second floor of an old shophouse along a very busy street. The staircase leading up to the agency is rather dark and gives a shady feeling to the place. The décor inside the agency is, however, very soothing and simple. Upon my entry, I heard the owner speaking on the telephone in a language that did not belong to any of the major dialect groups in Singapore. There was no one else inside the office.

The owner invited me into one of the two rooms in the office to discuss the reason I was at the agency, which was to “get married”. He first asked for my age and I told him I was 28 years old. He then asked me for my IC which I pretended I forgot to bring. When he asked if I remembered my IC number, I suspected my negative response discredited me to some extent. However, he proceeded to ask me if I was interested in meeting a bride whom he had in Singapore today. This caught me off guard and I rejected meeting the bride. To divert his attention, I asked if the brides he was going to introduce me were from Vietnam. He clarified that he usually introduces brides from the PRC. I then asked whether he had a portfolio of brides for me to look at as a sample of the type of brides he would be introducing to me. He informed me that I needed to pay S\$50 just to look at photos. I showed great displeasure so he flipped through his portfolio and showed me a few photographs of the brides. I also asked if the brides are virgins. He revealed that they are “absolutely virgins” and he suggested I take them back to “test” if I did not believe him. I was not sure what he was implying and I did not stay long enough to find out more.

The owner then asked me to fill in a form. The form required me to state my monthly salary, but I was not sure if he would actually verify the information. The form also required that I state my preferences for the level of education and the marital status of the bride (single, divorced, with kids, etc.). The owner seemed very anxious to secure me as a potential client. As I was preparing to leave, he suggested that I take the bride he had out for the night to see if she was “suitable”. I declined and left. He subsequently called me a few days later to inform me that he had another bride to introduce to me. This seemed to suggest that he might be in need of business.

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