

The Place of Vietnamese Marriage Migrants in Singapore: social reproduction, social ‘problems’ and social protection

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ABSTRACT While the literature on ‘global care chains’ has focused on the international transfer of paid reproductive labour in the form of domestic service and care work, a parallel trend takes the form of women marriage migrants, who perform unpaid labour to maintain households and reproduce the next generation. Drawing on our work with commercially matched Vietnamese marriage migrants in Singapore, we analyse the existing immigration–citizenship regime to examine how these marriage migrants are positioned within the family and nation-state as dependants of Singaporean men with no rights to work, residency or citizenship of their own. Incipient discussions on marriage migrants in civil society discourse have tended to follow a ‘social problems’ template, requiring legislative support and service provisioning to assist vulnerable women. We argue for the need to adopt an expansive approach to social protection issues, depending not on any one single source—the state, civil society and the family—but on government action to ensure that these complement one another and strengthen safety nets for the marriage migrant.

With the growing intensification of transnational mobilities in Asia in recent decades, human relationships of intimacy have been reshaped, as seen in the growth of ‘transnational families’ and ‘international marriages’. The phenomenon of ‘global care chains’ has fuelled a new ‘international division of reproductive labour’, whereby women from lower-income countries migrate across borders to provide reproductive labour (paid and unpaid) needed for the sustenance and renewal of productive labour in more advanced economies in Asia and beyond.¹ While the literature thus far has focused on the domestic service and care work industry, where migrant women substitute major gaps in

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housework, child- and elder- care through a global division of paid reproductive labour, a parallel and closely articulated trend that is gaining pace in the Asian region takes the form of marriage migrants, who perform unpaid labour to maintain households and reproduce the next generation.²

Global care chains refer to ‘a series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring’.³ This phenomenon is underpinned by household internalisation strategies, in which ‘transfers’ of emotional and physical care labour are maintained through hierarchical networks of care that link poorer households from sending communities to richer ones in the developed world. Many have critiqued the concept’s limited focus on ‘transnational transfers of “motherly” labour’—that is, how ‘poorer women raise children for wealthier women while still poorer ... women raise their children’—and argued for broadening its application to care services offered by skilled nurses, migrant carers in domiciliary settings, and highly educated women who migrate as dependants of their spouses.⁴ In this paper we highlight the role of marriage migrants in the globalisation of care, where transactions of love and labour, care and money, are intricately linked to racialised and class-specific discourses of familial gender roles, filial piety and inter-generational care work.

In the Asian context international marriage migration is a growing phenomenon in globalised networks of care, particularly in the case of high-income countries such as South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore.⁵ Inasmuch as migrant domestic workers are employed to perform the reproductive labour needed to maintain middle-class households, working-class men are increasingly seeking foreign brides to provide kin labour in the form of unpaid domestic work, elder care and child-bearing. In these parallel strategies migrant women are partially co-opted as ‘class-specific solutions to the alleged shortage of reproductive labour’ within the framework of illiberal immigration–citizenship regimes structured along social hierarchies of gender, class, race/ethnicity, and nationality in Asia.⁶

Social protection, as defined by Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, refers to ‘all public and private initiatives that provide income or consumption transfers to the poor, protect the vulnerable against livelihood risks, and enhance the social status and rights of the marginalised; with the overall objective of reducing the economic and social vulnerability of poor, vulnerable and marginalised groups’.⁷ Following this lead, Locke *et al* (this issue) adopt an expansive conceptualisation of social protection that goes beyond ‘formal social protection’ linked to citizenship status, to include ‘informal social protection, including institutionalised practices found within families, friendship networks, neighbourhood or community relations as well as the strategic agency of individual actors to secure and improve their lives’. This conceptual push chimes with parallel arguments for broader notions of citizenship to incorporate the constitutive relationship between the social and political—that is, understanding citizenship ‘both [as] a set of practices (cultural, symbolic and economic) and a bundle of rights and duties (civil, political and social)’.⁸ While these discussions have mostly been inserted from the standpoint of individual and group rights, bringing the scale of the family to the surface as an intervening layer provokes deeper questions about the tensions embedded within these conceptual categories, whereby the family functions as a site of both cooperation and conflict, particularly in ‘the way insti-

tutionalised strategies and their underpinning ideologies are mediated ... in the messy realities of everyday life and decision-making'.⁹

Marriage migrants straddle the ambivalent position of being 'outsiders within' the state and family¹⁰—entitled to stay, they 'theoretically become new citizens ... [but] not yet members of the society'.¹¹ Insofar as they are incorporated into the private sphere of the family as 'wives' and dependants of their Singaporean husbands, it is precisely this highly gendered mode of incorporation that accounts for their vulnerable status within both the family and the nation-state, and which restrict their rights to formal citizenship and access to work and social subsidies. As women brought into the family through commercial matchmaking arrangements, their tenuous position as 'wife' and 'daughter-in-law' often interchanges fluidly with the role of 'domestic worker', where traditional marital virtues are conflated with domestic skills. In this regard a gendered division of labour is reproduced, in which these women shoulder the burden of (unpaid) care work couched in 'family' terms and sanctioned by the bonds of marriage.

Drawing on our work with Vietnamese marriage migrants in Singapore, this paper examines the ways that marriage migrants are positioned within the family and nation-state as economic dependents of their husbands, with few rights to work, residency and citizenship of their own within Singapore's immigration–citizenship regime. Media discourses have tended to situate these women at two ends of the spectrum: those who enter into 'marriages of convenience' as a way of circumventing immigration laws to gain a foothold in Singapore; and those who are routinely exploited by their husbands and isolated from society. In this context we examine the gradual move among civil society groups (and, to a lesser extent, the state) to address issues concerning the social exclusion of marriage migrants, noting how underlying discourses and practices have tended to follow a 'social problems' template, which constructs these women as vulnerable migrants in need of legislative support and service provisioning.

Research methods

The paper draws upon findings from a research project entitled 'State Boundaries, Cultural Politics and Gender Negotiation in International Marriages in Singapore and Malaysia', of which a major component was focused on Vietnamese women who married Singaporean men through commercial matchmaking agencies. We first identified the matchmaking agencies in Singapore and interviewed the owners, a few of whom introduced us to couples whom they had matched. Attempts to snowball from these initial leads were largely unsuccessful, because of the social stigma attached to commercial matchmaking. Instead, we conducted regular English language classes over 11 months in 2008–09. Designed specifically for Vietnamese women who had little formal education or prior exposure to English, these classes drew participants through social networks and offered Vietnamese marriage migrants a platform to meet and socialise. We were also able to reach out to a wider network of Vietnamese marriage migrants and their husbands through various social events organised by class participants. We then asked individual women, men and couples whether they would like to participate in the project, while making clear that class attend-

ees were not obliged to participate in it if they did not want to (indeed, many declined). While most of the Singaporean husbands gave us recorded interviews, most of the Vietnamese women declined to be recorded, so we made detailed notes from our interviews or extended chats with them. We were also able to make detailed observations from our social interaction with them within and outside class-time.¹²

Here we focus on the 27 Vietnamese women who were married to Singaporean men through commercial matchmaking agencies and informal brokers. The Vietnamese wives were mostly in their twenties and early thirties, although the youngest was 18 and the oldest 45. They were mostly from the Mekong Delta; a few were from Ho Chi Minh City and other parts, while a very few others were from north Vietnam. Many of the women had achieved grades 4–9, although there were a few who had reached college level and also a few who had lower than grade 4 education. The Singaporean husbands' ages ranged from 29 to more than 70 years, but most were between their thirties and fifties. Most of the couples had been married for from a few months up to five years, but there was one couple who had been married for nine years. The couples communicated mostly in Mandarin, as the Vietnamese wives picked up the language quite quickly, and most of them lived in the lower range of public housing, which is indicative of a generally lower socioeconomic status. In addition to the interview material and extensive fieldnotes, we also draw on media articles as a supplementary resource, as well as on interviews with members of non-governmental organisations and shelters for women in crisis.

Situating marriage migrants in Singapore's reproductive predicament

As is the case with other advanced economies in East Asia, fertility rates in Singapore have fallen significantly over the past decades, decreasing from a rate of 1.74 in 1980 to 1.15 in 2010.¹³ Alongside plummeting fertility rates and increasing life expectancy, Singapore is becoming one of the fastest ageing populations in Asia, with Singaporeans aged 65 years and older expected to make up 18.7% (or 873 300) of the population by 2030.¹⁴ A parallel trend has been the steadily increasing rate of female labour force participation, rising from 50.2% in 2000 to 57% in 2011.¹⁵ These demographic shifts have translated into significant care deficits in the areas of child care, elder care and other domestic responsibilities.¹⁶

The Singapore state considers the family as the 'primary care-giving unit' for the young and elderly,¹⁷ and women often end up shouldering these twin responsibilities, often alongside formal work demands.¹⁸ To a large extent middle-class households have turned to employing live-in foreign domestic workers, mostly from Indonesia and the Philippines, as paid substitutes to fill in these social reproductive gaps. Eligibility to hire a domestic worker is tied to a certain degree of affluence, and is a privilege enjoyed by households with an annual income of at least SG\$30000. In a parallel strategy working-class Singaporean men are increasingly seeking foreign brides as a more affordable way of securing various forms of care work, including household chores, caring for elderly parents, physical and emotional companionship and reproducing and caring for the next generation.

Inasmuch as foreign domestic workers and immigrant wives are key providers of social reproductive labour in Singapore, the state's highly instrumentalist (im) migration policies have tended to categorise the labouring bodies of migrant domestic workers as 'work permit holders' (engaged in paid care work), on the one hand, and the reproductive bodies of immigrant wives as 'foreign spouses' (engaged in family formation and unpaid care work), on the other. While foreign domestic workers are denied reproductive rights through the 'Marriage Restriction Policy' and mandatory six-monthly health screenings for pregnancy,¹⁹ immigrant wives are disallowed from working, as their entry into Singapore is dependent on a short term or long term visit pass (LTVP), which has to be renewed every six to 12 months.²⁰ Marriage to a Singaporean does not automatically qualify a foreigner for long-term stay, permanent residency (PR) or citizenship; instead these rights depend on factors such as 'the ability of the sponsor to support his or her foreign spouse financially, whether the marriage is legally in order and [the] good conduct records of both applicant and sponsor'.²¹ Considering the tenuous nature of the LTVP and stringent selection criteria governing PR and citizenship rights, these measures imply that immigrant wives are entirely dependent upon their husband's sponsorship (and willingness) to secure their rights to residency, access to paid work and social subsidies.

Marriages between Singapore citizens and non-citizen spouses have been increasing in recent years, accounting for 40.6% of the total number of locally registered marriages in 2010.²² Of this total, 76.9% consisted of marriages between Singaporean men and non-citizen brides, of which the vast majority (95.9%) were from Asia. In 2010 the percentage of male Singapore citizens marrying foreign women was 34.5% of all marriages involving citizens.

International marriage trends have also exhibited a certain class hierarchy, with highly educated women marrying men from advanced Western economies, such as the UK and USA, and less educated men marrying women from lower-income countries in Asia, such as China, Vietnam and Indonesia.²³ A significant consequence of rising educational levels among Singaporean women has been the persistence of cultural and social impediments to women's 'marrying down' and men's 'marrying up', as Singaporean men continue to hold traditional attitudes about wifely roles, while women are increasingly unwilling to play such roles. Working-class men have found themselves marginalised in the local 'marriage market', with the largest proportion of singles found among those with below secondary school qualifications, particularly those aged between 45 and 54.²⁴ These men are the chief candidates seeking foreign brides from the region, in accordance with the logic of the 'marriage gradient', where women from less developed countries engage in 'global spatial hypergamy' by moving to a more advanced country via marriage migration.²⁵

The role of immigrant wives in Singapore's burgeoning reproductive crisis may be observed in two areas: 1) plugging care deficits in terms of eldercare and housework; and 2) boosting the nation's ultra-low fertility rate. Our interviews suggest that women's marital obligations are typically bound by kinship notions of filial piety, whereby moral expectations of a good wife include being a dutiful daughter-in-law who cares for her husband's elderly parents and household needs. On the reproductive front marriage migrants continue to play a pivotal role in sup-

plementing the nation's low fertility rate. Figures for 2008 show that 9870 babies born had a foreign parent, accounting for 30% of babies born as citizens.²⁶

Within the family but outside the state: the limits of social protection

Unlike migrant workers, who are differentially incorporated into the nation-state via their position in the labour market, immigrant wives are co-opted as dependants of their husbands within the privatised sphere of the family, while remaining non-citizens. The policy not to allow residency rights to be automatically tied with marriage bonds is premised on the assumption of the family's role as 'a bastion of welfare, stability, and cohesion'.²⁷ For immigrant wives, who often have a weak bargaining power within the fraught terrain of intra-family politics, the family's function as a provider of social protection and well-being is not necessarily guaranteed.

Scholars have argued that labour migration is often undertaken as a strategy to seek resources outside the family 'to make up for perceived shortfalls in social provisioning for families ... move out of poverty and ... build a better life for the future'.²⁸ Inasmuch as the migration journeys of Vietnamese marriage migrants are informed by similar rationales, they often find themselves thrust into performing social reproductive work for their marital families.²⁹ Despite their deep incorporation into the everyday social reproductive sphere of the marital family, they remain, paradoxically, 'outside' the nation-state as non-citizens and non-residents and are instead positioned in the nation-state's geo-body as no more than temporary 'visitors'.

The marriage migrant's positioning deep within the social fabric of the family but outside the full protective umbrella of the state puts her in an ambivalent and vulnerable situation in several ways. First, how long she is able to remain in Singapore is dependent on her husband's ability and willingness to sponsor her. In the case of Dan (20-year-old Vietnamese woman), who was commercially matched in 2012 to 45-year-old Paul, a divorcee with primary-level education, she had been increasingly worried, as her husband had been jobless for several months with little or no savings. Dan was 'very pessimistic' about her future, as her social visit pass was expiring and she was unsure whether she would succeed in obtaining a renewal given that Paul was jobless. Furthermore, she did not have health insurance cover and, without PR, she was not able to add her name to the title deed of the small flat that her husband owned.

The immigrant wife's vulnerability, stemming from her dependency on her husband's sponsorship, was brought home in a recent tragic case. Thai national Samai Chatthahan (27 years old) found herself confronted with the prospect of being sent back to Thailand when her long-term social visit pass expired because her husband, a lorry driver, had drowned when his vehicle slipped off a barge and into the sea.³⁰ She had failed three times in her bid for PR and, without her husband's sponsorship, she might have to be separated from her three youngest children (aged four to nine), who were Singapore citizens with no knowledge of Thai. Marrying a Singapore citizen thus does not automatically qualify a foreign wife for PR, let alone Singapore citizenship.

Case Studies

As these brief case studies taken from our notes show, for Vietnamese wives securing PR status remains a pressing concern, as residency rights represent a major pathway to paid work and access to social subsidies.

20-year-old Thach had been married to a 55-year-old widowed truck driver for 10 months. She had serious glaucoma and was in need of surgery, without which she felt she would become blind. Being a foreigner in Singapore, she was dependent upon her husband to finance her medical expenses. When she approached her husband to request an eye examination with a specialist, he repeatedly tried to avoid the issue, giving the excuse that 'he [didn't] see any problem with her eye'. Disappointed by his 'tight-fisted' nature, Thach was anxious to secure PR status so that she would be able to work to support herself. She had also hoped to be able to send money back to her family in Vietnam, which had been struggling to make ends meet.

In Thach's view, PR status offered access to an independent source of income from which to meet her immediate needs and help fulfil her role as a daughter.³¹ She had tried many times to persuade her husband to act as a guarantor for her PR application and it was only after much persistence that he had finally consented. However, this form of dependency led to a precarious situation that left her feeling trapped.

Thach shared that she was careful not to breach the relationship with her husband. While he was 'a good man', Thach revealed that she 'hated sex with him...because she could not stand the thought that an "old" man was that much passionate for sex [every night]'. Despite feeling both reluctant and uncomfortable, she confessed: 'If I don't do that, he won't love me anymore. So for everything he does to me, I do the same for him...But honestly, it was very disgusting to me.' She noticed that 'every time she consented to him sexually, he became generous to her the following day'. It was a case of 'no sex, no money'.

The vulnerabilities stemming from the marriage migrant's precarious condition of dependency on her husband's resources and support may be further compounded by her place in the family as a wife and daughter-in-law, responsible for social reproductive work. This second set of vulnerabilities is exemplified in the case of 31-year-old Phi Yen, who had been married for one-and-a-half years to a Singaporean who worked as a crane operator. She had a four-month-old daughter and lived with her husband, his elderly parents and two younger brothers. When she first joined the family, Phi Yen quickly found that she was obligated to meet various filial expectations, in which her position as daughter-in-law was interpreted almost synonymously with that of a foreign domestic worker (but unpaid):

Phi Yen said that her in-laws told her that it was her duty to serve the family as a daughter-in-law. She had to cook two meals a day for eight people, and did all the house chores like cleaning, laundry, and ironing for all family members. One brother-in-law also took advantage of her labour by leaving their nine-year-old son with her during the day.

For Phi Yen the expectation of unpaid care labour was tightly woven into the marriage bonds that made her a ‘member of the family’. As wife and daughter-in-law in a working-class family, it was seen as ‘natural’ that she performed care work for all members, particularly since she was ‘not working’. Being unable to contribute financially to the marital home, she was perceived to have no role outside the home and no value except through her domestic contributions. As Fakier and Cock put it,³² ‘the “ideology of familism” ... distorts an understanding of the work involved in social reproduction. The work of cooking, cleaning, shopping and caring is presented as a “labour of love”’³³. This collapses the distinction between physical labour (“caring for”) and emotional labour (“caring about”).³⁴ The marriage migrant’s place in the family as someone whose primary role is to shore up the social reproductive sphere is partly reinforced by the fact that she is not allowed by law to take on paid work while on a social visit pass.

Taking primary responsibility for social reproductive work in the household may also persist even when the marriage migrant has obtained PR and earned her right to paid work. In the case of 26-year-old Huyen, her husband Michael, who worked in a construction company, preferred her to remain at home to care for her 74-year-old mother-in-law, despite having been granted PR status. Apart from providing eldercare as a means to fulfil Michael’s filial obligation, she was also expected to do the domestic chores for every household member:

Right before their wedding, her mother-in-law had asked her younger single sister to move into their home, which was already also home to an older unmarried brother [of Michael] who had always lived with them to share the cost of living. In the same way that Michael was depended upon by all as the main breadwinner of this household, Huyen was expected to do the household chores for everybody.

Gender and age norms governing the distribution of care responsibilities within the household meant that Huyen was expected to stay at home to serve the family, despite possessing legal status to work.³⁵ Familism masked the extent of the exploitation faced by women such as Phi Yen and Huyen, who have to bear the brunt of performing housework and care work for practically all family members living under the same roof.

A third set of vulnerabilities relates to the intersecting gender, racial, nationality and class lines that separate the marriage migrant from other members of the family. For example, Phi Yen shared that she did not have the respect of family members, especially when her husband was out at work. She struggled to build a relationship with her father-in-law, because ‘every time she tries, her mother-in-law gets jealous and yells at her father-in-law for talking to her’. Although her domestic obligations were gradually eased after giving birth to her daughter, she found that she had little say concerning how her child would be raised, as her parents-in-law adopted a controlling role in relation to the latter’s upbringing, having the impression that Vietnamese women were ‘poor and not educated’, and unsuited to giving the best nurturance. Her position as ‘mother’ was thus undermined on the basis of her nationality and perceived lack of education. Far from being a site of social and emotional support, home was a place of vulnerability where her reproductive labour was exploited, and where she felt marginalised.

Phi Yen was active in raising these grievances with her husband, and told him that ‘even maids got their Sundays off while she had to work on Sunday as well’. He sought to comfort her, but was still unwilling to raise these ‘sensitive issues’ with his parents or brothers, as he routinely favoured his mother’s opinion over hers. Similarly, Huyen felt vulnerable as an ‘outsider’ with no negotiating rights:

She found it hard to satisfy her mother-in-law. Things were extremely difficult for Huyen when Michael didn’t listen to her but to his mother. Michael even stated that he would rather lose his wife than his mother if anything happened because he had only one mother while he could get another wife ... Huyen [told] her husband many times that they would need to have a maid and it wouldn’t be expensive if the brother and aunt contributed their share ... However, Michael didn’t agree and kept avoiding the discussion.

The power geometries of the marital home can also result in Vietnamese wives feeling entrapped in invidious circumstances. Our interviews with NGOs led us to the case of Mai, a 19-year-old Vietnamese marriage migrant, who found herself entangled in an awkward living arrangement with her brother-in-law, a single man with whom the couple lived. Her brother-in-law was a staunch naturist and, although she was happy with her marriage, she was highly uncomfortable with the lifestyle that was imposed on her, which required all three adults to roam around nude in the shared apartment. It reached a point where her brother-in-law withheld her passport, and she sought help from the matchmaking agency, who then connected her with the NGO.³⁶

Vietnamese wives starting out married lives find that their structural incorporation into the marital family via a commercial match often places them on the lowest rung of the family’s pecking order. In the eyes of their husbands their gender and generational positions as daughters-in-law, compounded by the debilitating effects of racism and classism within the home, was inferior to that of their mothers-in-law, and they might well be worse off than the (non-existent) maid whose labour position they seemed to have been made to fill. As Kim notes, for immigrant wives ‘not only gender ideology but also generational, cultural, and legal status differences complicate social relations within the family; thus, the family can be a site of gender and racial oppression’.³⁷ For commercially matched marriage migrants the exploitative dimensions of familism were further compounded by the stigma of becoming a member of the family by means of a commercial transaction. As a result, while seldom articulated in explicit terms, there was a palpable sense in the interviews that they needed to prove their value to the family—if not as wage-earning members then by shouldering domestic obligations.

Civil society’s response: from silence to the beginnings of awareness and action

Over the past decade civil society groups have played a prominent role in lobbying for the rights and welfare of migrant workers in Singapore,³⁸ although

much less has been done to address the issues that marriage migrants face. Part of this silence stems from the state's 'hands-off' approach towards the issue of foreign brides, as marriage is predominantly treated as a privatised domestic affair.

At the same time media portrayals of marriage migrants have tended to be largely negative in diametrically opposite ways: portraying them either as deceivers and cheats who enter into marriages of 'convenience' as a means of circumventing immigration laws in Singapore, or as passive victims forced into exploitative marriages and routinely abused by their husbands. The first image tends to be grafted onto the figure of the Chinese woman with the reputation of being 'unscrupulous, money-grabbing and out to cheat men of whatever fortune they have',³⁹ an image constructed around notions of racial and sexual danger.⁴⁰ At the other end of the spectrum the media has in recent years begun to highlight the plight of marriage migrants who 'suffer in silence' in the hands of abusive husbands who treat them no better than 'maid-cum-sex partners-cum-caregivers for their elderly parents'.⁴¹

Alongside the growth of the 'social problems' discourse around marriage migrants, civil society groups have gradually sought to address issues concerning foreign brides. One of the earliest efforts was taken by Singapore's leading feminist organisation, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) in their 2006 report, which documented the practices of matchmaking agencies whilst speaking against the commodification of foreign brides.⁴² The report was sparked off by a sense of outrage concerning an incident in November 2005, when a 64-year-old cobbler had approached various matchmaking agencies on the pretext of looking for a prospective bride. After handing over a faulty cheque for SG\$10 000, and without having his details verified, he was allowed to take his 21-year-old bride 'home'. In fact, he took her to a hotel and had sex with her for several days before he 'returned' her to the agency. Appalled by the apparent lack of protection against such blatant exploitation, AWARE's report advocated improvements in the governance of the matchmaking industry.

At the same time service-oriented groups and crisis shelters catering to women suffering from domestic violence began to notice a growing number of foreign wives requesting assistance. The Centre for Promoting Alternatives to Violence (PAVE), which specialises in helping victims of domestic abuse, reported an increase in the number of foreign women, from 12% to one in four spousal violence cases between 2010 and 2011.⁴³ AWARE reported a trebling of foreign wives (from 10 to 32) calling their helpline for assistance between 2009 and 2010.⁴⁴ The Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People was also frequently approached for pro-bono services concerning legal aid for foreign spouses via word-of-mouth, while other civil society groups began to intervene in the area of research and advocacy to push for a greater measure of civil rights to safeguard the welfare of foreign wives.

A recent study conducted by Beyond Social Services urged the Singapore government to address the different vulnerabilities that foreign brides faced.⁴⁵ It argued that immigration regulations which prohibit LTVP holders from working placed considerable pressure on Singaporean husbands as sole breadwinners. Should they find themselves unable to provide for the family, children could be denied adequate care and basic necessities. The NGO also recognised the need to

move beyond social service provisioning as a stop-gap measure, to focus on 'systemic factors...that influence family functioning in families with a foreign spouse [... and] policy change so that families with a foreign mother can function better'.⁴⁶ The report recommended allowing foreign wives to remain in Singapore to care for their children, even if their husbands cancelled their social visit passes or divorced them.

As civil society matures and diversifies, women's advocacy groups are increasingly finding the need to expand the reach of their focus from citizen-women to include foreign women living in their midst. As a feminist activist explains:

I feel we are now at the stage where AWARE too has to review the fact that one out of every four persons in Singapore is a non-Singaporean, which means that all the social dynamics, the interrelationships, everything will change. How are we going to relate to this new order of things? And when we say that we are going to focus on Singapore women, is it going to be women in Singapore or just Singapore citizens?⁴⁷

In AWARE's 2011 report concerning the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), a section was devoted to highlighting issues concerning foreign brides 'especially in regards to violence and abuse, their right to work, and their residence status in the country'.⁴⁸ The Committee called for the 'immediate attention' of the state to grant these women 'an automatic right to work', enforce stricter guidelines in matchmaking advertisements, and introduce greater transparency and 'a clear path to residency and citizenship for these wives'.⁴⁹

The latest policy amendment concerning the LTVP+ pass which allows foreign wives access to work (upon approval from the Ministry of Manpower) and healthcare subsidies for in-patient services represents a heartening move by the government to introduce 'a more compassionate [immigration scheme] that will help families stay intact'.⁵⁰ While it is unacknowledged whether the policy change was the result of the lobbying efforts of civil society groups, it is clear that this enhanced measure was put forward largely as a response to Singaporean husbands who appeared regularly at the government's Meet-the-People sessions to appeal for their wives' PR status or the renewal of their LTVPS. A member of parliament noted, for example, that she typically received five such appeals every week.⁵¹ While marriage migration has entailed a specific set of vulnerabilities for foreign wives stemming from their positioning inside the family but outside the state, policy change is less likely to be triggered by their predicaments in themselves. Instead, policy makers appear to be more responsive when their plight is represented and articulated by citizen-husbands, who have the channels to lobby for social citizenship rights on their behalf. In this light not only are marriage migrants' access to social protection from the state dependent on their citizen-husbands, their voice in articulating their own needs seems to be only audible via these same channels.

Conclusion

Stemming from the discussions above, we argue that social protection needs to go beyond 'an instrumentalist agenda to "mop-up" vulnerability in the absence

of widespread provision [in countries lacking a welfare state]’,⁵² and to take into account social reproductive concerns as a whole (beyond a narrow focus on the need for productive livelihoods). Within the context of migration, Locke *et al* (this issue) highlight two sets of issues in examining the changing social protection needs of migrants and their families: first, the ‘social reproduction [needs] of the migrants themselves’; second, the ‘social relational dimensions of their unfolding family lives (whether at source, [among] accompanying [members]....or replacing them in due course)’.⁵³

Our work on marriage migrants chimes in with this framework of social protection, which gives attention to the social reproduction needs of the migrant herself, needs which are inextricable from the ‘unfolding’ of family lives both in the natal and marital homes. We note that the perspectives at source and destination may differ: from the viewpoint of the natal family, migration itself provides a form of social protection to secure its own social reproduction; however, at destination, inserting herself into the marital family puts the migrant in an ambivalent position with regard to social protection. On the one hand, the marital family is an important source of care provision for the migrant and may be generative of meanings and relations of intimacy that confer well-being. As Lu observes in the context of Taiwan, transnational marriages and family formation are a ‘strategy of care exchange’ among Taiwanese veteran soldiers and their mainland Chinese spouses.⁵⁴ On the other hand, the marital family can also be a site of exploitation, where the extent of this is masked or distorted by these same meanings and relations of ‘being family’. This has particular salience in the case of international marriage migrants as they are removed from the safety nets provided by their own kin and social networks. Some Vietnamese wives, such as Phi Yen and Huyen, find themselves treated as expendable labour under the guise of familism, while others, like Thach (in having to have sex with her husband which is distasteful to her) and Mai (in having to accept a naturist lifestyle), are inducted into privatised spheres that induce personal discomfort or distress.⁵⁵

As a way forward a broadminded approach to understanding the nature of social protection is necessary to secure the social reproduction needs of marriage migrants. Such an approach needs to take into account multiple sources of social protection: formal social rights (including the right to engage in paid work) linked to residency/citizenship status that is controlled by the state; the social service and advocacy work conducted by civil society groups; and the ambivalent nature of the marital family in providing care to and extracting care from the foreign wife. We note, for example, that husbands may be both accomplices in the exploitation of their wives’ labour and instrumental in negotiating with the state in pushing for better conditions for their wives.⁵⁶ There is a danger of slippage in relying on any one form of social protection for the marriage migrant, given the calibrated selectivity with which the state extends formal rights, the limited reach of Singapore’s civil society, and the Janus-faced quality of the family in offering a protective shell. What is needed as a first step is leadership on the part of the government to bring into dialogue and alignment these different sources of social protection, thereby creating a multi-layered safety net with a finer mesh to better secure the social reproductive needs of marriage migrants.

Notes

We would like to acknowledge the valuable research contributions of Vu Thi Kieu Dung, and the research assistance of Gary Lee, Tran Anh Dao, Nguyen Thi Thanh Tam, Cheng Yi 'En, and Lim Pei Wen. We are grateful for research funding support from the Ministry of Education, Singapore (Grant No: T208A4103).

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- the first instance, and up to five years at each renewal (as opposed to the current one-year validity period). Holders will be entitled to a range of healthcare subsidies and will be allowed to work to supplement the family's income pending approval from MOM. Couples who have at least one Singaporean child from their marriage will be eligible to apply. For those without children factors such as the duration of the marriage (three years as a minimum) and the husband's income and educational level will continue to apply. 'New Long Term Visit Pass-Plus good news for foreign spouses', *The Straits Times*, 2 March 2012. It should thus be noted that the LTVP+ does not signal a relaxation of the criteria to qualify for a long-term pass, nor does it diminish the spouse's dependence on her husband for sponsorship.
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55 While the paper has focused largely on the intersecting sets of vulnerabilities that Vietnamese marriage migrants confront, it is important not to depict them as entrapped victims without agency. Many of the women narrated a wide range of small tactics that they would try to better their own circumstances and to live up to their own expectations of being both good wives (in the context of their marital families) and daughters (in the context of their natal families). See Yeoh *et al*, 'Between two families'. While these actions may not result in immediate change (as seen in the accounts discussed), they speak to the women's active struggles under often difficult circumstances.
56 We thank one of the reviewers of an earlier version of this paper for drawing our attention to this point.

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