

Transnational Marriages: A Review of the Policies and Initiatives in Singapore and the Potential Lessons for Vietnam

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the relevant policies and initiatives formulated by the Singapore and Vietnam governments with regards to transnational marriages and their effects on transnational couples, identify challenges faced by transnational couples in Singapore and Vietnam, and outline the potential lessons from international and Singapore experiences for Vietnam's policies and initiatives in addressing challenges faced by transnational couples. By utilizing semi-structured interviews and secondary research, it is shown that transnational couples in Singapore and Vietnam suffer from the complexity of the legal framework in both countries, communication and cultural barriers, and a lack of social and community support. Three recommendations were proposed for the Vietnamese government, namely, the creation of comprehensive policy and initiatives dealing with transnational marriages, the enhancement of social integration and marriage preparation programs, and the increase of awareness and sensibility of society towards transnational marriages. A contribution is made to the literature by providing a comparative analysis of policies and initiatives in two understudied countries, identifying challenges faced by transnational couples in these settings, and providing evidence-based policy recommendations for enhancing the legal and social environments for transnational marriages.

Keywords: *Cultural Barriers, Legal Complexity, Marriage Preparation, Social Integration, Transnational Marriages.*

1. Introduction

In an age of increasing globalization, characterized by the fluid flow of capital as well as of people and goods, the integration of migrants from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds into host societies has become a hotly debated topic. Governments around the globe have devised numerous policy initiatives to tackle the challenges posed by this global flow. A point of crystallization for these policies is the handling of transnational marriages, and matrimonial unions between two individuals of different nationalities.

Transnational marriages force governments to reckon with the introduction of foreigners, and vis-à-vis their nation's background and personal affiliations, into its social fabric in a manner that would also affect its nation's family unit and future generations. This issue is particularly pertinent in countries grappling with an aging population such as Japan, Korea, and Singapore (UN.ESCAP et al., 2020). Though the proportion of annual matrimony to international spouses by Singaporeans has remained relatively constant

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throughout the past 19 years, it is by no means insignificant, with roughly 1 in 4 Singaporeans getting married to a partner of a different nationality every year (Ang, 2021). However, while countries such as Singapore are receiving foreign spouses, developing countries such as Vietnam are supplying spouses, often in search of better socio-economic opportunities (Phan et al., 2022).

Yet, there has been a dearth of research which compare the experience of transnational marriages in developed countries such as Singapore and developing countries such as Vietnam. Thus, this study's main purpose was to conduct a comparative analysis between transnational marriages in Singapore and Vietnam in terms of the relevant policies and initiatives as well as the challenges faced by transnational couples in both countries. Additionally, as Vietnam is slowly finding its footing on the global economy, its regulatory frameworks and social conventions for handling transnational couples will prove in need of key learnings and adaptation from international experience. In this study, the focus was placed on transnational marriages in which the couple was residing in either of their native countries. It aimed to answer the following questions:

- What are the key policies and initiatives formulated by the Singapore and Vietnam governments to support transnational marriages?
- What are the challenges faced by transnational couples in Vietnam?
- What are the potential lessons from international and Singapore experiences for Vietnam?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Transnational Marriages and Its Associated Legal and Interpersonal Issues

Discussions on international marriages involve citizenship, ethnicity, and the challenges faced by foreign spouses. The legal belonging and status of foreign wives from developing countries, married to men from more developed countries, are often tied to their marital status and dependence on their husbands. This arrangement creates a reliance on their spouses and in-laws for financial, legal, and social support. These women are sometimes derogatorily referred to as “foreign brides.” In addition to citizenship issues, intercultural relationship dynamics can lead to frictions due to differences in attachment styles, communication strategies, and relationship expectations. Studies indicate that international and inter-racial couples tend to experience more challenges and worse outcomes compared to monocultural relationships (Craft et al., 2022). Even when cultures align to some extent, factors like socio-economic backgrounds and racial ideologies can still contribute to conflicts and negative effects in these relationships.

2.2 Transnational Marriages in Singapore: Policies, Initiatives and Challenges

In Singapore, there is a higher proportion of Singaporean men marrying foreign women compared to Singaporean women marrying foreign men. This has led to an increase in the number of babies born to non-citizens in Singapore, prompting the need for policies regarding transnational marriages. The increased importance of this issue is abundantly clear when seen through the following quote by Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong: “The couple has to consider carefully how their kids will be brought up and what the kids’ identity will be: Will they be a Chinese kid, an Indian kid, maybe European, maybe Japanese, maybe Vietnamese – there are many Singaporeans here who have married Vietnamese spouses” (Hussain, 2010). However, the existing frameworks and projects in Singapore do not fully serve the interests of transnational couples. Foreign spouses moving to Singapore typically require a Long-Term Visit Pass (LTVP) if they don't already have a work visa. The issuance and cancellation of the LTVP are managed by the Immigration & Checkpoint Authority of Singapore (ICA) (Immigration & Checkpoint Authority of Singapore, 2023). The financial reporting requirement of the

Singaporean spouse emphasizes their ability to support the foreign spouse. Legal frameworks often push foreign spouses into a dependent position, reducing their autonomy and increasing the risk of isolation (Yeoh, Chee, & Baey, 2013). They are primarily integrated into Singaporean society through their spouse's family, leading to expectations of motherhood and domestic responsibilities. Discrimination and stigma arise from the perception of foreign spouses as dependents, further limiting their support and opportunities (Chib & Nguyen, 2018). Due to this perception, foreign spouses who usually lack autonomy, communication abilities, and social capital are further derived of support due to their image as an interloper or social climber (Tan, 2021a; Yeoh, Chee, & Vu, 2013).

2.3 Transnational Marriages in Vietnam: Policies, Initiatives, and Challenges

The increase in transnational marriages involving Vietnamese citizens can be traced back to the economic reforms of Doi Moi in 1986. These reforms opened up Vietnam to foreign investment and led to a rise in marriages between Vietnamese individuals and foreigners, particularly in the Mekong Delta Region. Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore have become popular destinations for Vietnamese spouses, while more foreign spouses have also chosen to settle in Vietnam (Bui, 2022). The Vietnamese government has implemented policies to regulate matchmaking services, imposing fines and restrictions on such activities. Marriage registration processes have been streamlined for transnational couples. Vietnamese spouses abroad face challenges such as dependency, lack of support, and difficulties in integration. Vietnamese brides married to Taiwanese husbands often struggle with language barriers and limited qualifications, leading to isolation and subjugation within their spouse's family. In cases of marital breakdown, they may return to Vietnam with little financial support and a damaged reputation. Transnational couples residing in Vietnam face bureaucratic challenges related to the status of their children and residency rights for the foreign spouse, highlighting the need for clearer regulatory frameworks. However, research on the specific challenges faced by transnational marriages in Vietnam is limited (Phan et al., 2021).

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

This study employed semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of transnational couples in Singapore and Vietnam regarding the policies and initiatives of both countries, as well as the challenges they faced in their transnational marriages. The interviews aimed to uncover additional support measures and avenues that could assist these couples in their lives and marriages. Researchers recruited participants through personal networks and utilized snowball sampling to gather more data. Secondary research was also conducted to supplement the limited number of primary interviews, which involved reviewing cases of transnational marriages and experiences reported by other researchers, news articles, and social media posts. This secondary research was sourced primarily from Chib & Nguyen (2018), Phạm Nga (2023), Nguyễn Phong (2019), Tan (2021a), Tan (2021b). By combining desk-review, in-depth interviews, and comparative analysis of policies, the study identified similarities, differences, strengths, and weaknesses of support systems in both countries. The sample respondents comprised stakeholders (77.4%), researchers (9.7%), and social associations (12.9%), providing diverse perspectives on the research topic. Overall, this research sheds light on the experiences of transnational couples and offers insights into policies and initiatives that can enhance support for them in Singapore and Vietnam.

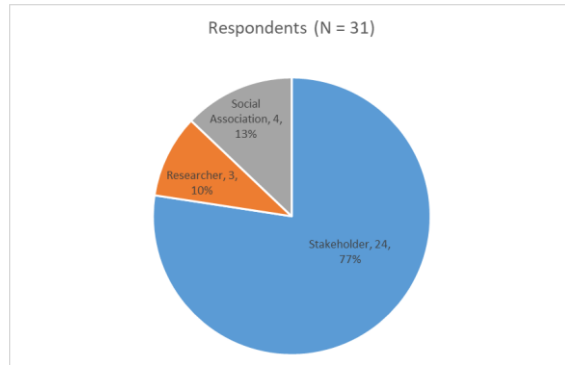


Fig. 1: The Composition of the Sample Respondents (Source: authors)

4. Results

Transnational marriages in the case of Singapore are marked by many of the same problems discussed in transnational marriages globally as well as in the Singapore literature. However, there are distinct differences between participants interviewed and information gleaned from other sources of couples formed from match-making.

4.1 Demographic Profile

Table 1: Demographic Profile

No.	Characteristic	Frequency (N=24)	Percent (%)	
1	Gender	Male	7	29%
		Female	17	71%
2	Perceptions	Positive	12	50%
		Negative	8	33%
		Neutral	4	17%
3	Occupation	Housewife	4	17%
		Non-Degree Occupation	6	25%
		Professional Occupation	14	58%
4	Education Level	Secondary Education	10	42%
		Undergraduate	10	42%
		Postgraduate	4	17%
5	Residential Area	Singapore	15	63%
		Vietnam	7	29%
		Other Countries	2	8%

The demographic profile of the sample respondents (N=24) reveals key characteristics that contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the participants. The gender distribution indicates that the sample consists of 7 male respondents, accounting for 29% of the total, while 17 female respondents represent the majority at 71%. Perceptions among the respondents varied, with 12 individuals (50% of the sample) expressing positive views, 8 individuals (33% of the sample) holding negative perceptions, and 4 individuals (17% of the sample) reporting neutral perceptions. In terms of occupation, 4

respondents (17% of the sample) identified as housewives, 6 respondents (25% of the sample) were engaged in non-degree occupations, and the majority, 14 respondents (58% of the sample), held professional occupations. Regarding education level, 10 respondents (42% of the sample) had completed secondary education, an equal number of 10 respondents (42% of the sample) possessed undergraduate degrees, and 4 respondents (17% of the sample) held postgraduate qualifications. Furthermore, residential areas varied, with 15 respondents (63% of the sample) residing in Singapore, 7 respondents (29% of the sample) in Vietnam, and 2 respondents (8% of the sample) originating from other countries. This demographic profile provides a nuanced understanding of the sample, incorporating gender distribution, perceptions, occupational backgrounds, educational attainment, and residential locations.

4.2 Policies & Initiatives in Singapore

Despite existing drawbacks in its legal framework concerning foreign spouses, Singapore has implemented relatively comprehensive policies and initiatives to support transnational couples, including financial incentives, streamlined visa processing, and social integration programs. One of the policy highlights in terms of supporting parents would be the Marriage and Parenthood Package, which aims to reduce the cost associated with child-bearing. Additionally, programs meant to aid transnational couples in marital relationships have recently been promoted more heavily by the Singapore government.

The Marriage and Parenthood Package, which subsidizes childcare and provides financial benefits for parents, has been effective in encouraging marriage and childbearing among transnational couples in Singapore. As part of this package, couples with one Singaporean spouse would receive a cash bonus when having children as well as a top-up to their child's national insurance account (National Population and Talent Division, 2023). The measures within this package aims to defray the cost of child-bearing and child-rearing while ensuring that parents can devote more time to their children; the element of cost is particularly pertinent to transnational couples for whom cost might be a major concern. However, these policies also concretize the idea that child-bearing is one of the primary objectives for domestic or transnational marriages, further reinforcing the marital responsibilities imposed on couples.

In addition, The Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA) provides clear guidelines for visa processing, facilitating smooth immigration for foreign spouses. However, literature suggests a dependence on the Singaporean spouse, creating fear of losing resident status. Government support programs, like the Marriage Preparation Programme (MPP) and Marriage Support Programme (MSP), help international couples integrate and build support networks. Buddy programs also connect Vietnamese wives, fostering cultural understanding.

4.3 Policies & Initiatives in Vietnam

The policies and initiatives in Vietnam for transnational marriages are relatively limited compared to Singapore. This is possibly due to the lack of pressure on the government from the relatively fewer number of transnational couples residing in Vietnam as opposed to abroad. However, the lack of policies and initiatives have caused problems for transnational couples as well as for Vietnamese whose marriage encountered difficulties.

There is a need for more comprehensive and targeted support systems, including legal frameworks, social integration programs, and cultural orientation initiatives. Currently, the Vietnamese legal system is inadequate in facilitating the residence of transnational couples in Vietnam as well as for Vietnamese returning from abroad due to marital separation. In the former case, the existing legal framework allows for an issuance of a temporary visa which lasts up to 3 years but nothing longer, creating a permanent temporariness for foreign spouses trying to stay with their family in Vietnam. Additionally, they do not have enjoy the tax, social security, and health benefits that

Vietnamese couples would usually enjoy. As a respondent noted, “It’s also frustrating to settle in Vietnam from a legal perspective as the visas to stay in Vietnam with your spouse are still only issued for 3 years.” Thus, although it is easy for foreign spouses to quickly obtain a short-term visa, their inability to access long-term residence is a pain point for transnational couples. With regards to the latter issue, Vietnamese returning from abroad has faced difficulties in enrolling their children into school due to a lack of a Vietnamese birth certificate and citizenship. This creates a difficult scenario for those who are already dealing with fallout from a potential separation or divorce.

Limited awareness and accessibility of support services pose challenges for transnational couples in Vietnam. As evidenced by news report and other research, there is a stigma associated to transnational marriage, especially if the Vietnamese spouse is a woman. These beliefs help to foster prejudice against transnational couples and further reduce the support available to the Vietnamese spouses in the scenario of marital dissolution. Additionally, this might prevent the full integration of transnational couples into Vietnamese society.

4.4 Challenges Faced by Transnational Marriages in Singapore and Vietnam

Legal Complexity

Transnational couples in Singapore and Vietnam both faced challenges posed by the legal frameworks of the respective countries. In both countries, though it is possible to gain an early foothold in the countries with a temporary residence permit or long-term visit pass, it became increasingly difficult to gain additional regulatory accommodations such as permanent residency, tax privileges, and housing rights. These policy challenges possibly stemmed from a lack of concern from the respective government regarding the status of the foreign spouse, who were still viewed only as “foreigners” rather than as a part of the nation-state. In Singapore’s case, residence is viewed as a privilege not to be given out easily, not even to foreign spouses of citizens.

Communication and Cultural Barriers

Communication and cultural barriers arose due to misaligned expectations of relationships and marital responsibilities, linguistic barriers, and cultural barriers. These negative consequences also arise in other cases where foreigners entered marriage with little knowledge of their native spouse, their culture, and native laws. However, as cases in Chib and Nguyen (2022) show, these barriers might also stem from inherently prejudiced perceptions of one spouse’s culture. In these cases, the spouses who moved to Singapore in order to stay with their in-laws were forbidden from speaking or consuming media in their native language in fear that their child would be influenced to learn that language instead of English. These barriers are further concretized by the stigma that foreign spouses seek out Singaporean matches in order to improve their socioeconomic situation. On the other hand, transnational couples with higher income and educational qualification whose relationships formed organically did not tend to experience as much communication or cultural barriers, though they are by no means immune to such obstacles; a key component appeared to be upkeeping communications with a commitment to openness and honesty. In Singapore’s case, government programs have been initiated in order to equip transnational couples with the skills to overcome these barriers.

Lack of Social and Community-Level Support

Transnational couples in Singapore and Vietnam had difficulties in finding social and community support when residing in a foreign country. These social networks would be vital in establishing social capital and emotional and mental support for foreign spouses. The lack thereof is especially serious if a spouse chooses to exploit the dependence and power imbalance to enact abuse. Unlike in Taiwan or South Korea, these networks have not fully developed in Singapore and Vietnam. There exist only scattered efforts from the

grassroots, often stemming from the local foreigner communities. However, in Singapore, thanks to a nascent buddy program, these networks are being formed partly through government's efforts to improve the relationship quality and standard of living for transnational couples.

Lessons from International Experience

International experiences from countries such as the Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Australia highlighted the importance of comprehensive integration programs, language courses, and cultural orientation initiatives in facilitating the social integration of transnational couples.

As transnational marriage is a global phenomenon, other countries have taken steps at various scales in order to better equip their societies to handle the effects of such unions. These policies can be either targeted at transnational marriages directly, or address it through indirect means.

One of the most notable international cases would be that of South Korea and its recent embrace of multiculturalism as an approach towards ethnic integration. In this course of action, the Korean government has created Multicultural Family Support Centres (MFSCs) where classes and activities are held for transnational couples to better support them in socializing and integrating into Korean society. These centres promote not only integration, but also understanding and acceptance between foreign and native spouses, as well as their families (Dicolen & Sanchez, 2016).

Taiwan presents another example of a new policies and initiatives which embrace multiculturalism. As part of its New Southbound Policy, the Taiwanese government has set aside resources in order to help second-generation children of immigrants to learn more about their foreign parents' culture and heritage. These programs are meant to expand their outlook outside of Taiwan and further strengthen their multicultural capital as global citizens. Additionally, these initiatives will help to improve Taiwan's relations with other countries as well (Lan, 2019).

These lessons can be adapted and applied to the Vietnamese context to enhance support systems for transnational couples.

5. Recommendations for Vietnam

From the results of participant interviews and secondary research into the policies and initiatives by the Singapore and Vietnamese governments, the challenges faced by transnational couples in both countries, and the lessons from the international community, three recommendations have been identified for the Vietnamese government to enhance its handling of transnational marriages.

Develop Comprehensive Policy & Initiatives for Transnational Marriages

It is essential that a clear, detailed, and streamlined regulatory framework is created specifically for couples in transnational marriages. These legal mechanisms should not only pave a pathway towards temporary residence, but also clearly delineates benefits and an eventual path towards citizenship for the foreign spouse and the resulting progeny of such a union. If possible, these policies should encourage foreign spouses and children of transnational couples to take up Vietnamese citizenships by allowing for dual citizenships or to enable them to access benefits of citizenships if they choose to reside and contribute to Vietnam. When comparing Vietnam to Singapore, Singapore presents a much more comprehensive and thought-out system of legal processing and integration for foreign spouses, however, it is still wholly insufficient.

In concurrence with this necessity, Professor Xoan, former Dean of Sociology from the University of Social Sciences & Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City stated: "Addressing

limited legal understanding among immigrants, especially Vietnamese brides in Singapore, through legal education and open policies for employment and integration is essential. Good preparation leads to positive outcomes, including integration, confidence, access to services, and improved parenting.”

Thus, by logical extension, a comprehensive legal and policy framework for transnational marriages would serve Vietnam well by providing a clearer future for transnational couples as well as their children. Such permanence would help them feel more integrated into Vietnamese society and be confident in building a family in Vietnam.

Enhance Social Integration and Marriage Preparation Program

Similar to the MPP and MSP of Singapore, the MSFC of South Korea and the New Southbound Policy of Taiwan, Vietnam still has ample room for creating new social integration and cultural learning programs. These programs should aim to promote healthy relationship behaviors for transnational couples such as intercultural conflict management and communication strategies. In addition, these programs should aim to promote understanding and acceptance of different cultures and customs and aid the spouses in learning each other’s languages. In this endeavor, the government can partner with existing social organizations such as the different countries’ Union of Friendship organizations and the local groups for different expatriate communities to host and run these training programs and courses. Moreover, the government should further enhance its efforts in preparing Vietnamese citizens planning to move abroad for marriage by hosting preparatory courses covering essential legal and cultural knowledge.

According to one respondent, Lim, President of the Singapore Chamber of Commerce in Vietnam: “Vietnamese women marrying Singaporean men quickly adapt, becoming proficient in language and daily activities, boosting confidence and integration.”

It is probable that such a buddy support system would translate equally well into a Vietnamese setting, both in pairing Vietnamese spouses with others who are in transnational marriages, as well as for foreign spouses to be supported by other international inhabitants in Vietnam. These programs can also impart important marital skills onto transnational couples. As some of these programs already exist, new policies and initiatives can focus on partnership and expansion, rather than reinventing the wheel. The content and benefits of these programs were described by a Vietnamese social worker.

Increase Awareness and Sensibility of Society Towards Transnational Marriages

Lastly, Vietnam can take the opportunity to learn from South Korea’s and Taiwan’s commitment to multiculturalism by enhancing its education and propaganda efforts to normalize transnational marriages and prevent the concretization of stigmas in society. The government must take the initiative to invest in research and education to highlight the benefits of multiculturalism and of transnational unions. Social morays should be adjusted to foster civility, courteousness, and acceptance towards transnational couples and children borne from transnational marriages. Additionally, natives engaging in transnational relationships, especially women of socioeconomically-disadvantaged backgrounds, should not be unfairly maligned. The prejudice experienced can push these women into a difficult situation with little recourse other than to leave behind the support of their community, as described by a Vietnamese social worker in the case of an abused Vietnamese spouse returning from abroad.

One example of such an initiative to increase awareness and normalize transnational marriage was mentioned by Huong, head of the women committee, Korean-Vietnamese Multicultural Family Association in Ho Chi Minh City: “The President of South Korea honours multicultural families for raising talented and well-behaved children, contributing to development, peace, and democracy. They are praised for their significant contributions to freedom, peaceful order, and unity.”

6. Conclusions

Transnational marriages are inherently extremely complex, concerning legal institutions, civic culture, as well as normative perceptions of foreignness. This study examined the relevant policies and initiatives in Singapore and Vietnam as related to transnational marriages, identified the prevalent challenges faced by transnational couples in both countries, and outlined lessons for Vietnam to better enhance the experience of transnational couples residing in the country. The findings indicate that Singapore and Vietnam still lack a clear legal framework for integrating foreign spouses into the nation state. In the case of Singapore, while it has been successful in initiating social integration programs, its policies still result in alienation and dependency of the foreign spouse, reducing their autonomy, agency, and socialization. This legal complexity is one of the three challenges faced by transnational couples in Singapore and Vietnam. Aside from this, these couples also experience communication and cultural barriers resulting from possible cultural misalignment and linguistic difficulties. Additionally, this is exacerbated by the lack of social and community support for these couples as they try to navigate their relationships. The study also identified several lessons from the international experience in Canada, South Korea, and Taiwan which could prove valuable to Vietnam. It proposed three policy recommendations in order to aid Vietnam in creating a better environment for transnational couples in its borders. By implementing these recommendations, Vietnam can protect transnational marriages and the individuals involved while promoting better intercultural understanding and enriching its social fabric.

In conclusion, the study has contributed to research by providing insights into the policies and initiatives, challenges, and lessons from international experience as they relate to transnational marriages in Singapore and Vietnam. It has also contributed to evidence-based policy-making by outlining recommendations for Vietnam. Future research can further contribute to the space by utilizing quantitative methods on a larger sample of transnational couples to systematically study their experience.

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