

# Vietnamese women marrying foreigners: a view from studies

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**Abstract:** *In recent years, marriage with foreigners is no longer a new phenomenon in Vietnam and has become a problem attracting much attention of mass media and public opinion. Thorough studies on this phenomenon have shown positive impacts of marriages involving foreign elements. However, over the past ten years, press at home and abroad has repeatedly reported on incidents of overseas Vietnamese brides being violated seriously in human dignity, spirit as well as body. There have been Vietnamese brides being tortured, beaten, cruelly treated, forced to be sex slaveries, etc by their husbands and husbands' family, and they must escape to live outside the law or return to Vietnam with disable, ruined bodies. More heartbreakingly, some died in foreign lands due to being murdered tragically by their foreign husbands... It is negative impacts of this phenomenon. The content of this article helps to clarify the status of Vietnamese women marrying foreigners in recent years, explaining the causes and summarizing some proposals and solutions to reduce risks of Vietnamese women's marriages involving foreign elements.*

**Key words:** Vietnamese women, Marriage and family, Marriages involving foreign elements, Vietnamese brides

**1. Status of Vietnamese women's marriages involving foreign elements** Vietnamese women and foreign husbands.

In recent years, marriage relationships with foreign elements in Vietnam have grown considerably, of which the majority is the marriage between According to the Ministry of Justice's statistical data announced at the overseas Vietnamese Women's Conference held in Hanoi in November

2013, during 2008-2010, nearly 300,000 Vietnamese women married with foreigners, i.e nearly 100,000 Vietnamese women married foreigners every year on average. Most of them were from Taiwan, China, Korea (Ngọc Hà, Nguyễn Xoài, 2013). The problem is that 86.3% of them got married while they were unemployed, mainly homemakers, 2.8% of them were workers, 5% of them were employees. A survey by the Institute of Social Sciences in the Southern region showed that, Vietnamese women' fiances were citizens of Taiwan and South Korea who were mostly farmers, workers and employees with low qualifications (83%); the number of self-employers weren't significant (11%); some were completely dependent on their husband's family (Phạm Bá Nhiều, 2009)

According to the Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Welfare's statistics, during 2008- 2010, nearly 70,000 women in SouthWest Vietnam married foreigners (the Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Welfare, 2009). Among top five provinces and cities having the highest proportion of women marrying foreigners, the Mekong Delta region had three provinces of Đồng Tháp, Bạc Liêu and An Giang. In recent years, Đồng Tháp has had the proportion of women marrying foreigners decrease (In 2005, there were 336 cases, then in 2010 there were 156 cases) (Ngọc Long, 2011).

Since the year 2005, the number of Vietnamese brides marrying Taiwanese men has tended to decrease but the number of Vietnamese brides marrying Korean men has increased rapidly, among them Southern women still occupied an absolutely large number, that was higher than all other areas. From 2006 until now, the number of rural women in Southwest provinces marrying foreigners continued to increase, and South Korea has won the top position from Taiwan. Thus, for decades, there have been tens to hundreds of thousands of young girls in rural areas leaving their home to marry and live in foreign lands, creating an unprecedented, frantic trend of foreign-element marriages in Vietnam's history which has no signs of stopping so far (Trần Thị Thu Lương, 2012) .

Starting up the "movement" of marrying foreigners is Hochiminh City and Southwest provinces. Now this phenomenon is "spreading" throughout such mountainous and coastal provinces and cities of the Northern Delta as Lạng Sơn, Quảng Ninh, Hải Phòng. Some communes of Hải Phòng as Đại Hợp, Lập Lễ, Đoàn Xá, Tú Sơn has become prominent examples for the "movement" of women marrying foreigners with an average of over 500 brides marrying South Korean, Taiwanese men each commune. According to the 2010 national survey of the Government of South Korea

over 130,000 households, the proportion of Vietnamese women marrying Korean men was 18.4%, ranking the third among inter-country couples, equivalent to 30 799 people. This figure was actually higher because there were many Vietnamese women immigrating for marriage illegally (Vũ Hoa, 2012). Typically in Quảng Ninh, the number of women marrying foreigners (mainly South Korean men) has increased strongly, in 2005 there were 126 cases and in 2010 the number increased to 786 cases, of which very few cases registered marriage at the Department of Justice but essentially followed their husbands to leave for South Korea to register marriage, then came back to the South Korean Embassy in Vietnam to apply for marriage certificate, and finally went to the Department of Justice to apply for marriage note. Therefore, these women suffered very high risks because they were not consulted before marriage (Ngọc Long, <http://baophapluat.vn...>).

## **2. The reasons why Vietnamese women get married to foreigners**

Each Vietnamese woman marrying foreigners has her own reasons. According to studies of sociologists, main causes of this phenomenon may be referred to main groups as followed:

*Expectation of improving family's economic status*

The Survey “*Understanding the status of women in the Mekong Delta marrying Taiwanese men*” (2004) by Trần Thị Kim Xuyên showed that, the dominant cause of Vietnamese women’s decision to marry foreigners was economic factor (Trần Thị Kim Xuyên, 2005).

In the Mekong Delta area, families whose daughters married foreigners mostly had low educational background, no qualifications, mainly do farming, lack lands, had to be employed (at this stage young girls in the Mekong Delta mainly marry Taiwanese men). Some households had their own small business and service, but their income was not stable, even not much enough to afford their life. Many families, inspite of having a better life, just earned enough to make ends meet. Whenever they faced disasters or their dear relatives were seriously ill, they would get into the difficult situation. The fact that their daughters married foreigners provided them with quick economic efficiency. Therefore, many families in the Mekong Delta expected their daughters to marry foreigners.

The Study on “The phenomenon of Vietnamese women getting married to Taiwanese men “made in 2004 also concluded: the economic factor was the biggest reason why a woman decide to marry foreigners. For the question why they want to marry foreigners, 78.94 % of them stated that

was due to their personal and family life in trouble; 65.5 % due to unemployment; 62.56 % due to lack of money for solving unexpected difficulties; only 47.1 % said that they'd like to marry a foreigner. Thus most of the girls married foreigners due to difficult economic circumstances" (Phan An, Phan Quang Thịnh, Nguyễn Quới, 2005) .

Providing a further support for the argument that the economic factor is the main cause of most decisions to marry foreigners by Vietnamese brides, the results of the Survey "*The status of Vietnamese women marrying Korean men (Research on Đại Hạp commune, Kiến Thủy district, Hải Phòng city)*" in 2009 showed that 53 % of parents whose daughters married Korean men said that their daughters sent them money, 8 % of them sent money regularly, 75 % occasionally, and only 17 % of respondents said their daughters rarely sent them money. Local people said that most of the families having daughters marry Korean husbands were wealthy.

In addition, there were also significant differentiation in living standards between families having daughters marry foreigners and other households. The living standards of local people could be grouped into three categories: rich, middle and poor. Rich households spent 5 million, middle households spent 2.5 million and poor households spent 1 million monthly. Among

wealthier households, they were mainly families having daughters marry foreigners (80%) and send them money (Hoàng Bá Thịnh, 2010).

Thus it is no coincidence that all answers to the reason of young girls' marriage with foreigners emphasizes the economic factor. Many people have rushed to assess that these families and their daughters are greedy of money without notice to other consequences. However, to understand the problem profoundly, it is needed to further analyze other causes.

#### *Community's acceptance*

The Study "*the reason why women in the Mekong Delta marry Taiwanese men*" (2004) showed that the phenomenon of Vietnamese brides marrying foreigners was due to other causes, that was the community's attitude of acceptance. Although there still remained many adverse opinions, the majority of people in the community didn't deny the phenomenon of marriage with foreigners. People in the community often sympathized with families in difficulty and empathized with the way of thanksgiving to parents by these girls (Trần Thị Kim Xuyên, 2005). They said that parents had merit of giving the birth, bringing up and daughters should be obliged to help parents, that should be considered as filial daughters. Thanksgiving was expressed in not only spiritual care but also material care, and marriage with

foreigners was considered as a solution to this problem. In this case, the community's attitude has a collective meaning, i.e families are preferred, while individual elements only have unessential role.

*Supply meets demand and supply's ability to meet demand*

With the appreciated concept of thanksgiving in many local communities, all girls want their future husbands to be capable of providing financial support for their whole family, so that their life is better... However, young men in their communities where they live can not meet this condition. Meanwhile, foreigners (from Taiwan, South Korea...) also encounter similar situations in their countries. Those who have average income and low social status can not also meet the standards of the girls who are qualified and have stable jobs because of high living standards in their country. The 2004 Research by Trần Thị Kim Xuyên indicates that Taiwanese men often focused on their career and financial accumulation when they were young. Until they realized that it's time to marry, they were too old to marry a desired wife. Those with low social status were even more difficult. Meanwhile, information from various sources gave them a new opportunity - marriage with Vietnamese girls. Therefore, they tried their luck through free travelling or brokerage companies.

At the same time, Taiwanese men's standards for a wife also often fit Vietnamese girls. Vietnamese girls as they figured were diligent, hardworking, tolerant, filial to parents and loved their husbands. It could be said that both Vietnamese brides and grooms from Taiwan in particular and other countries in general had their own purpose. Although the passionate love and the ardour was not much in their relationship, but both parties remained conjugal attachment. The study by Trần Thị Kim Xuyên also showed that they mainly felt their inter-country marriage life good. Both the bride and the groom were happy with their decision (Trần Thị Kim Xuyên, 2005).

*Marriage for love*

Though economic motivation is the main reason of most Vietnamese girls' decision to marry foreigners, among them there still remain marriages for love. At the National Conference on Marriage and Family involving Foreign Elements held in Cần Thơ in late 2011, according to the Institute of Labour Science and Social Affair, in the year 2011, about 7% of 130,000 women marrying foreigners came from love (Ngọc Long, <http://baophapluat.vn> /...). Although this figure was relatively low, but it also showed that a small minority of those marrying foreigners were lucky to find their happiness, and got married based on true love. Those who marry

foreigners were also aware that unless marriage was based on love, it could not be happy. However their standards were often ideal, but not real.

Although the society still exists unsympathetic gazes upon women marrying foreigners, their role cannot be negated in spreading Vietnam's culture in the international community through their swap stories with local residents and Vietnamese dishes. They also play an important part in contributing to the flow of overseas remittances sent home. They deserve more esteem, equal recognition from the society.

### **3. Some solutions to reduce risks of foreign-element marriages**

The biggest difficulty that Vietnamese brides marrying foreigners have is too large differences in culture, customs and language. When these differences are causes of conflicts, women or Vietnamese brides will be put at the greatest disadvantage. They have almost no way back, but the only and mandatory way, that is to integrate with their husbands, husbands' families and society abroad. Because personal dignity of each person is formed during long time, they will have difficulties in changing suddenly and join a totally new environment. Vietnamese girls with low starting point, mostly in rural areas, low educational background, limited social understanding and almost completely different language, when involving a

marriage without (or with little) affection, love, understanding of native culture and language, will encounter many difficulties and potential risks. Vietnamese brides must accept a completely dependent life on their husbands. Once economic dependence appears, it would lead to many other dependences. When husbands know however they treated their wives, their wives have to depend on them, there is hardly an equal treatment. Violence, even homicide of Vietnamese brides in foreign lands is one of negative consequences resulted from the above causes. Therefore, it is impossible to leave them involve a marriage in foreign lands with nothing in hands except a life-changing dream. In our opinion, it is necessary to equip them well to engage in a marriage in foreign lands with as followed:

*Strengthening the role and responsibilities of unions and social organizations:* Now Vietnamese women's marriage with foreigners needs to be properly concerned by the community, society and organizations in order to help them in the best way. For example, the Vietnam Women's Union- a social and political organization of women - should be deeply concerned about members of the group of marriage with foreigners. Genral Statistics Office of Vietnam should give specific statistical data on cases of marrying foreigners. The Ministry of Justice should analyze

thoroughly these data. The Supreme Court should provide a statistical data on foreign-element divorce rate and analyze causes of these incidents... Thereby this problem will be multi-dimensionally approached to be adjusted and there will be practical policies to protect Vietnamese women in marriages with foreigners.

*Strengthening the role of the family:* families' education on culture, lifestyle and code of conduct plays a very important role not only in the formation of human dignity but also in equipping each person with understanding, life skills, adaptability to face life's changes and risks. Especially the girls marrying foreigners need to be educated how to intergrate into the culture and environment where they will arrive to marry in order to avoid or minimize arising risks.

*Information on the status of Vietnamese brides' marriage life abroad:* It is needed to provide Vietnamese girls and their parents with the status of Vietnamese brides' marriage life abroad so that their families and themselves think twice before making any decision, avoiding the lack of information or misinformation (provided by brokers) resulting in disillusion and regrets for their bad decisions. It is needed to provide girls with proper and accurate information about their future husbands, their future husbands'

circumstances, the locations where they will arrive and live as wives and daughters-in-law, that will contribute to help Vietnamese girls and their families consider before deciding whom to marry appropriately.

*It is needed to train skills as a wife, as a daughter-in-law abroad for Vietnamese brides:* Vietnamese girls need to understand laws, customs and practices in regions of the country where they will come to. They need to be aware of differences in culture, language, thinking and should be equipped with skills of houseworks, using home devices, cooking native dishes. This is quite an important factor to ensure a sustainable marriage in a foreign country.

*Well-prepared for language:* This can be considered as one of the most important factors for Vietnamese brides to live well in a foreign land. It will be hard for them to complete their role as a wife, as a daughter-in-law abroad if they can not communicate, express their thought and want due to not understanding the native language. So, the girls before marriage need to learn the native language of the husband they intend to marry. Though they can not speak fluently, at least they should know how to communicate at a minimum level, call the names of objects and devices in the family, etc .. This is the premise for Vietnamese girls to come over language barriers towards integrating

into the family life abroad.

Besides, not only in Vietnam (representing the “brides”), but also in those countries representing the “bridegroom” should also have effects, adjustments of policies and public opinion on misconceptions about happiness in general and Vietnamese women in particular (Hoàng Bá Thịnh, 2006).

### **Conclusion**

It can be seen that not all marriages between Vietnamese women and foreigners are bed of roses, and not all of these marriages are full of tears. In spite of shortcomings, it is undeniable that the source of money Vietnamese brides send to their families help change the economic status of their families in particular and the regions of Vietnam in general.

Vietnam is still a country influenced by the thought of “valuing men above women”, which has led to the phenomenon of gender imbalance in Vietnam children today. In the context of international marriages, in regions where women marry foreigners massively a new perception appeared: the thought of valuing men above women has no longer strong influence as before, not to say there are a change in value that people appreciate women’s value more and more. Because women marrying foreigners bring their family a change in life, while families with many sons are

worried about not having a wife. The fact that women marrying foreigners have sent money back to their families makes the conception of “filial” eminently economic.

Once the local marriage market have difficulties due to scarcity of women in the age of marriage, men must find a wife elsewhere. This is an inevitable principle in marriage and family, especially with Vietnam’s culture and in rural areas where people are not familiar with single lifestyle .

Foreign element marriage in the context of urbanization, industrialization and international integration is an inevitable trend which took place under the influence of economic, cultural and social factors as well as variations in perceptions, values, traditional norms of marriage and family. In the advance development of the society, freedom to marriage has become a fundamental value of human rights. However, along with the development of the market economy and strong globalization trends, marriage life and family in Vietnam is facing risks of unusual marriage phenomena, taking advantage of this right towards beneficial relationships. The phenomenon of marriage between Vietnamese women and foreigners which is not from love and advance purposes in many cases is a typical example of negative effects of the left-side of the market economy on

the marriage relationship. It is really a complex social problem that should be received much attention from public opinion as well as state authorities, at the same time raises it should be considered and resolved from the perspective of international justice □

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