

TRANSNATIONAL MARRIAGE: AN ECONOMIC STRATEGY FOR POOR FAMILIES

Marriage between Vietnamese brides and Taiwanese grooms has become a phenomenon in Vietnam which receives a lot of public concerns. According to official statistics, there are more than 120,000 Vietnamese brides in Taiwan. Since 2001, Vietnamese brides account for almost half of the foreign brides in Taiwan. In 2006, Vietnamese brides accounted for 85 percent of total 11,973 persons becoming new Taiwanese citizens. There are a number of issues which attract attention of the public and need to be understood and explained. This study gives a better understanding about situation and factors leading to this marriage phenomenon.

Data source and methodology

The study has been conducted in 6 provinces in the Mekong River Delta – the main source of Vietnamese brides to Taiwan by the Vietnam Commission for Population, Family and Children (VCPFC). Both quantitative and qualitative research methods are employed. There is a total of 460 youths interviewed with questionnaires and more than 100 in-depth interviews and group discussions.

The collected information has been analyzed with use of SPSS for quantitative data and topics for qualitative information.

Findings

All six provinces in the study have high percentage of married women with Taiwanese husbands. This percentage is as high as more than 90% in Can Tho and Hau Giang, 70-80% in Vinh Long, about 80% in Dong Thap, An Giang or lower of 40% in Tien Giang.

Majority of the Vietnamese brides (nearly 90%) come from rural areas where the living conditions are much lower than the urban ones. Results from other studies show that there is a big income gap between urban and rural areas in the Mekong River Delta region. This gap reflects in shortage of food, basic living conditions as well as tools to overcome their poverty. Migration of young family members to work in urban areas for income is very common in the region. Marriage with Taiwanese is also a way which receives supports from many poor families.

Socio-demographic characteristics of Vietnamese-Taiwanese couples

The big gap in age between brides and blooms is the most considering characteristic. The average age of Vietnamese brides is 21.7 years with most of them in the ages of 18-20 years. In contrast, the average age of Taiwanese blooms is 34.6 years – almost 13 years older than the brides. Most of the blooms are in the ages of 30-40 years.

Age difference of 11-15 years is found among 35% of the total couples, following by 6-10 years (27%) and 16-20 years (24%). Qualitative information also gives an impression that young Vietnamese brides seem eager in the marriages while Taiwanese blooms try to take advantages for their late marriages.

Regarding educational level, Vietnamese brides have quite low education in general. Most of them (85%) have completed primary or lower secondary education. Taiwanese blooms have higher education i.e. 54% of lower secondary schools and 36% of higher secondary schools. Only few of them have university or higher education (less than 2%). Though education is higher among Taiwanese blooms, they still belong to the low education group in Taiwan.

Due to low education, the Vietnamese brides mostly engage in low-paid jobs or only doing house work before marriage. According to the statistics of the Taiwanese Economic-Cultural Office in Hanoi, 91% of Vietnamese brides state that they are doing housework. That kind of work is also common expectation from Taiwanese husbands. However, qualitative results reveal that Vietnamese brides do different jobs, not only housework. Similarly, the Taiwanese blooms more likely engage in services works, unskilled works and in factories. The results give an evidence to the public that even though the Taiwanese blooms are not rich and in high social positions in Taiwan, but they are also not mainly famers, poor, unemployed, etc. as mentioned in the newspapers.

Other information is on health status of marriage couples. The results show that Vietnamese brides are in good health status since most of them are young, live in rural areas where social diseases are not common. Most of the Taiwanese blooms also have good health (68%). About one-third have relatively good health and only 1% has some kinds of disabilities.

Marital status before marriage also gives interesting information. For Vietnamese brides, 90% are single; 7.7% have boyfriends and 1.4% divorced. For Taiwanese blooms, similar percentage (88%) is single but 1.4% is married and 6.8% divorced.

Marriage process and brokers

Marriage process has very important impact on the marriage life later on, especially for foreign marriage cases. Majority of Vietnamese brides state that due to distant and cultural barriers, they cannot meet the blooms themselves. Main sources of information include previous Vietnamese brides (28.6%), marriage brokers (28.6%), relatives/family members (22.2%) and friends (12.1%). Usually, meetings between brides and blooms are arranged by marriage brokers. For Vietnamese brides, economic conditions are given some priorities. For Taiwanese blooms, the requirements are somewhat vague. Marriage brokers play key role in this process. Beside the legal ones, many illegal marriage brokers are functioning in this field.

Who make decision to the marriage? Research results reveal that 40% of the brides make decision themselves, 34% by parents (fathers alone, mothers alone or together) and 24% by joint-decision of brides and parents.

After the meeting and with agreement of both sides, average time to the official marriage ceremony is only 3.5 days – quite shocking time duration. The duration can be up to 5 days in Vinh Long and only 1.5 days in Tien Giang.

Marriage with Taiwanese – An effective economic strategy for poor families

Economic reason plays an important role in making marriage decision. Majority of Vietnamese brides come from poor families which are characterized by:

- Mainly engaging in agricultural works but having no land, money, etc;
- Low parents' education i.e. 10 percent illiterate, 60 percent with primary education and 22 percent with lower secondary education;
- High fertility i.e. average of 5.3 children per family comparing to only 2 for Vietnam;
- High dependency rate (no income) i.e. 2.24 per working person;
- Poor family status before getting marriage i.e. 20 percent very poor, 41 percent poor and 30 percent average.

Thus, getting marriage with Taiwanese is considered as only way to overcome economic difficulties for many poor families. The marriage can benefit both the family and the daughters themselves. When a daughter gets marriage, more than 80 percent of parents expected some forms of economic support to the families, comparing to only 15 percent said no expectation. This expectation is higher among parents with lower education. Economic support can be in the time of marriage i.e. some money or in the long-run when their daughters can earn money in Taiwan.

This strategy is translated into marriage intention that the daughters want to help their parents and families to overcome difficult conditions; to have opportunity to change their lives; or to stay in a foreign country with better conditions. Only small proportion said that they married because of love.

Effectiveness of this strategy is proven in practice. Research results show that living condition of families having daughters to get marriage with Taiwanese is significantly improved. Proportion of well-off families increased to 48 percent from only 8 percent while the proportion of poor and very poor families dropped sharply from 60 percent to less than 10 percent. Qualitative information also confirms this actual improvement.

Public attitude towards this marriage phenomenon also changes from against the marriage to understanding and then somewhat agree with the Vietnamese brides. Economic benefits to the families are clearer and can be seen after a short time. In other side, unhappiness of Vietnamese brides in Taiwan is also documented in certain cases leading to conflict public opinion.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of Vietnamese brides – Taiwanese blooms has become a public issue in Vietnam. This phenomenon has both benefits and negative impact. The mentioned benefits are mainly economic for families and the brides themselves in the forms of money, house improvement, living conditions, etc. The disadvantages receive less attention and are quoted from other sources, not directly. In response to this phenomenon, various recommendations are suggested focusing on the root causes such as economic restructure, job creation in the local areas, providing support to poor families, strengthening education and communication to the target groups, providing full information on life in Taiwan and other necessary preparation for those married.