

Vietnamese Brides in Taiwan: Who Are They?

**Tran Quang Lam¹
Nguyen Thi Mai²
Tran Diem Hong³**

As the globalization process is going, Vietnam is integrating into the world in all socio-economic, political and cultural aspects. Beside positive impacts of this integration to the country development and cultural exchanges, negative impacts also appear. Marriage between Vietnamese and foreigners, especially with Taiwanese and Korean grooms, has become a phenomenon in Vietnam which receives a lot of public concerns. This phenomenon implies complicated issues arising from big gaps in ages, geographic areas, culture, languages, etc.

This paper pays more attention to marriage between Vietnamese brides and Taiwanese grooms. 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 Taiwanese citizens. Majority of the Vietnamese brides come from the Mekong River Delta. There are numbers of issues which attract attention of the public and need to be understood and explained. Various studies have been conducted to explain the reasons behind this marriage relationship. In favor of the positive viewpoint, Mr. David Ngo from the Taiwanese Economic and Cultural Office in Vietnam has cited the fact that the divorce rate among Vietnamese-Taiwanese couples is about 8 percent or approximately 1,000 per year and this rate is lower than among native couples. However, in newspapers, especially in Vietnam, there are more sad stories about marriage life than the happy ones. Since economic reason has been widely mentioned as the main factor for this marriage phenomenon, unhappy ending is more likely to happen.

This study tries to provide better understanding about situation and factors leading to this marriage phenomenon.

Data source and methodology

The study has been conducted by Vietnam Commission for Population, Family and Children (VCPFC) in 6 provinces i.e. An Giang, Can Tho/Hau Giang, Dong Thap, Tien Giang and Vinh Long in the Mekong River Delta – the main source of Vietnamese brides to Taiwan. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods are employed.

There is a total of 460 youths aged 13-25 with diversified education, jobs, life style and religion and 635 families interviewed using questionnaires and more than 100 in-depth interviews and

¹ Management Sciences for Health Vietnam/Thang Long University

² Center for Population Research, Information and Database

³ National Economics University (PhD Candidate)

group discussions with Vietnamese brides, their families, marriage mediators and local government staff.

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

Research findings

Previous study findings suggest that economic reason plays an important role in this marriage phenomenon. It is helpful to provide an overview of socio-economic and cultural characteristics of the Mekong River Delta region. Majority of people in the region still live in rural areas and engage in agricultural activities. However, not all people have their own land and many of them have to work for others. 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.

According to Vietnam statistical report (2013), poverty rate in the Mekong River Delta is still more than 12 percent. The figure is 2 to 3 times higher in the rural areas than that in urban areas. This situation leads to massive labor migration from this region to big cities and industrial zones for economic reason, especially among young people. In addition, this region also has an opened and interactive culture leading to its inhabitants being much more opened to and easy acceptance of new socio-economic and cultural changes. It is easy to accept new comes as well as allow people to leave without tight. Another characteristic is that community relationship is not very close and strict as in the Northern part of Vietnam.

All the mentioned socio-economic and cultural characteristics contribute to the typical demographic changes of marriage with Taiwanese grooms. Marriage is considered as one effective way to escape from poverty and improve living standard of certain population group in this region.

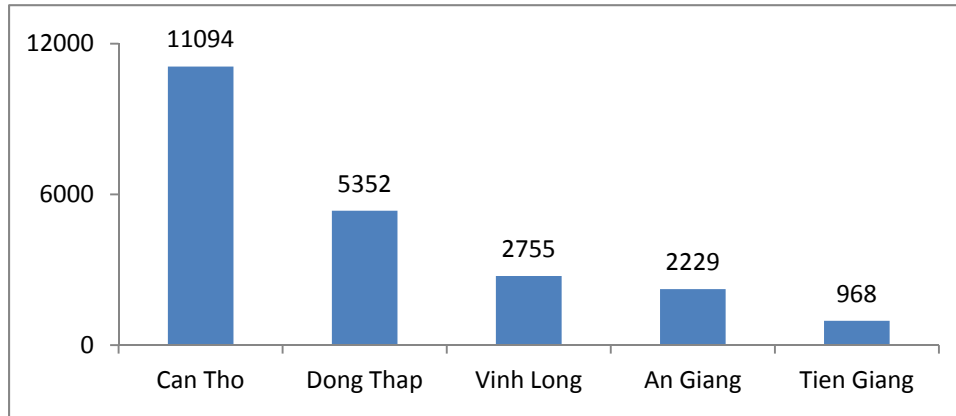
According to statistics from the Taiwanese Economic and Cultural Office in Vietnam, Taiwanese -Vietnamese marriage began in mid-90s and picked in 2003-2004 with about 10,000 married couples per year. Vietnamese brides from the Mekong River Delta usually accounts for a big proportion. Majority of the Vietnamese brides (nearly 90%) come from rural areas where the living conditions are much lower than the urban ones. For example, out of 11,358 Vietnamese brides in 2003, 7,285 persons or 64,14 percent came from this region. Some typical province can be named including Can Tho/Hau Giang, An Giang, Vinh Long and Dong Thap.

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/Hau Giang, 70-80% in Vinh Long, about 80% in Dong Thap, An Giang or lower of 40% in Tien Giang. Number of Vietnamese brides during 2000-2003 period in those provinces is presented in figure 1.

The data reveal that during 4-year period, only the surveyed provinces had nearly 22,400 Vietnamese brides to marry with Taiwanese grooms or more than half of the estimated number

of total Vietnamese brides in the same period. Can Tho/Hau Giang, with more than 11,000 brides or about 50 percent, is the biggest province, followed by Dong Thap with more than 5,000 or one-fourth of the total. Tien Giang has lowest number of Vietnamese brides with less than 1,000.

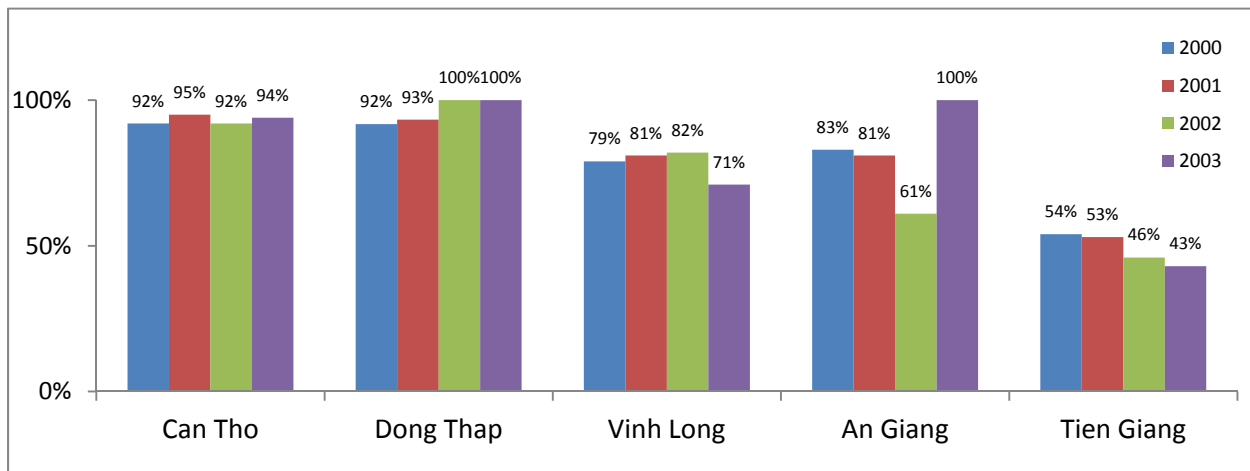
Figure 1. Number of Vietnamese brides by province during 2000-2003 period



Sources: Statistics from Provincial Department of Justice in 5 provinces

Marriage with Taiwanese grooms accounts for a majority of total international marriage as shown in figure 2. It can be seen that the pattern is quite consistent over year. The figure is always more than 90 percent in Can Tho/Hau Giang and Dong Thap, 60 to 80 percent in Vinh Long and An Giang, and about 50 percent in Tien Giang.

Figure 2. Percentage of Taiwanese-Vietnamese marriage (2000-2003)



Sources: Statistics from Provincial Department of Justice in 5 provinces

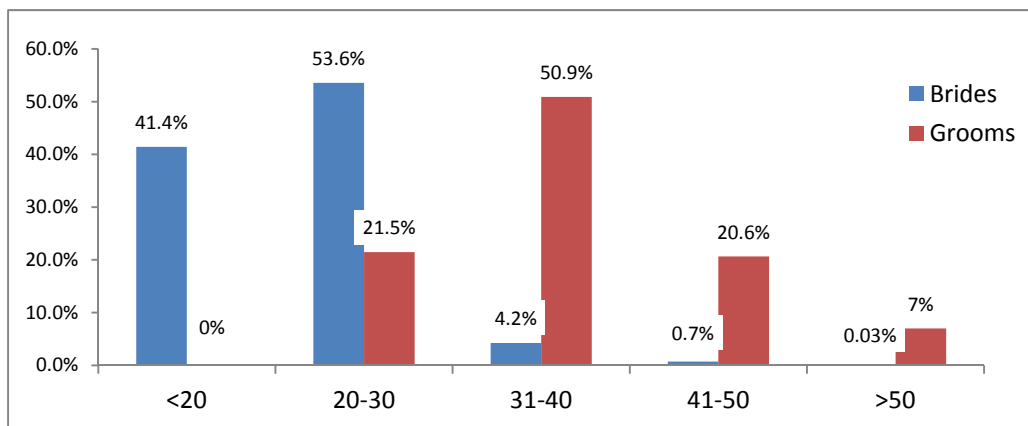
Socio-demographic characteristics of Vietnamese-Taiwanese couples

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 distribution of marriage couples in 2003 is presented in figure 3.

According to statistical data from Taiwanese Economic and Cultural Office, there was a total of 11,358 Vietnamese-Taiwanese couples married in 2003. It can be observed a clear pattern of age distribution between brides and grooms. While 95 percent of the brides are in the ages of less than 30 years, even 41 percent less than 20 years, nearly 80 percent of grooms have ages of more than 30 years. The big contrast is that more than 41 percent of brides and no groom are in the ages of 20 years or less comparing to 28 percent of grooms and 1 percent of brides are in the ages of 40 years or older.

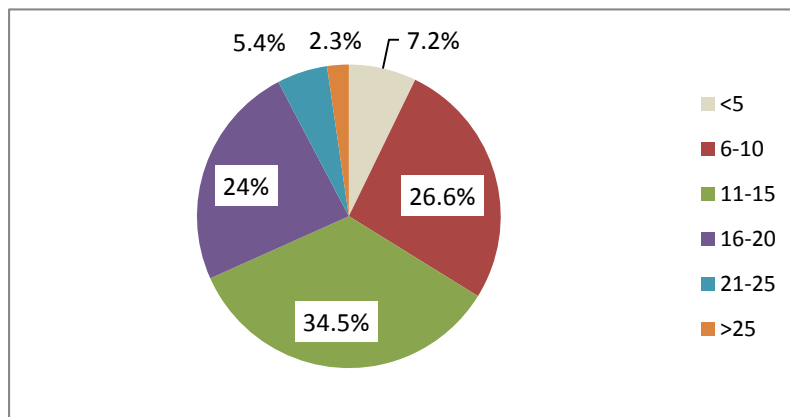
Figure 3. Age distribution of marriage couples in 2003 (percent)



Sources: Statistics from Taiwanese Economic and Cultural Office

Big age-difference is also an important characteristic of this marriage phenomenon. Qualitative information from interview of brides, grooms and their families also gives an impression that young Vietnamese brides seem eager in the marriages while Taiwanese blooms try to take advantages for their late marriages. Figure 4 shows age-difference for married couples in 2003.

Figure 4. Age-difference of married couples in 2003



Sources: Statistics from Taiwanese Economic and Cultural Office

The data from figure 4 shows that the normal age difference for native couples i.e. 5 years or less accounts for a small proportion of 7.2 percent. Highest age difference is 11 to 15 years with 34.5 percent, followed by 6 to 10 years with 26.6 percent and 16 to 20 years with 24 percent. In some exceptional cases, the difference is more than 25 years. The situation is somewhat the same in the surveyed provinces, the mean age differences are found from 12 to 15 years. The highest age difference is 51 years in Tien Giang province.

As mentioned above, there is a big gap in living standard between urban and rural areas which can be an important factor behind this transnational marriage. Information on place of residence of Vietnamese brides in the surveyed provinces during 2001-2003 period also supports this fact (table 1). The data suggests that majority of Vietnamese brides come from rural areas with around 90 percent of the total.

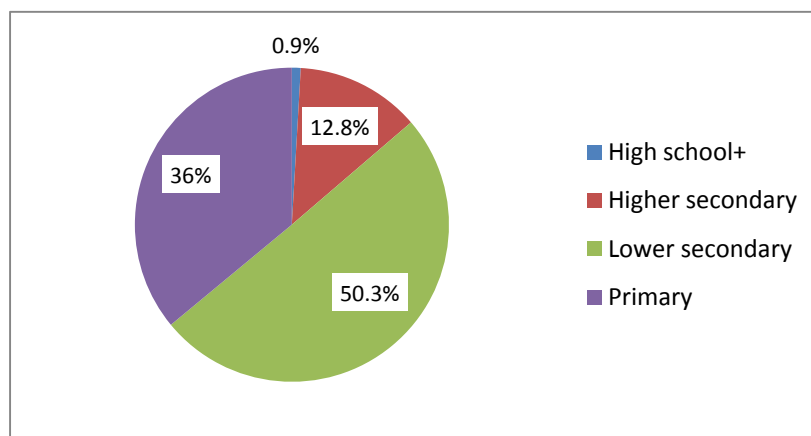
Table 1. Place of residence of Vietnamese brides (2001-2003)

Year	Urban residence (%)	Rural residence (%)
2001	8.7%	91.3%
2002	13.8%	86.2%
2003	10.2%	89.8%
Total	11%	89%

Sources: Statistics from Taiwanese Economic and Cultural Office

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. Data from figure 5 also confirms the pattern of low education among Vietnamese brides in the surveyed provinces with 86 percent completing primary and lower secondary education. Only 12.8 percent brides has higher secondary education and less than 1 percent has high school or higher.

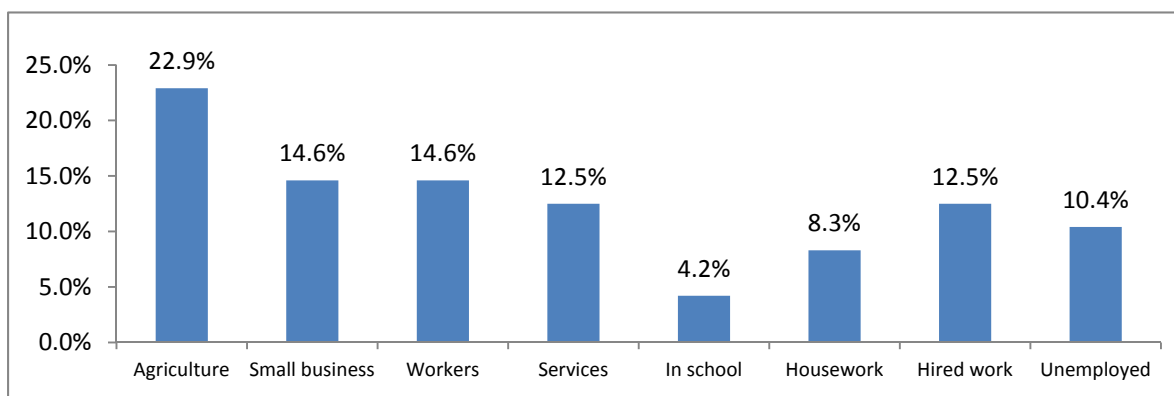
Figure 5. Age-difference of married couples in 2003



Sources: Calculated from field data collected in surveyed provinces

Due to low education, the Vietnamese brides mostly engage in low-paid jobs or only doing housework before marriage. According to the statistics of the Taiwanese Economic and Cultural Office, 91 percent of Vietnamese brides states that they are doing housework. Since this kind of work is also common expectation from Taiwanese husbands, girls are suggested to state their job as good housework. However, qualitative results reveal that this job statement does not reflect the real situation. However, field interviews show much more diversified work activities of Vietnamese brides rather than housework (figure 6).

Figure 6. Vietnamese brides' job prior marriage (percent)



Sources: Calculated from field data collected in surveyed provinces

Interviewing results show that housework only accounts for 8.3 percent of the total, not majority as official statistics. Agricultural work, small business and working in factories are mostly cited with nearly 23, 15 and 15 percent respectively. Only 10 percent say they are unemployed.

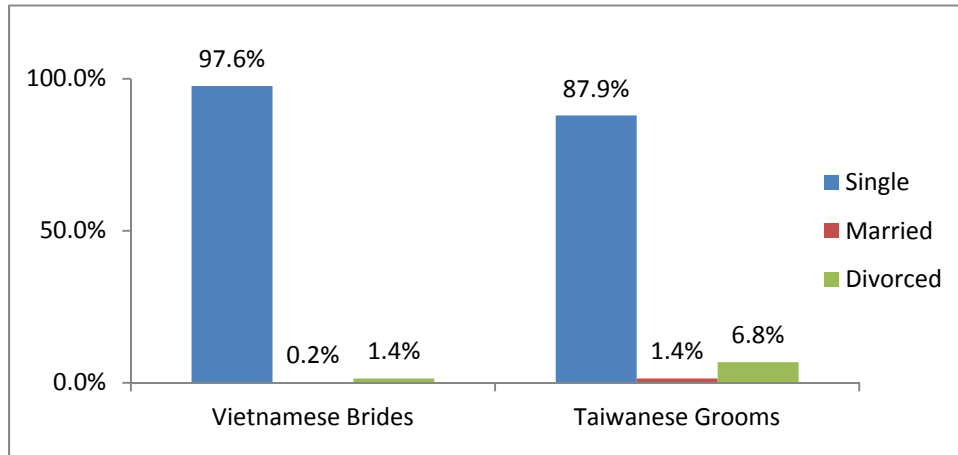
Similarly, the Taiwanese blooms more likely engage in services works, unskilled works and in factories. Survey data shows that 26 percent of grooms engage in hired works, followed by service activities (22 percent), government servants (15 percent) and workers (15 percent). Only 8.7 percent are unemployed. The results give clear evidence to the public that even though the Taiwanese blooms are not rich and have 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 abnormalities. This fact is also against media stories that Vietnamese brides married with abnormal Taiwanese grooms because they cannot get marriage with Taiwanese girls at home.

Marital status before marriage also gives interesting information (figure 7). It can be observed that majority of brides and grooms are single prior their marriages, especially for Vietnamese brides. Data in figure 7 reveals that 97.6 percent of Vietnamese brides are single (including 7.7 percent having boyfriends) and 1.4 percent divorced. However, nearly 8 percent of brides

dropping their boyfriends to marry with Taiwanese males may cause negative social view on their marriage. For Taiwanese blooms, percentage of single is lower (88 percent) but higher for married (1.4 percent) and divorced (6.8 percent). It should be noted for legal procedure that some married females and males could still go through and get marriage certificate.

Figure 7. Marital status prior marriage



Sources: Calculated from field data collected in surveyed provinces

Marriage process and players

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 distance and cultural barriers, they haven't got opportunity and cannot meet the blooms themselves. Marriage mediators play an important role in this process. Results from in-depth interview of 51 Vietnamese brides reveal that the main sources of marriage information include previous Vietnamese brides (28.6 percent), marriage agencies (28.6 percent), relatives/family members (22.2 percent) and friends (12.1 percent). Out of 51 Vietnamese brides interviewed, only one bride did make the marriage by herself.

The above findings are similar to quantitative information collected from 635 parents of Vietnamese brides in surveyed provinces (table 2). The results show that in practice, marriages arranged by mediator accounts for more than one-fourth of the total, not as overstating in newspapers. Relatives (22 percent) and friends (29 percent) account for a half of the total marriage cases, while other types of marriage mediators account for about 20 percent. So, it can be said that many of the marriage mediators are not really outsiders, and as a result, information on Taiwanese grooms can be accurately acceptable, not too overstated. However, it should be noted that some of relatives or friends also act as professional marriage mediator. Types of marriage mediators vary greatly by province. Example, professional mediators accounts for 40 percent in Can Tho, but only 12.5 percent in Tien Giang. In addition, since the legal procedure for international marriage is complicated, all the cases still need to go through official marriage

agencies. Service cost is quite expensive. Interview results suggest that the Taiwanese grooms have to pay about USD 10,000 for each marriage case.

Table 2. Type of marriage mediators by province (percent)

Type of marriage mediator	Province						Total
	Vinh Long	An Giang	Can Tho	Dong Thap	Tien Giang	Hau Giang	
Professional mediator	24.7	15.6	40.1	29.3	12.5	25	27.2
Relatives	24.7	22.9	21	22.7	33.9	10.9	22.4
Friends	27	44	19.2	28.7	32.1	28.1	28.8
Neighbors	2.2	4.6	4.8	6.7	3.6	3.1	4.6
Others	21.3	12.8	15	12.7	17.9	32.8	17

Sources: Calculated from field data collected in surveyed provinces

Usually, meetings between brides and blooms are arranged by marriage agencies. For Vietnamese brides, economic conditions are given some priorities. For Taiwanese blooms, the requirements are somewhat vague. Marriage agencies play key role in this process. Beside the legal ones, many illegal marriage agencies are functioning in this field.

Who make decision to the marriage? Findings of 635 interviews with brides' families are shown in table 3. Research results reveal that 40 percent of the brides make decision themselves, followed by joint-decision of brides and parents (24 percent). However, there is still one-third of the marriages decided by parents either by fathers alone (10 percent), mothers alone (11 percent) or both parents (12.4 percent). This is a significant figure for arranged marriage concerning the willingness and freedom of Vietnamese brides to marry Taiwanese grooms.

Table 3. Who make marriage decision? (percent)

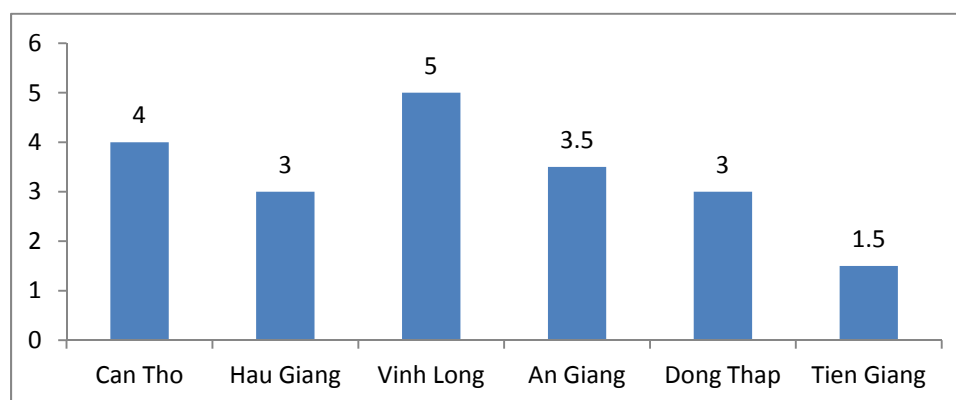
Decision-maker	Province						Total
	Vinh Long	An Giang	Can Tho	Dong Thap	Tien Giang	Hau Giang	
Brides themselves	49.4	41.3	31.1	44	50	34.4	40.5
Fathers alone	5.6	13.8	12.6	8	10.7	7.8	10.1
Mothers alone	10.1	11	16.2	6.7	10.7	10.9	11.2
Both parents	5.6	9.2	14.4	14	10.7	20.3	12.4
Parents and brides	28.1	23.9	21.6	26.7	14.3	26.6	23.9
Others	1.1	0.9	4.2	0.7	3.6	0	1.9

Sources: Calculated from field data collected in surveyed provinces

Type of marriage decision-makers also vary greatly over provinces. For example, about half of the brides could make decision by themselves in Vinh Long and Tien Giang provinces. The figure is only one-third in Can Tho and Hau Giang.

Another characteristic is length from getting to know each other to wedding ceremony. This duration is significantly shorter than the one for native marriage (figure 8). After the meeting and with agreement of both sides, average time to the official wedding 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.

Figure 8. Average number of days from meeting to wedding ceremony



Sources: Calculated from field data collected in surveyed provinces

However, different marriage approaches also lead to different lengths. Through marriage mediators, the brides and grooms only contact by phone and translated by the mediators. This period usually lasts for one or one and half month. Very few couples have chance to meet directly during this period, partly because the grooms cannot travel very far to meet with their future brides. So, after introduction time to get knowing each other (by phone and mediators), if both sides decide to get married, the grooms fly to Vietnam to meet the brides in person. Then, wedding ceremony is organized within few days, followed by legal procedure application.

More than a half of interviewed families (53.7 percent) say that the wedding ceremony is fully held according to Vietnamese traditional style. About 6 percent of wedding ceremonies are Taiwanese style. Very few couples (less than 2 percent) did not have wedding ceremony.

Affecting factors

Interview results, both quantitative and qualitative, suggest four main reasons for Vietnamese brides to marry Taiwanese grooms. They are 1)Helping their families (46.7 percent), 2)Change their current lives (8.8 percent), 3)Have better living conditions (26.7 percent), and 4)Love-based marriage (17.8 percent).

Economic reason plays an important role in making marriage decision. Majority of Vietnamese brides come from poor families. Findings show that 41.1 percent of Vietnamese brides' families are poor and 19.8 percent very poor. They have no land, money and have to borrow from others.

Let a girl in the family to get married with Taiwanese groom is a way of helping family to overcome economic difficulties. When deciding the marriages, the brides expect to have some money to help their families to live. Some others want to show their gratitude to their parents and help families in difficult conditions. In this case, marriage with Taiwanese husbands is one of their favorite choices. Survey results also suggest that 81.4 percent of brides' families expect some economic support from the marriages. The lower the education of brides' parents, the higher the expectation. In fact, families' economic conditions are actually improved after family member's marriage. Survey findings reveal that percentage of poor and very poor families decreases from more than 60 percent before marriages to 9.3 percent after that. In contrast, percentage of average and better-off families increases from 8.4 percent to 47.4 percent.

The second motive is to change their current lives. This is partly because of their negative attitude toward Vietnamese males in their communities. Some bad behaviors of rural husbands are mentioned including drinking, beating wives, etc. Another reason is that most of them come from poor families and it makes them difficult to marry a good husband.

The third motive is expectation of having better living conditions and stay in a foreign country. Since the brides come from poor families, have low education and can do only unskilled work, marriage is a fast way to escape from this poor situation. Some of them want to live in a rich foreign country rather than their poor communities.

Lastly, the fourth motive is because of love, even from the first sight. This motive may happen since the brides have already made up their mind in marrying foreign husbands and it just comes out when they meet each other.

It should be noted that the above mentioned motives cannot be clearly separated in many cases. The motives can interact but overall impression is expectation for better living condition for them first, then helping their families.

Public attitude towards this marriage phenomenon also change 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.

Discussions

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. This phenomenon can lead to the situation that some girls themselves and family members do not want to work for living and only wait for a chance to get married and support from the foreign grooms. In the long term, it may cause sex imbalance and even social problem in some areas where number of males exceeds number of females.

To solve the problem, various recommendations are suggested including job creation in the local areas and providing support to poor families. This solution helps to solve the root cause of this marriage phenomenon. Next recommendation on strengthening education and communication to shape right public opinion on this marriage phenomenon, especially on marriage life, love, sexual knowledge, reproductive health and family. Target groups of young female should be communicated on self-esteem, work attitude, care for people and social responsibility.

Vietnamese brides need to be fully consulted on legal procedure, marriage life in Taiwan, cultural behavior and local custom, so that they can adapt in a completely different environment. This approach will help Vietnamese brides fully prepared and avoiding negative consequences of their marriage later on.

It is somewhat obvious that Vietnamese-Taiwanese marriage does not base on love, but also not a kind of woman smuggling. It is the same for native marriage. However, not all marriages are unlucky. Majority of the marriages are still going on and Vietnamese brides are protected by law. Thus, public media should be more objective when giving information on this marriage issue, not create public prejudice or negative view towards the couples.