

‘He beat me when I was pregnant’ – Vietnamese marriage migrants and domestic violence in Taiwan

Taiwan’s “New Immigrant Women” are particularly vulnerable to abuse in the home. With their immigration status tied to their marriages, many have no choice but to stay silent.

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In recent decades, marriage migration has been an emerging trend in Taiwan. About 400,000 Chinese and Southeast Asian women have migrated to Taiwan by virtue of marriage since the mid-1980s, according to the country's interior ministry. In 2008, one in every seven newly registered marriages was between a transnational couple.

Marriage migration to Taiwan reached its peak in 2003, with ministry figures showing 31% of marriages that year involved a non-Taiwanese citizen. Although this phenomenon has been in a gradual decline since then, foreign spouses still constitute a significant group on the island, totalling 559,638 people in February 2020.

Often referred to in public and political discourse as “the fifth ethnic group”, the marriage migrant population is mainly composed of women from mainland China, Vietnam and Indonesia. These “New Immigrant Women” – a term coined by the Taiwanese government – now constitute about 1.7% of the entire population of Taiwan.

This case study analyses the domestic violence suffered by Vietnamese marriage immigrants in Taiwan. It examines the stories of 16 Vietnamese women who endured abuse within their relationships.

'My parents-in-law knew it, but they did not help'

Most marriage migrants decide to marry Taiwanese men because they hope to escape poverty and turbulence in their home countries. Marriage migrants **mainly marry**¹ farmers and working-class men. However, after they join their husbands' family, these women often feel **disappointed and disempowered**² due to their stressful economic situations, lack of social networks and support, and discrimination.



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Many marriage migrants also experience domestic violence, which usually begins in the first or second year after women arrive in Taiwan. These women suffer from a heavy burden of domestic work, quarrels with in-laws, psychological and physical abuse from their husbands, and sexual harassment by other male family members in some cases.

In Taiwan, domestic violence is often seen as a problem to be kept behind closed doors. New immigrant women are also often unaware of their rights and protections under the law, making them reluctant to report abuse.

One woman recalled her experience:

'Sometimes he came home around two or three o'clock in the morning and quarrelled with me. He started to beat me around the third month of my pregnancy. He beat me when I was pregnant. My parents-in-law knew it, but they did not help me.'

Immigration status as a means of control

Because all marital immigrants to Taiwan enter the country as "kin dependents," their legal standing prior to naturalisation is tied to the continuation of their marriage and the assistance of their guarantor, who is typically their spouse or his family. If the Taiwanese spouse or his family members refuse to participate in this process, the new immigrant woman may find herself unable to progress to acquire citizenship or, worse, saddled with expired documents that put her at risk of deportation.



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Research has shown that abusive husbands use their wives' dependence on them as a **means of control**³, and prevent them from applying for Taiwanese citizenship. Violent husbands and their families were found to hold the woman's passport or Taiwanese ID for the purpose of preventing her from leaving or applying for citizenship

Gendered expectations

When a Vietnamese woman migrates to Taiwan, she faces a totally different set of gendered expectations than she may have been used to in Vietnam. She is expected to be a subservient wife, a servile daughter-in-law, and a mother, specifically to a son. Such rigid gender ideologies prohibit marriage migrants from exercising their individual agency.

Many marriage migrants from Southeast Asia cannot speak or read Mandarin Chinese or the other languages commonly used in Taiwan. This language barrier makes it even more difficult for them to build new social networks in their new home. Thus, they have very little knowledge of services and opportunities that exist beyond their immediate social group. In rural parts of the country, there may be few opportunities to meet other members of their ethnic community.

Some marriage migrants face hostility and discrimination from local Taiwanese communities. Widespread stereotypes about Vietnamese women fuel this discrimination. Their narratives show that they are often perceived as individuals who were poor, who could be purchased, who came to Taiwan solely for monetary reasons, who could not understand Chinese, and who did not know how to teach their children.

Tackling domestic violence

There is urgent need for researchers and services to establish reliable data about domestic violence in these contexts – but it must be acknowledged that the marginalised status of migrant women makes such research challenging. In a positive development, volunteer organisations led by marriage migrants themselves are becoming more common and immigrant women who have experienced abuse have begun to influence the design and delivery of services.

But there is much more to be done to tackle this problem.

To start with, women need more secure immigration status in Taiwan, to avoid being trapped in violent relationships. For those who are seeking help, the national hotline for family violence in Taiwan employs interpreters for those who do not speak Mandarin, but much work needs to be done to train interpreters to serve the language needs of the increasingly diverse population of marriage migrants.

Social workers should also be given cultural competence training before they enter professions supporting women in cross-border marriages, while marriage migrant integration policy should involve husbands and in-laws, rather than just the migrants themselves.

Last but not least, promoting more flexible gender role ideologies and women-friendly social policies in Taiwan will increase the wellbeing of marriage migrants overall.

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Suggested further reading

Hsia, H. C. (2008). **The development of immigrant movement in Taiwan: The case of alliance of human rights legislation for immigrants and migrants.**⁴ *Development and Society*, 37(2), 187-217.

Tang, W.-h. A. & Wang, H.-z. (2011). **From victims of domestic violence to determined independent women: How Vietnamese immigrant spouses negotiate Taiwan's patriarchy family system.**⁵ *Women's Studies International Forum*, 34(5), 430-440.

Williams, L. & Yu, M.-k. (2006). **Domestic violence in cross-border marriage—a case study from Taiwan.**⁶ *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care* 2(3), 58-69.

Yang, WS. and Schoonheim, M. (2006). Minority group status and fertility: The case of 'foreign brides' in Taiwan [Paper presentation]. International Conference on Intermediated Cross-border Marriages in Asia and Europe, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan.

Links

1. <https://s-space.snu.ac.kr/handle/10371/86714>
2. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/011719680901800102>
3. <https://scholar.lib.ntnu.edu.tw/en/publications/domestic-violence-in-cross-border-marriage-a-case-study-from-taiw>
4. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/deveandsoci.37.2.187>
5. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2011.06.005>
6. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17479894200600032>

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