

Ask: NUS

# The globalisation of marriage markets

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For The Straits Times

**Q** More Singaporeans are marrying foreigners. What are the causes and consequences of this trend?

**A** Cross-border marriages are becoming increasingly common, not just in Singapore but globally.

As the term “global hypergamy” depicts, marriage migrants are mostly women who move from underdeveloped areas to marry wealthier men abroad, showing a clear gender asymmetry.

Singapore is a typical destination country for cross-border marriages in Asia. The proportion of marriages between a Singaporean and a non-citizen spouse rose from 32.8 per cent to 38.7 per cent during the 1998-2008 period. This trend was primarily driven by a boost in marriages involving a non-citizen wife, the proportion of which rose from 24 per cent to 30.2 per cent. Marriages involving a non-citizen husband were less common.

An article titled “Marriage to foreigner less likely to last”, published on Oct 30 last year in *The Sunday Times*, documented a trend of Singaporean men, mainly older and blue-collar workers who struggled to find local partners, seeking foreign brides from developing countries.

In our recent research, we studied the causes and consequences of the globalisation of marriage markets, by developing a theory of gender-asymmetric cross-border marriages. The theory suggests the main force driving global hypergamy is the interaction of two factors.

The first factor is the longstanding gender asymmetry in marital attributes. This means certain traits like age, income and looks are more valued by potential partners depending on one’s gender. For example, age, an indicator of beauty or fecundity, is more important in evaluating the marital attributes of women, whereas income is more important in evaluating those of men. So younger women in poor regions are more attractive to men in rich regions than low-income men in poor countries are to women in rich regions.

The second factor is the recent decline in cross-border marriage costs, as technology makes it easy for people to get information on and communicate with prospective partners. This factor may raise the demand among men in developed countries for such marriages, which in turn stimulates the relevant service market like international marriage brokers and Internet dating systems. The flourishing of these matchmaking agencies reduces cross-border marriage costs even more, further facilitating such activities.

Our case study based on Hong Kong and mainland China provides clear insights into the role of immigration costs underlying cross-border marriages and the consequences of such marriages on the destination region.

From 2 per cent in 1986, cross-border marriages registered in Hong Kong made up 43 per cent of all marriages in 2006. The rise was triggered by a discrete increase in the one-way permit quota and the handover of Hong Kong to

China in 1997. Spouses or children of local Hong Kong residents are strictly required to obtain a permit before moving to Hong Kong. The daily quota for such permits was 75 in 1982, which rose to 105 in 1993 and 150 in 1995. This implies over 27,000 permits were issued yearly after 1995. Partners and children from the mainland normally had to wait eight to 10 years for the document before 1996, but only three to five years after.

Using Hong Kong census data, we compared marriage market and labour market outcomes between men and women, before and after the triggering events. We found that gender differences in the currently-married, ever-married and currently-divorced rates changed little from 1991 to 1996, but changed largely since then. For example, relative to men, Hong Kong women’s currently-married and ever-married rates decreased by 8.8 percentage points and 6.8 percentage points after the triggering events, respectively, while the divorced rate increased by 1.8 percentage points.

These patterns were primarily driven by the triggering events. This would suggest that freer movement of people between Hong Kong and China resulted in more Hong Kong women not being married or getting divorced.

The data also shows that these disadvantages in the marriage market lowered Hong Kong women’s bargaining power within the household. Relative to men, their probability of being a household head decreased by 8.5 percentage points after the triggering events. Finally, we found the adverse outcomes in the marriage market had an incentive effect on their labour market behaviour. They were more likely to participate in the labour market or take a second job.

As such, we can tentatively conclude that global hypergamy would result in a new pattern of regional and gender inequality in the marriage market. Men in affluent destination countries gain, as do women in poor source countries, because each group has access to more potential marital partners. But women in affluent destination countries and men in poor source countries lose, as they have more competitors in the marriage market.

As a typical destination country for cross-border marriages, Singapore would observe a rise in gender inequality along with the growing popularity of such marriages. Singaporean men would benefit from more potential brides; Singaporean women would become less attractive partners because of the influx of foreign competitors, and the resulting lower bargaining power within marriage may further discourage them from getting married.

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