Marriage Migration: Lived Experience of Foreign Spouses Married to Malaysian Citizens

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ABSTRACT

Marriage migration has led to marriage migrants as a significant aspect of migration. While much of the literature on migration in the Malaysian context discusses labour migration, very little is documented on marriage migration in Malaysia, especially concerning foreign spouses' viewpoint on their international marriage. Therefore, this paper sought to investigate and document the foreign spouses' lived experience in several aspects of life from acquiring the spouse visa to employment to family and relationship with friends in Malaysia. Results obtained from data collected through in-depth interviews give the overview that foreign spouses experience difficulties due to their status as a 'foreigner'. Foreign spouses' experience of living in Malaysia is related to the idea that a 'foreigner' is considered socially excluded in the country, leading to difficulties. Overall, foreign spouses face many challenges living in Malaysia.

Keywords: International marriages, foreign spouses, lived experience, Malaysia, marriage migration

INTRODUCTION

The social phenomenon of foreign spouses is becoming more evident in Malaysia as marriage migrants come to live with their Malaysian spouses after entering into an international marriage. Literature on international marriages and marriage migration in the Malaysian context is limited as research into migration in Malaysia

centres on labour migration. Using Malaysia as the country of focus for this study, this paper aimed to identify and discuss the range of the lived experience of foreign spouses from obtaining their spouse visa to pursuing employment to family and relationships with local friends as a foreign spouse. Marriage migration can be defined as migration within or across borders due to marriage (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2017). An international marriage can be defined as marriage between two persons of different nationalities (Chee, 2011).

The lived experience of foreign spouses is conceptualised within the social exclusion theory framework, which views foreign spouses as any other foreigner (such as labour migrants) and excludes them from various aspects of life on a case-to-case basis. Social exclusion on a case-to-case basis occurs when foreign spouses are unable to find a job that aligns with their knowledge and skills due to the fact that they are still considered a foreign entity in the country until they acquire Malaysian permanent resident (PR) status and citizenship. Facing social exclusion at some point of their life and having to deal with various difficulties that come with being a foreign spouse in Malaysia are part of their lived experience. Social exclusion can lead to having to live with a wide range of phenomena and processes related to poverty, deprivation and hardship, and includes a wide range of categories of excluded people and places of exclusion (Peace, 2001). Peace (2010) argued that the broad definition of exclusion

is useful for analysing multidimensional and complex issues in developing countries.

The paper is divided into several sections. The first is a literature review on marriage migration, social exclusion and international marriages in Malaysia. After outlining the situation on international marriages in Malaysia, this paper presents the research methodology undertaken in this study before reporting on the findings of the data collected on the lived experience of foreign spouses in the country in the three main aspects of spouse visa, employment and relationship with Malaysian family and friends. The paper concludes by examining the overall experience of foreign spouses married to a Malaysian citizen and their coping strategies in response to the difficult experience of being a foreign spouse in Malaysia.

MARRIAGE MIGRATION AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Migration is often a family affair, involving the families of those who move; in this study, the movement studied is that of marriage migrants after marriage (Butt, 2014). Migrants, in short, are subjects who made a wide range of choices based on a highly social personal space, with the result that they may suffer negative emotional effects of isolation and have little control over their working and living conditions (Butt, 2014). A paper by Wong, Ng and Chou (2015) showed that marriage migrants have difficulty being socially included and building a social network outside their own communities. Although the paper focusses

on the situation of female marriage migrants in Hong Kong, the findings are relatable to the situation of foreign spouses living in any country. It is also arguable that some foreign spouses may not have difficulty in building a fresh social network with their family and friends after marriage as they may possess higher social adaptability skills than other marriage migrants.

Extensive studies and surveys have indicated that marriage migrants encounter tremendous difficulties with social and economic integration resulting in various levels of psychological stress (Chou, 2009, 2012; Lai, 1997; Mo, Mak, & Kwan, 2006; Yu, Stewart, Liu, & Lam, 2014). In order to combat the psychological stress from living in a foreign country, foreign spouses seek support in the form of intangible support. Intangible support is emotional support involving verbal and nonverbal communication that extends care, trust and concern (Hogana, Lindena, & Najarianb, 2002). This type of support usually comes from family members and close friends who provide empathy, love and care (Antonucci & Jackson, 1990; House, 1981). Therefore, having a good relationship with family and friends will provide foreign spouses with a good experience of living in Malaysia.

The term 'social exclusion' began in France in the 1970s and has been used widely in Europe in response to contemporary social disintegration arising from migration (Silver, 1994). The social exclusion theory was further developed in Europe in the 1990s, originating in the study of social inequality, and has now become a core concept in interpreting various social problems (Wan & Zhu, 2013). The problem of social exclusion is usually tied to that of equal opportunity, as some people are more subject to such exclusion than others. People who lack equal opportunity tend to be excluded; to be socially excluded means to be marginalised from society (Razer, Friedman, & Warshofsky, 2013).

It is also important to note that social exclusion is multidimensional and is not limited only to poverty and the denial of social rights (Silver, 1996). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2004) deemed social exclusion as cultural exclusion dividable into two types. The first type is when state and social customs suppress a group's culture, while the second occurs when the state engages in discriminatory policies and practices in society. The second type of social exclusion applies to the vulnerable situation of foreign husbands and wives in Malaysia, where discriminatory policies highlight foreign spouses' dependency on their Malaysian partners either in the visa application process or in obtaining employment.

A study of Vietnamese wives in Singapore by Yeoh, Chee and Vu (2013) stated that in the case of Singapore, immigrant women from less developed countries who marry Singaporeans are positioned within the nation's immigration-citizenship regime not as potential labour but as dependents (non-working wives) who rely on the legitimacy of the marriage and resources of their husbands in negotiating their rights to residency, work and children

vis-à-vis Singaporean laws. Because of this, their position as a foreign spouse makes them highly vulnerable, as they are economically dependent and live engulfed by the fear of deportation if the marriage goes wrong. Foreign wives in Malaysia may be said to face a similar situation as they are also dependent on their Malaysian husbands, and therefore, receive less attention from the state.

Another study by Gaetano and Yeoh (2010) also supported the theory that migrant women traversing borders and boundaries experience marginality and exclusionary politics operated through gendered, sexualised, classed, ethicised and nationalised apparatuses. Other than that, marginalisation of foreign spouses is also shown in research by Wang and Chang (2002), who noted that in Taiwan, even though foreign brides managed to reside in the country on a permanent basis, they are still viewed as 'outsiders' by the general population, who perceive foreign brides as the source of social problems due to the high number of divorces between local men and foreign brides and because they threaten the traditional family system and education system and tend to become involved in prostitution (Hsia, 2000).

In another study, Ishii (2016) categorised marriage migrants as multi-marginalised due to the "multiply displaced" status of marriage migrants as without formal citizenship, these marriage migrants are often in a much more precarious situation after marriage (Piper & Roces, 2003). Marriage migrants are said to be doubly marginalised when they are unable to realise their goals in both sending or receiving nation states (Yeoh et al., 2013). For instance, a vulnerable migrant worker seeking secure residential status may enter into marriage with a local man but discover afterwards that she has to go through indefinite periods of waiting and is unable to work before she can actually become a 'non-migrant'.

Existing literature on the subject of social exclusion in Malaysia mostly concerns the experience of refugees such as the Rohingyas (Fielding, 2016) and labour migrants (Franck, 2015) and is limited on the subject of foreign spouses living in the country. From the reviewed literature, it can be seen that foreign spouses are subject to marginalisation and are socially excluded mainly due to their status as a dependant of their spouse. The next section addresses the problems faced by foreign spouses living in Malaysia as socially excluded individuals in terms of citizenship, employment and other aspects.

INTERNATIONAL MARRIAGES IN MALAYSIA

Malaysia's mixed-race population is largely the result of migration flows over the past 150 years (Jones & Shen, 2008). The new international migration flow of 'marriage migrants' is due to international marriages and marriages spanning borders (Bélanger & Linh, 2011). The rapid increase in Malaysia's foreign population over the past three decades is also spurred by migration. In 1980, 0.48% out of a population of 13 million in Malaysia were non-citizens.

This figure rose to 2.3 million non-citizens in 2010 i.e. 8.3% out of 28.4 million Malaysians (Department of Statistics, 2011). Although the majority of these non-citizens are low-skilled workers, the figure also includes other groups of migrants such as expatriates, international students, participants of the 'Malaysia My Second Home' programme, asylum seekers and not to forget, foreign spouses of Malaysia citizens (Azizah, 2014).

This paper focusses on the lived experience of foreign spouses who enter into an international marriage with a Malaysian. Existing studies on the issue of marriage migration mostly focusses on the commodification of marriage migrants through commercial brokerage (Constable, 2009; Yeoh, Chee, & Vu, 2014) and the issue of the marriage migrants' strategies and claim of citizenship rights in their 'integration' process into racialised and gendered national membership regimes (Chee, Lu, & Yeoh, 2014; De Hart, 2006; Friedman, 2010; Turner, 2008). The influx of immigrants is not a new phenomenon in Malaysia, particularly as a result of labour migration, as testified by the current situation in multi-ethnic Malaysia (Kudo, 2013). However, there is little research into international marriages in Malaysia; most of the research in Southeast Asia focusses on the situation in developed countries such as Singapore, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong (Toyota, 2008; Wang & Chang, 2002; Yeoh et al., 2013; Zhang, Lu, & Yeoh, 2015).

Chee (2011) mentioned in her paper that although Malaysia is also experiencing a rise in the number of international marriages, yearly statistics on international marriages are not published by the government. However, these statistics are captured by the media. The media have disclosed that there was a rise in the number of international marriages in Malaysia from 2001 to June 2005 amounting to 33,995 international marriages between local men and foreign women Leng, 2011). As research into this area progressed over the years, researchers were able to source out the yearly statistics on international marriages from 2010 to 2015 from the Malaysian Immigration Department. It was reported by the Malaysian Immigration Department that 10,212 international marriages were held in 2010. The number rose to 55,898 marriages in 2012 and reached its peak in 2015, with 118,581 marriages (Department of Immigration, 2016). The increasing number of international marriages in Malaysia highlights the significance of conducting research into this subject of marriage migration.

METHOD

The qualitative research method was considered the appropriate method of investigation for this paper as it was unrealistic to conduct a quantitative survey for this study given its advantages in providing a thickly descriptive report of the individual's opinions, understanding and experience on the subject matter.

According to Creswell (2007), qualitative research is appropriate for use in the presence of complex issues that require careful understanding. Qualitative research enables researchers to attain in-depth knowledge, and at the same time, explore the meanings of a social phenomenon, in this case, international marriage migration, as experienced by the individuals themselves (Alasutaari, 2009).

The primary data collection method used in this paper was the in-depth semi-structured interview. In-depth semi-structured Interviews were conducted as an on-going two-year research project in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The reason for doing the sampling of the study in Kuala Lumpur was because Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of the nation, is a highly urbanised major city, making it the natural place of residence for many (including foreign spouses). According to the Department of Statistics (2011), Malaysia's level of urbanisation was only 34.2% in 1980, but it increased to 50.7% in 1990, 62.0% in the year 2000 and reached 71.0% in 2010. By 2010, Kuala Lumpur had become 100% urban and the eighth largest urbanised area in Southeast Asia, larger than some megacity urban areas like Jakarta, Manila and Seoul despite having a smaller city population (The World Bank, 2015).

Apart from using the in-depth semi-structured interview, data for this paper was also collected from material reviews on the subject of migrants' experiences in

Malaysia. A total of 20 foreign spouses were interviewed, 10 of whom were foreign grooms, while the other half were foreign brides married to Malaysian citizens. The respondents originated from different countries such as the Philippines, Pakistan, India, China, Russia and Palestine and had different demographic characteristics as international marriage brings together people of various ages, occupation and networks. The summary of socio-demographic information about the foreign spouses interviewed in this study is compiled in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Summary of respondents' socio-demographic information

Socio-Demographic Information	Number
Gender	Male: 10
	Female: 10
Age	Majority age-range: 31-37
	Youngest: 27
	Oldest: 56
Country of origin	Palestine: 3
	Pakistan: 4
	China: 4
	Russia: 1
	India: 4
	Philippines: 4
Type of visa upon entry	Social: 11
	Student: 5
Type of current visa	Work: 4
	Work: 4
	Spouse: 15
Number of years living in Malaysia	Permanent resident: 1
	Average: 9

Table 1 *(continue)*

Socio-Demographic Information	Number
Number of years married	Longest: 26
	Shortest: 2
	Longest: 26
	Shortest: 2
Religion	Islam: 12
	Christian: 4
	Buddhist: 4
Level of education	Diploma: 2
	Undergraduate: 5
	Postgraduate: 13
Employment status	Self-employed: 3
	Employed: 14
	Not employed: 3
Household monthly income	RM4,000 – RM4,499: 5
	RM5,000 and above: 15
Number of children	Minimum:1
	Maximum: 3

From Table 1, it can be seen that all the respondents of the study came from a household of M40 (middle 40) group with a monthly income between RM3,860 and RM8,319 (Surendra, 2017), and possessed either a diploma, degree or Master's degree. This background trait may distinguish between the lived experience of the study respondents and that of foreign spouses who may only possess primary-level education. Therefore, it can be said that this study was limited to a certain group of foreign spouses in the country who were from the middle-income group, had tertiary-level education level, were living in Kuala Lumpur and did not represent foreign spouses in the country as a whole.

The qualitative method involving multiple approaches for recruiting respondents for this study brought together a relatively diverse group of interviewees. First, we approached friends who happened to be foreign spouses themselves and through the snowball sampling method, they introduced us to their circle of foreign spouses' friends. Then, we collaborated with a respondent who was an administrator of an NGO group for foreign spouses who introduced the researchers to a larger network of foreign spouses. Although the sampling of the study used the snowball sampling method, all the respondents selectively chosen fulfilled the following criteria:

i.   18 years old or older ("adult")

ii.   A foreign citizen regardless of country of origin

iii. Married to a Malaysian citizen

iv.   Has been staying in Malaysia for not less than one year

v.   Able to comment on issues and problems faced being a foreign spouse, based on daily life experience.

Prior to each interview session, the researcher obtained consent from each foreign spouse for audio taping the interview session and citing their narrative in the findings. To ensure confidentiality, the actual names of the respondents were not used in the paper findings. Each interview lasted from one to two hours and during the interview, the researchers also implemented note-taking to

ensure accuracy of data collection and due process of transcription. Next, the recorded interviews were transcribed and coded according to theme for further thematic analysis of the qualitative data.

Questions asked of each foreign spouse in the interviews included how the foreign spouses had met their Malaysian spouse and what their daily lives were like in terms of various aspects such as employment and relationship issues, among others. The researchers encouraged the foreign spouses to talk freely and in order to minimise the drawbacks of interview-based research, we avoided leading questions and did not interrupt their narration. However, we do not claim that the interview data were fully autonomous. The results of this study are presented and discussed in the next section of the paper summarising the respondents' narrative on their experience in establishing a home in Malaysia with their Malaysian family.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The paper discusses the real lived experience of selected foreign spouses living in the capital city of Malaysia. Foreign spouses are a significant part of the larger migrant community and comprise marriage migrants, immigrants who enter into an international marriage with a Malaysian and migrate to Malaysia to start their new life with their Malaysian spouse. In most cases are the individual arrives in Malaysia for education, work or travel but ends up marrying a Malaysian man/woman. Although there is much in the literature on the experience

of migrant workers in Southeast Asia, Malaysia included, very little reports on the experience of marriage migrants. Therefore, this study undertook to conduct in-depth interviews to explore the lived experience of selected foreign spouses in Malaysia.

This section of the paper will examine the different issues that these selected foreign spouses encountered after marriage as a foreign spouse living in Malaysia, focussing on their experience of: (1) acquiring a spouse visa; (2) getting employment, and (3) building relationships with family and friends in Malaysia.

Lived Experience of Acquiring Spouse Visa

As all other migrants anywhere else around the globe, marriage migrants in Malaysia also find their main concern to be obtaining a visa and citizenship. Issues related to acquiring citizenship, a spouse visa and PR status emerge as the most prominent in marriage migration studies (Chee et al., 2014; Friedman, 2010; Lee, 2008; Toyota, 2008; Turner, 2008; Yeoh et al., 2013). However, in this study, the foreign spouses held a spouse visa and had not as yet applied for Malaysian citizenship.

The majority of the study respondents relayed that they had difficulty in acquiring a spouse visa, a distinct visa granted to the foreign spouses of Malaysian citizens according them some privilege. The 'spouse visa' is actually is the 'Long Term Social Visit Pass' (LTSVP). Most of the respondents claimed that the difficulties that they faced being married to a Malaysian arose from

the procedure applying for a visa, lack of information and transparency in acquiring a spouse visa. Nahid, a male foreign spouse aged 37 from Palestine, spoke about his experience in getting a spouse visa:

> At the beginning, it was very challenging. A lot of documents are needed, lots of paperwork, and countless number of journeys that I have to make to the immigration. In the beginning, I thought that I have to go to the immigration office at Putrajaya, but unfortunately once I got there, they told me to go to Shah Alam instead.

Nahid experienced a lot of difficulty in having to present the proper documentation and had even gone to the wrong location to apply for the documentation. Another respondent agreed that the initial stage of applying for a spouse visa had been difficult:

> I think for me when I first started the registration there's a lot of things you have to submit and also you have to wait for 6 months. It's the biggest challenge for me. It's really hard. I have been in Immigration for many times for my spouse visa. I went to Immigration and I did the documents for spouse visa application, but here they made it a hassle. They ask for many documents and each time the officer requests for different kind of documents (Lee, 26 years old from China).

Apart from the need to prepare many different documentation to support the application for a spouse visa, Lee also experienced confusion when given different instructions by different officers as to what supporting documents were required (Immigration Department of Malaysia, 2017). Each time he visited the immigration office, he was given a different document checklist and instructions. Besides that, Lee also felt that the 'cooling period' after his marriage was difficult for him and his wife. Lee's experience was that the spouse visa application process was marred by lack of information and transparency.

However, a small number of the selected foreign spouses had experienced a relatively easy process in applying for a spouse visa. One male respondent said:

> Apart from being aware on the necessity for foreign spouses to apply for a spouse visa, there is one thing that I would like to praise on how Malaysia government handles the spouse visa application. The process is much easier as it will only take a day or two to be completed. Whereas student visa and work permit takes longer to approve and is much more expensive (Mohamad, 30 years old from Palestine).

The data collected revealed that each foreign spouse had a different experience in acquiring the spouse visa. For many it was difficult. In the case of Mohamad, the experience might have been an easy one because of his background. Unlike Lee, who had only been in the country for three years, Mohamad had been residing in the

country for 13 years before he married a Malaysian and applied for the spouse visa. Mohamad was able to speak fluent Bahasa Melayu, the national language of Malaysia. Being better assimilated into Malaysian culture and life, Mohamad probably had a better understanding of how Malaysian bureaucracy works, resulting in the smoother process he had experienced.

To sum up, the most prominent problems faced by the foreign spouses interviewed in the study had to do with government bureaucracy and practice in relation to application for a spouse visa. The respondents' poor access to the legal systems in terms of spouse visa and PR application signified that at one point of time, they had been socially excluded due to discriminatory policies and practices of the state in connection with foreign spouses of Malaysian citizens (Chee et al., 2014).

Lived Experience of Acquiring Employment

The need for steady employment is a concern for all people, and probably more so for marriage migrants who have left their home country. The pressure to provide for the family is probably felt more deeply by male foreign spouses coming from and now living in a traditional culture that still tends to see the male as the breadwinner of the family. Nevertheless, many foreign brides also feel the urgency of gaining employment so as to have financial freedom and not be financially dependent on their Malaysian husbands. In the interviews, the respondents shared that acquiring employment had

been a strenuous and difficult experience for them. Many Malaysian companies were unwilling to hire a foreign spouse as they were considered foreigners if they did not have PR or citizenship status. One respondent(Musa) remarked, "Most companies won't hire us. The minute they see a foreigner or "Bukan Warganegara" in the CV, they will filter our CV out. Automatically."

Furthermore, potential employers might be misguided on the legality of hiring foreign spouses as the spouse visa contains a misleading statement i.e. that "any form of employment is strictly prohibited – SPOUSE OF A MALAYSIAN CITIZEN." This statement may cause employers to hesitate when it comes to firing foreign spouses. Because of this, the majority of the respondents encountered problems in finding employment. According to one respondent:

> It's not easy to find a job. Because the employers don't understand the concept that I have my own visa. For any company to hire a foreigner, it's scary because they think that they have to take care of your visa which is very expensive for foreigners. Besides, there are certain regulations by the immigration that if you want to recruit a foreigner, the salary has to be on a certain level. And this level is a little bit high, at least 5K and above (Jabal, 36 years old from Palestine).

Jabal appeared dissatisfied that it was difficult for him to find a job in the country of

his spouse. He further stated that Malaysian hiring companies were not adventurous in hiring a foreign spouse as a foreigner's salary is higher than the average salary of a Malaysian. Data analysis also revealed that most of the respondents were frustrated that they were not given the opportunity for equal employment in the Malaysian workforce as a foreign spouse. One respondent (Orhan) strongly believed that he had the necessary skills to contribute to the Malaysian labour force but it was difficult for him to apply for a job as he does not hold PR status. According to Orhan,

> Maybe they felt I am not suitable for the post or maybe because I don't have a PR status. And, if they do consider, maybe out of hundred posts there is only one post that is available for a foreigner employee . . . so the challenge is really real.

The data suggested that although the foreign spouses were able to work with a spouse visa, it was difficult for them to search for jobs due to their foreign status in the country. One respondent, Adam, also experienced difficulty in procuring a job in the beginning and stated that foreign spouses would continue to be perceived as foreigners until they obtained PR status. He remarked, "When you apply for the job and bring your CV, it doesn't state in the CV that you married a Malaysian. So, it is not easy. Unless you have a PR."

To conclude, most of the respondents experienced difficulty of some degree in searching for a job as Malaysian employers were not aware that foreign spouses of Malaysian citizens are allowed to work based on their spouse visa instead of their work visa despite the misleading statement on work in the spouse visa. This then imposes a difficulty on foreign spouses, making their experience of job seeking in the country a negative one.

Lived Experience of Relationships with Family and Friends

Foreign spouses' relationships with family, in-laws and Malaysian friends forms a large part of their lived experience while living in Malaysia. Good relationship with family and Malaysian friends provides emotional support in their new experience as marriage migrants living outside the country of their birth. Data obtained from the interviews revealed that the majority of the respondents had a good relationship with their Malaysian in-laws and friends and they were able to assimilate well into Malaysian culture. Take the following case, for example:

> I met my wife through my Malay foster family. It was an arranged marriage but still we are happily married. Apart from my Malaysian family, I'm actually closer to Malaysians. I've been playing football like in a weekly basis with my Malaysian friends almost for 4 years. Even during the match, they thought that, "This guy looks like a foreigner". But when they tried to talk to me in English but I replied in Malay, they were shocked. I tried to adapt into Malaysian

culture and before I got married, I was wearing Malaysian clothes and had too many Malaysian foods (Aswad, 32 years old from Gaza).

Aswad had been living in Malaysia for eight years. The respondent was able to speak fluent Bahasa Melayu, was a Muslim and was fully assimilated into Malaysian culture. These factors may be why it was easier for him to mingle and form close relationships with Malay society and acquire Malaysian friends. It was found that most of the foreign wives interviewed in this study had good relationships with their Malaysian in-laws. Jean, a female foreign spouse seemed happy when she revealed, "My family in-laws are very nice to me. So, I'm lucky." Another foreign wife, Fiona, also expressed that she had become very good friends with her mother in-law and expressed cheerfully, "Mainly we have a very good relationship. When we got married, my mother-in law came to meet with us in London and we have travelled together so we became very good friends." According to Shay, a 33-year-old foreign wife from the Philippines:

> My husband's family is not the types that push you. And they also understand that I'm a foreigner so my behaviours may not be the same as them. It is the same on the issue of wearing the headscarf. Because as I has converted into Islam, they don't really push me to wear a headscarf but they open up the possibility that someday I will wear them. And they are quite an open-

minded family so not quite difficult for me.

Shay had lived in Malaysia for eight years. Like most of the respondents who had been in Malaysia for more than five years, Shay had an excellent grasp of Bahasa Melayu and was able to adapt well to Malaysian life.

It can be concluded that the majority of the foreign spouses interviewed in this study had a good relationship with their Malaysian family and friends although a small number experienced relationship problems with their Malaysian family before the marriage due to religious and cultural differences between them and their Malaysian spouse. Aside from that, it can be argued that the ability of foreign spouses to speak Malay fluently enabled them to assimilate well into Malaysian society, and this ability probably affected their relationship with their Malaysian family and friends.

Coping Strategies

As shown in past studies by Chou (2009, 2012), Lai (1997), Mo et al. (2006) and Yu et al. (2014), the respondents in this study also sought support in coping with their new life from their Malaysian family and friends. Intangible support is a coping strategy among emotion-focused strategies (Aldwin & Revenson, 1987; Peraica, 2009) to regulate the emotional consequences of stressful or potentially stressful events (Peraica, 2009; Taylor, 1998). Emotion-focused strategies rely on handling the feeling of distress emotionally, such as by relying on social support by talking

to friends or family about concerns. One respondent, 30-year-old Mari from India, stated:

> You could say that my coping strategies are my Malaysian husband and my Malaysian family. There was one time, when I was filling my spouse visa form and was not too unsure on some of the items, my husband actually asked his dad. Because his dad is a lawyer.

By talking to someone who could do something concrete to help overcome the trauma caused by the stressful situation, the respondent displayed an emotion-focused coping strategy to a specific problem. Another respondent obtained intangible support by connecting with his ethnic group and participating in an online ethnic forum consisting of users who were also foreign spouses from his home country. Tan, a 29-year-old from China, said:

> If I have any questions about immigration-related matters, I will ask my friends and we will also search the solution through an online forum. There is this Chinese forum. If you have any questions you can ask them. Quite a number of the users have been married here for more than 10 years with a local so they can provide you with the answer.

When the respondents sought advice from someone or shared their feelings with them, whether it was their Malaysian spouse, Malaysian family, friends or others, they were able to minimise or resolve the problems that they were facing by resorting to a form of intangible support that relied on emotion-focused coping.

CONCLUSION

This paper addressed the lived experience of foreign spouses married to Malaysians and living in Malaysia. The aspects of their experience focused on were problems faced in (1) acquiring a spouse visa, (2) gaining employment, and (3) forming relationships with family and friends in Malaysia. The in-depth interviews revealed three issues related to their lived experience in Malaysia. Firstly, we discovered that in terms of acquiring a spouse visa, the majority of the respondents expressed that they had encountered a number of difficulties in the initial phase of applying for the visa such as that a lot of documentation was required to support their visa application. Secondly, the interview data found that the foreign spouses had difficulty getting a job in Malaysia as most Malaysian companies hesitated to recruit them due to their status as 'foreigners'.

Thirdly, in contrast to other studies that had found that foreign spouses had experienced difficulties in forming relationships outside their own community, our analysis revealed that the majority of the respondents living in Malaysia had a good relationship with their local in-laws and friends. Most of them reported that they led a happy married life with their Malaysian spouse and children. We also found that to overcome the difficult experiences they encountered, the respondents implemented

emotion-focused coping strategies as a form of intangible support and that they applied for such support from their Malaysian spouse, family and friends.

We centred our discussion upon the notion that foreign spouses married to Malaysians and living in Malaysia are still perceived as foreigners, being socially excluded from the larger Malaysian community and therefore, experiencing difficulties in their lives here. In essence, the lived experience of these foreign spouses in Malaysia demonstrated their struggle in a number of aspects of their life that were beyond their control. Future research could investigate the underlying factors such as educational background in exploring the lived experience of foreign spouses.

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