

New study sheds light on cross-national families in S'pore

Those with local-born dad, foreign-born mum have lowest income, highest level of conflict

Theresa Tan
Senior Social Affairs
Correspondent

A new study on cross-national families has found that families with a Singapore-born husband and a wife born overseas have the lowest per capita family income and the highest level of family conflict, compared with other family types.

The other family types in the study are those with both parents born here, those with both parents born overseas, and those with a foreign-born dad and a Singapore-born mum.

The study was done by Professor Jean Yeung, founding director of the Centre for Family and Population Research at the National University of Singapore, and PhD student Shuya Lu.

They aimed to find out how cross-national families with young children are functioning and how children who grow up in such families fare, compared with other types of families here.

Cross-national families in the study are defined as those with a person born in Singapore married to someone born in another country.

It is the first large-scale national study to examine cross-national families here in detail and the findings are representative of Singa-

pore's resident population, said Prof Yeung.

More than one in three, or 37 per cent, of citizen marriages registered here in 2019 were transnational, according to the Government's Population In Brief 2020 report. Citizen marriages refer to those involving two Singapore citizens, or a Singaporean and a non-citizen.

Prof Yeung's study is part of a bigger one, called the Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study, funded by the Ministry of Education.

She presented the findings on cross-national families at a conference, *Emerging Dimensions of Marriage in Asia*, last November.

Her study interviewed 3,121 mothers who were the primary caregivers of Singaporean children aged up to six years old, in 2018 and 2019. The interviews were done in person.

Of the families, 18 per cent had a mother born overseas and a Singapore-born father, while 6 per cent had a father born overseas and a Singapore-born mum.

In more than half (57 per cent) of the families, both parents were born here. The remaining are families in which both parents are foreign-born.

In the study, China, Malaysia and Vietnam are the top three countries that the foreign-born mothers were born in.

STRESS POINTS

Such instability and dependency status are not conducive for a family to grow and prosper healthily. It can be detrimental for spousal relations and children's development.



PROFESSOR JEAN YEUNG, founding director of NUS' Centre for Family and Population Research, on wives holding long-term visit passes who are dependent on their husbands.

The study found that families with a Singapore-born husband and a foreign-born wife had the following characteristics:

- The Singapore-born husbands had the lowest academic qualifications, with a third having only secondary-level education or lower. This is compared with about one in five husbands in families with both parents born in Singapore.
- The largest age difference between the spouses – an average of seven years. This is compared with an average of three years for the other family types.
- The lowest average monthly per capita family income of \$1,709, compared with \$2,611 for families where both parents are

born here, and \$3,062 for families with a foreign-born father and Singapore-born mother. The figure for both foreign-born parents was \$2,725.

- The foreign-born mothers have a more traditional gender ideology than mothers in other family types.
- The highest level of family conflict.

Prof Yeung said there is a small but statistically significant difference in the level of conflict experienced in families with a foreign-born mum and Singapore-born father, compared with the other family types.

She noted that money woes and difficulties in making ends meet often lead to family conflict and the study found that the level of family conflict is inversely related to family income.

She added: "Besides, the different cultural norms and habits of the parents growing up in different countries may cause some friction, too."

About one in three foreign-born mothers had a university or higher education. This debunks a stereotype that foreign brides have little education, Prof Yeung said.

Another significant finding is that 55 per cent of the foreign-born wives had attained permanent residency and 26 per cent had become Singapore citizens, after an average of eight years of marriage.

However, 17 per cent of them held long-term visit passes.

A more detailed analysis shows that among the foreign-born spouses, the women holding long-

term visit passes are the most socio-economically disadvantaged group, with the lowest education level and monthly per capita family income.

Prof Yeung said: "Their lives can be quite unsettled as they need to continue to get their visa renewed, and depend on their husbands to sponsor them and provide financial support. Such instability and dependency status are not conducive for a family to grow and prosper healthily."

"It can be detrimental for spousal relations and children's development. We should explore how to support them better."

Ms Chong Ning Qian, senior research executive at gender equality group Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware), said the finding that foreign-born women wed to Singapore-born men experience the highest level of family conflict is of concern.

Other studies and Aware's own experience have also found that these women are particularly vulnerable to family violence, she said.

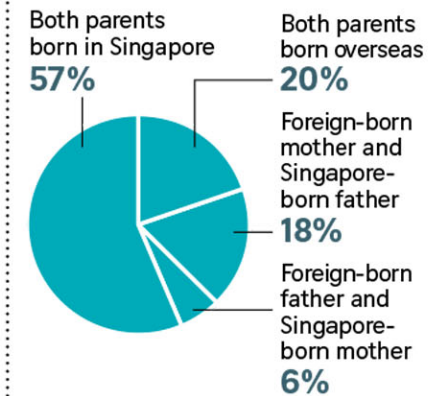
For example, they may stay in abusive marriages for fear of being separated from their children, if they report the violence and their husbands cancel their immigration passes.

She said: "This study confirms the vulnerability of migrant spouses in cross-national families in Singapore, particularly those consisting of migrant mothers and Singaporean fathers."

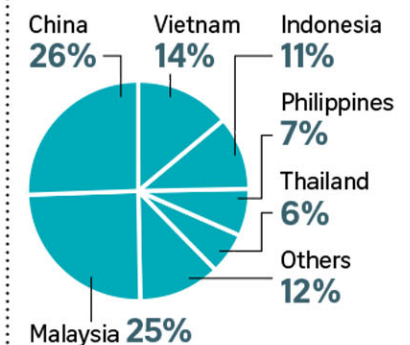
theresat@sph.com.sg

Characteristics of cross-national families

TYPES OF FAMILIES

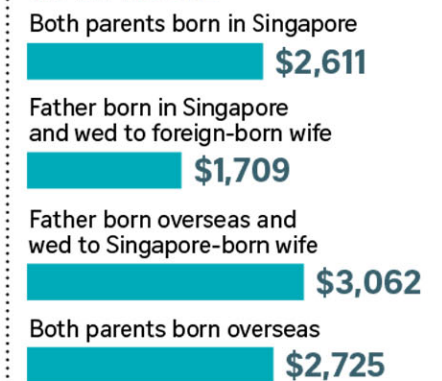


WHERE THE FOREIGN-BORN MOTHERS WERE BORN IN



NOTE: Figures do not add up to 100% due to rounding up.

MONTHLY PER CAPITA FAMILY INCOME



Source: JEAN YEUNG AND SHUYA LU
STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS