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Living Apart Together. Cross-border marriage, Riau Islands style
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'Holding hands', a photograph by Jos van Calen



45 Transnational marriage in Asia



NEWSLETTER

Living Apart Together Cross-border marriage, Riau Islands style.

“He’s everything to me. Because when I’m with him, I’m respectable. I’m a success now (*jadi orang*). Before I was scum, always being taunted by people, being laughed at, being sneered at because of my work, my immoral work. That’s why I’m so grateful – truly grateful – to have my husband”.

Former Indonesian sex worker, Ani.

LENORE LYONS AND MICHELE FORD

Former Indonesian sex worker, Ani, was 24 years old when she met her husband Ah Huat on the job in 1999. Ah Huat, a 57 year old Singaporean Chinese widower, paid S\$2,000 to Ani’s Madam to release her debt with the brothel where she worked in Tanjung Balai Karimun, part of the Riau Archipelago in Indonesia. She now lives with her child from a former marriage in a house that Ah Huat bought for them in Tanjung Balai Karimun. He provides Ani with Rp. 4,000,000 house-keeping money per month, and pays

for other expenses when he visits from Singapore. He used to visit once a month when he was working full-time, but now he is semi-retired and spends more time in Tanjung Balai.

Ani is one of many women in the Riau Islands married to Singaporeans. While some Indonesian women met their husbands through extended family or while working overseas in factories or as domestic workers, a significant number of women with Singaporean spouses living in the Riau Islands are former, sometimes still-practicing, sex workers. For the former

sex workers, international marriages provide a means to escape the drudgery and risk of their work. But more significant than financial gain is the social standing that they obtain by virtue of being married. The social stigma attached to sex work is very strong in Indonesia and marriage provides sex workers with a means to become ‘respectable’. Although Ani married an older Chinese foreigner, her status as a married woman restored her confidence and allowed her to finally establish a comfortably-off ‘real family’ with her child.

Working class Singaporean men like Ah Huat are increasingly choosing international marriage because of the difficulties they face in finding suitable spouses at home. The tendency for women to ‘marry up’ and men to ‘marry down’ has limited the marriage opportunities for two groups of Singaporeans – tertiary educated professional women, and working-class men with little education. Marriage opportunities diminish further as individuals age, or if they are previously divorced or widowed. In these circumstances, international

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Karimun brothel village. Photograph by Lenore Lyons, 2004



Karimun streetscape. Photograph by Lenore Lyons, 2004

marriage allows Singaporean men to fulfil their desire to marry and to meet their social and family obligations as married men.

Significant numbers of these couples live their lives on opposite sides of the border – the women remain in Indonesia and the men visit them with varying degrees of frequency from their homes in Singapore. In some cases, this pattern is explained by Singapore's immigration regime. Under Singaporean law, the foreign wives of Singaporean citizens only have access to the right to permanent residence if their Singaporean husbands can demonstrate that they have the financial means to support them. Working class men find it difficult to obtain visitors' passes, work permits, and permanent residency permits for their for-

ign spouses and children because their incomes are deemed to be too low. Residency is even more elusive for women who have previously held work permits to enter and work in Singapore. Singapore's Marriage Restriction Policy prohibits current work permit holders from marrying Singaporean citizens or permanent residents without the Ministry of Manpower's approval. If the marriage takes place abroad, the work permit holders are barred from re-entering Singapore. As a consequence, some Indonesian wives of Singaporean men find themselves confined to the Indonesian side of the border. The Singapore government claims that the purpose of this restriction is to prevent large numbers of low-skilled foreign workers settling in Singapore through marriage and placing a potential welfare burden on the state.

Lifestyle choice

But immigration restrictions do not always explain why husbands and wives live separately rather than cohabiting in one country. For example, for Ani, the Singapore state's tight control on unskilled migration does not figure in her decision making. She asserts that if she wanted to migrate to Singapore to live with Ah Huat she would simply do so, without problem. At this stage of her life, however, other considerations have taken precedence. Ani's natal family has expressed strong opposition to the possibility of Ani moving to Singapore with her son. In addition, her son could not migrate without being adopted by Ah Huat, which is difficult since his father (Ani's ex-husband) is still alive. Ani also sees her decision to remain in the Riau Islands as a lifestyle choice. At first she was impressed by Singapore's orderliness and beauty, and the vibrancy of the nightlife compared with Tanjung Balai's sleepy provincial atmosphere. Her visits increased in frequency and length after the wedding, but soon she tired of Singapore. She dislikes the pace of life, has difficulty communicating in English or Chinese, and found her long days at home alone in their flat in Singapore boring, and the cost of living too expensive. She enjoys the extra living space that their Tanjung Balai house provides and the slow pace of life in the Islands.

Ah Huat has also not considered migrating permanently to Indonesia. Under Indonesia's 1992 Immigration Law, foreign citizens who wish to live in Indonesia must obtain a stay permit for the purposes of work, business or tourism. Indonesian women are not permitted to sponsor their husbands so in most cases they must be sponsored by an employer, which leads to numerous problems, particularly when husbands lose their jobs. Naturalisation is not an option. Ah Huat would never consider naturalisation in view of Indonesia's unstable social and economic conditions. Singaporean citizenship provides him with access to a range of services, including preservation of superannuation funds and medical care, which would not be attainable in Indonesia.

These cross-border marriages are the particular product of life in the Indonesia-Singapore borderlands. Ani and Ah Huat can successfully live apart, and yet together, because the close proximity between the Riau Islands and Singapore means that

travel to and from the islands is relatively fast and cheap. Travel times vary between 40 minutes to one and a half hours depending on the destination, and return ferry tickets cost as little as S\$25. Ah Huat can come and go as he pleases since Singaporeans are permitted to visit Indonesia without a visa and stay for up to 30 days on a tourist pass.

The close physical proximity of Singapore and the Riau Islands means that the couples can see each other regularly while at the same time taking advantage of the economic opportunities presented by living on different sides of the border. Men like Ah Huat have much greater earning capacity if they stay in Singapore, and their families have a much higher standard of living if they remain in Indonesia. For working class men and women who are economically, (and in some cases socially), marginalised in their countries of birth, cross-border marriages allow them to experience a degree of upward class mobility in Indonesia.

Differential class mobility

Understanding this particular kind of cross-border marriage as a form of class mobility requires a shift away from conventional views, which attribute the class of unwaged women solely to the class position of the main male income earner, (usually a husband or father). The strong association between a woman's marital and employment status and her class position means that women can experience significant class mobility during the course of their lives. Indonesian women in Riau Islands-style cross-border marriages experience a shift in their class location so long as they continue to reside in the Islands. For these women, the economic benefits of cross-border marriage are immediate. Favourable exchange rates between the Singapore dollar and the Indonesian rupiah, combined with the lower cost of living in the Riau Islands, allow them to visibly consume a lower middle class lifestyle. The women (and their children) are not only better off financially than if they had married working class Indonesian men, but also far better off than if they had migrated to Singapore.

Their husbands do not experience class mobility in the same way; for the men the economic advantages to be gained from the differential exchange rates are usually deferred. While their wives and families immediately enter the ranks of the lower middle classes in Indonesia, the men retain their marginal status as poor, working class men in Singapore. They appear to be satisfied with their living arrangements because it saves them money or provides them with greater personal freedom. On their visits, they enjoy a comfortable lifestyle including spending time in a relatively large house, and the chance to indulge in food, such as seafood, which is normally quite expensive in Singapore. These working class men, economically marginalised in their home countries, can 'live like kings' in the Riau Islands. They look forward to their visits to the Islands, and to retirement, when they will be able to live with their wives in Indonesia and enjoy their financial investments in property and consumer goods. In the meantime, however, their families' ability to retain their new class location is dependent on the male breadwinner's ability to earn more than a subsistence wage in his home country.

For centuries Indonesian women have become involved in relationships with men whose primary residence is in another

country. What is new about the kinds of relationships women experience in the Riau Islands is that their partners live close enough to permit frequent short visits – and the community in which they live is fluid enough to allow them to enter the ranks of the lower middle class on the basis of economic resources alone. The women also benefit from greater levels of personal autonomy because their husbands live abroad. However, it would be a mistake to view these women's lives as reflective of a new form of women's agency. They are still subject to the same gendered ideologies that shape the lives of other Indonesian women, including expectations about women's roles in marriage. Their foreign husbands also hold entrenched ideas about sex roles, and there is some evidence to suggest that men seek out wives and mistresses in the Riau Islands because the women are regarded as more 'traditional' and therefore submissive towards their husbands.

Most importantly, however, women's life choices as cross-border wives are constrained by gender imbalances that reflect the economic differences between Indonesia and Singapore. As the primary breadwinners their husbands control the household finances, and determine when the couple will be together and when they will live apart. Ultimately it is also the men who possess the power to withdraw from their cross-border relationships, leaving the women with little legal recourse in relation to maintenance or division of assets, unless the couple has purchased a house in the wife's name. Ani's story and those of other women like her demonstrate that cross-border marriage Riau Islands-style opens up new opportunities, while at the same time entrenching old oppressions.

Note: This research is based on in-depth interviews conducted in the Riau Islands between November 2004 and August 2006 with Indonesian wives and Singaporean husbands. Pseudonyms are used at the request of informants. ■

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Lenore Lyons and Michele Ford are currently working on an Australian Research Council Project titled "In the Shadow of Singapore: The Limits of Transnationalism in Insular Riau" which examines transnational encounters between Singaporeans and people living in Insular Riau (see <http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/research/intheshadow/>).