THE ROLE OF ICTS IN THE LIVES OF FOREIGN WIVES IN SINGAPORE

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ABSTRACT
This research aims to understand the factors that lead to exclusion among foreign wives in Singapore and the role that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) plays in inclusion and empowerment. Increasingly, there has been a trend of migration through marriage in Singapore, especially between foreign brides and Singaporean men. Present literature show that ICTs can be a source of social support to help migrants adapt to life in their host country (Choi & Chen, 2006). We conducted in-depth interviews with 27 foreign wives in Singapore and found that although not a direct cause of empowerment, ICTs act as an agent to enhance social, political and economic inclusion. We also found out how respondents adopted ICTs differently to achieve inclusion, yet the very same benefits ICTs bring could have negative impacts too.
Keywords: Foreign wives, ICTs, Singapore, empowerment, social exclusion

INTRODUCTION

Singapore has seen a growing number of female migrants who have moved to Singapore for the purpose of marriage. The number of foreign women who are married to Singaporean men has increased by about 10% in the last ten years, from 20% of total marriages in Singapore in 1998 to 30% in 2008 (National Population Secretariat, 2009). The National Population Secretariat (2009) also reported that in 2008, 97% of these foreign brides came from other parts of Asia, who may have met their husbands overseas or in Singapore through the help of match-making agencies (Tan, 2011).

Many foreign wives face a myriad of problems upon their arrival in Singapore. According to AWARE (2006), language is one of the biggest barriers for these women. Most of them do not speak the same language as their spouses, and are not familiar with English, the working language of Singapore. Integration into the local society thus becomes a huge challenge for them. The lack of cross-cultural understanding between the couple also creates strain on their marriage (Ng, 2011).

Furthermore, as many of these wives are relocating to a new country to be with their spouses, they often do not have a solid support network in Singapore. They face several social problems adjusting to their new host country, such as having to endure discrimination and disparities in culture.

With regards to legal status, the Immigration Checkpoint Authority (ICA) maintains that foreign spouses of Singaporeans do not automatically become permanent residents (PR). Applications are reviewed on a case-by-case basis, and the rules for approval remain vague. Most of these wives are only granted a long-term visit pass, which allow them to stay up to a maximum of five years. Even so, their long-term social pass hinges on their relationship between them and their husbands, making them vulnerable and heavily dependent on their husbands. In the event of divorce, or death of the husband, these foreign wives will be legally required to return to their home countries.

In addition, due to Singapore's labour regulations, employers are restricted in their ability to hire foreign workers. This makes it extremely difficult for these foreign wives without a PR status to land a job. Holders of the long-term visit pass are entitled to remain in Singapore but are not granted health or education subsidies. Foreign wives who wish to work would have to convert their long-term visit pass to a work permit upon confirmation of an employment opportunity. However, should their work permit be annulled, they would have to leave the country immediately. A number of foreign wives also fear that holding a work permit would hinder their chances of a successful application to be a PR in Singapore. Fearing this, most wives would rather hold on to their long-term visit pass and miss out on economic opportunities to bring in more income for the family. In addition, financial assistance for these wives is scarce as priority goes to Singapore citizens or permanent residents. These obstacles to gaining employment may amount to great financial difficulty for this group, especially the lower-income ones.

The problems listed above signify the lack of ability to change their situations and the constant entrapment by the various roadblocks in their lives, namely the lack of PR status, language barrier and reliance on the marriage relationship. While there is extensive literature on foreign wives in other parts of Asia, such as South Korea and Taiwan, there is little research done on foreign wives in Singapore. Conversely, our paper seeks to explore how ICTs could improve the lives of these foreign wives in Singapore by mitigating exclusion and empowering them.

ICTs are slowly becoming more widespread in both the developing and developed world (International Telecommunication Union, 2011). Singapore in particular has a high level of ICTs usage, with a penetration rate of 143% for mobile phone and 191% for household broadband (Info-Communication Development Authority [IDA], 2011). This suggests that Singapore is highly connected and thus ICTs could be a potential avenue foreign wives can tap on to reduce the severity of their problems.

Literature has shown that ICTs allowed for the empowerment of individuals both in the personal and professional spheres. In the area of migration, ICTs offer significant progress for the marginalised community (Chib & Aricat, 2012). ICTs allow migrants to maintain relations with their family and friends back home and sustain ties with their local co-ethnic community. Within the professional sphere, foreign domestic workers were empowered by the use of ICTs as a form of liberalisation from the watchful eye of their employers (Lin & Sun, 2010).

In this study we seek to examine the different types of problems faced by these wives, which are broadly categorised into three forms of exclusion, namely social, political and economic. We will also study how ICTs can play a part in solving the problems that they face, through the process of empowerment. In the next section we explain the theoretical frameworks used in this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW EXCLUSION AND MIGRATION

Exclusion is a term used to describe the different forms of social disadvantage, which can hinder groups or individuals from participating fully in social, political and economic activities. The term, narrowly defined, refers to financial deprivation, whereby the individuals cannot enjoy activities falling within the social norm. A broader definition takes on a more multi-faceted approach, including factors such as quality

of education, unemployment, inadequately paid jobs, lack of community inclusion, information deficiency and poor access to facilities (Peace, 2001; Silver & Miller, 2003; Cass, Shove & Urry, 2003). Most studies have divided the concept of exclusion into three distinct dimensions: the social, political and economic (Chigona, Beukes, Vally, & Tanner, 2009; Selwyn, 2002; Peace, 2001; Van Winden, 2001). It is useful to do so, as it allows us to target each aspect systematically to reduce the exclusion foreign wives face. While they may be distinct aspects, each is very much interrelated with another. Selwyn (2002) gave an example of how long-term unemployment, a form of economic exclusion, can lead to a poorer social life, where individuals were demoralised and turned to a life of crime or drugs. Sen (2000) also argued that exclusion has been in part responsible for capability poverty, where individuals are unable to take part in the social communal life due to their inability to interact freely with others. This then limits the individual's living opportunities, such as the opportunity to be employed or receive credit that in turn lead to economic impoverishment. This cycle could go on, potentially leading to inter-generational exclusion (Verner & Alda, 2004; Harper, Marcus, & Moore, 2003). Exclusion is thus a delicate and complex state, and it is important to recognise it as an inherent social problem (Phipps, 2000).

Migration can exacerbate exclusion, where migrants face problems in adapting and acculturating into the society they are in. These problems include financial exploitation at work, a lack of social support, language barrier and the inability to obtain independence (Tastsoglou & Hadjicostandi, 2003; Levitt, Lane, & Levitt, 2005). This leaves them in a state of exclusion, void of the social communal life and economic well being an average citizen enjoys. Foreign wives are no exception within the broader group of migrants, only perhaps more vulnerable. Being married to a Singaporean entails a commitment to remain in Singapore and thus integration into the host society is of paramount importance, more so than, for instance, a foreign student, who has the liberty to return to his homeland once his study ends. These wives could end up being in a prolonged stage of exclusion should they fail to adapt. There have been various news reports documenting the plight of these wives who migrated in hopes of escaping a life of poverty in their home countries or to gain a more comfortable life in Singapore. However, they found themselves in unfavourable situations after migration (Mulchand, 2005; Tan, 2009; Ng, 2010). These reports also described the discrimination they face inside and outside of the home, the economic desperation they are in and their lack of social support. The situation after migration was a stark contrast from what most have expected out of the marriage. This phenomenon is parallel to the social exclusion framework developed by Kothari (2002) that seeks to explain the links between chronic poverty and migration. According to Kothari (2002), migration is both a cause and consequence of poverty. The lack of resources, capital and discrimination within one's homeland could cause individuals to move to other lands, which are perceived to have more opportunities. Migration thus becomes a livelihood strategy to improve their current condition. However, the outcome of such a livelihood strategy could result in greater exclusion, as illustrated by the various news reports. The purpose of this study is thus to examine the different forms of exclusion foreign wives in Singapore face upon migration.

Upon the elimination of all these forms of exclusion comes empowerment, where the marginalised groups and individuals carry out more participative action in the community and society, thereby becoming empowered and gaining agency and autonomy. Perkins and Zimmerman (1995) argued that empowerment is the process by which individuals gain control over their lives, through an enhancement of their well-being coupled with the amelioration of problems. In concrete terms, this means that individuals gain opportunities to develop knowledge and skills, as well as engage professionals as collaborators rather than authoritative experts. The activities described closely resemble that of exclusion reduction, and therefore we defined empowerment to be the alleviation of the various forms of exclusion.

ICTs could provide a solution to exclusion, empowering the foreign wives. Existing literature has documented the tangible benefits that can be derived from the usage of ICTs, which are beneficial and crucial in helping migrants to fit in with their host country (Lin & Sun, 2010; Thomas & Lim, 2010, Thomas, 2008; Roldan, 2009). These studies highlighted how the usage of mobile phones had been a key mode of communication by allowing the social group to establish and maintain connections back home, while also extending out to other fellow migrant co-nationals to build up their local social networks (Thompson, 2009). Thompson (2009) also examined the strategies used by migrant workers to maintain their social networks via mobile phones, with effective cost control, whilst maintaining relationships and trying to improve access.

ICTs such as the Internet can also be a source of social support for immigrants (Choi & Chen, 2006). Other studies focus on ICTs as a means of learning a language in order to help migrants grasp the language of their host country. Webb (2006) found that after taking into account social aspects of learning, ICTs had the potential to increase migrants' motivation and enable them to take greater control of their learning. This is further substantiated by another study by Fisher, Durrance and Hinton (2004) about the confidence gained by high participation rates in English by Second Language (ESL) learners in Community Technology Centres in the USA.

With the adoption of ICTs, exclusion can be alleviated by enabling communication across time and spatial dimensions which permits migrants to maintain relations with their families and friends back home (Paragas, 2009). ICTs facilitate instantaneous and simultaneous communication, despite trans-geographical boundaries, making communication more convenient and accessible. Through using the Internet, migrants are given the opportunity to form virtual communities with fellow countrymen whom are geographically divided (Law & Chu, 2008). With wireless communication, information and communication has also been reconciled into physical space. (Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qiu, & Sey, 2004). The literature only examined mobile usage. These benefits should similarly, if not more so, be derived from the usage of ICTs by the foreign wives in Singapore.

Specific to empowerment, García-Montes, Caballero-Muñoz and Pérez-Álvarez (2006) discovered that mobiles were able to provide everyday empowerment for individuals, highlighting how new power was attained and how a sense of control was maintained over their communications without the interference of the organisations to which they belong to. Another study by Adams, Blandford and Lunt (2005) found that when users discovered how ICTs could enhance and support their daily work practices, there was also a purported increase in empowerment. ICTs could therefore be a facilitating and empowering tool in helping foreign wives counter exclusion by helping them to achieve a perceived sense of empowerment through obtaining control. In addition, Chib and Chen (2011), in their study on midwives' ICTs use, argued that agency and autonomy could be acquired through the use of ICTs. They asserted that ICTs allow the midwives to realise the power struggle within their society and negotiate this power relation to achieve greater gender equality. This, in essence, refers to empowerment. The following will explain in detail how ICTs can play a part in reducing each aspect of exclusion, thus achieving empowerment.

Social Exclusion

The social aspect of exclusion refers to the extent that an individual is excluded from society in terms of social interaction and participation, and is also known as social marginalisation (Peace, 2001). Online communities may enable more diverse contact between people. By enabling social integration, ICTs are also said to enhance and promote the integration and participation of ethnic minorities, through the Internet (Van Winden, 2001). ICTs have an enormous potential for enhancing networking and communication at a local level (National Working Party on Social Inclusion in the Information Society [INSINC], 1997).

In addition, Kothari (2002) included another aspect of social inclusion, namely culture and identity. The cultural aspect of social exclusion refers to the lack of, or minimal language skills, which make it difficult for migrants to adapt to the local culture, thereby hindering

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social inclusion. Yang and Wang (2003) noted that language barriers may force foreign wives to live in isolation, where they are unable to leave the house alone, or seek help when needed. The primary communication within the family unit may also be hindered, thereby frustrating family relations (Yang & Wang, 2003). Language empowers one and facilitates social contact, while helping one to reduce dependency on others. It also helps one to achieve a sense of control over one's life (Cakir & Guneri, 2011). On the other hand, cultural and identity exclusion can manifest in the state of foreign wives being unable to express their cultural identity. These wives need to abide by rules and norms of the host society, or of their spouses' family, which may be vastly different from that of the rules back home (Yang & Wang, 2003). In Yang & Wang's study (2003) on Indonesian foreign wives in Taiwan, they discovered that some of these wives were forced to stay at home for their spouses feared them running away. Similarly, some foreign wives in Singapore face the same plight (Tan, 2011).

Gender would also have a part to play in social exclusion. Singapore is a relatively conservative Asian society that still has a strong emphasis on the domestic household roles of females as the nurturer and caregiver. Many of these wives come from a more conservative Asian society where breadwinner roles are dominated by males, which may colour their perspective on their gender role. Such perceived structured gender roles would possibly affect the way their new host families or their spouses view the roles of these foreign wives. Some Singaporean spouses expect their wives to be a "maid", to clean and look after the family including their elderly parents (Tan, 2011). Furthermore, given that employment opportunities in Singapore are scarcer for these foreign wives due to the lack of a proper legal status, these wives may find it befitting to remain in their role as a mother. Over time, they may find it even more difficult to overcome social exclusion.

The many aspects of socio-cultural exclusion these wives face in adjusting to their new host country, including the lack of social support, could potentially be mitigated by the use of ICTs, which help in the building of community connectedness (Phipps, 2000). The telephone plays an important social role in building and maintaining relationships while fulfilling certain significant care-giving and receiving functions (Rakow, 1992). This gives individuals a sense of self-worth and identity, particularly in a situation where family and friends are absent (Thompson, 2009). Even though Thompson's (2009) study focuses on foreign domestic workers in Singapore, similar situations could arise in the lives of foreign wives given that both groups are far away from their home countries and are therefore bound to share similar psychological responses (i.e. lack of self-worth and identity). However, this same benefit may or may not materialise in the case of foreign wives, as this group of women is essentially different from other migrant groups. Being married to a Singaporean and permanently situated in Singapore may mean a different criterion for independence (i.e. being socially integrated into Singapore's society in this case). Overall, mobile phones, or ICTs in general, can become a valuable tool in sustaining close relationships with family members and friends, thereby reestablishing their self-worth and identity (Thompson, 2009).

The availability of mobile telephony has allowed users to communicate globally and locally, as and when they want (Castells, et al., 2004). Similarly, the usage of ICTs has allowed communication to flourish, enabling individuals to choose when, where, with whom to communicate. As such they are no longer restricted by social structure, such as family units, and are able to create their social network according to their interest, values and priorities. For example, instead of being restricted to only communicate with their in-laws, they could have an additional avenue of social support through the use of ICTs, by joining online communities who share the same interest (Castells, 2007).

Political Exclusion

The political form of exclusion relates to the individual's inability to participate in political activities (e.g. voting), where they are unable to exert their political and human rights (Selwyn, 2002; Peace, 2001). This form of discrimination usually results in a sense of helplessness, particularly in the area of influencing political decision-making processes (Chigona et al., 2009). For foreign wives in Singapore, achieving a PR status is considered to be attractive as it would mean obtaining rights that will optimise the migrant's lifestyle in Singapore, such as gaining subsidies for medical care, employment opportunities, government-subsidised housing, and so on (Zhou, 2010). However, the process to obtain the desired legal status is often grey and ambiguous. ICTs have the potential to reduce the political exclusion experienced by migrants by providing a channel for dialogue between the authority and themselves (Chigona et al., 2009). Cachia, Kluzer, Cabrera, Centeno and Punie (2007) added that ICTs enable individuals to organise themselves in order to participate in political debates. This presents a platform for their voice to be heard. Such a dialogue contributes to empowerment, as individuals are able to engage professionals as collaborators rather than authoritative experts (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Although the political climate of Singapore allows for little citizen participation, this research hopes to uncover ways in which foreign wives in Singapore have used ICTs to gain political inclusion, namely obtaining PR status and reaching out to authority for help.

Economic Exclusion

The economic aspect of exclusion refers to poverty, including the lack of employment opportunities, inability to accumulate funds, thereby leading to a potential loss of income (Chigona et al., 2009). Chigona et al. (2009) suggest that ICTs could provide a solution for the alleviation of economic exclusion if the economically excluded individuals have the appropriate knowledge to make use of the technology to propel themselves up the socioeconomic ladder. Those who do not, however, get propelled downward. This concept is similar to that of the digital divide, which is the gap between those who have the opportunity to access ICTs and those who do not (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2001). Individuals who lack the access to, or the knowledge on how to use such technologies, which are skills essential in today's job market, will then remain in low-paying jobs, continuing their cycle of poverty (Hall, 1998).

ICTs have been shown to assist the migrant in looking for employment. In Thomas' study (2008), she found that ICTs helped migrant workers to find and take advantage of better job opportunities. Thompson (2009) found that ICTs also confer a certain degree of autonomy to foreign domestic workers, because it allows them to connect with their social network even while being under supervision of their employers. In this sense, they are enabled to have some control over their lives. In addition, Foley (2004) highlighted the benefits ICTs bring in terms of learning. It encourages learning by motivating individuals, particularly those with a lower education level, to start learning again. Extending this to the situation of the foreign wives, such a benefit could spur them to take on new skills, which will then improve their employability. This way, ICTs can lead the economic excluded to economic inclusion. Chigona et al. (2009) noted that having personal access to ICTs has helped migrants reduce the cost of contacting loved ones back home, look for jobs online, and start their personal businesses. However, to gain economic independence and economic inclusion in Singapore does not only encompass having the relevant skill set for the economy, but also the legal status for work. About 40% of the foreign wives in Singapore have a secondary education, while another 26% have received up to post-secondary education (National Population Secretariat, 2009). Thus, most of these foreign wives, with some education, have the potential to contribute economically, but due to the lack of a Permanent Resident status, find it hard to get a job. Given the unique circumstance in Singapore, this research aims to examine the possible economic exclusion faced by foreign wives here, and if and how their use of ICTs has helped them to overcome economic exclusion.

In conclusion, this body of literature suggests that ICTs can empower women in a socioeconomic and political sense, because ICTs create a comfortable and welcoming environment for women, as well as address certain needs and provide necessary skills for women. It has been suggested that it is a woman's prerogative to ICTs (Bonder, 2002). ICTs can be a means to help with the development needs and priorities of women and hence all types of ICTs should be considered to determine the types of ICTs that would be more useful at a particular setting (Jorge, 2002). Studies have also shown that ICTs can help in the problems migrants face. However, there is a lack of literature suggesting that ICTs can do the same for foreign wives. This study seeks to explore if ICTs does help them achieve the aforementioned empowerment. Therefore, we post the following research question:

RQ1: How does the usage of ICTs lead to empowerment by alleviation of social, political, and economic exclusion?

BARRIERS OF ICTS

Foreign wives may not have the necessary skills and training in using more complex ICTs like the computer and thus may not be fully able to take full advantage of the benefits of ICTs to achieve empowerment, and consequently, reduce exclusion. Foley's (2004) study found that socially excluded people expressed a need for assistance when faced with the challenge of using ICTs, for they do not have support to overcome ICTs problems. Most of them seek for help at online centers. It has also been argued that not having access to electronic communications can exacerbate the position of those that feel excluded (Christie & Perry, 1997; Phipps, 2000).

However, there remain existing barriers that can hinder the adoption of ICTs by foreign wives as outlined by Ballabio (1998), which are namely 1) Availability, 2) Accessibility, 3) Affordability, 4) Awareness and 5) Appropriateness.

The unavailability of technology and the inconvenience in accessing this technology can hinder the take-up of ICTs. However, the situation in Singapore is different. Singapore has a developed technological infrastructure and an estimated 92% of Singaporeans own a computer at home, with an estimated 7 million mobile subscriptions. With the widespread availability of mobile phones and subscriptions, it is not difficult for foreign wives to own a mobile phone and have a subscription. The statistics suggest that many foreign wives in Singapore have access to the computer and Internet, and possess a mobile phone.

Although affordability was not highlighted as a significant barrier to obtaining a phone, it recurred as a significant element in the purchasing of computers or laptops. According to Kivunike, Ekenberg, Danielson and Tusubira (2011) in their study on ICT adoption in the rural areas of Uganda, poverty is one of the major factors inhibiting the use of ICTs in the rural communities. The lack of disposable income to purchase a perceived luxury item (computer) in this regard appears to be of a considerable threat to ICT adoption.

Being unaware about the tangible benefits that could be brought about with the usage of ICTs could also prevent the adoption of ICTs. Kabbar and Crump (2007) also wrote that many respondents who used ICTs were not using them to its fullest potential. For example, many only used the Internet to connect with their social network, and did not know about other uses the Internet can offer such as "learning English, Internet banking, paying bills, applying for jobs, dealing with local and central government online, children's education." Recognition of opportunities that could be attained from the usage of ICTs is also important in increasing the take-up of ICTs. Furthermore, this uptake rate will be improved when users are able to weigh the tangible benefits versus the cost of using ICTs and realise that the benefits far outweigh the cost.

Lastly, appropriateness could be a significant barrier to ICT adoption for users would need to see the relevance that ICT usage would have on their lives. If they do not find ICTs useful or relevant for themselves, the chance of them using it would naturally be lower. Goodall, Ward and Newman (2010) noted in their research on ICT adoption amongst older Australian migrants that those who perceive computers to be only for young people tend not to be interested in learning how to use them. This illustrates how the personal perception of the appropriateness of a particular communication tool affects its adoption.

All these barriers could then limit the extent to which empowerment can take place in the lives of the foreign wives. Thus examining the barriers to ICT adoption is important to gain a holistic understanding of how ICTs can help these foreign wives. We therefore pose the following research question:

RQ2: What are the barriers that hinder ICT adoption by foreign wives?

METHODOLOGY RESEARCH DESIGN

This study utilised a qualitative approach whereby in-depth interviews with 27 foreign wives were conducted. A qualitative approach is normally adopted when there is considerably little research in an area of study, and is most suited in studying the attitudes and behaviors of subjects within their natural settings (York, 1998; Babbie, 2011). We adopted a semi-structured instrument because it allows us to gather unanticipated views and issues that would be raised by respondents, while allowing for further probing. This is particularly important, as our research is exploratory in nature.

Our interviews were categorised into six sections, which sought to find out the perspectives and experiences of the foreign wives with regards to different subject areas. These specific areas are derived from our literature review, each aiming to answer a part of our research questions.

The first area of focus was to find out more about the respondent's initial period of settling down in Singapore and their opinions of Singaporean culture. The second area of focus zoomed in on the respondents' support group in Singapore, how and where they had made friends in Singapore, and if they spent time with their friends besides their family. The purpose of these two areas of study was to compare the respondents' experiences in Singapore to their experiences back home, and thereby suggest if they faced social exclusion outside of their home

The third area of focus sought to examine the respondent's relationship with her family and husband in Singapore as well her perspectives pertaining to her in-laws. This was to find out the relationship within the respondents' immediate family unit and if it offers any social support to the wives. This will then be an indication of whether the respondents face social exclusion at home.

The fourth section of the interview focused on the respondents' views of their personal identity. This is to examine if the respondents are aware of discrimination against them and if they have personally experienced it. Questions were also crafted to see whether this affected their sense of belonging in spite of such knowledge. This might possibly have an implication on their assimilation into Singapore.

The next section centered on the economic aspect, and examined the respondent's perspectives on working and being financially dependent. This was to find out how empowered the wives are in making personal and financial decisions. At the same time, these questions sought to find out their motivations and goals in the near future and if they have taken any practical steps toward these goals.

Lastly, the interview touched on the respondents' ICT usage as well as their opinions towards the benefits of ICTs. This will help us find out the usage pattern of the respondents and how ICTs have helped them thus far. In addition, it allows for comparison between those who are frequent users of ICTs and those who are not. In turn, this could generate ideas on how foreign wives can leverage on the benefits of ICTs, allowing for greater assimilation and empowerment in their lives.

SAMPLING PROCEDURE

We selected participants based on predetermined criteria according to our research objective (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The team set a number of qualifiers for the respondents, namely, the foreign wives have to come from other parts Asia, particularly Southeast Asia. Furthermore, their main purpose of migrating to Singapore should be because of their marriage to a Singaporean man. Snowball sampling was used as members of our target population are difficult to locate (Babbie, 2011). The first tier of sampling was done through voluntary welfare organizations (VWOs), namely the Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People (ACMI) and Yong-En Care Centre, both of which offer help to foreign wives through counseling and classes. The second tier of sampling was by way of the references of our first few participants. In addition, we recruited foreign wives who are within our social circle. Through our personal contacts and snowball sampling, we managed to gather a sufficient number of interview participants.

We worked with a fellow Nanyang Technological University student, Dorcas Koh, from the School of Humanities and Social Studies, to interview the respondents from Yong-En. As Dorcas was also conducting a similar study with the same set of respondents, we decided to combine our interviews with hers, as both teams' area of focus was similar enough to have overlapping questions. This way, we did not need to take up too much of their time by requesting them to come down twice for the interviews.

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 27 foreign wives between the ages of 25 – 51, were interviewed for this study. The respondents were originally from Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, China and Indonesia. The table below shows the breakdown of the respondents' demographics in terms of age, nationality, education level and PR status.

Table 1: Interviewees' Demographics

Demographics		Number
Gender	Female	27
Age Groups	20-30	10
	31-40	12
	41-50	4
	51-60	1
Educational Attainment	Primary School	3
	Secondary	10
	School University	6
	Others	8
Nationalities	China	4

Demographics		Number
Gender	Female	27
Age Groups	20-30	10
	31-40	12
	41-50	4
	Indonesia	12
	Philippines	2
	Thailand	6
	Vietnam	3
PR Status	PR/Citizen	13
	Non PR	11
	Others	3

DATA COLLECTION AND TRANSCRIPTION

Conducting interviews

The in-depth interviews were audio recorded for transcribing and accurate data analysis purposes. Language barriers was one of our initial hurdles, as English was not many of the interviewees' first language. We employed translators through personal contacts for the Indonesian interviewees, who spoke Bahasa Melayu, and spoke in Mandarin to the Chinese and Vietnamese interviewees as many of them were also comfortable with the language. Although the Thai and Filipino wives have a better grasp of the English language, we simplified our interview questions so that they could best understand them, and hence give more accurate answers. In general, the interviews were conducted in three languages, namely English, Mandarin and Bahasa Melayu.

Transcribing

As English is not the first language for these wives, Singlish (a unique blend of the English language and local dialects) was prevalent in the interviews, Thus, the interviews were transcribed in verbatim to capture the responses of the wives more accurately and to preserve the integrity of the original statements. This would ensure that the research analysis could be done based on the actual phrasing of the respondents. Transcribers were hired, and where the interviews were conducted in a language other than English, a translation was included.

Data analysis

The data analysis was done by first coding the transcripts according to the conceptual framework that was listed out in the literature review, and then categorised into specific themes. The process of coding includes dividing up the transcripts into meaningful units according to themes. In situations where the themes were unclear, we constructed new categories to fit these codes in them. In this way we do not lose important data because we do not have prior categories for them, but are able to retain information that may help in explaining certain phenomenon.

The theoretical framework earlier identified in our literature review was that of the modified social exclusion framework by Kothari (2002), which included the three distinct themes of exclusion: namely social, political and economic, how ICTs can aid in these three aspects, as well as the barriers to the usage of ICTs along with the theme of empowerment.

To ensure consistency, transcripts were repeatedly read and coded by all of the members of the group. Relevant data from the transcripts that resonated with the themes were then put into the coding sheet. Names of participants were also changed for confidentiality purposes

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The adopted and modified framework of social exclusion from Kothari (2002) reveals and highlights the current situation that foreign wives in Singapore find themselves in. According to the framework, migrants more often find themselves facing social exclusion, political exclusion and economic exclusion that hinder their smooth integration into their host country. Our findings support the existence of such factors of exclusion.

*All names in this section have been changed to preserve the respondents' anonymity.

EXCLUSION

Social Exclusion

Kothari's (2002) framework defines the social aspect of social exclusion as the degree to which an individual experiences social marginalisation where they are socially excluded due to a lack of social interaction and participation (Peace, 2001 as cited in Chigona et al., 2009).

Findings of the study revealed that many of the foreign wives found it a challenge when communicating with other Singaporeans. They felt it was difficult for other Singaporeans to understand them and often, they felt that the Singaporeans looked down on them upon finding out that they were unable to converse in proper English. Some of the foreign wives also reported that they felt excluded when their immediate family members in Singapore started conversing in a language foreign to them. Penny reported that her husband's family communicated in Mandarin or in a dialect, for instance Cantonese[i], so that she could not understand them.

Furthermore, the participants also felt that discrimination of foreign wives in Singapore was prevalent. They often heard stories or experienced some form of discrimination from their husband's family and friends initially, or even from other Singaporeans. Tina noted that she experienced first-hand discrimination from her spouse's immediate family members previously. Tina's mother-in-law treated her inferiorly, and made off-hand remarks about her being in Singapore so that she could stay in their house to leech off them. She also added on that her mother-in-law stereotyped foreign wives, and expected her to fulfill her traditional domestic role as a homemaker. She expected Tina to be like a housewife of the past, for instance, by cleaning the house.

Respondents also reported receiving condescending looks from passers-by, being regarded as a domestic helper, a person out to cheat Singaporean men, to break marriages up or even as a social escort. They often were labeled and discriminated against.

> I don't like it when you know every time take taxi, then the taxi driver will ask us
> like where are you from? Then we say we are from Vietnam... and then they
> mention that a lot of Vietnamese girls come here. Not only me but a lot of my friend
> also encounter this. So normally in the taxi they say you just keep your mouth shut
> or say you don't understand English. [laughs] -Adele

Respondents also felt that the disparity in cultures between their home country and that of Singapore's also posed difficulties in adapting to Singapore's lifestyle. The mannerism and cultural norms of their country were different from that of Singapore and it took some time for them to grow accustomed to the Singapore way of living. Some had difficulties in navigating around Singapore initially. Fiona, an Indonesian wife, pointed out that she faced difficulties even while ordering in a food court as she was unable to distinguish between the halal[ii] and non-halal food. Having not been exposed to a non-Muslim environment, Fiona found it hard to adapt to the cultural mish-mash in Singapore. She said: "A lot of things were different. For food, the cooking and eating is very different. It was difficult to differentiate halal and non-halal food. Even at the food court, I did not know what stall sells what."

The findings also revealed that many of the respondents felt that Singapore was their second home. They felt that their first home was their hometowns, where their immediate family members were. Penny shared: "Because my first home still the place where my mom stay... Right now it does not feel like family yet because of... once house finish, she come here, she will become first home already."

> Because I'm born in Thailand, I open my eyes and Thailand is the first right. So I
> feel that the second home, you should understand me, I born in Thailand, I got a lot
> of Thai friends there, so I came here I need to start first step you know. – Rita

However, those whom reported that Singapore was their primary home usually were respondents whom bore children in Singapore, or had already been living in Singapore for extended periods of time. They cited reasons such as hoping to see their children study and work in Singapore due to the better education system in Singapore compared to that of their home country. Nancy said: "First home. Because here, the schooling for the children is like good, guaranteed. The education is more successful. At the root of it, it's more developed."

Besides language, cultural and discriminatory factors, respondents faced other aspects in the social context that contributed to them being socially excluded. When asked to depict their daily routine, many of them shared that they did not have time to participate in social activities as they were too focused on taking care of their family, cleaning the house, etc. Therefore, they often had "no time". Jamie said: "Sometimes la [nonchalant tone]. If they call, I answer. If they message, I reply them. But I don't go find them, because they are busy, got a lot of children, must look after the house."

A lack of a supportive network would also lead to social exclusion. Not having the support or encouragement from a trusted friend or family member could in turn, exacerbate the pressure and stress of migrants as they adjust to living in a new host country. Having a supportive network would relieve and negate the pressures of fitting into a new society. Respondents from our study reported experiencing intense feelings of loneliness and fear when arriving in Singapore initially and thereafter not having a supportive network of friends/family. Nancy said: "I did not like. I did not like staying here, I had no friends, I was lonely, I was bored because there was nothing to do."

However, we found that having the immediate support of family members in Singapore, in particular, where good relationships are forged with their mothers-in-law, could also help with the smooth transitioning into their new lives at their host country. Mary explained that she did not experience any problems interacting with her mother-in-law, unlike many other foreign wives, and goes on to explain that one possible reason why such relationships sour is the lack of open communication.

> I see many people come here to like have the problem with the mother-in-law.

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Many. But as long as you never talk out, what you not comfortable, my mother in
law we talk out one. What she don't like and what she like. And I also say. What I
can eat and what I cannot eat. We... everyday together whole day whole night. We
always talk one. I starting I come here.... Ya. My mother-in-law friend is become

my friend. Ah, at the 'market'. I go 'market' every morning. I go drink 'Teh O'[iii] with
them then I come back. [Enthusiastic] -Mary

The findings seem to be congruent; not having a lack of supportive network was usually the cause of social exclusion even if the other factors of social exclusion were not present. Without friends and family they felt close to, it was usually difficult for the respondents to participate actively. Most of them also found it hard to keep up with their social networks had it not been for the usage of ICTs.

The use of ICTs allowed these foreign wives to keep in contact with their families and friends back home, as well as in Singapore. Mobile phones and computers allow the foreign wives to build up a support system that can be reached at their own convenience. Findings also revealed that the usage of ICTs allowed participants to strengthen and maintain their social connections, thereby reducing social exclusion. Particularly among the Thai and Vietnamese groups, online support networks were found to provide them with a form of social support. Singtip.com, a website for Thais in Singapore, and vnas.org, a website for Vietnamese residing in Singapore, have forums through which the respondents formed their own social support networks with other Thai and Vietnamese nationals in Singapore. Some of the respondents who made use of such websites made friends through the forums. Mary, a Thai national, explained how she made friends through Singtip by first sending messages, then meeting them in person: "Then you talk in the message first (on Singtip) then you get the number then we call, eh! Which block you stay!? Come out, come out and drink coffee like that."

ICTs were used as a tool to keep up to date with their friends' and families' lives and vice versa. Mary uses Facebook to keep updated with her friends' lives. She said: "Sometimes. Sometimes only. I just see what happened to their life. How it's going to be like that." Susan also used ICTs for this purpose: "Just say, how are you, and then, say what happened there, like that la. Then they also SMS me, how are you in Singapore, I say okay in Singapore, like that."

Respondents also reported that they felt a sense of connection with family members back home through the phone and increased frequency of contact. Mary said: "Oh I talk to my mother every day. I call back her every day." Many of the respondents called home at least once a week, and several also sent SMS-es, used Internet Video services such as Skype, and social networking sites beyond their phones to stay in contact with their family. Valerie, from China, said: "Using QQ online is one important tool."

They also reported that without the usage of ICTs, they would have most definitely felt lonely and hence experienced some form of social exclusion. The mobile phone and computer helped them to sustain their social network back home and aided them in keeping contact with their families, with some respondents calling them almost every day. Respondents also revealed that the usage of ICTs was a great platform for keeping in touch with their friends back home. Penny said: "Without phone, I cannot contact, I cannot call, I cannot talk every day. Without Internet I cannot contact, means I can lost contact with them and be really lonely, no friend."

ICTs were found to have played a definite part in navigating time and space for the foreign wives in their social exclusion. ICTs act also as dis-embedding mechanisms, powerfully granting individuals the ability to escape imaginatively despite being bounded by geographical constraints (Morley, 2000). All the foreign wives we interviewed shared that they used ICTs, albeit at different levels, to stay connected with their family in their home country. The borderless characteristic of ICTs has allowed these wives to maintain a sense of control and autonomy in managing when they want to call/message/email home and the duration or length of these connections. Nancy shared: "It makes communication a lot faster, should there be problems at home, you can just telephone to tell the news." Advancements in ICTs and lower cost options, such as special international rates for phone calls, have also allowed the foreign wives to dictate their own timings of connecting with family back home, which gives them a sense of control and autonomy.

Besides keeping connected with family back home, ICTs also allow foreign wives to stay afloat of current news in their home country even though they may not be physically there. Mary shared that she can check on her Thai stocks and read the news on social networks. She said: "Singtip I last time I always go see. But now I only seldom see. I read the news. Thailand news... Ya I see the stock. Thai stock."

The wives also shared that ICTs helped them connect with family back home instantaneously, allowing them to find out first hand information and news. In Gergen's study (2002), he also reported that the mobile phone enables people to maintain an absent presence. ICTs also allow these wives to act as a source of support for their families back home and live out their responsibilities and roles vicariously as a daughter or as a mother through the usage of ICTs. Michelle explained how she uses ICTs to continue her role as a mother to her two older children currently still living in the Philippines:

Actually its like three times a week, four times a week to find out how they are
doing, because they are schooling, like you have to monitor their studies… It
depends if lecturing time of course longer, but if just want to find out if they are
okay, then it's a very short conversation like ten minutes like that.

ICTs therefore play a significant role in combating social exclusion by helping the foreign wives to maintain their support network while allowing them to continuously forge and foster bonds with their family and friends from their hometown. Foreign wives will be more socially included when they are also able to have an active social life and are more participative in society. ICTs can be a powerful facilitator in negating social exclusion by providing opportunities for the foreign wives to keep connected with their networks despite the context of time and space. This in turn makes it comfortable for them knowing that their support system is in safe reach and can be accessed at anytime, anywhere.

Political Exclusion

According to Kothari (2002), political exclusion refers to the individual's lack of participation in political activities, resulting in the inability to exercise their political and human rights (Selwyn, 2002; Peace, 2011). This renders them helpless when faced with unfavourable policies, for they lack the means to present their views for political consideration. In the case of our interviewees, using Kothari's definition of political exclusion, it would appear that those who do not possess a PR status are considered politically excluded for they are not entitled to the same benefits and rights as that of a PR, which are in many ways similar to that of a citizen, short of the fact that they may not vote. As a by-product of their political exclusion, they face various limitations in bureaucratic processes. For instance, in Singapore, foreign spouses are only granted a maximum stay of three months for short term visit pass (STVP) holders and 12 months for long term visit pass (LTVP) holders. As such, the strategy that most foreign wives employed was to leave the country after the maximum period of stay and re-enter Singapore to extend their stay. Yvonne, a STVP holder, described the burdensome task of maintaining her legal status in Singapore as a STVP holder: "Every 3, 4 months, yah I have to leave. Sometimes I go to Malaysia, or maybe go Batam then come back here again." Rachel, who has since received her PR status, recalled the time when she was a STVP holder and expressed similar sentiment on the issue

of retaining her legal status previously:

Last time, one month, two weeks only, I can stay. How many days already finish my
job. Want to go Indonesia. But I money cannot. So expensive so I go back to Batam.
Stay one night. How much I spend money? There and come back, two weeks. In the quote above, Rachel described how she needed to return to Indonesia once every two weeks in order to maintain her legal status in Singapore. This hindered her working schedule and added to her financial burden. In order to keep the cost low, she traveled to Batam, an island near Singapore instead of where she was originally from.

Political exclusion is not an end to itself; it has implications in the other realms of exclusion. Because of their legal status in Singapore, many in turn face economic exclusion and social exclusion as well. In terms of economic exclusion, many of our interviewees expressed a desire to work, which will confer a certain degree of financial independence, but could not due to their lack of a PR status. Susan explained her reasons for desiring a PR status:

Mm… and I want to get PR! Cos if get PR next time can work and got CPF[iv] right?
Let's say if any time, my husband don't have then I have money then can keep for
them [her children], study. Ah, that's why I need PR. Like that la. [Resigned tone] Here Susan expressed her longing for a PR status so that she would be able to work, both for an immediate income and pension for old age. She would then have the means to support herself and her children should her husband die.

Sally faced a similar situation, after the death of her husband, who was the sole breadwinner of the household, the family plunged into financial difficulty. Thus, obtaining PR and subsequently finding a job is crucial for her and her family to escape economic exclusion. Currently, she survives on her late
husband's savings and is planning to get a job after obtaining her PR status. She said:

I don't have a PR. I want to work, to take care of the children, but there's no
opportunity. … My money. My husband was smart, told me, before he passed away,
he planned how two people could live off the savings. The money can probably last
for 5 to 10 years, but after which, I would probably really have to work. But I should
be able to get my PR by then.
The single biggest hindrance to economic inclusion (i.e. being employed), in the opinion of the foreign wives, is political exclusion (i.e. lack of a PR status). Mary said: "We no chance, we no choice. Like me, I don't have PR. Then I cannot find job. Because all the job right, welcome only PR and Singaporean only." The ostensible solution to alleviate economic exclusion among foreign wives in Singapore, therefore, is to offer them a legal status to both stay and work for a substantial period of time. In a very recent policy change in Singapore, measures have been taken to address this issue faced by foreign spouses. The newly introduced Long Term Visit Pass plus (LTVP+) allows for a longer period of stay of three years, compared to one year previously (Teo & Ong, 2012). In addition, these foreign spouses will receive health-care subsidies and are able to work upon obtaining a Letter of Consent from the Ministry of Manpower. This seems to be a viable solution to the economic problems these foreign wives face, but it remains to be seen how, if at all, this policy change will help to reduce economic exclusion among foreign wives.

With regard to social exclusion, the lack of a PR status limits the foreign wives' movement and opportunities for empowerment. Mary revealed the difficulty she faced in returning to her home country because of her legal status in Singapore:

The quota of the PR is more less every year. Every year less and less. Maybe stay
longer then can. It's very difficult you know, because you cannot go back Thailand
too long. They will check. I cannot go over 15 day. I cannot go back home over 15
day. Last time I go only four days I must come back already. Mary's quote revealed the insecurity she felt when returning to her hometown. She said that because the number of PR applications that gets approved decreases each year, her chance of obtaining one is slimmer too. She opined that perhaps with a longer stay in Singapore would she then be able to get the issuance. In addition, she believed that the authorities check on an individual's movement in and out of Singapore as a determinant for the approval of their PR application. A stay of 15 days away from Singapore will diminish one's chance of getting PR.

This inevitably leads to greater feeling of loneliness and detachment from one's culture and homeland, which exacerbates their social exclusion. Moreover, having to constantly move in and out of Singapore, particularly for those with a STVP, disrupts any plans they may have to improve themselves. For instance, Yvonne spoke of wanting to attend English language classes but was unable to do so because she needed to exit and re-enter Singapore every other month:

Actually I would like to, I want to learn more, I saw that day I go to Bishan, I
checking about the course right, I like to search to take the course in the Mandarin
and English also. But still cannot because I cannot get my long term pass yet, so
wait for next month lah see how. So I can go like continue follow the class.
In spite of the lack of a PR status, these foreign wives are not entirely excluded from political activities in Singapore, contrary to what Kothari (2002) argued for. In many of our interviews, the foreign wives had actively sought help from political actors, namely the Ministers of Parliament (MPs), particularly for their PR application. Jamie said:

Yes. Go ask for help to the MP, last time I not stay here, I stay at Kampong Bahru
there, so I have to meet MP there. Here also I have to meet MP, every what ah, after
I meet already I wait for the letter, if I never get I have to go again ask for the PR. Jamie recounted her experience in meeting the MP at her previous home. She met the MP frequently with regard to her PR application and should there be no progress, signified by the absence of letter from the MP, she would again return to seek help. This demonstrates the active political participation of the foreign wives, they are in fact less politically excluded than most would have imagined.

Tying in with the concept of empowerment, it appears that the personally meaningful goal (i.e. obtaining a PR status) drives these foreign wives to take action in achieving it. Besides looking for help from the political figures, foreign wives also look to online forums for guides on how to better their chances of gaining a PR status. Mary said:

They will… Check, check like the passport ah. Come in and out, how long, like that
ah. But I know most information from Singtip[vi]. Singtip ah, is many case ah. Why cannot come in. Now the Singtip is really important to Thai people here, because
every event they will do, they will put, all Thai people will know from this one will
go. If you have a problem, if have anything to share, the second hand thing, or the
people want to come here study... got the study one, where to go, what things to eat

nice, they will put one. This one is the our society. Mary highlighted the importance of the online forum Singtip, which contains useful information for Thais who are coming to or who currently reside in Singapore. She said that the information she has gathered on how the authority monitors movement of individuals in and out of Singapore to determine their PR application came from this online forum. In addition to that, Singtip, a peer-to-peer network, offers help in various situations, whether you are someone looking for second-hand items or a student who hopes to study in Singapore. She concluded that Singtip has become an online society for the Thais in Singapore.

Such is the role ICTs play, allowing for control over one's life by providing information for foreign wives, helping them to navigate in the new society they now live in. Fitting into the empowerment literature, ICTs become a channel where individuals can take concrete action toward their goal, by enhancing their knowledge of how to achieve the goal.

Economic Exclusion

Our findings showed that most of the wives were not economically excluded in the home setting when it came to making financial decisions. Most of them make financial decisions with regards to domestic expenses together with their husbands, which demonstrates the equality between husband and wife, where the wife's needs, embedded in the wife's suggestions, are taken into consideration. Lisa said, "We usually discuss it between the both of us. There is no 'one-person' who makes the decision. We usually discuss and if we agree, we'll buy; if not, we won't buy."

However, there were also some, who although seem to have equal power with their husbands when it comes to making financial decisions, held some restraint when it comes to buying the things they want. This happened more among wives who did not hold jobs, possibly because they were unable to find work and were thus financially dependent on their husbands. Mary shared: "I can say I spend his money. He work and he give me money. But I also help some my budget like that." Lily shared a similar sentiment to Mary, in that she did want to burden her husband by being extravagant. She said:

> Expensive things… There will be considerations. I will come up with the money
> myself or else I wouldn't want them. I wouldn't ask from my husband. He needs to
> sustain the family; I won't give him a heavy burden. […] Between me and him I
> wouldn't ask for too much as long as we can get by peacefully.

These wives, like Mary and Lily, may seem to be economically included as they make decisions together with their husbands, but they admitted that their lack of financial contributions made them more careful with their spending, and often sought their husbands' opinion before making personal purchases.

There was also the instance of Valerie, who although she held her own job, could not afford to spend on courses to upgrade herself. For example, she was interested in driving classes, as well as a human resources course. However, she had to stagger the skills that she wanted to learn, as her husband would not contribute to funding her courses. She said: "My husband doesn't pay for me. He says that I'm working [and so will be able to afford the expenses]."

With regards to employment, there were two main groups: those who held jobs, and those who do not. In the case whereby legal status was not a problem for the wives in obtaining employment, education was one factor in affecting economic exclusion. Education affected the type of jobs, and subsequently income, that the wives could get, and thus influenced the level of economic exclusion they face. For instance, Alice, an O level certificate holder, holds a low-skilled job at a shop, and hence faces economic exclusion due to the her small income. On the other hand, Adele, a degree holder, works as a business executive. Adele and her husband are moving into their new home and have plans to travel in the next two years with their two children. This shows that they have some sort of disposable income.

The other group who remain unemployed expressed the desire to work and contribute financially to the family, but said that it was difficult or impossible to do so due to the lack of legal documents. Susan said: "Very important, because PR at least can work, if not PR ah, difficult to find job."

For wives belonging to the lower income group, financial issues presented a significant obstacle, and thus they wished to help ease this burden. Jess expressed her desire to work, because: "Firstly, to help my family. And secondly, it is boring at home, and while you're young, you should work." As for the wives who belong to the higher income group, they still wanted to be economically active. Michelle, whose husband earns between $3000-$4000 a month as a sales manager, used to work as a singer prior to getting married. She mentioned that, having worked all her life since young, she had to adjust to not being able to work. She said: "For me, practically I think even though I'm married to a Singaporean guy and we have a daughter, nowadays it is not practical that a woman stay at home and not work."

ICTs have allowed Michelle to gain some form of control over her economic exclusion. As a former singer, she decided to offer voice training lessons at her home, giving her a source of income. She acknowledged that although the amount she can earn from giving singing classes is not a huge sum, it still enabled her to contribute financially, in whatever small way, to the family. She said:

> Maybe teaching is not my passion, but at least its more concerned about singing, so
> instead of just sitting at home doing nothing, I decided to teach you know. I decided
> to save up my money. Not much, but you know can help.

Michelle's students were all recruited through putting advertisements on various websites For her, YouTube is also essential as it helps her to learn new songs to teach her students, who are from a younger generation. To Michelle, the use of ICTs is important in achieving economic inclusion, as it helps her to overcome the time and space constraint in searching for her students, and keeps her updated and relevant as a singing teacher.

A fair number of the wives interviewed were aware that ICTs can serve as an avenue for job hunting. Rita said: "I think now very easy, because I see from the website, like jobstreet.com, you can post your profile, your resume." However, the lack of legal documents prevented them from actually securing employment. ICTs also helped Mary to monitor her Thai stocks, conquering the time and space constraint. As it can be seen from our findings, political exclusion (i.e. the lack of a PR status) and education levels are factors affecting economic exclusion.

BARRIERS RESULTING FROM ICT USAGE

Availability

Availability refers to whether ICTs are within reach of the individual. It also refers to whether the individual has the ICT device, and a mobile network subscription in order to use the device. Often, this is subject to the individual's economic background and whether the individual knows how to make use of ICTs. Availability is hence linked to affordability and awareness. We found that although availability was not a big barrier to mobile phone usage among the wives (as all of them owned a mobile phone), it did present a barrier to computer and Internet usage.

However, availability was found to be one of the least significant barriers. For example, in Lily's case, although she does not have

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a mobile Internet subscription plan, she uses alternative methods to access the Internet on her mobile phone. She said: "Now I will use Wi-Fi, WhatsApp. vii " Although a mobile Internet subscription plan was not made available to her, she still managed to counter this barrier. Hence, other factors played a bigger role in presenting a barrier to ICT usage.

Accessibility

Accessibility describes the extent of the telecommunication infrastructure of a country, which allows for timely communication to take place. Chigona et.al. (2009) found that where more socially excluded people tended to live, there was a lack of internet availability. Accessibility in Singapore remains high as the country is highly connected and every individual is able to stay in touch with others. The situation in many of the foreign wives' hometowns however varies according to the connectivity of the country. For instance, Nancy, an Indonesian wife, whose family resides in the rural area of Indonesia, described the irrelevance of Internet as a means of communication with her family as they do not have access to the Internet. She said: "Because it's kampong [village in rural Indonesia], how to use email email." Zoe, a Chinese wife from a developed city in China cited the bad connection in her hometown as a reason for not using the Internet as the main tool for communicating with her family back home. She said: "The Internet at my house (in China) isn't very good to use, so more often than not, I'd use the phone or handphone." Similarly for Rita, the difference in the speed of the Internet between her hometown in Thailand and Singapore makes it difficult to have a smooth conversation should Internet be the mode of communication. She explained:

> Sometimes I use my computer, and then their side the Internet the speed is different
> right? Sometime the blur blur the photo you know. Because down here is high speed
> right, but down there quite slow. So I feel like ah "wait wait wait wait for me first I
> need to start my computer" So I feel like aiyah, just on the phone okay, no problem.

The limited knowledge of ICT usage among the family members in hometowns of the foreign wives is another restriction for communication with their family back home. Mary, a Thai wife, whose family comes from a suburban part of Thailand, described the problem she faced in having video calls with her parents: "Actually I want to put the Skype at home the webcam at home. But they don't know how to do. Then so troublesome for them. Then sometimes the signal no good. Call better." The lack of knowledge on how to use Skype on the part of her parents, coupled with the weak Internet connection in her hometown leads to the Mary's inability to use such communication tools with her family.

In addition to the above causes of inaccessibility, countries with restrictions on certain communication platforms also pose a significant threat to accessibility. Carol, a foreign wife from China, described her inaccessibility to Facebook as a means of communication with friends and family back home because the social networking platform is not available there. She said: "My friends in my hometown in China cannot use Facebook, so whatever I post on Facebook, people in China can't see at all." Zoe, also from China, echoed the same point: "No one from my hometown, because we can't use Facebook in China." Likewise, Mabel, a Vietnamese wife, explained how her family members do not have access to Facebook due to restrictions imposed by the Vietnamese authority: "Family, no one use Facebook. The Facebook only Singapore can. Now Vietnam, sometimes they stop people log in to Facebook." Instead, these wives resorted to other channels of communication with those back home.

Accessibility hence appears to be a significant barrier to ICT usage as the infrastructure of a country determines to a large extent whether or not the foreign wives would consider certain types of ICTs over others. However, this barrier does not stop them from communicating altogether. Instead, it only acts as a condition for the discrimination of one ICT tool over another.

Affordability

For many of the wives, the cost of sending text messages and calling was a significant factor in preventing them from contacting their families back home as often as they wanted to. Jess talks to her Indonesian family on the phone for only ten minutes at a time as she found it expensive to make longer phone calls. When asked if she would contact her family more often, she said: "Yes, if I had more money, I would." For others, cost was a barrier to using their mobile phones to a greater degree here in Singapore. For example, Sally, whose mobile phone has mobile Internet capabilities, said that she does not want to use this function due to affordability issues: "My phone might have Internet, but if I use it, I'm afraid my bill will skyrocket."

Many respondents also would rather use money that can be spent on ICT usage on other things, such as on their children's needs. Sally said: No point spending on a phone, since newer models will come out. I can use the money on my children."

Awareness

The lack of awareness of the benefits of ICT usage as well as the lack of knowledge on how to use ICTs can present a barrier. This led to a low level of ICT usage among some of the wives. For example, Cindy, who does not use ICTs very often, said: "Computer very troublesome." This lack of awareness of the benefits of ICTs hinders her from fully enjoying the advantages of ICTs.

In Nancy's case, she had no avenues from which to learn how to use the Internet. She said: "Ya I want to learn but no people, but nobody wants to try to teach me." The language barrier also prevented her from using the Internet. Nancy said: "Because I don't know how to use. The Internet so many, the English. Sometimes I can read la, but I don't know what the meaning this one."

Appropriateness

Several foreign wives highlighted that they did not want to spend a large proportion of their time on their phones or computers, particularly on social networking sites like Facebook. Zoe highlighted that "You would keep wanting to look at your phone, to see who's emailing you, or if there are any updates on Facebook, these would occupy one portion of my life, so I try my best not to use this kind of things so much." Amy said: "I feel that playing Facebook is a waste of time."

Another foreign wife, Mary noted that she did not have the luxury of time to engage in ICTs all day. A few of them echoed the point of having to care for their children or tend to housework which sharply reduced the time they had to use the computer to surf the internet.

> "Yaya, I've been there (Singtip, a Thai online forum), but seldom. Because like I
> say, I busy with housework… I got time, but not to play. You know when I use
> computer, one hour already fast, you feel that? One hour, I tell my mother I spend
> time with the computer 2 hour already ah, I feel like I need to do other things…
> Facebook have. But now I don't use it, cos I don't have time." -Fiona.

Even though the foreign wives may be actively engaged in using the phone as a means to keep in touch and communicate with their friends and families, many felt that using the computer and the Internet were not a priority. Hence, some were not interested in learning how to operate a computer or the programs that would allow them to contact their friends and families. "I know how to buy but I'm so used to using the phone, using phone to call Philippines," Michelle said, when asked if she knew of any programs such as Skype to keep in contact with her family in Philippines.

DISCUSSIONS

Transnational marriages or marriage migration often require one partner to move, and more often the one making the shift would be the foreign bride (Zhou, 2010). Once migrated, the mobility of the foreign brides is often restricted due to fears of their husbands, that the foreign brides might run back to their home country (Yang & Wang, 2003). They might also be obstructed by financial difficulties that make it difficult for them to return to their hometown to visit their families. Space therefore becomes a barrier for foreign wives.

Based on our findings, the foreign wives experience economic, political and social exclusion. Although each of these aspects of exclusion has their own symptomatic manifestation, they do not operate apart from one another in the lives of the foreign wives. Each aspect intertwines with another, exacerbating the problem of exclusion and thus making it a complex issue where one aspect of exclusion cannot be solved without solving another. On the other hand, when one aspect of exclusion is alleviated, it results in a positive effect on the other aspects as well. This is particularly the case for economic and political exclusion, which are intricately linked. For example, when one receives a PR status, one can qualify for jobs, and hence start earning an income, thereby countering economic exclusion. Without obtaining a legal status, these wives usually found it a challenge to secure suitable jobs (due to the stringent regulations on the hiring of foreigners) and they often were afraid that this might affect their chances of gaining the permanent residency status in Singapore. In addition, when social exclusion is reduced, economic exclusion can also be mitigated. This is especially so in the case of language. Assuming one already holds a PR status, having knowledge of one of Singapore's four national languages (English, Mandarin, Malay, Tamil) will better one's chances of finding a job. This situation is more likely to aid the Indonesians and Chinese nationals who, although may not speak English well, still have knowledge of one of Singapore's national languages. This will then improve their employability, as language is a crucial asset.

The usage of ICTs was also found to be an empowering tool in countering exclusion. Our study found that the benefits of ICTs aided the migrant wives in their integration and adaption to Singapore society by granting them control, providing them the opportunity to foster a network and support group unbridled by time and space. ICTs, and especially the portability of mobile phones, made it easier for these foreign wives to continue to maintain and build connections with their families and friends back home and in Singapore, which aids them in feeling more included.

Consistent with previous literature, this research found that ICT usage has helped to reduce social exclusion, as well as economic and political exclusion to a certain degree. However, the flipside to ICT usage, i.e. barriers to integration, has emerged. ICTs can act as a double-edged sword, creating tension in the foreign wives' goals to become empowered and counter exclusion. While ICTs help them to stay in touch with family and friends back home, as well as with their co-ethnic networks in Singapore, it can also hinder their social integration into Singapore society. This is similar to what Granovetter (1973) found, which was that strong social ties breed local cohesion, but lead to overall fragmentation. This makes it likely that they may still be trapped in the same social, language, and economic networks. The availability and usage of ICTs enables these wives to keep in contact with fellow nationals in Singapore, which enabled them to build up their own supportive network. However, ICTs may also reduce the incentive for these foreign wives to make Singaporean friends, given that they have already built up their own network comprised of their own nationalities and they feel comfortable within their own social network. Most found their friends through forums. For example, Mary, a foreign wife, found fellow Thai wives residing in Singapore married to Singaporean spouses through a popular Thai forum in Singapore called Singtip. Hence, she was able spread out her social network, which composed of mainly Thai nationals. Having constructed a supportive network, this might have possibly been a reason why Mary did not engage in other forms of ICTs to find new Singapore friends, as she already felt comfortable with her fellow Thai national friends. She listed her family, particularly her mother-in-law as her closest Singaporean companion.

IMPLICATIONS

In our study, ICTs have shown to be beneficial in helping the foreign wives to overcome social exclusion while empowering them. Similarly, our study has also highlighted the barriers to adoption of ICTs. It would be ideal to take into consideration the implications this study would have for stakeholders such as policy makers, network providers, VWOs, society and even the foreign wives themselves. Implications for Academic Research

This research adds to the growing literature on foreign wives, describing the different aspects of exclusion they face, namely political, economic and social. These forms of exclusion have impeded their smooth transitioning into their new lives in their host country, Singapore. As highlighted earlier, the different aspects are very much interrelated and the solving of one aspect requires the elimination of another. This is consistent with previous literature (Chigona et al. 2009; Selwyn, 2002; Peace, 2001; Van Winden, 2001), emphasising the point that these aspects are intricately linked. In addition, this research sieved out the benefits ICTs bring in the alleviation of exclusion, and underscored how the very same benefits can become a disadvantage for them. This confirmed the findings of previous literature (Chigona et al., 2009; Thomas, 2008), which contended that although ICTs do bring about inclusion, it is not without its negative impact. As such, appropriate usage of the technology is crucial to reap the intended benefits.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS

Presently, foreign wives face discrimination on top of experiencing exclusion and are often made to feel inferior compared to Singaporeans. Many of the foreign wives are holders of Long Term Visit Pass (LTVP), instead of being Permanent Residents (PR). Despite new changes in the system with the LTVP being revised to a LTVP plus (LTVP+), allowing the foreign wives to stay for lengths of up to 8 years and making them eligible for medical subsidies, the challenge comes in the form of securing employment. The foreign wives have to apply for a letter of consent (LOC) if they are a LTVP holder. In the eyes of the employer, it is a hassle to go through the bureaucratic red tape in helping the foreign wives to apply for the LOC, as compared to hiring Singaporean citizens or PRs. It is also with good reason why foreign wives view the Permanent Residence (PR) status as the most ideal tier in the legal status system for it opens up many doors and opportunities for them. They are able to stay for a longer term and gain rightful employment without any worries and are also automatically granted education and medical subsidies. However, it has become more difficult over the recent years to obtain PR and many of these wives could have spent years applying for one with their efforts coming to naught. Perhaps a viable solution could be attained, which would be a tier below PR but a tier above the LTVP+. This solution would essentially retain some of the elements of the LTVP+ but at the same time, remove the need to obtain a pass of employment before the foreign wives can work legally in Singapore.

Furthermore, the government or government associations like the People's Association could also help to match these foreign wives to a suitable job with their current skills. They could tie up with employers to come up with mini job fairs to expose the foreign wives to possible jobs that they could take on to contribute to their household income. In addition, employers and foreign wives are dogged by the stigma that hiring of foreign wives is illegal. However, it is only considered illegal if they do not possess the proper work passes. Policy Makers could possibly educate employers and foreign wives on the possibilities of foreign wives attaining proper work passes. They could

also consider helping to make it easier for both employees and foreign wives in obtaining the work passes by bringing the application processes online instead of offline.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NETWORK PROVIDERS

Quite a few of the respondents noted that the cost of sending text messages and calling family members back home were a barrier to their usage of ICTs. They had to limit calling family members to avoid high phone bills. Thus, network providers can tap onto this segment of the market to provide alternative subscription plans for these foreign wives, such as special rates for contacting their family in their home countries. While this group of foreign wives may not be a substantial number, network providers can consider combining this group of people with other migrants in Singapore who share similar characteristics to offer special subscription packages.

IMPLICATIONS FOR VWOS

Voluntary welfare organizations (VWOs) can raise their awareness of this group of people (i.e. foreign wives) who may approach them and are in need of assistance, and thus tailor their resources accordingly to support programmes for them. Knowing that foreign wives face certain cultural problems in their integration into Singapore society, they can offer language classes, as well as other classes that may interest them, such as parenting classes. Social workers at Yong-en Care Centre are also looking into starting lessons on Singapore culture, which can be very helpful in the foreign wives' assimilation into Singapore. As the study found some cases of wives who either did not know how to use ICTs, or how to make full use of their ICT devices, VWOs can conduct lessons to educate them on this. VWOs can also make use of ICTs to reach out to them when providing information on their programmes, thus reinforcing the use of ICTs among the foreign wives.

Since VWOs are in frequent contact with some of these foreign wives, they can play a vital role as a communicator in the relaying of information from government agencies to the foreign wives. This would be especially helpful when new changes to policy are made, such as the recent implementation of the LTVP+, to ensure that all foreign wives who are affected by new changes will be informed.

In addition, this study has found that there is still a very strong stereotype against foreign wives amongst the locals, and this stereotype has led to discrimination and in turn social exclusion. Efforts need to be taken to educate the public on the inaccuracy of these stereotypes, and to raise understanding and awareness of the social exclusion foreign wives faced. Such educational campaigns can be spearheaded by VWOs, and supported by the government.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FOREIGN WIVES

This study uncovered several benefits of ICTs amongst foreign wives to alleviate social exclusion, particularly in providing a social support network for these women. Foreign wives should be made aware of such benefits, and hence use it as a starting point for them. However, through our research, it was found that many wives still were unaware of further benefits that ICTs can provide them. Besides just keeping in touch, they should also see the importance of utilizing the connectivity aspect of ICTs to share information and knowledge so that they can engage in a higher level of ICT adoption which in turn can empower them.

Foreign wives were also found to be more docile towards the social exclusion that they face. They seemed to almost be resigned to their current situation rather than actively seeking to change it. This suggests a lack of empowerment, and there should be efforts to help boost their personal value. It is also important to note that the adoption of ICTs is not a solo effort, and it is all the more vital that foreign wives can do so with the support of their family, friends and potentially VWOs as well.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

One limitation of this research is the potential bias that may occur in the process of translation. As translators search for cultural equivalent of certain words or phrases during translation, interpretation is inevitable, and meanings could be lost or altered in the midst of it (Temple & Young, 2004). Temple and Young (2004) provided some suggestions with regards to this problem. In the case where the researcher is the translator (i.e. when the interviews were held in Mandarin), and where meanings of the phrase or sentence required further interpretation, the thought process or dilemmas of the researcher were detailed in the report. Where a translator was hired, the meanings of the translated phrases or sentences were clarified during the interviews, hence giving the respondents a chance to correct the misinterpretation, should it arise. With the precautionary measures in place, misinterpretations are kept to the minimum, allowing for accuracy in the research. Our research has attempted to take these suggestions into consideration, but the total elimination of biases was, in reality, not possible. As such, this could be a limiting factor of our research.

The researchers being outsiders (i.e. not being foreign wives themselves) may pose potential threat to the research. The personhood of the researcher in a qualitative study, including his or her membership status in relation to those participating in the research, is ever-present in the research (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). While there are benefits in being an outsider, such as having greater neutrality with fewer preconceived notions of the group, there are also considerable hindrances that could affect the process of data collection. For instance, the respondents may be inclined to give politically correct answers so as to not offend the researchers. To reduce the possibility of that, we constantly assured the respondents that they could present their most honest views and probed further when necessary.

As our study employed qualitative interviews, future studies could consider adopting field research on top of qualitative interviews to gain a more comprehensive understanding of these foreign wives in their natural setting. As our research sets the precedence on using ICTs to alleviate exclusion, thus gaining empowerment, among foreign wives in Singapore, future exploratory studies could also seek to investigate whether the same can take place for other female migrant groups in other countries.

Since the 2011 watershed elections in Singapore, the Singapore government has amended measures by raising the levy for hiring foreign workers, and tightened the influx of immigrants (Adam, 2011). In order to not marginalise the foreign wives in policy schemes that were originally meant for foreign workers, the government introduced a new visit pass in early 2012 for the foreign wives named the Long Term Visit Pass plus (LTVP+). This new pass grants them a longer period of stay of three years instead of one year, as well as a longer stay of 5 years upon renewal. The pass would also entitle foreign spouses to certain health subsidies and provide them with economic opportunities. This new implementation would seem like a viable solution for these foreign wives. The pass also encourages employers to hire foreign spouses, as they are no longer required to pay a foreign workers' levy. Future research could target this new development, exploring how this new policy change and the present political climate implicate migrants in Singapore.

CONCLUSION

There has been extensive research on the adoption of ICTs to address problems of exclusion. This research capitalises on the benefits ICTs bring for foreign wives in particular, but the very same benefits could be extended to other migrant groups, especially female migrants, as well. While each of the migrant groups may have its unique characteristics and face unique problems, they still do share certain common issues, such as loneliness during the initial stage of migration, language barriers, financial woes, as well as subjection to a country's policy

regulation of foreigners. These issues put the migrants in a vulnerable position, where exclusion occurs. This research emphasises that exclusion in its various forms ought to be looked at collectively, rather than as individual entities. This is not only true for the lives of foreign wives in Singapore, but also for other cases of exclusion, as each aspect is intricately linked with another. The mitigation of different aspects of exclusion which increased the participative action of the foreign wives in society also led to empowerment. ICTs were also an effective communication tool in bridging the time-space difference. They are empowering devices for gaining control over one's life, where the individual could exercise autonomy in deciding how, when and with whom he communicates, or which information he seeks. The benefits to be reaped from the usage of ICTs become even more pronounced and significant especially in the initial stage of migration, given the alien environment that the migrant has to face. Despite this, ICT usage must be managed appropriately to avoid negative effects of over-reliance on these communication technologies. ICTs could potentially contribute to inclusion for migrants, but misuse of it could bring about exclusion, exacerbating the very problem it meant to solve.

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NOTES

i
Cantonese -Dialect

ii
Halal: A term describing an object or action that one is permissible to use or engage in, according to Islamic Law.

iii
Teh O: A colloquial term for Tea.

iv
CPF refers to Central Provident Fund, a compulsory savings scheme for both Singapore citizens and Permanent Residents who are working, for the purpose of funding housing, healthcare, insurance, education, and most importantly, their retirement.

v
Residents in Singapore are given the chance to talk with the Minister of Parliament (MP) in charge of their living area once every week in the meet-the-people session, where concerns of the residents are raised.

vi
An online community for Thais living in Singapore.

vii
WhatsApp is a mobile messaging service that replaces SMS by utilizing the current internet data plan on the users' devices, and hence allowing users to send messages without incurring additional SMS charges by their Telcos.