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Year 2008

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Kepri Wives and their Cross-border
Husbands

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This article was originally published as Lyons, LT and Ford, M, Love, Sex and the Spaces In-between: Kepri Wives and their Cross-border Husbands, *Citizenship Studies*, 12(1), 2008, 55-72.

This paper is posted at Research Online.

<http://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers/170>

**Love, Sex and the Spaces In-between:
Kepri Wives and their Cross-border Husbands**

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Love, Sex and the Spaces In-between: Kepri Wives and their Cross-border Husbands

Lenore Lyons and Michele Ford

Scholars of globalisation are paying increasing attention to the impact that transnational migration is having on the structure of family life. Focusing on what have variously been referred to as examples of international marriage, transnational marriage or cross-border marriage, these studies seek to demonstrate the ways in which patterns of marriage and family forms have changed as a result of increasing mobility (Piper and Roces, 2002; Constable, 2005a). They argue that globalisation not only challenges “the hyphen that links nation to state” (Appadurai, 1996: 19), but also the traditional relationship between the state and the family. These studies explore the ways in which states seek to assert particular visions of family life, and the ways that individuals challenge these ideologies through a range of transnational marriage practices. By focusing on state policies and processes these accounts uncover the gender and race ideologies that underpin legislation on immigration, marriage and employment. They suggest that despite the increasing trend towards dual citizenship and the formation of transnational families, nation-states continue to see the family as a nationally-bound institution and exert control over family forms by managing access to citizenship rights, including the right to claim nationality through birth place or parentage, the right to marry or divorce, and the right to emigrate to join a foreign spouse (Suzuki, 2003; Burgess, 2004). International marriages thus bring into sharp relief the inherent link between citizenship rights and the nation-state. This ability of nation-states to impact on the married life of their citizens debunks the myth of an implicit distinction between the public and private (Lyons, 2007), and points to a need to examine in greater detail the links between citizenship, social rights, and family structures.

In paying closer attention to the role that nation-states play in shaping the private choices of individuals, however, it is important not to fall into the trap of overstating the power of the state to shape everyday practices of citizenship. Nation-states can play limited and contradictory roles in shaping international marriages. Nobue Suzuki’s (2000) study of Filipina women married to Japanese men shows that even as local government agencies worked to enhance international marriage options for rural Japanese men by engaging marriage brokers in the Philippines, national laws restricted these women’s access to residency. Where nation-states take a keen interest in the conferral of citizenship rights through international marriage, individuals are often able to develop creative responses to state regulation. For example, in her study of Filipinas married to Japanese men, Tomoko Nakamatsu (2005) recounts the story of Emillie, who arranged for her marriage agent to dissuade her estranged husband from divorcing her so that she did not have to leave Japan. This agreement continued until the agent was able to find new spouses for them both. Similarly, Nicole Constable’s (2003) study of Filipinas working in Hong Kong who use local laws to legally divorce their Filipino husbands shows that while structural factors like legal frameworks can constrain individuals and couples at the local level they also open up new transnational possibilities. Studies of cross-border marriages show similar patterns. For example, Matthew Amster’s (2005) study of cross-border marriages that involve illegal border crossings of Indonesian women into the Kelabit Highlands of Malaysia reveals that in some instances nation-states can take a completely hands-off approach to international marriage.

These studies demonstrate that while the citizenship rights of married couples and their children cannot be understood without reference to the nation-state, international marriage practices should not be viewed solely through the lens of state control. In our research on cross-border couples living in the Riau Islands of Indonesia, nation-states are curiously both present and absent. Our examination of the motivations and desires of cross-border couples living in the Riau borderlands

reveals that space and mobility mediate their interactions with the Singaporean, Malaysian and Indonesian states, thus producing very localised accounts of citizenship in which class mobility (rather than physical mobility) becomes the dominant frame through which they view state regulation of marriage and migration.

Attention to the class dynamics of international marriage is not new. Many scholars have described women's marriage mobility from the developing to the developed world as a form of 'global hypergamy':

[I]t is global in the sense that it involves men and women from different regions of the world. It can be considered hypergamous – building on the conventional anthropological definition of 'hypergamy' as women marrying up into a higher socioeconomic group – if we conceive of 'up' as referring to a hierarchy or a chain of geographical locations (Constable, 2005b: 10).

However, particular case studies of international marriage demonstrate that marriage mobility does not always imply upward class mobility because middle-class women may in fact 'marry down' to working-class men in other countries (Freeman, 2005), or working-class women may find themselves in more marginal social and economic positions after marriage (Suzuki, 2005). In fact, economic marginalization is a common explanation for working class men's decision to marry foreigners – and marriage, far from improving the household's economic position, may make it more precarious (Piper, 1997; Wang and Chang, 2002; So, 2003). Constable (2005c: 184) argues therefore that it is more useful to describe a general pattern of "spatial hypergamy, with women's geographic mobility often from a poorer country to a richer one, even though this pattern may, in fact, say little about the particular social or economic mobility of any given individual or ... couple".

These discussions of global or spatial hypergamy assume that international marriage involves the migration of one spouse (usually the wife) to a more developed country. Our research into marriages that take place between Singaporean men and Indonesian women living in the Riau Islands are more accurately described as 'cross-border' marriages in the sense that they continue to traverse the national border. In these cases, neither spouse migrates after marriage: instead, husband and wife continue to reside in their country of origin. In the Riau Islands, this experience is a particular product of life in the Indonesia-Singapore-Malaysia borderlands. The close physical proximity of Singapore, Peninsular Malaysia and the Riau Islands means that the couples can see each other regularly while at the same time taking advantage of the opportunities presented by living on different sides of the border. For working-class men and women who are economically (and in some cases socially) marginalized in their countries of birth, these cross-border marriages allow them to experience a degree of upward class mobility *in* Indonesia. While the men's class position in their home country does not change, their wives and children are able to take advantage of the differential exchange rate between the two nations to live a lower middle-class lifestyle across the border. The men themselves get to enjoy this lifestyle during their intermittent visits.

Attention to the 'marital subjectivities' (Constable, 2003: 164) of couples who engage in cross-border marriages in the Riau Islands allows us to explore the border as a site where individuals both challenge the normative model of the nuclear cohabiting couple/family and recuperate the traditional ideal of marriage as a life choice. In doing so, we question the state-centric tendencies in some of the scholarly literature on international marriage which places overwhelming emphasis on the ability of states to regulate access to citizenship rights (see for example Piper, 1997; So, 2003). Even in those studies that do not explicitly engage with the issue of citizenship rights, the state's ability to regulate migration flows and enforce marriage/divorce legislation is taken *a priori* to explain the context in which cross-border or international marriage occurs (see Wang and Chang,

2002; Freeman, 2005; Nakamatsu, 2005; Shen, 2005; Thai, 2005). We are not suggesting that nation-states do not have an interest in regulating their national boundaries – nor that nation-states have no impact on the marital lives of their citizens – but rather that for some cross-border couples, the state is of secondary importance. In presenting a view of inconsistent and sometimes incoherent states, we highlight the significant differences between perceptions of state influence and actual state practices, and show that “frontiers, far from being homogenous sites of state regulation, remain creative sites of social interaction” (Amster, 2005: 147). Our study thus supports the work of other borderland studies which show that “local border cultures almost always transcend the limits of the state” (Donnan and Wilson, 1999: 12).¹

This paper draws on ethnographic data collected from Indonesian women who live in the towns of Tanjung Pinang (Bintan) and Tanjung Balai Karimun, and from the relatives and husbands of some of these women.² These stories demonstrate how men and women creatively negotiate the transnational terrain to achieve their desired status as married couples. From the perspectives of both the Singaporean and Indonesian states, these relationships are far from successful – they involve men and women on the margins of society, they often contravene immigration or family law, and they seldom result in the creation of a cohabiting nuclear family. The inevitable geographical distances and emotional dislocations that define these relationships mean that the bonds between these couples are often tenuous. But while these relationships may not be successful in the eyes of either the state or the wider community, cross-border marriage nonetheless offers the possibility of emotional and financial security, as well as personal empowerment and autonomy. By exploring the place of love, sex and intimacy for women and men who live their lives across the Indonesia-Singapore border, we shed light on the complex social and economic reasons that give rise to cross-border marriages in the Riau Islands.

Meeting across borders

The Indonesian islands of Karimun and Bintan, which are the focus of our study, are located a short distance away from Singapore and the southern tip of Peninsular Malaysia by high-speed ferry, with journeys lasting between 45-105 minutes depending on the destination. In 2006, together with the island of Batam, they became part of a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) with Singapore. The SEZ aims to capitalise on the islands’ close proximity to Singapore to enhance economic development. Before the SEZ was announced, the three islands were part of the Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle (IMS-GT) which was established in 1990. The underpinning philosophy of the IMS-GT was economic complementarity in which Singaporean capital would be combined with Indonesian and Malaysian labour and land to facilitate cross-border regional growth (Sparke et al., 2004). In recent years, the promise of the IMS-GT has not been realized and the new SEZ is seen as an effort to reinvigorate economic development in the islands.

However, the history of economic interaction between the Riau Islands, Malaysia and Singapore is much longer than the life of the Special Economic Zone, or the growth triangle that preceded it. Both Bintan and Karimun are home to large towns and villages that trace long-term family and business connections to Chinese and Malay communities in both Singapore and Malaysia (Ford and Lyons, 2006).³ Since the 1990s, foreign investment in the islands has resulted in significant social and economic change, not all of which has been positive. Despite the promise that foreign investment would result in job creation and economic growth, the port, manufacturing and tourism sectors established in Karimun and Bintan provide limited employment for locals. Notwithstanding occasional government crackdowns, the vice industries of prostitution, gambling and drugs prospered. The increasing ease of travel from Singapore and Malaysia, and in-migration to the islands from other parts of Indonesia, provided conditions for these industries to thrive. As a result,

the Riau Islands became home to a large sex industry that predominantly caters to foreign men (Ford and Lyons, in press).

The presence of prostitution in the islands shapes international marriage practices in many ways. The close proximity of the islands to Singapore in particular has given rise to the formation of long-term relationships between Singaporean men and sex workers, so-called 'second wives' or 'Batam wives'.⁴ The use of the term 'wife' to describe these relationships does not infer that it is a formalised or legal marriage but implies that the relationship extends beyond a casual sexual encounter to include the provision of a home (bought or rented by the Singaporean 'husband') and an allowance. In Indonesia local government crackdowns on the *simpanan* (lit. kept women) of foreign men have meant that the women are often the target of harassment by local authorities. To avoid these problems, some couples perform a religious or customary marriage; however, these marriages are not considered to be legal by either the Indonesian or Singaporean governments unless they are presided over by a recognized Solemniser of Marriages and a legal Notice of Marriage has been approved by the relevant authority. It should be noted here that not all couples enter into a religious marriage simply to avoid harassment. Single Singaporean men may agree to a religious ceremony (rather than a legal marriage) with their Indonesian wives because they want to be married in the eyes of God and/or the community, but want to keep the marriage a secret from their Singaporean families who may not approve of their choice of marriage partner (Arshad, 2003).

For other couples, the decision may be based on the fact that the men are already legally married to Singaporean women and marrying legally a second time may not be possible. The Singapore Women's Charter provides only for monogamous marriages but Syariah Law, which governs marriages between Muslim couples, allows a man to marry as many as four women at one time. However, the marriage must have the existing wife's (or wives') approval for a further marriage and the man must demonstrate that he has:

the capability to provide a life that is well balanced where the financial, physical and emotional well being of his wives are concerned; has a good marriage life currently and the adverse is not the reason he has decided to take another wife; and have specific reasons, which are benefits that his first marriage cannot provide but his second marriage can. In this context, love is not one of the benefits (Registry of Muslim Marriages, 2002).

In the case of Muslim men who take a second wife overseas, a religious ceremony may be a means to address his and his new wife's religious convictions without having to gain approval from his first wife and their children. Indonesia's 1974 Marriage Law permits polygyny among Muslims if the man obtains permission from his wife/wives and is able to meet the needs of his wives and children equally (Katjasungkana, 2004). Malaysia's Islamic Family Law Act permits polygyny on the same grounds. In the case of the latter, Nik Noriani bt Nik Badli Shah (2004) notes that Syariah judges tend to give emphasis to financial capacity rather than other factors, and that Malaysia's system of separate state jurisdictions allows Malaysian men to 'shop around' for the most convenient law for their personal circumstances. Men who contract polygamous marriages without the courts approval are merely ordered to pay a small fine.

Religious differences can also influence a couple's decision to marry. Indonesia's 1974 Marriage Law does not permit mixed religious marriage unless it is allowed by the religious laws of both partners (Katjasungkana, 2004: 163-4), and consequently does not permit a Muslim woman to marry a man of another faith. A similar law exists in Singapore where two laws govern the registration and solemnization of marriages – the Women's Charter which deals with marriages between non-Muslims, and the Administration of Muslim Law Act (commonly referred to as Syariah Law) which governs marriages amongst Muslims (see Part VI). A Muslim and a non-Muslim can marry under the Women's Charter, but under the Syariah Court a non-Muslim seeking

to marry a Muslim must first obtain a certificate of conversion. Conversion involves formal classes and a religious test, after which a Certification of Confirmation is issued by the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) – the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore.

The formation of mistress relationships, sometimes involving religious or customary marriage rites, provides sex workers with a steady income and a place to live. However, the instability of these relationships often means that for the women a return to sex work is a common outcome. For their foreign ‘husbands’, mistress relationships may be more costly than casual sexual encounters, but the stability and intimacy of a long-term relationship brings with it other benefits, including the health and psychological benefits of regular contact with a single partner as well as social prestige. Many men prefer mistress arrangements because they dislike the negotiations and clear monetary transactions involved in casual paid sex. They may also believe that by having a single partner they are less likely to contract a sexually transmitted disease. While the men may assume that a mistress relationship implies that they have sole sexual access to their ‘wives’, many women continue to supplement their incomes through paid casual sex with other men. For some women these ‘extra-marital’ relationships may act as a safety net in case their primary relationship dissolves. Other women may continue to have sexual relationships with their pre-existing legal husbands, boyfriends or pimps. Although such relationships are clearly based on an economic transaction in which neither partner has an expectation of a permanent arrangement, many couples express genuine affection for each other. At the same time, while the lack of legal standing means that neither the woman nor man can be charged with bigamy, a further implication of these unions is that neither partner has legal recourse in relation to property, custody of children, or maintenance when the relationship ends (see Vasoo and Yap, 1999; Arshad, 2003).⁵

Mistress relationships are not the only way in which sex workers living in the Riau Islands enter into long-term cohabiting arrangements with foreign men. Although legal marriages are less common than cohabitation, they offer a means for sex workers to leave the sex industry altogether if they choose to. One of our informants, Ani, met her husband Ah Huat in 1999.⁶ Ah Huat is a 57 year old Singaporean Chinese widower who paid S\$2,000 to Ani’s Madam to release her debt with the brothel. Ani is originally from a transmigrant family in Lampung, who was sold into prostitution by a friend who promised her legitimate work in Malaysia. The debt owed to the brothel owner consisted of the costs incurred in her purchase, and other expenses for example food and healthcare, incurred while working in the brothel. After paying-off the debt, Ah Huat brought Ani to Singapore to meet his grown-up children. They were eventually married in Tanjung Balai Karimun after Ah Huat converted from Buddhism to Islam, allowing him to contract a legal marriage under Indonesian law. At first the local authorities in Karimun were unwilling to marry them for fear that as a foreigner Ah Huat would renege and sue them. This attitude partly reflects a dominant view held by Riau Islanders that Singaporean men are interested in having casual sex with local women rather than in forming legitimate relationships. The religious or customary rites that some men undertake are thus considered to be ‘marriages of convenience’ rather than committed relationships. The local marriage authorities in Tanjung Balai may have feared that Ani’s husband actually intended to enter into one of these short-term arrangements without realising that an authorised marriage was in fact legally binding. The couple finally managed to marry after the Singaporean authorities issued another letter confirming that Ah Huat was free to marry.⁷ The couple have since bought a two-bedroom house in Tanjung Balai where Ani lives with her child from her previous marriage.

Former freelance sex worker Lia also married a foreigner, in her case a Malaysian Muslim man. Lia had spent a short time in Singapore as a foreign domestic worker and after returning to her village in Deli Serdang a friend suggested that she come and work in Tanjung Balai Karimun to earn money to support her two children. Lia chose to marry her husband Farid after weighing up another marriage proposal from a former client, a Singaporean Indian divorcee. Although Lia’s other suitor

offered her a chance to live in developed Singapore, she was worried that because he was Hindu and she is Muslim their religious beliefs were incompatible. The prospect of living in Singapore was not attractive either, not least because she would be further from her children, who live with their grandparents in North Sumatra. After working in the sex industry for a few years, Lia decided that it was better to be the legal second wife of a Muslim man and to live in Tanjung Balai. Farid's first wife cannot bear children and knows he has taken a second wife, but they have never met. Not everything went smoothly with Lia and Farid's marriage. When the couple went to ask about the procedure for marrying under Indonesian law, they were tricked into paying S\$1000 for a false marriage license. When she discovered that the license was a fake, Lia reported it to the local Office of Religious Affairs, the government department responsible for Muslim marriages, who in turn took the matter to the police. Farid was very angry about the situation, and Lia was worried when he left for Malaysia that he might never come back. To her relief, he returned and, after legally marrying, he rented a house in Tanjung Balai for her to live in.

For Ani and Lia, legal marriage to a former client has proven to be a secure means to leave the sex industry behind.⁸ While neither woman discussed the strategies they employed to negotiate marriage as a legitimate option with their clients, the stories of other sex workers reveal that such outcomes require careful and deliberate management.⁹ In Ani's case, leaving the sex industry was further complicated by the need to repay a large debt owed to the brothel owner. That both women were able to arrange marriages within two years of entering the sex industry points to their interpersonal skills and foresight. At the same time, we do not want to suggest that these are just marriages of convenience. Ani says that her second husband is "everything" to her. She cannot believe how different he is to her first husband, who beat her and cheated on her when she was pregnant. Although Ah Huat is old and not very good-looking, she claims she would not swap him for the most handsome man in the world because he loves her, her child and her family. She says, "I give thanks constantly, I am very happy". For his part, Ah Huat expresses considerable affection for his new wife and her child. His decision to convert to Islam in order to marry her was not easy, but now that they are married he looks forward to moving to Tanjung Balai permanently once he retires. Lia's husband too clearly cares for his new wife, and persevered with the marriage despite the initial legal setbacks. Lia is less romantically involved. Her perspective on her marriage, like that of many of her friends, is that "It's better to marry one of them and just wait for him [to visit] than to have to have multiple partners every day." Even so, Lia worries about her financial security. Many of her friends who have had long-term relationships with foreigners were abandoned when they became pregnant. In contrast, the future of Lia's marriage could depend on her ability to conceive, as Farid took a second wife because he wishes to have children. Lia worries that even if they do have a child together, the financial and physical pressures of travelling from Kuala Lumpur to Tanjung Balai may eventually threaten the marriage.

Sex workers are not the only women who meet and marry foreigners in the Riau Islands. For another group of women, marriage to a Singaporean may occur as a result of long-standing family ties across the Straits. Halimah was born in Singapore, but her family moved to Jambi on mainland Sumatra when she was a small child. As an adult, she moved to Tanjung Pinang where she married a local man. Halimah has many relatives in Singapore – in fact many more than in Indonesia – so when it was time for her four daughters to marry, she used her family contacts to set them up with Singaporean men. Halimah's youngest daughter fell in love with an Indonesian and subsequently married him, but Halimah succeeded in arranging marriages with Singaporean Malays for her other three daughters.¹⁰ Halimah's family is a talking-point in the neighbourhood. Although many Malay women in Tanjung Pinang marry Singaporeans, it is unusual for so many women in a single family to do so. Halimah's neighbours gossip constantly about them, complaining that Halimah thinks Indonesians are not good enough for her family. Halimah, however, cares little about what her neighbours say – her Singaporean sons-in-law are a source of pride to her, as well as a guarantee of economic security.

Halimah's oldest daughter Zulfiyanti, who is married to Hambali, a security officer at Changi Airport, is now a Permanent Resident of Singapore. She lives in Singapore with her husband and children. Halimah's middle daughters, Mardiyah and Katijah, continue to live with their mother in Tanjung Pinang. Their Singaporean husbands, Yusof and Yasin, visit them and their children on a regular basis, but have not considered moving to the island permanently. Nor have they considered moving their families to Singapore. The children's citizenship status is somewhat ambiguous despite the fact that both Singaporean and Indonesian citizenship laws consistently apply the principle of *ius sanguinis* (citizenship by descent) to the children of Singaporean men. Under Singaporean law, children born overseas to a Singaporean father are automatically granted Singaporean citizenship. Under the 1958 Indonesian Citizenship Law children born to an Indonesian woman who is married to a foreign citizen follow the citizenship of their fathers.¹¹ However, Halimah's grandchildren have not applied for Singaporean citizenship because this would complicate their residency in the islands. The 1958 Law requires foreign children to be sponsored by an Indonesian in order to remain in Indonesia, and permits are usually not valid for longer than five years. Typically an Indonesian mother cannot sponsor her own child and the children cannot apply for Indonesian citizenship until they reach the age of 18. In changes to the Citizenship Law in 2006, Indonesian women can now pass on citizenship to their children and such children can hold dual citizenship until the age of 18 (see Tjakrawinata and Wellesley, 2006). Until 2006, the 'foreign' children of legally married cross-border couples were at the mercy of the local authorities, who could ban them from attending local schools or demand that they pay for expensive annual residents' permits. Given the prevailing laws at the time of our interviews, it is not surprising that Halimah's family were reluctant to discuss the ways in which they had negotiated the citizenship laws to enable the children to reside in Tanjung Pinang and attend Indonesian schools.

Although most women in the Riau Islands who marry Singaporean men meet their husbands in the Islands through work or family connections, there are some exceptions. Siti left her home town of Tanjung Pinang to travel to Singapore to work as a domestic worker for a distant relative in 1989 when she was 23. She went to Singapore hoping to have new experiences and save some money for the future, and enjoyed her ten years there, where her boss treated her like a niece rather than as a servant. On her one day off every week, Siti spent time socialising with other Indonesian women at the Indonesian Embassy or at Marina Bay. It was there that she met Hamid, a working-class Malay Singaporean. Hamid was a 50 year old divorced father of three who earned a living as an odd jobs man. Not long after Siti met him, her parents – who did not know she had a boyfriend in Singapore – decided it was time for her to get married, and matched her up with a distant relative, an Indonesian man who was working on a plantation in Malaysia. She reluctantly agreed, but after the wedding she continued to work in Singapore and her husband went back to Malaysia. They initially kept in contact by telephone, and her husband sent her some of his monthly wages. Within months, he stopped sending her money and claimed that because she was working he did not need to support her. Angry with her husband, Siti started seeing Hamid again. He still wanted to marry her and when Siti told her parents she wanted a divorce after a short period of marriage, they were furious.

But Siti had made up her mind, and went ahead with the wedding despite her parents' objections. Siti returned to Tanjung Pinang where she lives with her parents and where her husband visits her every few months. For women like Siti, employment abroad is quite lucrative, but it poses many problems, including the inference that young women who work overseas are more likely to be influenced by 'bad' ideas and immoral forces. As a single woman, Siti also found that her long stint working overseas effectively barred her from the local marriage market and by her early 30s she was considered an 'old maid'. Of the women we have spoken to, Siti is the only one to describe hers as purely a 'love marriage'. She chose the stigma and shame of divorce, made even more embarrassing to her parents because it occurred a short time after they had arranged her first marriage, in order to marry her Singaporean boyfriend. Unlike former sex workers who legally

marry, Siti is not worried that the marriage will end but seems resigned to a life in which she doesn't see her husband for months on end and during his absences has little contact with him. For her this is better than a loveless marriage to an Indonesian who works overseas.

In contrast to Siti, whose marriage has not brought her financial security, financial support is an important factor in Ani's and Lia's decision to marry because it provides a means to escape the drudgery of the low-paid, dirty, dangerous jobs in which they were employed. Poor, working-class women in the Riau Islands have few job opportunities, and choices are even more limited for women like Ani who are sold into prostitution. However, more significant than financial gain has been the social standing that these women obtain by virtue of being married. The social stigma attached to sex work is very strong in Indonesia and marriage provides sex workers with a means to become 'respectable'. For Ani and Lia cross-border marriage provides an opportunity to 'try again'. After she married, Ani finally had the courage to return to her home village and visit her parents and child. Although she had married a foreigner and, more problematically, a much older Chinese man, her status as a married woman meant that she could hold her head up in her home village and effectively bury her previous life as a sex worker. Even Lia, who became the legal second wife of a Malaysian man, has obtained a socially more acceptable position as a 'wife' in the community.¹²

Finance is also an important consideration for the working-class men who seek first or second wives in the Islands. Siti's husband Hamid, who has worked as an odd-jobs man and sub-contractor since his first marriage fell apart, can ill-afford to support Siti in Tanjung Pinang, and could certainly not afford another Singaporean wife. For him, marriage to Siti brings the promise of a loving relationship into old age – a prospect that was not available to him in Singapore. Yusof, the husband of Halimah's second daughter Mardiyah, is in a similar financial situation. Yusof did not complete primary school, and his job in maintenance pays very poorly. When asked why he had not married a Singaporean, Yusof's answer was unequivocal: "It wasn't that I didn't want to marry a Singaporean, but it was just too expensive. Everything in Singapore is expensive, so lots of men look for wives here." For Yusof and Hamid, the financial cost of marriage is twofold – the cost of a wedding ceremony, and the cost of supporting a wife and family. What remains unspoken in their accounts are the difficulties that such men face in finding suitable spouses in Singapore. The tendency for women to 'marry up' and men to 'marry down' has limited the marriage opportunities for two groups of Singaporeans – tertiary educated professional women, and working-class men with little education (AWARE, 2004). Marriage opportunities diminish further as individuals age, or if they have been previously divorced or widowed. In these circumstances, international marriage allows Singaporean men to fulfil their desire to marry and to meet their social and family obligations as married men.

Our interviews reveal that cross-border marriages between foreign men and Indonesian women living in the Riau Islands take place for a variety of reasons. Like couples elsewhere, they meet in the workplace, in social settings, or through friends and family. While some marry for love and others for economic security, all experience some degree of emotional and physical intimacy in their relationships. In the case of the marriages described above, however, this intimacy is shaped by the reality of living across national borders. Only one of these cross-border couples live together permanently – in all other cases the Indonesian wife lives in the Riau Islands and her husband visits her from his country of origin.¹³ For most of their married lives the couples have spent considerable periods apart. The men spend varied lengths of time in the Riau Islands visiting their wives. Ani's husband Ah Huat used to visit her once a month when he was still working full-time, but now he spends more time in Tanjung Balai. Once he is fully retired, he plans to live with Ani in their Tanjung Balai home. Lia's husband visits once a month, usually for three to four days, but sometimes up to a week. If Farid is too busy to come to Indonesia, she sometimes goes to Malaysia, where they meet in a hotel. There is no work for her husband in the Islands, but she is reluctant to move to Malaysia because her children are still in North Sumatra. Halimah's oldest daughter lives

in Singapore with her husband in a more 'standard' international marriage, but the Singaporean husbands of her two middle daughters visit every second week, for a day or two at a time. After her wedding, Siti's husband spent a month in Tanjung Pinang, and then he'd visit her for three or four days every month. In more recent years, however, sometimes six or seven months pass between visits, although when Hamid comes he tends to stay for two or three months depending on how much money he can save before his arrival.

Class mobility and cross-border marriage

The decisions that these cross-border couples make to live their married lives across national borders is a product of the border itself. The close proximity between the Riau Islands and Singapore and Malaysia means that travel not only takes little time but is also relatively cheap.¹⁴ Indonesia's immigration regime for ASEAN passport holders means that Singaporeans and Malaysians can enter Indonesia without a visa and stay for up to 30 days on a tourist pass. Passing through the immigration checkpoints on either side of the border takes a matter of minutes for the foreign husbands of these Indonesian women. Frequent travel between their home country and Indonesia would be much less practical for these men if their wives lived in most other parts of the Indonesian archipelago because they would normally need to travel by air, which is much more expensive, or by a mixture of sea and land transport, which is very time-consuming. There are, however, other places in Indonesia which share a similar degree of geographical proximity to a neighbouring country, particularly on the island of Borneo where Malaysia and Indonesia share a land border. Amster's (2005) study of Borneo, for example, describes international marriages involving couples who cohabit in Malaysia after the illegal migration of the Indonesian wife.

But, spatiality alone does not explain the decision to live on separate sides of the border in the case of these women from the Riau Islands. To understand these cross-border marriages it is important to examine the class and gender dimensions of state regulation of citizenship in both Indonesia and in the husband's country of origin. For example, Singapore's immigration law only grants the foreign wives of Singaporean citizens the right of permanent residence if their Singaporean husbands can demonstrate that they have the financial means to support them.¹⁵ Working-class men have found it difficult to obtain visitors' passes, work permits, and permanent residency permits for their foreign spouses and children because their incomes are deemed to be too low (Mathi, 2000).¹⁶ Obtaining residency is even more difficult for women who have previously held work permits to enter and work in Singapore. Under Singapore's Immigration Law the Marriage Restriction Policy prohibits current Work Permit holders from marrying Singaporean citizens or permanent residents without the Ministry of Manpower's approval. If the marriage takes place abroad, the Work Permit holders are barred from re-entering Singapore. The Singapore government claims that the purpose of this restriction is to prevent large numbers of low-skilled foreign workers settling in Singapore through marriage and placing a potential welfare burden on the state. This sentiment is summed up in a statement by Singaporean MP Mr Sin Boon Ann who claimed that "We can't afford to have liberal policies because once we open the floodgates, we'll be overwhelmed" (cited in Lim, 1999: 44). As a consequence, some Indonesian wives of Singaporean men find themselves confined to the Indonesian side of the border. Siti is one such ex-Work Permit holder who has found it difficult to travel to Singapore. Not long after her wedding, she spent a month in Singapore during and after Idul Fitri, the Muslim festival at the end of the fasting month of Ramadhan. The following year she stayed for two weeks. Both times she had trouble entering Singapore. She has not been there since, and her passport has now expired. Siti knew she would have problems getting permanent residency in Singapore because of her status as an ex-domestic worker and her husband's marginal economic position, which is made worse by his responsibilities to his children from his first marriage. Despite

these difficulties she was not dissuaded from marrying the ‘love of her life’ – the fact that they would have trouble living together was of secondary consideration.

Although the other women do not face the legal problems entering Singapore that Siti faces as a former Work Permit holder, almost all of them have had some difficulties dealing with the Singapore Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA), which carefully screens all Indonesian tourists and refuses them entry if they are suspected of being involved in illegal activities. Ani found it difficult to get through the immigration checkpoint when she visited Ah Huat before their marriage: once she was sent back to Indonesia for not carrying enough ‘show money’ (*uang tunjuk*),¹⁷ and another time she was tested for drugs. It has been easier since she married because Ah Huat’s identity card and marriage details have been entered into the immigration database, and despite these early difficulties with the ICA, Ani asserts that she could apply for permanent residency if she wanted to because Ah Huat is happy for her to move to Singapore even though money would be tight. Ultimately, however, other considerations have weighed more heavily on her mind. Ani’s natal family has expressed strong opposition to the possibility of Ani moving to Singapore with her son. In addition, her son could not migrate without being adopted by Ah Huat, which would have been difficult since his father (Ani’s ex-husband) is still alive. It is also important to note that Indonesia’s 1958 Citizenship Law did not allow dual citizenship so if Ani had obtained Singaporean citizenship she would have lost her Indonesian citizenship, thus potentially making it difficult for her to spend extended periods in Indonesia with her child and parents, or to own (or inherit) land.¹⁸ In Ani’s account of why she has stayed living in the islands, however, the Singapore state’s tight control on unskilled migration does not figure. She asserts that if she wanted to migrate to Singapore to live with her husband she would simply do so, without problem. At this stage of her life other considerations have simply taken precedence.

Halimah’s eldest daughter Zulfiyanti was able to migrate permanently because her husband Hambali earns a stable if modest living. However, Halimah’s other sons-in-law earn much less, so even if her daughters Mardiyah and Katijah wanted to move to Singapore permanently it is most likely that their applications would be refused. Although their husbands Yusof and Yasin would have difficulty proving they can support their wives, the men nonetheless assume that their wives would be able to migrate if they wanted to. It is evident from our interviews, however, that the possibility of migration is often not seriously considered. Instead they presented their cross-border living arrangements as purely a lifestyle choice. Cross-border living arrangements allowed them to stretch their minimal wages much further while at the same time allowing the men to enjoy the slower, more laidback lifestyle in the Islands whenever they wanted. They did not believe that this arrangement had a negative impact on their family life or on their children’s education. Yusof could see no advantages for his own children in living in Singapore. When asked if he planned to take his children to Singapore for secondary school, Yusof said that he was very happy with the standard of schooling in Tanjung Pinang, and was able to pay for extra tuition for his children there, which he could not have afforded in Singapore. He spoke pityingly about Zulfiyanti’s daughter Aman, who enjoyed spending time with her extended family in Tanjung Pinang so much that she often returned to her home in Singapore in tears.

These accounts reveal a gap between states’ regulation of unskilled migration and the personal perceptions of those individuals who may be affected by that regulation. None of the men considered migrating to Indonesia because their capacity to earn an income in their country of origin is much higher than if they moved to the Islands. While many asserted that they like the pace of life in Indonesia because it is less stressful, they associated that kind of lifestyle with future retirement. Nonetheless, such a future scenario would not see them relinquishing their citizenship or applying for a long-term stay permit. Under Indonesia’s 1992 Immigration Law, foreign citizens who wish to live in Indonesia must obtain a stay permit for the purposes of work, business or tourism. Indonesian women are not permitted to sponsor their husbands so in most cases they must

be sponsored by an employer (Tjakrawinata and Wellesley, 2006), which leads to numerous problems, particularly when husbands lose their jobs. While these laws create significant difficulties for the foreign spouses of Indonesians living elsewhere in Indonesia, the ease of cross-border travel in the Riau Islands makes such regulations relatively unimportant for Singaporeans and Malaysians. The ease of ferry travel to both countries, combined with the low cost of tickets, means that foreign husbands who 'live' in the islands can easily return to their countries of origin every month for a few days before re-entering Indonesia on a new social pass. By retaining their citizenship, these men further benefit from their access to a range of services in their home country, including preservation of superannuation funds and medical care. Retention of one's citizenship is also considered to be wise in view of Indonesia's unstable social and economic conditions.

Like their husbands, the women also expressed the view that their decision to remain in the Riau Islands is a lifestyle choice. Despite Singapore's higher standard of living and cosmopolitan lifestyle, none of the women liked living in high-rise apartments which they found dislocated from the community atmosphere of village life. Siti asserts that she would not have migrated even if it had been possible, because she doesn't get on with her husband's family. "Singaporean people", she says, "just think about themselves". At first Ani was impressed by the orderliness and beauty of the city, and the vibrancy of the nightlife compared with Tanjung Balai's sleepy provincial atmosphere. Her visits increased in frequency and length after the wedding, but soon she too tired of Singapore. She disliked the pace of life, had difficulty communicating in English or Chinese, and found her long days at home alone in their flat in Singapore boring and the cost of living too expensive. Like Ani, Mardiyah and Katijah also enjoy the extra physical space that their Tanjung Pinang house provides and the slow pace of life in the Islands. They also liked being close to their mother and friends. They felt they had a far better lifestyle than their sister Zulfiyanti. These views of Singapore are not uncommon amongst Riau Islanders (see Ford and Lyons, 2006). Lia too disliked the pace and style of life in Singapore and this was another factor in her decision to marry a Malaysian. She felt trapped in Singapore because she felt that everything was over-regulated, and although people lived close together in flats, they did not know their neighbours. If she didn't already have children in Indonesia, Lia would have been much more open to the idea of living in Malaysia which she said was not too much different from Indonesia.

The cost of living in Singapore is clearly a significant factor in the other couples' decisions to remain separated. Siti's financial circumstances are more difficult than the other women's. During the Indonesian economic crisis of 1997-98,¹⁹ Hamid had plenty of money and Siti could live well, but now he brings very little – a few hundred dollars at most. He doesn't have a permanent job and as he gets older he is finding it more difficult to make ends meet. The cost of living in Singapore is constantly rising, and although his children are now grown up, family obligations continue to drain his resources. Although Siti originally lived on her own in Tanjung Pinang, she has returned to live with her parents in order to cut costs. For a time she took in washing to supplement her meagre savings but Hamid did not approve. He said she had worked too long as a maid already, and it was time for her to rest. Hamid claims that if they chose to live in Singapore, they would both have to live on one wage, so it is better if Siti lives in Indonesia because the cost of living is much cheaper and she can stay with her family. The couple look forward to the time when Hamid can access his state superannuation fund, and their financial position will improve.

In contrast, Ani and Lia are better off than most. Ani's husband provides her with Rp. 4,000,000²⁰ housekeeping money per month, but also pays for other expenses when he visits, while Lia's husband sends her 1500 Malaysian ringgit²¹ per month to cover her living costs. These allowances are well in excess of the official minimum wage in Karimun, which was set at Rp. 766,000 in 2006 (Batam Pos Online, 2006). Yusof and Yamin pool their resources, and also manage to provide a lower middle-class lifestyle for their wives and children. The women, however, are not the only ones to enjoy a comfortable living. The favourable exchange rate with both the Singapore dollar and

Malaysian ringgit means that the men are able to afford a comfortable lifestyle in Indonesia including a relatively large house, and the chance to indulge in relatively expensive food such as seafood during their visits. These working-class men, economically marginalised in their home countries, can ‘live like kings’ in the Riau Islands. The split location of income (Singapore/Malaysia) and consumption (Indonesia) allows most of the men to provide their wives (and children) with a relatively comfortable lifestyle in the present. This investment, while it may be built on bonds of love, sex and other forms of intimacy, also rests on an expectation that the men themselves will be able to enjoy the benefits of a lower middle-class status during their visits, and on a more permanent basis in the future.²²

Conclusion

Attention to laws governing marriage and divorce, immigration and naturalization, and the citizenship of children, demonstrate that marriage is primarily understood within the bounds of the nation-state, and that significant barriers therefore exist to the formation of international marriages. In the case of the cross-border marriages under study in the Riau Islands, focus on the marriage and immigration laws of Indonesia and Singapore reveals similar constraints on the formation of nuclear, cohabiting families. We asserted in our introduction, however, that a state-centric approach to the study of international marriage risks focusing on the problems that couples face in becoming married (or divorced) or in migrating in order to live together and thus overlooks the opportunities that cross-border marriage practices provide. The individuals in our study live their marriages across borders for a variety of reasons, and in some cases they may see the Singapore-Indonesia border as extending, rather than restricting, the choices that are available to them as married couples. In the stories that these women tell about their married lives, the state is largely absent. All, including Lia, have experienced the power of the Singapore state to restrict their entry into Singapore, but these controls appear to play a relatively insignificant role in their lives. Siti’s problem with entering Singapore as a former Work Permit holder simply provides her with another reason not to spend time in the city-state. Migration for Ani is complicated by the presence of a child from her previous marriage whom she is reluctant to leave behind. In contrast, Mardiyah and Katijah assume – perhaps falsely – that they could move to Singapore, as their sister Zulfiyanti has, but have not explored that option seriously because it would not make financial or social sense. For all of the couples in this study, the economic logic of maintaining split households far outweighs any emotional desire to cohabit on either side of the border. Similarly, while the ability of nation-states to regulate migration flows across the border is a practical reality, neither the Indonesian nor Singaporean state looms large in the reasons behind their decision to live on opposite sides of the border. Instead, it is the class mobility that such marriages offer that is much more significant.

An understanding of cross-border marriage as a form of class mobility requires a shift away from traditional views, which attribute the class of unwaged women solely to the class position of the main male income earner (usually a husband or father). The strong association between a woman’s marital and employment status, and her class position means that women can experience significant class mobility during the course of their lives (Prandy, 1986: 141; Walby, 1986: 26-7). The majority of the Indonesian women described in this study have clearly experienced a shift in their class location so long as they continue to reside in the Riau Islands. For these women, the economic benefits of cross-border marriage are immediate. Favourable exchange rates between the Singapore dollar (or Malaysian ringgit) and the Indonesian rupiah, combined with the lower cost of living in the Riau Islands, allow them to visibly consume a lower middle-class lifestyle. The women (and their children) are not only better off financially than if they had married working-class Indonesian men, but are better off than if they had migrated to Singapore, or even Malaysia. Their husbands do not experience class mobility in the same way. For the men the economic advantages to be gained

from the differential exchange rates are usually deferred. While their wives and families immediately enter the ranks of the lower middle-classes in Indonesia, the men retain their marginal status as poor, working-class men in Singapore. They look forward to their visits to the Islands, and to retirement, when they will be able to live with their wives in Indonesia and enjoy their financial investments in property and consumer goods. Meanwhile, their families' ability to retain their new class location is dependent on the male breadwinner's ability to earn more than a subsistence wage in his home country.

While all the couples reflected on a range of possible situations in which the couples could live permanently under one roof, they repeatedly emphasised the positive aspects of their current arrangements. The foreign husbands involved in these cross-border marriages appear to be satisfied with their living arrangements, perhaps because it saves them money or provides them with greater personal freedom. The women too benefit from greater levels of personal autonomy because their husbands live abroad. More importantly, for the Indonesian wives of foreign men, marriage is a goal in itself.²³ For Ani and Lia, who face the social stigma attached to sex work, the social acceptance that they obtain through marriage cannot be overlooked. Marriage has made them 'respectable' again (Lyons and Ford, in press). Although Ani married an old Chinese foreigner, her status as a married woman restored her self-confidence and allowed her to finally establish a 'real family' with her child. Lia too hopes that she will be able to have a child with her husband and establish a family. Siti chose the stigma and shame of divorce in order to marry her Singaporean boyfriend. For Siti being an impoverished married woman living at home with her family is a much better option than being a foreign worker married to a man she does not care for.

The social and cultural impact that these cross-border marriages will have on Halimah's cross-border grandchildren is not yet clear. While Yusof might assert that his children are better off in Tanjung Pinang, the social and cultural capital associated with Singaporean citizenship cannot be underestimated. At the same time, it is also important to give attention to the significant role that class and ethnicity play in the lives of Singapore's Malay community (Rahim, 1998), and not to simply assume that growing up in a more developed country necessarily has flow on effects in relation to life opportunities. In making judgements about the impact of 'absent' fathers on the lives of cross-border children, it is also essential not to impose cultural understandings of family life and child rearing practices.

For centuries women have become involved in relationships with men whose primary residence is in another country. What is new about the kinds of relationships these women experience in the Riau Islands is that their partners live close enough that access to modern transport allows frequent short visits – and the community in which they live is fluid enough to allow them to enter the ranks of the lower middle-class on the basis of economic resources alone. However, it would be a mistake to view these women's lives as reflective of a new form of women's agency. They are still subject to the same gendered ideologies that shape the lives of other Indonesian women, including expectations about women's roles in marriage. Their foreign husbands also hold entrenched ideas about sex roles, and there is some evidence to suggest that men seek out wives and mistresses in the Riau Islands because the women are regarded as more 'traditional' and therefore submissive towards their husbands.²⁴ Most importantly, however, women's life choices as cross-border wives are constrained by gender imbalances that reflect the economic differences between Indonesia and Singapore. As the primary breadwinners their husbands control the household finances, and determine when the couple will be together and when they will live apart. Ultimately it is also the men who possess the power to withdraw from their cross-border relationships, leaving the women with little legal recourse in relation to maintenance or division of assets, unless the couple has purchased a house in the wife's name. However, these stories demonstrate that cross-border marriage opens up new opportunities as well as entrenching old oppressions. They challenge the assumptions, which underpin macro-level analyses of international marriage, about the power of the

state over family formation and the importance of formal citizenship rights for everyday practices. The state is not absent from the lives of women like Ani and Lia, Katijah and Mardiyah, or Siti, but nor is it omnipresent. It is just one of many factors these women and their partners take into account when deciding how to live their lives in the borderlands.

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¹ There is a considerable body of research on borderland communities which demonstrates the limits of the state. For an overview of these issues see Donnan and Wilson (1999), Cunningham and Heyman (2004), and Horstmann and Wadley (2006).

² The research on which this paper is based was funded by an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project grant *In the Shadow of Singapore: The Limits of Transnationalism in Insular Riau* (DP0557368) – see project website <http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/research/intheshadow/>.

³ In contrast to Bintan and Karimun, Batam was largely unoccupied jungle prior to the 1970s. Today it is dotted with large-scale industrial parks, tourist resorts, administrative infrastructure, and housing estates, and boasts a population of almost 600,000 largely as a result of internal migration from other parts of Indonesia (BPS-Kota-Batam, 2004). For a discussion of the significant differences between Batam and Bintan, see Ford and Lyons (2006).

⁴ For a discussion of Singaporean men's relationships with their mistresses, see Amster and Lindquist (2005).

⁵ These types of relationships are similar to those observed amongst ethnic Chinese businessmen from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore working in the People's Republic of China (Tam, 1996; Lang and Smart, 2002; Yeoh and Willis, 2004; Shen, 2005). Studies of these business communities suggest that taking mistresses is an integral part of a transnational business culture and form of transnational business masculinity that encourages the pursuit of 'play' by foreign businessmen (Shen, 2005: 420). In the Riau Islands, however, the practice of taking second wives is predominantly a working class or lower middle-class practice.

⁶ Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper at the request of informants. The stories recounted here are based on in-depth interviews conducted between November 2004 and August 2006. All interviews, which were taped and transcribed, were conducted in Indonesian and translated into English by the second author.

⁷ Interestingly, all the couples we spoke to were married in Indonesia. In the case of Singapore, this may be related to two factors – the cost of wedding ceremonies in Singapore, and the bureaucracy surrounding marriage. Where a Singaporean seeks to marry a foreign citizen in Singapore, the future spouse must supply a letter from their country of origin confirming his/her marital status; a letter of approval from the Work Permit Office, Ministry of Manpower if the future spouse is a work permit or ex-work permit holder; and in the case of Muslim marriages where the future spouse is an Indonesian, Malaysian or Bruneian citizen, the intended spouse must provide a letter of non-impediment from the local registry of marriages or approved Islamic body (Registry of Marriages, 2002). One of our informants, a Malay Singaporean man claimed that the cost of getting married in Singapore was so high that he married his wife in her home town of Tanjung Pinang.

⁸ For further discussion of the marginal status of sex workers and the opportunities presented by marriage to foreigners, see Lyons and Ford (in press).

⁹ See for example Lisa Law's discussion of marriages between sex workers and their clients in the Philippines (2000).

¹⁰ International marriages between Malay Singaporean men and Riau Islander Malay women have been occurring for generations. They were especially common during the 1950s, and the marriages described here reflect those longstanding ties.

¹¹ As many Singaporean-Indonesian couples in the Islands are not legally married this law does not apply and their children are eligible for Indonesian citizenship.

¹² In Indonesia, *janda* (divorcees or widows) are frequently the object of community distrust "regarding [their] sexual activities because they are no longer under the supervision or control of fathers or husbands" (Brenner, 1998: 163). Marriage, even as a second wife, reinstated Lia's position as a socially (and morally) acceptable member of the community.

¹³ We are not suggesting that all cross-border marriages involving Indonesian women from the Riau Islands demonstrate a similar pattern. Many women who marry foreign men migrate to join their spouses. However, the phenomenon of cross-border marriages described in this paper is sufficiently prevalent to be worthy of separate attention. It is impossible to quantify the number of couples who live across borders because no state authority has sought to measure its incidence.

¹⁴ The cost of a return ferry ticket to the islands in September 2006 varied between S\$25-30.

¹⁵ In contrast, the foreign husband of a Singaporean woman must show that he is gainfully employed.

¹⁶ These cases are analogous to the situation faced by many working-class Hong Kong men who marry women from Mainland China (Lang and Smart, 2002; So, 2003).

¹⁷ The ICA often requires Indonesian tourists to demonstrate that they have enough financial resources to support their stay in Singapore. Those without sufficient money are assumed to be entering Singapore to engage in illegal work and thus refused entry. As a freelance sex worker, Lia often traveled to Singapore to meet clients. Unlike Ani, she never had trouble getting in. She asserts that getting through is all a matter of having the right attitude, dressing appropriately, and showing the right amount of *uang tunjuk*.

¹⁸ Whether this situation will change as a result of amendments to the Citizenship Law in relation to dual citizenship is still unclear (see Tjakrawinata and Wellesley, 2006).

¹⁹ During the crisis, the purchasing power of the Singaporean dollar increased by a factor of more than five. The Rupiah fell from Rp. 1779 for S\$1 at the beginning of August 1997 to a low of Rp. 9575 in mid June 1998, before stabilising at around Rp. 5000 in late 1998.

²⁰ September 2006, Rp.1,000,000 = USD110.

²¹ September 2006, 1000 MYR = USD274.

²² In this sense, these men have much in common with international labour migrants who spend much of their working lives abroad supporting their families 'back home'.

²³ Nicole Constable describes a similar situation amongst Filipinas who become 'mail-order brides'. She argues that the women don't simply marry to migrate, but migrate to achieve a desired goal of marriage which is an important aspect of their self-fulfilment (Constable, 2003: 164).

²⁴ In the words of Haji Handarlin, Head of Riau's Muslim Affairs Office, "Indonesian women are more docile and can look after them. Singapore women are always so busy and they [Singaporean men] can't get enough physical and sexual satisfaction" (cited in Arshad, 2003).