

## **The Barriers to Social Integration of Vietnamese Brides in Cross Border Marriages**

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### **1. Introduction**

Cross-border marriage is a particular socio-cultural phenomenon of the border areas lying between neighbour countries. Cross-border marriage has appeared for a long history since ethnic and national borders were not definitely declared. Cross-border marriage has been mainly formed as the result of business, friendship or kinship relations among ethnic communities residing in the both sides of the national borders. At present, cross-border marriage is still taking place, reflecting both historical and complicated manifestations of globalization and the development of the market economy. Aligning with the voluntary marriage as results of historical and cultural relations and interrelations among ethnicities living in the cross-border areas, cross-border marriage have been also established for economic purposes or as results of deception, coercion or abduction. A significant social issue of cross-border marriage is that a number of them have been celebrated mainly in traditional customs with the witness of grassroots authorities; however, not many marriages have been legally recognized. As a result, a number of cross-border brides have not been naturalized in the receiving countries. Hence, a large amount of Vietnamese brides who are living in China have faced with various challenges and barriers (Ly Quyen and Long Dieu 2007, Hoang Hac Phi and Tran To Hao 2011, Luong Mau Xuan and Tran Van 2011, Tuong Duc Thuy 2012). Most of the Vietnamese brides have been married with the Chinese men in Guangxi, Guangdong, and Yunnan provinces and they have shared the same “three NOs” characteristics (no nationality, no resident certificate, and no national identify card) or even “five NOs” characteristics (aside from three above-mentioned “three NOs”, they have no access to health care services and no social interaction),... (Duong Huy and Hoang Gia Tin 2007, Ly Bich Hoa 2008, Phung Nhat Tan 2013). Despite of several preliminary research findings from the above-mentioned available studies, the picture of Vietnam’s cross-border brides is still unclear in a number of aspects, particularly the social barriers they face in the integration process with their in-laws and communities in receiving places. This Paper will fill in that gap.

### **2. Research Methodology**

#### **Research Sample**

This Paper is built on the survey results of the National Study on Cross-border Marriage and Social Development which was conducted in 6 provinces of Viet Nam, including Lang Son, Quang Ninh, Cao Bang, Nghe An, Ha Giang and Kon Tum between 2014 and 2015. The Survey was sponsored by the Government of Viet Nam. Within the scope of the Survey, 1,536 households from 11 ethnic minorities residing in three cross-border areas (Viet Nam – China; Viet Nam – Lao; and Viet Nam – Cambodia) were interviewed, of which, there were 302 households engaging in providing information about Vietnamese brides’ cross-border marriages. Though the research team could not access Vietnamese brides in China, the collection of information about cross-border brides via their families, to some extent, has helped to identify the social barriers that Vietnam’s cross-border bride are facing. In addition, the Paper is also deepened with the information gained from the results of qualitative research (in-depth interviews with the returning brides whose marriages were unhappy).

Cross-border marriage refers the marriage of individuals who live in the countries sharing the border(s). In this Paper, cross-border marriages are those of the individuals living in Vietnamese border areas with the individuals living in the border areas of Vietnam’s neighbour countries such as China, Laos and Cambodia.

### **Analytical Method**

In this Paper, the author has used the multivariate analysis with a logistic regression model to investigate the factors influencing Vietnamese women’s possibilities of encountering social barriers in the integration process with their in-laws and communities in receiving places. The results of the regression analysis model reported as the OR value (odds ratios) with 95% confidence intervals and  $p < 0.05$  are considered as statistical significance.

## **3. Key Findings**

### **3.1. Fundamental Characteristics of Cross-Border Marriage**

So far, there has been no large-scaled survey providing an accurate number of Vietnamese people who engage in cross-border marriage. The results of the National Study on Cross-border Marriage and Social Development conducted in 6 provinces of Viet Nam reveal that of 1,536 surveyed households, about 20.7% of which have their children or family members (such as brothers, sisters) get married to the people from the neighbour countries. Particularly, many families have had 2-3 household members get married to the people from the neighbour countries.

#### **Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Vietnamese Brides Engaging in Cross-border Marriage in the Survey Sample**

Based on the data of 302 Vietnamese women engaging in cross-border marriages, we have identified the socio-demographic characteristics of Vietnamese brides as follows:

*In terms of marriage age*, the average age of Vietnamese brides in the cross-border marriages is 22.4 years, which is slightly lower than the average marriage age of Vietnamese women in general (23 years) (GSO 2016)

It is noted that a significant proportion of the women engaging in cross-border marriage before the prescribed age (full 18 years old – according to the amended Vietnam’s 2014 Law on Marriage and Family). In fact, early marriage still occurs and is common among ethnic minorities; however, it is noticed that early marriage is often perceived as a not good indicator for a lucky and happy marriage. In this study, 8.1% of Vietnamese women are recorded to engage in cross-border marriages at the age of above 30 years. Most of them failed in their marriage in Viet Nam; thus, they have engaged in cross-border marriage to seek marriage opportunities and a new life.

*In terms of ethnicity*, most of the Vietnamese brides are from Tay or Nung ethnicity. Those ethnicities are residing in the mountainous provinces of Northern Viet Nam, which share the shame borders with China.

*In terms of current jobs*, most of the Vietnamese brides are unskilled/manual workers after marriage. They often do cultivating work in the farming lands of their in-laws. Only a very small proportion of them (4%) are working in factories or for companies. A part of them (8%) only stay at home to do house- care work for their families.

<b>Socio-Demographic Characteristics</b>		<b>Rate</b>
Age group (248)	< 18 years	16.1
	19-20 years	27.8
	21-25 years	24.8
	26-30 years	14.6
	> 30 years	8.1

Ethnicity (302)	Kinh	3.2
	Tay	28.5
	Nung	54.6
	Other	13.2
Current work	Manual/employed worker	78.4
	Housewife	8.0
	Trader and businessperson	2.0
	Factor worker	4.0
	Others	7.6

[Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Vietnamese Brides Engaging in Cross-border Marriage]

### Marriage Situation of Vietnamese Brides

*Regarding the subject of marriage*, most of the cross-border marriages investigated in this study are those between Vietnamese and Chinese people (94.4%). Several remain ones are the marriages between Vietnamese and Laotian people.

*Regarding the time spent before marriage*, 43.7% of the respondents stated that they did not remember/know how long the brides took to learn about their partners before marriage. A significant proportion of the respondents (21.2%) said that the time the brides spent on learning about their partners before marriage was less than 1 month. The remain ones revealed that the duration was around 1 years or less (32.1%).

*Regarding in-ethnicity marriage*, of 302 households participating in the survey, 61.9% informed that the cross-border marriages of their children or household members were between two people from the same ethnicity (for instance, Tay and Tay). That characteristic clearly reveals the close ethnic relations in the border areas. The ethnicities who are residing in the border areas often do not care much about the national borders but the ethnic relations in their marriage and family relations. In the in-ethnicity marriages, couples face fewer difficulties in holding their wedding ceremonies and adapting the new living environments because they share the same languages and customs. 90.6% of the respondents stated that Vietnam's cross-border brides are fluent with the languages of the receiving places. However, despite the above-mentioned advantages, Vietnamese brides engaging in cross-border in-ethnicity marriages still face various barriers because of differences in customs and daily habits of their in-laws, communities of receiving places as well as the legal marriage documents of the two countries.

*Reasons for marriage*, most of the cross-border marriages are established within the business or working relations. In recent years, rapid development and expansion of commodity exchanges of the markets, towns and cities in the border areas between Viet Nam and China, Viet Nam and Laos have created opportunities for ethnicities in the border areas to have more economic and cultural interactions. The sessions of the markets are the opportunities for people from two countries to meet, to get acquainted, and to create cross-border relationships. Moreover, in recent years, a large number of Vietnamese people have migrated to China to work; hence, Vietnamese and Chinese people have more chance to meet and establish relationships. The information obtained from the interviews with the authorities and people in the border areas of Viet Nam indicates that underemployment, low income, difficulties in economic life in the border areas are the main reasons that have motivated the people in the border areas to migrate to work in China. Besides, there are many trails in the terrain between Viet Nam and China; thus, people from the two countries have easily passed through. In addition to the reason related to work, 18.9% of the respondents said that the cross-border marriages had also been established through referrals and matchmaking. Particularly, 11.5% claimed that the marriages were the results of abduction or coercion. In that case, Vietnamese brides have been cheated, abducted and sold in the deep main lands of China. As a result,

those brides are at high risks of facing barriers and being not executed with the right to social protection in the receiving places.

<b>Circumstances</b>	<b>Rate</b>
Going out/Going to the markets	16.4
Trading/working	45.8
Matchmaking/referring	18.9
Coerced/cheated/trafficked	11.5
Others (visiting friends/ relatives/ engaging in cultural exchange activities	6.6

**[Table 2: Circumstances of Cross-border Marriage of Vietnamese Brides]**

*Regarding the right to make decision in marriage*, except for the coerced/trafficked brides, 68.8% of the respondents stated that Vietnamese brides had made their own decision on their cross-border marriages without any insight or interference from their parents. Only some women have consulted with their parents about their marriages. The data from the study reveal that the voice of parents in cross-border marriage is low.

Generally, this Paper has reflected the situation of cross-border marriages in the border areas of Viet Nam. Most of the marriages between Vietnamese women and Chinese men are in-ethnicity ones. However, it is noted that in addition the voluntary marriages established through working or cultural exchanges, there are still the marriages built on abduction, coercion or human trafficking. It is also noticed that there are still early marriages or the marriages with short time for couples of learning about each other, which have increased the risks for Vietnamese brides to encounter barriers/difficulties in their in-laws and communities of receiving places.

### **3.2. Social Barriers faced by Vietnamese Brides in Their Cross-border Marriages**

#### **3.2.1. Barriers Related to Their Integration into Their In-laws and Communities in Receiving Places**

Integration into the marriage life is not easy, particularly for the brides engaging in cross-border marriages because of different factors. The barriers can be caused by differences in life style or customs and traditions of the two countries. In this study, 12.9% of the surveyed households said that the women engaging in cross-border marriage (members of their families) often got difficulties during their integration into the life in receiving places. Those difficulties may include incompatibility of integrating into their in-laws, differences in languages and customs in their in-laws, being unregistered to their in-laws' resident certificates, discrimination or violence, etc. 20.2% of the respondents revealed that cross-border brides had also faced economic difficulties such as underemployment or low income, etc.

A study conducted by a Chinese scholar also indicates that Vietnamese brides in China have often been less confident in communication. Language barriers as well as differences in customs and daily habits are often the reasons for Vietnamese brides' certain difficulties in integrating into their in-laws and communities in receiving places. As a result, they have had certain distances with members of their in-laws and people in receiving places. In addition, Vietnamese brides are not allowed to participating in making decisions related to land-use rights or inheritance, insurance or medical care. Though Vietnamese brides are thirsty for integrating into the communities in receiving places, they are not generally supported or receiving the recognition of the surrounding communities. Hence, they can only contacting with each other by themselves (Hoang Hac Phi and Tran To Hao 2011). The information collected from in-depth

interviews further reveals that even among the in-ethnicity brides, they still face difficulties in communicating and sharing emotions with the members of their in-laws. *“Though my in-law members and I all speak Tay language, we still don’t share the same language. They didn’t understand what I say; thus, it was difficult for me to ask them to give me some money to buy sanitary napkins for my period, I missed my mother and my home in Viet Nam very much. In China, I did not have any friend or reliable person to confide in. Hence, I cried a lot”* (IDI, woman, 3 years old, Quang Ninh province).

Several brides who are not lucky in cross-border marriages have suffered from domestic violence; however, they do not dare to leave their in-laws for Viet Nam because of their concerns about legal barriers: *“In China, my husband and sister-in-law often beat me and they do not allow me to go anywhere. I am like a “housemaster”. I am very afraid of being expelled from China because I am not legally registered into my in-law’s resident certificate while maybe I have been also excluded from my family’s resident certificate...”* (IDI, woman, 29 years old, Quang Ninh provinces). It is obvious that domestic violence is a permanent matter that cross-border brides must have to face. The absence of legal protection due to lack of marriage registration along with cultural and lifestyle differences have make it difficult for Vietnamese brides to effectively cope with violence. So far, there almost no study to deeply investigate the domestic violence situation among cross-border marriage. Therefore, further research is needed on this issue to provide a scientific basis for policymaking and designing interventions to protect cross-border brides from violence.

In order to understanding the factors contributing to Vietnamese brides’ probability of social encounters in their national marriages, the research team developed logistic regressors with impact variables which were used in the analysis. The impact variables include marriage age, in-ethnicity marriage, language proficiency in receiving places, time spent between cross-border couples before marriage, bride’s work at receiving places and marital circumstance. The results of the analysis are presented in the Table 3.

In-ethnicity marriage and language proficiency in receiving places are the factors contributing to the reduction of barriers faced by Vietnamese brides in their in-laws. The probability of encountering difficulties in integrating into cross-border families and communities in receiving places among in-ethnicity brides is only 0.4 time compared to the brides whose ethnicities are different from their in-laws. The probability of encountering difficulties in receiving among the brides fluent at the language of receiving places is only 0.2 time compared to those who are not.

Independent Variable		OR (95%CI)	N
<b>Vietnamese bride’s job</b>	Unskilled worker	1	177
	Housewife (doing housework)	0.8	14
	Worker/trader	0.6	15
<b>In-ethnicity marriage</b>	No	1	57
	Yes	0.4*	149
<b>Martial circumstance</b>	Arranged/referred marriage	1	53
	Trafficked/abducted marriage	1.2	19
	Voluntary marriage	1.3	134
<b>Having time spent on learning each other before marriage</b>	No	1	58
	Yes	1.1	148
<b>Marriage at the prescribed age</b>	No	1	32
	Yes	1.3	174

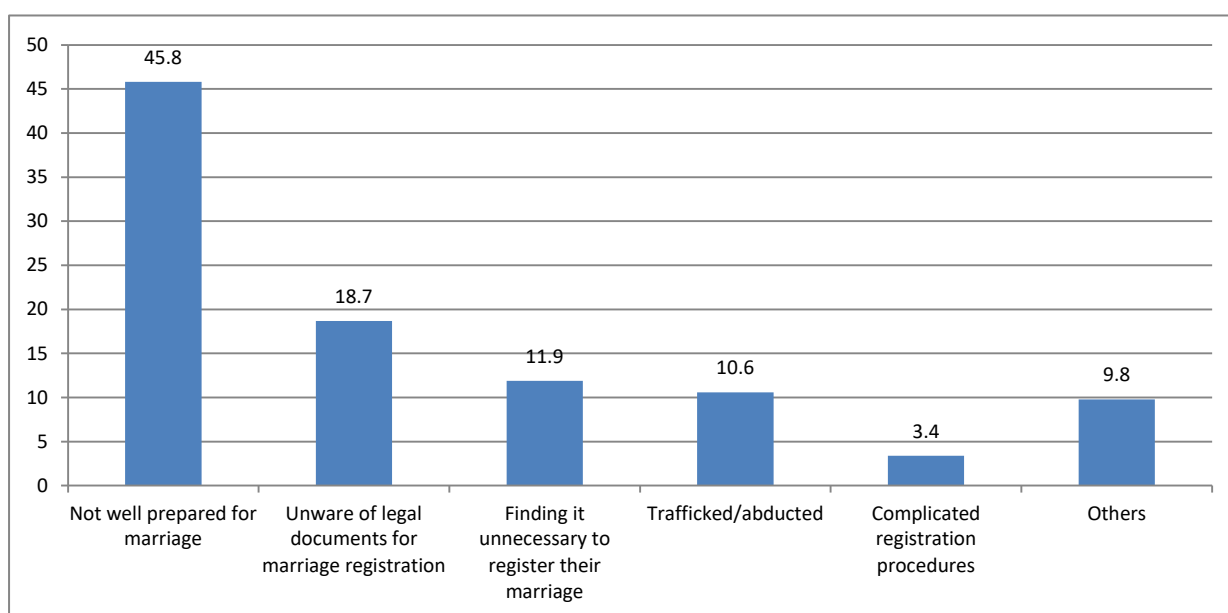
<b>Language proficiency at receiving places</b>	No	1	15
	Yes	0.2*	191

**[Table 3: A Multivariable Logistic Regression Model of the Factors Influencing the Probability for Social Integration among Vietnam’s Cross-border Brides in Receiving Places]**

**3.2.2. Barriers Related to the Legal Procedures for Marriage Registration**

The proportion of marriage registration among Vietnam’s cross-border brides in this study is very low. Only 4.5% of the Vietnamese brides get marriage registration at the time of marriage. By the time of the survey, the marriage registration rate of Vietnamese brides was only 10.5%. The information obtained from the interviews with Cao Bang Women’s Union (one of the surveyed provinces) shows a very low rate of cross-border marriage registration with the Provincial Department of Justice among Vietnamese brides. Between 1991 and 2013, the total number of Vietnamese women marrying Chinese men was 4,726 people. However, by April 2014, only 1,913 women had registered their marriage to the Provincial Department of Justice (accounting for 40.4%) (Cao Bang Women’s Union 2014). A Chinese scholar has also recognized the situation of Vietnamese women getting married to Chinese men without marriage registration in a study. According to (Tuong Duc Thuy 2012), the number of Vietnamese women getting married to Chinese men in Guangxi was up to 50 thousand people. Nonetheless, up to 95% of them had not legally registered their marriages to both Vietnamese and Chinese authorities.

The main reason for no marriage registration which has been most stated by the respondents is the fact that many of Vietnamese brides are not well prepared for marriage. For instance, 45.8% of the brides got marriage before the prescribed age or they did not have enough legal documents for marriage registration; 18.7% of the brides said that they did not know how to process the marriage registration; 11.9% believed that it was necessary to register their marriages to the authorities of both countries. It is noticed that the brides themselves and their family members believe that it is unnecessary to register cross-border marriages because it does not affect much their life.



**[Graph 1: Main Reasons for No Marriage Registration among Vietnam’s Cross-border Brides (%)]**

According to the Amended Law on Marriage and Family (2014) of Viet Nam, the application for marriage registration between Vietnamese and foreigners consist of following documents: (i) Application for

Marriage with Foreigners; (ii) documents proving the single status of Vietnamese and foreigners; (iii) Written medical declaration on bride's and groom's cognitive ability and behavior by authorized medical facilities; (iv) certified copies of national identity cards; (v) certified copies of Passports or international travel documents, residence card, copies of residence certificates/temporary residence certificate; (iv) Certificate proving that Vietnamese citizens have been counselled and supported for marriage involving foreign elements which is issued by the Centre for Counselling and Supporting Family and Marriage involving foreign elements in following cases: the couples are different in age of 20 years or over; the foreigners who have experienced two marriages or more or those who used to get married and divorced to Vietnamese; bride and groom who has not had a good understanding of their family and individual backgrounds, proficient with partner's language, customs, tradition, culture and legal regulations on family and marriage. For the procedures of marriage registration in Viet Nam, the couple needs to submit the application to the Provincial/Municipal Department of Justice of the place where the Vietnamese bride/groom is registered for their permanent or temporary residence.

During the implementation of the Law on Marriage and Family in mountainous provinces, the Provincial Departments of Justice revealed that they encountered many difficulties in appraising, reviewing, and interviewing the people who have demands of getting married with foreigners. Most of the applicants do not have all required documents while they do not also understand the procedure. In addition, linguistic differences between provincial judicial officers and ethnic minority applicants have contributed to unsuccessful interviews. Moreover, the process of appraising the application also takes times, which has caused applicants' multiple travelling to the Department. Moreover, there are too many documents that applicants have to prepare while their knowledge and language capacity is limited. Those above-mentioned regulations have significantly contributed to increasing the rate of ethnic minorities who has no interest in marriage registration.

Because of the typical characteristics of cross-border marriage related to geography and living places of the cross-border couples, Vietnamese Government has issued several particular regulations on the marriage for Vietnamese citizens residing in the border areas with the citizens of the neighbour countries. The Chapter III of the Decree No. 24/2013/ND-CP detailing the guidance for the implementation of several articles of the Law on Marriage and Family involving foreign elements stipulates that the Commune People's Committees in border areas are allowed to receive and process the marriage registrations between Vietnamese citizens and the citizens of neighbour countries according to Vietnam's provisions on marriage and family. Accordingly, the application for marriage registration shall be submitted directly by one of the two parties to the commune-level People's Committees (instead of submitting to the Provincial/Municipal authorities). After receiving the full and valid documents, the Commune-level People's Committee shall have to verify the application and seek comments from their Provincial Department of Justice and process the marriage registration after getting the approval from the Department of Justice for the application. In implementing the Decree No. 24/2013/ND-CP, commune authorities in the border areas have received and processed the application for the marriages involving foreign elements. Nonetheless, due to the lack of training provided for commune judicial cadres, the state management for the marriages involving foreign elements is still facing a number of shortcomings. Thus, in practice, the procedures and process for marriage involving foreign element registration still present certain obstacles.

No marriage registration will affect many of Vietnamese brides' rights and benefits, of which, the most important is the right to naturalization. The right to a nationality is a crucial means to ensure that cross-border brides have equal access to social services in the receiving countries and enjoy other economic and political interests such as divorce, land use right, right to vote, right to candidature, right to participating in community activities such as meetings, or joining in mass organizations. In fact, the policy of the Chinese (Mainland) Government is relatively strict in issuing birth certificates and household registration if the

brides are imported into China illegally. Those brides shall be subjected to illegal marriages. Thus, so far, most of the Vietnamese women who have married to Chinese men have no Chinese citizenship. They have become a marginalized group in Chinese society (Tuong Duc Thuy 2012). On the other hands, even if they are registered into their in-laws' household certificates, Vietnam's cross-border brides are also not easy to return their home countries to visit their families, let alone the brides who have no marriage certificate or Chinese citizenship who are living in a fear of being detected and often try to stay away from people. The results of the analysis of the colleration between two variables – marriage registration and the level of family contact of Vietnam's cross-border brides, expose that those who have registered their cross-border marriages have a high level of monthly/regular contacting/meeting with their families (24.0%) compared to the ungresitered groups (9.5%).

The Table 4 below presents the results of the analysis of the factors influencing the marriage registration among Vietnam's cross-border brides. The figures indicate that there is no significant difference in the probability of making marriage registration between the groups of in- and out-ethnicity brides; the brides married at the prescribed age or under age, the brides who are voluntary or forced/trafficked to get married. The brides who are factory workers or traders have registered their cross-border marriage with the competent authorities 21.4 times higher than the brides who do manual work.

<b>Independent variable</b>		<b>OR (95%CI)</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>Vietnamese bride's job</b>	Unskilled worker	1	157
	Housewife (doing housework)	2.2	13
	Worker/trader	21.4***	12
<b>In-ethnicity marriage</b>	No	1	51
	Yes	0.7	131
<b>Martial circumstance</b>	Arranged/referred marriage	1	45
	Trafficked/abducted marriage	0.8	15
	Voluntary marriage	0.7	122
<b>Having time spent on learning each other before marriage</b>	No	1	47
	Yes	0.5	135
<b>Marriage at the prescribed age</b>	No	1	26
	Yes	1.8	156
<b>Language proficiency at receiving places</b>	No	1	15
	Yes	6.2	167

[Table 4: Multivariable Llogistic Regression Model of the Factors Influencing the Marriage Registration Probability of Vietnam's Cross-border Brides]

#### 4. Conclusion

In general, cross-border marriage is a social phenomenon, which has been existing across the border areas of Viet Nam. The situation is the inevitable consequence of sustaining cross-border kinship relations, economic exchanges as well as cross-border human trafficking. It is noted that most of the cross-border marriages have not been legalized as prescribed in both Vietnam's and China's marriage and family legislations. Lack of understandings of legal regulations, procedures for marriage registration, right



awareness of the importance of marriage registration, etc. are the main reasons for illegal cross-border marriages. Cross-border marriage is also associated with early marriage, trafficking of girls and women due to weak supervision of local governments and families. A number of Vietnam's cross-border brides, especially those who are not fluent at the languages of receiving places, are getting troubles with integrating into their in-laws and the communities in receiving places.

In the trend of globalization and international economic integration, cross-border marriage is inevitable. Hence, feasible interventions and supportive measures to minimize the risks that Vietnamese brides may face during their process of integrating into the communities of destination will attribute to forming equal, happy and sustainable marriages. Adopted from the results of the analysis above, following recommendations have been developed for dealing with the barriers faced by Vietnamese cross-border brides:

Strengthening communication about and legal aids for the people engaging in cross-border marriages in particular and the ethnic minorities in general to help them improve their understanding of the importance for marriage registration and of the procedures and process for registering the marriages involving foreign elements with the competent authorities.

Promoting the effective implementation of marriage registration involving foreign elements at the grassroots (commune) level through providing training for the responsible cadres at the grassroots level to equip them enough qualifications and skills to handle marriage registration procedures for cross-border marriages.

Paying a special attention to diplomatic and cooperation activities between the Government of Viet Nam and the Governments of the neighbour Countries in dealing with the issues of cross-border marriages (the situation of no marriage registration, violence against women, etc.) to stabilize the lives of the people engaging in cross-border marriages and to manage those population groups effectively.

Bringing into play the role of families in orienting marriage for adolescents and youths in ethnic minority areas to reduce early marriage and in providing them with the skills to cope with human trafficking and abduction.

The Paper has initially identified the fundamental characteristics of cross-border marriage between Vietnamese brides and the grooms of neighbour countries. However, the information and data collected for this Paper is from the family members of Vietnamese cross-border brides, which have not fully reflected the accurate picture of Vietnamese cross-border brides' situation in receiving places (China). Hence, further research on this topic is highly recommended.

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