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JOO CHIAT 'WORKING GIRLS' GIVE MY PEOPLE A BAD NAME

It makes her angry when some of her countrymen give Vietnamese brides a bad name.

Ms. Pham Thi Hong Truc, 20, has been in Singapore for three months, after finding her husband through a matchmaking agency, Mr. Cupid International Matchmakers.

Ms. Pham said she heard from friends and relatives about the "working girls" in Joo Chiat.

She told The New Paper in Mandarin: "When I was preparing to come to Singapore, I was worried about how people might look at me - would they think I'm a working girl?"

"I didn't want to be mistaken for a prostitute and be treated differently just because I'm Vietnamese."

Thankfully, her worries were unfounded.

She lives in a quiet three-room HDB flat with her husband, 37, a renovation contractor who earns \$2,000 a month, his elderly mother and his sister.

No one has passed any nasty remarks, she said.

If anything, neighbours thought she was Thai because of her darker complexion.

Ms. Pham said, with a laugh: "When I first arrived, I was so tanned people thought I was Thai.

"Now, I'm fairer, probably because I don't go out in the sun as often as I did when I was back home."

Ms. Pham, who also speaks Vietnamese and is learning English, is the youngest of six siblings. She comes from Hau Giang province, a six-hour drive from Ho Chi Minh City.

Her two elder sisters are married to Taiwanese men, but she was encouraged to marry a Singaporean by a cousin, who also married one.

They chose to marry a foreigner because she didn't want to marry a Vietnamese man who might "beat me up when he's drunk".

As Ms. Pham and her relatives joined matchmaking agencies which took prospective grooms to Vietnam to select brides, they didn't have to save to get married or pay the agencies.

Her husband paid \$11,000 to the agency.

Ms. Pham, who has applied for PR, has not met many matchmade brides like herself, much less ventured into Joo Chiat, as she is still new to the country.

She recalled how stringent the immigration authorities were when she first landed here.

Ms. Pham said: "The airport officers asked me a lot of questions about my purpose here, whether I was here as a tourist or here to work.

"I told them I was here as a bride.

"Perhaps they thought I was related to the girl who died earlier this year because our names are very similar."

She was referring to Ms. Pham Thi Truc Linh, who fell to her death from a block of flats in Toa Payoh in March.

While Ms. Pham wants to distance herself from the "working girls", she is quick to jump to their defence.

She said: "Not every one wants to be in that line - some are forced by circumstances.

"I am sure they have their reasons for doing what they do.

"As long as my husband and family know that I'm not like them, I'm happy."

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