

AWARE believes some foreign brides mum on spousal abuse

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Indonesian Riana Agustina had stayed at a shelter for abused wives before she was found murdered in her Bukit Merah flat.

Her husband has been charged with her murder.

She was among a growing number of foreign brides in Singapore who have complained of spousal abuse here.

Women's group AWARE has already seen 17 cases this year but it believes many more foreign brides are keeping such abuse to themselves.

Little did Riana imagine when she came to Singapore as a foreign bride 10 years ago that her life would end that way.

Riana's counsellor said Riana had complained of being subjected to months of spousal violence, including slapping, punching and continual emotional harassment.

It got so bad that her counsellor at the Tanjong Pagar Family Centre brought 26-year-old Riana to a family shelter in April this year.

The counsellor does not know why Riana returned home that fateful day in October.

"Family violence is actually a combination of a lot of factors. To prevent it, the couple themselves, or the family themselves, must have a solid source of support," said Peng Hai Ying, a social worker at the Tanjong Pagar Family Centre.

But support is often hard to come by for foreign brides.

Many are from developing countries, they have few friends, and even fewer, if any, immediate family members here.

And many do not speak the local language well.

Surveys have shown that women suffering from spousal abuse tend to turn to their family members, but not their in-laws, for help, before they approach welfare organisations.

While this is possible for local women, most foreign brides do not enjoy the same support system as their family members often remain in their home country.

Associate Professor Paulin Tay Straughan, deputy head of Sociology at the NUS, said: "We think that these women are here to exploit our men, they're just here to take their money and run off.

"You could have a few cases like this, but on the other hand you also have women who feel this is the best chance for them to get out of a poverty cycle and help their families back home.

"If you think about it, if anyone had a choice, why would you want to marry in this manner, why would you rob yourself of a marriage that is based on romance, mutual respect and love.

"During courtship, you iron out all your problems but because the luxury of courtship is absent in these cases, then what happens is that it exaggerates the communication gap.

"I certainly won't be surprised that there is a lot more tension in these marriages."

AWARE says it is getting more calls for help from foreign brides - at least two calls are from new cases every month.

It believes the figure would be higher, if the foreign women know where to seek help and if

they are less culturally constrained.

Said Saleemah Ismail, Vice President of National Committee for UNIFEM, Singapore: "Asia as a whole, there is a culture of silence and an unwillingness to report domestic violence.

"In countries like Cambodia, domestic violence is considered a crime only if the woman is stabbed, shot, unconscious or dead.

"So if you have a Singaporean man marrying someone from Cambodia, she is not likely to report violence inflicted on her.

"Very often, you get the mother-in-laws, the mothers, the girl's family as well who are against having the girl reporting the family violence."

And emotional violence is said to be more rampant than physical violence.

President of AWARE, Braema Mathi, said: "It is very easy to threaten a foreign wife to say that 'if you don't do certain things, I'm sorry I am not going to put in your application for permanent residency, I'll send you home', that is a huge fear factor.

"I think we should start treating our foreign women who have married our Singaporean men on a more equal footing.

"We should give them a higher starting point of being made as soon as possible permanent residents and then the citizenship."

Studies show one in three women is a victim of violence by someone known to them.

International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women falls on 25 November this year but for some women, such a day may come too late.