

23 fake Batam brides in vice scam

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S'porean accused of 'marrying' them so they can work here as prostitutes
IT WAS marriage in name only.

Forty-two-year-old Singaporean widower Seman (not his real name) allegedly 'married' at least 23 women from the Indonesian island Batam - so they could use the marriage certificates to stay longer in Singapore and work as prostitutes or karaoke lounge hostesses. Now his game is up.

Acting on a tip-off, Batam police raided his house at Happy Garden, near the entertainment centre of Nagoya, and confiscated 14 marriage certificates, believed to be fakes.

In police custody since Oct 5, Seman is believed to be part of a trafficking syndicate headed by two Singaporeans and a Batam man.

He cannot be identified as he has yet to be charged in court. He is accused of using fake documents and could be jailed up to eight years if found guilty.

As a 'husband', his duty was to accompany each woman to the HarbourFront or Tanah Merah Ferry Terminal checkpoint and present the 'marriage documents' to prove she was his 'wife'.

Once the couple got past the checks, the woman would be handed over to a Papi Ayam (pimp in Bahasa Indonesia) here. And Seman would be paid \$100.

But only seven of the 23 women were successfully 'exported' between January and March this year, Seman told Malay newspaper Berita Minggu. The rest were sent home. 'I suspect they might have previous criminal records for trying to enter Singapore illegally or for prostitution,' said Seman, whose wife died a decade ago.

He claimed the women came willingly and said he did not know what happened to them after they entered Singapore.

Marriage to a Singapore citizen does not automatically qualify a foreigner for long-term stay here, or for permanent resident status or citizenship.

Officers would have to assess the husband's ability to support the family, documentary evidence of present and past employment and income, and whether the marriage is legal, among other things.

Sergeant Theohardi, a Batam criminal investigations department officer, told The Straits Times yesterday that there could be other syndicates bringing women illegally from Batam to Singapore.

Last month, two Singaporean women were sentenced here for 'escorting' Batam prostitutes here by pretending to be their relatives.

One of them, 36-year-old Hamida Abdullah, was jailed for three months after she admitted taking \$300 from a Batam-based vice syndicate to be an 'escort'.

Marriages between Batam women and foreign men are common and bogus marriage certificates can be obtained easily, said Mr Husaini Tarmizi, an outreach officer at a Batam non-governmental organisation, Partnership for Health and Humanitarian Foundation.

He believed that many women married Singapore men willingly in the quest for a better life.

'However, there could be some who were not aware they would have to be sex workers in Singapore.'

But Batam social worker Martje-Rogi believes that most of these women, who could be prostitutes in Batam or maids sent back by employers, joined the business with their eyes wide open.

'The sex trade in Batam is very competitive. The women might be considered too old and could not find clients so they did not mind venturing to Singapore,' she said.

Ms Saleemah Ismail, vice-president of Unifem Singapore, the local branch of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (Unifem), said she knew of Batam prostitutes who borrowed cash from syndicates at high interest rates to enter Singapore to ply the vice trade here.

Ms Saleemah said: 'The money here is definitely more lucrative than in Batam.'