

# Poor state of stateless children

Theresa Tan

## Kids in citizenship limbo face a multitude of problems from schooling to financial woes

This is the story of Nadiah, a 29-year-old unwed mother of five children aged eight, seven, six, four and three years old.

Her first two children are Singapore citizens, because she was a citizen when they were born.

But the three youngest have no nationality because she was declared stateless before she gave birth to them.

All five children have the same father, a 43-year-old Singaporean man. He is a dishwasher earning about \$1,000 a month.

Nadiah has O-level qualifications and stays at home minding her children. She declined to explain why she never married her partner, saying they had “too many problems”, such as making ends meet.

He is a Singaporean, but that does not help their three youngest children, because according to the law, it is the mother’s citizenship that matters when a child is born out of wedlock.

Social workers trying to help the family say they have come up against hurdles repeatedly and everything leads back to the citizenship limbo that Nadiah and her three youngest children are in:

- The three children are not in kindergarten. Nadiah says she cannot afford it because, as non-citizens, they are not entitled to subsidies and the fees would be too much.

- They might not go to primary school. She cannot afford to pay their school fees as they will be charged the rate for foreigners – up to \$500 a month for primary school, said social workers.

- To stay in Singapore, Nadiah and the three children must renew special passes issued by the Immigration & Checkpoints Authority (ICA) every month.

Nadiah claims her citizenship mess stems from the fact that she did not take the Oath of Renunciation, Allegiance and Loyalty.

Certain individuals, such as those with dual citizenship and those born overseas to Singaporean parents, have to take this oath within a year of turning 21 or they lose their citizenship automatically, said the ICA.

Nadiah had to take this oath because she was adopted from another country by a Singaporean couple.

She declined to say more about her adoptive parents, but The Sunday Times understands she found out she was adopted only when she had to deal with her citizenship problems.

She told The Sunday Times: “I ignored taking the oath as I didn’t know about its importance and I had lots of family problems to deal with.”

Once she was declared stateless,

her three youngest children ended up in the same boat.

Under the Singapore Constitution, a child born here is automatically a Singapore citizen only if his

parents are married and at least one parent is a Singaporean.

If a child is born out of wedlock, the mother must be a Singaporean at the time of birth for her child to

be a Singaporean. If an unwed mother is stateless, her child will be stateless too, an ICA spokesman told The Sunday Times.

The number of such stateless

children is believed to be small, comprising mainly children like Nadiah’s – born to Singaporean fathers and stateless mothers who are not married, say social workers.

Last year, a Parliamentary reply revealed that 500 to 600 stateless people applied for Singapore citizenship annually between 2003 and 2012. Nine in 10 were successful.

The ICA spokesman said the bulk of those applications were from minors born overseas to Singaporean parents.

But stateless children like Nadiah’s face a multitude of problems – from being unable to afford school to finding it hard to get a job when they grow up. Their own children could end up stateless too, said Mr Benedict Kuah, an assistant director at the Singapore Children’s Society.

A social worker at Kampong Kapor Family Service Centre, Ms Lee Yean Wun, said she knows of parents who have pulled their children out of school when the schools press them for payment and they cannot pay.

Being stateless, the children also do not qualify for financial and other help schemes that poor Singaporeans have access to.

Social workers hope the authorities would make it easier for stateless children to obtain Singapore citizenship, which would solve many of their problems.

For Nadiah, her citizenship woes are piled atop a heap of other problems.

The family has been homeless since her partner sold his flat when he could not cope with payment arrears. They have moved five or six times in the past two years and are now putting up in a friend’s flat.

Her situation came to light when she failed to register her eldest son for primary school in the midst of moving from place to place. Social workers from the Singapore Children’s Society came checking on children not registered for primary school as required under the Compulsory Education Act.

Now, the two oldest are both in Primary 1 and receive financial aid, free textbooks and uniforms, among other help. The family also receives food rations from a family service centre.

The three youngest children are at home. Occasionally, she teaches them their A,B,Cs.

Nadiah is now trying to apply for citizenship for herself and her children. Her Children’s Society social worker Lee Poh Leng said Nadiah has been advised by the ICA to apply for a long-term visit pass first, before applying for permanent residency and citizenship.

Said Nadiah: “I hope to get my citizenship back and the main thing is to let my children go to school.”

