A LAW professor has urged Singapore to sign an international convention aimed at protecting children caught in cross-border parental abduction tussles.

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A LAW professor has urged Singapore to sign an international convention aimed at protecting children caught in cross-border parental abduction tussles.

The move will expedite the process of returning to their home country, children who were spirited away to another country by one parent.

The accord - known as the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction (HCCAICA) - has 79 signatory countries. There have been calls over the years for Singapore to sign the pact.

The latest call came from Associate Professor Debbie Ong from the National University of Singapore's law faculty.

She studied 26 cases of reported parental abductions of children from or to Singapore that occurred over the last five years.

She noted that 16 of the cases do not show the child was returned to the country from which he or she was removed.

Prof Ong, writing in the latest issue of the Law Gazette, noted that outbound cases (22) outnumbered inbound cases (four).

She said that, due to Singapore's small size and relative social interconnectedness, there was 'less room to hide a child here'.

'If Singapore accedes to the Convention, parents resident in Singapore stand to benefit much from it since there are likely to be more outbound abductions than inbound ones,' said Prof Ong.

In her research at the Family Registry here was the case of a father serving a prison term in 2000. The mother took the child out of Singapore, and although the father sought court action to vary the custody order, the mother could not be located.

Separately, in a 2003 're-abduction' case, a father returned from Britain to find the mother and two children had left for Taiwan. More than four months later, he tracked them to Shanghai and got the children back to Singapore.

In another 're-abduction' case, the daughter of a Filipino mother was taken to China in 2001 by the father. The mother searched for her there, and through a third party, brought the girl back four years later.

Prof Ong pointed out that, currently, self-help seems to be the alternative and she cited two cases where the parent who was left behind had to spend time, effort and money to get the child back.

'Hiring an investigator to track down a child 'is usually far too costly', she said.

'The state's assistance can be guaranteed only by international treaties such as the Hague Convention,' she said.
Prof Ong also noted that nine of the 26 abduction cases involved China, Vietnam and Indonesia - all non-signatories.

Law Society president Philip Jeyaretnam, in his message in the same issue of the Law Gazette, cited cross-border parental abduction as one area 'where the Bar may urge reform because of its own special perspective'.

'In the end, children, among the most vulnerable in society, demand and deserve the highest protection the law can give them.'

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