

The Miserable Lives of Mail-order Brides

by Shay Cullen

The 'mail-order bride' industry is a cold and callous trade. If you are in any doubt about that, you need only click on the Internet and wonder at the name of one particular service offering 'marriage-minded Filipinos' the "Mail Order Bride Warehouse." Heartless businesses such as this have been occupying human rights campaigners for decades, but progress against their activities has been limited. In fact, their trade is booming.

Every year, tens of thousands of young girls and women are packed off to the West under the pretence that they will be entering into a rewarding marriage and a new life of prosperity. Nowadays a huge number come not just from South East Asia but also from Russia and Eastern European countries. Often, the women are trapped in actual or virtual slavery, or in rings of prostitution.

Some 50,000 women are lured to the United States alone every year, but 90 percent of the 35,000 trafficked women who leave the Philippines each year go to Japan. "There they find themselves sold on as brides or as 'entertainers,' or as victims of the "Vaginal Economy," in the sad words of one women's rights campaigner in Manila.

Many trafficked women, and even girls, are indeed victims of fraud and fake marriages through the mail-order bride system. They end up in loveless marriages, in forced prostitution and repressive labour. Others are almost enslaved by uncaring husbands who deprive them of personal freedom, money and civil rights, and use them as sex objects.

Of course there are many legitimate marriage agencies. There are traditions of arranged marriages between families, and 'match-making'—a long honoured custom in many societies—that cannot be regarded as trafficking.

However, the marrying off of children aged between 12 and 16 to older adult men for a dowry, as happens in parts of Africa and the Middle East, is another matter. Some may see this as legitimate, but in reality, it is a form of sexual exploitation of children.

But there are many thousands of normal encounters between western men and women from poor developing countries that result in good, happy marriages. What concerns campaigners and authorities worldwide is the growing practice of treating young women as commodities to be bought and sold in a web of exploitation and enslavement.

In Japan, Thai or Filipino brides are married to farmers and lead lives of boredom, docility and dependency, devoid of meaningful communication. Fewer than 10 percent learn fluent Japanese.

In Australia, several Filipino women have been brutally assaulted or murdered in remote sheep stations where they were brought in as wives. Despite the horror stories, the casual visitor to the Australian Embassy in Manila still sees queues of beer-bellied husbands-to-be in their 60s with their prospective brides applying for a spousal visa. "It won't happen to me," the women think, and they are usually right. The violent deaths and spousal abuse may be rare, but the long servitude to a loveless marriage is almost certainly something that will be happening to them.

Young women are frequently duped into believing that by marrying a foreigner, they will be rich and thus escape grinding poverty and unemployment. They do it to help their families, but it seldom works out as hoped.

For many, it is a form of modern-day slavery, replacing the 'bonded servitude' of the past. "The person may enter into an agreement with the

recruiting agent on an apparently voluntary basis but conditions at the destination point are likely to involve coercion, including physical abuse, restrictions on freedom of movement, abuse and violence, and fraud," says a recent 128-page study from the International Labour Organisation.

In the early 1990s, as many as 5,000 bogus marriages were being arranged in The Netherlands annually. Following media exposure of mail-order bride traffic, authorities stopped the practice.

"The men there (in Europe) think we Filipinos are docile and submissive and that they can treat us like domestic servants, but they are wrong, we know our rights and dignity," said Josie, a former mail-order bride who divorced an abusive husband she met through the Internet.

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