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# IN THE NAME OF “LOVE”: MAIL ORDER BRIDES – THE DANGEROUS LEGITIMIZATION OF SEX, HUMAN & LABOR TRAFFICKING

*by* RACHELLE SICO

**T**he age-old concept of the mail order bride hinges on the fantasy of a handsome western man playing savior to a beautifully exotic Asian woman by lifting her out of a world of poverty and destitution.<sup>1</sup> However, cultural, social, economic, and legal issues lay the foundation for an industry that merges sex and labor trafficking across the globe. The stereotypical Filipina

mail order bride is portrayed as a young and obedient woman who connects with a Caucasian man through an online international marriage brokerage (IMB) firm that facilitates the process of establishing a “pen-pal” relationship for a year, which guides the men towards processing the marriage legally.<sup>2</sup> These men are hardly the virtuous, romantic, knights-in-shining-armor shown in Western films and projected across the world.<sup>3</sup>

These relationships do not live up to the fantasy. Mail order brides are often subject to physical and sexual abuse once they arrive in the U.S., which they are especially vulnerable to due to their immigrant status.<sup>4</sup> This common occurrence contributed to the re-authorization of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA 2013), which will increase protections and resources for immigrant women subjected to the adverse effects of these marriages.<sup>5</sup>

#### CASE STUDIES: IMMIGRANT BRIDES

Control, abuse, and exploitation are industry standards in the mail order bride business, and are clearly demonstrated through the case studies of two Filipino mail order brides. Emelita Reeves was a Filipina woman from the town of Cebu who connected with her husband, Jack Reeves, through an IMB called Cherry Blossoms.<sup>6</sup> She left her home in the Philippines when she was just 18 years old to marry Reeves, a retired U.S. Army Officer thirty years her senior.<sup>7</sup> She became pregnant after marrying him, but Reeves was convinced the child was not his.<sup>8</sup> The day before she was going to leave him, she mysteriously went missing and her body was later found near Lake Whitney.<sup>9</sup> Emelita was his fourth wife, and his previous two wives; also mail order brides, both died allegedly from accidental and suicidal causes, respectively.<sup>10</sup> Reeves was later convicted for the murder of Emelita and his third wife.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the horrifying risks of physical and sexual abuse that mail order brides face, the hope for a better life in America still encourages families to participate. “Male” brides are not often discussed and are not considered a commercial commodity like Filipina brides, but they deal with similar experiences as their female counterparts. Ray was 21 years old and living in the Philippine province of Cavite when his family encouraged him to marry the Filipina American daughter of a family friend in California.<sup>12</sup>

Seeking greener pastures, Ray left his eight brothers and sisters to come to America and marry a virtual stranger.<sup>13</sup> He lived with his Filipina American wife for a total of eight years and they had a daughter.<sup>14</sup> He obtained permanent resident status from this marriage and obtained a position with the U.S. Navy that expedited his citizenship process.<sup>15</sup> His relationship with his wife and her family deteriorated after he received multiple promotions and his new family commanded that he sign over his paychecks to pay for their expenses.<sup>16</sup> They claimed he was indebted to them for life because he was just a "piece of trash that they picked up from the Philippines."<sup>17</sup> In the middle of the night, he woke up with a gun to his head and his wife standing over him.<sup>18</sup> She threatened to kill him because she was convinced he was cheating on her in addition to not providing her with his entire paycheck.<sup>19</sup> The next day, he tried to access his joint bank account and found it completely empty.<sup>20</sup> He did not have a penny to his name, and when he tried to return home, he found his wife and daughter gone and the locks changed on all of the doors.<sup>21</sup>

#### PROSTITUTION, HUMAN TRADE, OR THE ONLY VIABLE WAY OUT OF DESTITUTION?

These Filipino men and women are essentially sold as commodities in transactions that are legitimized through the recognition of the legal binding of marriage. Millions participate in variations of this transaction despite the risks. Filipina women are at a high risk for exploitation because thousands leave to work legitimate jobs and enter into legal marriages, only to be forced into some form of prostitution.<sup>22</sup> Now, with advances in technology, human trafficking organizations are able to effectively mobilize because of the Internet.<sup>23</sup> On their websites, the IMBs project the stereotypical image of a Filipino woman being sweet, submissive, traditional, virginal, Christian, and familiar with the English language in their ads, making them the most popular ethnic group for mail order brides in the world.<sup>24</sup>

However, the mail order bride industry is a unique form of exploitation because it attempts to legitimize human trafficking through the respectable guise of marriage. The inclusion of marriage is what prevents Filipino families from realizing that this process is a form of prostitution, human trafficking, or exploitation.<sup>25</sup> Emelita Reeves' father was so desperate for her to have a better life than what he could provide her in the Philippines that he placed his daughter's

ad in Cherry Blossom.<sup>26</sup> The mail order bride industry capitalizes on the destitute conditions of the poor in the Philippines.<sup>27</sup>

#### LIVING THE “AMERICAN DREAM”

Once these individuals are transported to the U.S., they are subject to the will and control of their consumer spouse. Filipino women and men are vulnerable to abuse because the situation places them at a great disadvantage.<sup>28</sup> Some IMBs do not even pretend to protect the mail order brides. Instead, they adopt the angle that they are “selling” subservient women that are ready to please their new husbands.<sup>29</sup> Once the transaction is complete, these consumer spouses believe that they have bought and own a person.<sup>30</sup> These individuals do not have the ability to support themselves because they lack language skills, family support, and employment opportunities to live financially independent lives in the U.S.<sup>31</sup>

Mail order brides often feel like they owe their consumer spouse everything because he saved her from a life of poverty.<sup>32</sup> An imbalance of power exists in these households, and often times this is exactly what the consumer spouse wants.<sup>33</sup> These individuals are locked into abusive situations because they are continuously threatened with deportation.<sup>34</sup> So, although statistics state that the rate of divorce is low for mail order bride marriages, the reason may be due to the lack of awareness of immigrant rights in abusive marriage.<sup>35</sup> Many endure abuse because they fear that if they retaliate they will lose their American “dream” lives and go back to a life of poverty and destitution.

#### GLOBAL ACCOUNTABILITY: U.S. LEGAL PROTECTIONS FOR IMMIGRANT BRIDES

The legal trajectory of this industry began by identifying that many brides were being subjected to involuntary servitude, which is prohibited by the 13th Amendment.<sup>36</sup> The U.S. first issued the Mail Order Bride Act.<sup>37</sup> Then, the International Marriage Broker Regulation Act (IMBRA) repealed the previous act and was enacted to stop spouses from threatening deportation while inflicting long-term physical and sexual abuse. IMBs have not been shut down because they have modified their services to fit the loophole in IMBRA, which allows Internet sites like Match.com to exist.<sup>38</sup> However, the process for get-

ting cleared to participate in these services is much more stringent for Filipina women than it is for potential consumer husbands.<sup>39</sup>

These individuals arrive in the United States through either a K-1 or K-3 visa.<sup>40</sup> They endure a two-year waiting period to switch from conditional permanent residency status to permanent resident status. The abuse typically manifests in the first two years because the consumer spouse can threaten deportation and withhold financial resources if the bride retaliates or attempts to leave.<sup>41</sup> There has been an expansion of protections for victims of violence and human trafficking, including stricter regulations of IMBs and the western men that subscribe to their services.<sup>42</sup> With the passage of VAWA 2013, this statute reauthorized federal anti-trafficking provisions and programs for the next four years.<sup>43</sup> Federal programs such as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) actively protect immigrant spouses subject to violence and abuse from this form of trafficking.<sup>44</sup> However, these laws and programs only apply within the jurisdiction of the U.S.

#### CONCLUSION

The desperation to escape poverty and political pressures greatly increases the likelihood that a Filipino individual would risk taking part of the mail order bride process. The realities do not match up with the fantasy American life many hoped to achieve for themselves and their families. Much of the abuse that these immigrants endure lies beneath the surface of a respectable and legally binding marriage, but the U.S. must work in collaboration with nations globally to closely monitor this dangerous legitimization of sex, human and labor trafficking.

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#### NOTES

1 *Bride Trafficking Unveiled* (Current TV 2010), available at [http://current.com/groups/on-current-tv/92357386\\_bride-trafficking-unveiled.htm](http://current.com/groups/on-current-tv/92357386_bride-trafficking-unveiled.htm).

2 Cain Bowes, "Male" Order Brides and International Marriage Brokers: *The Costly Industry that Facilitates Sex Trafficking, Prostitution, and Involuntary Servitude*, 18 *CARDOZO J. L. & GENDER* 1, 5 (2011); see also Lisa Ellis, *What it Costs for a Mail Order Bride*, *WHAT IT COSTS BLOG* (April 25, 2013), available at <http://outthere.whatitcosts.com/mail-order-bride-pg3.htm> (adhering to the practice of the western man visiting his chosen bride and her family in the Philippines).

and courting her briefly by showering her family with money and gifts, before he returns back to the United States and processes the paperwork so that she is able to join him).

3 *Bride Trafficking Unveiled*, *supra* note 1. (interviewing an Asian woman: “Western men are very romantic, I’ve seen in TV’s and Movies [ . . . ] Western men are honest and sincere. When a Western man has a girlfriend or a wife, he is faithful to just that one person. He doesn’t go playing around”); *see also* Filipino Kisses: An International Dating Service, (May 3, 2013), *available at* [http://www.filipinokisses.com/gallery\\_photo.php?l=en&gender=2&randm=5&randw=9](http://www.filipinokisses.com/gallery_photo.php?l=en&gender=2&randm=5&randw=9); (majority of men are Caucasian; hailing from the U.S., Australia, and the UK, and are portly, considerably older and have less than virtuous motives).

4 Bowes, *supra* note 2, at 13; *see also Id.* at 15 (intensifying the abuse is the fact that immigrants; with a conditional permanent resident status for two years, are continually being subjected to the fear of deportation, extreme isolation, lack of knowledge of viable resources for their safety, and complete unfamiliarity with the language).

5 Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013, Pub. L. No. 113-14, 127 Stat. 54 (2013); *see also* VAWA 2013 & TVPRA: What Practitioners Need to Know, ASISTA (April 25, 2013), *available at* [http://www.asistahelp.org/documents/news/Changes\\_and\\_Practice\\_Pointers\\_VAWA\\_2\\_6C6195F9009A0.pdf](http://www.asistahelp.org/documents/news/Changes_and_Practice_Pointers_VAWA_2_6C6195F9009A0.pdf).

6 *But I Own You: 2 True Crime Short Stories About Murdered Mail Order Brides*, TRUE CRIME ZINE (May 31, 2012), *available at* <http://truecrimezine.com/murdered-mail-order-brides/> (posting Emelita’s name and picture as an advertisement was her father’s idea).

7 *Man Is Convicted, Again, of Killing Wife*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (August 20, 1996), *available at* <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/08/20/us/man-is-convicted-again-of-killing-a-wife.html>.

8 TRUE CRIME ZINE, *supra* note 9 (in addition to inflicting physical and sexual abuse upon her, he sent her back to the Philippines only to bring her back two years later).

9 THE NEW YORK TIMES, *supra* note 11 (later her body was found near Lake Whitney, with enough evidence to place Reeves in the area).

10 *Id.*

11 TRUE CRIME ZINE, *supra* note 9, (explaining that his second wife, Korean-born Myong Chong died by accidentally drowning in Lake Whitney and his third wife, Sharon Reeves had committed suicide).

12 Telephone Interview by Rachelle Sico with Ray\*, Filipino Immigrant (April 25, 2013) (name withheld for privacy and Ray was an engineering student and activist against the Marcos dictator regime, at the height of Marshall Law).

13 *Id.*

14 *Id.*

15 *Id.* (obtaining his citizenship enabled him to bring his entire family over from the Philippines to the US within a span of five years)

16 *Id.*

17 *Id.*

18 *Id.*

19 *Id.*

20 *Id.*

21 *Id.* (happily, Ray ended up remarrying and has a loving and supportive family).

22 *Human Trafficking Syndicates Growing: Philippines*, AFP NEWS (April 25, 2013), *available at* <http://sg.news.yahoo.com/human-trafficking-syndicates-growing-philippines-075438397.html> (many Filipinos work in the health care industry in the US, or as domestic helpers in large households all across the world); *see also* INT’L LABOUR ORG., *Labour Migration*, (May 2, 2013), *available at* <http://www.ilo.org/manila/areasofwork/labour-migration/lang—en/index.htm> (annually more than 1 million Filipinos leave the Philippines to work abroad and 10 million are

currently working abroad, adhering to this process allows the Philippines to collect considerable remittances from Filipino workers across the world, which bolsters the Philippine economy).

23 *Id.*; see also Filipinokisses.com *supra* note 3 (accessing a Filipina woman's profile is as easy as adding them to their cart, thus increasing the notion that these women are products; a commodity that can be purchased and controlled); see also *What is a Good Site for Mail Order Brides?*, ASKVILLE: AMAZON (May 2, 2013), available at <http://askville.amazon.com/site-mail-order-brides/AnswerViewer.do?requestId=440956>, (posing a question on the Internet, "What is a good site for mail order brides? Do these sites warranty their product? Like if it can't cook or is bad in bed, can I return it? [ . . . ] what ethnicities or nationalities should I look for? I need: (1) Good in bed, (2) Submissive, (3) Good cooking, (4) Doesn't mind what husband looks like. Serious responses only please").

24 Filipinokisses.com, *supra* note 3.

25 Telephone Interview with Ray, *supra* note 18, (engaging in pre-marital sex is highly frowned upon and normally young men and women live with their parents until they move in with their spouses; Filipino parents encourage this process because they believe that marriage is a respectable process, rooted in love, responsibility, and legal implications.); see also Central Intelligence Agency, *World Fact Book: Philippines* (May 3, 2013), available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rp.html> (encourages strict adherence to Catholicism, the dominant religion, which is influential in Filipino government and culture).

26 TRUE CRIME ZINE, *supra* note 9.

27 Telephone Interview with Ray, *supra* note 18 (government corruption is rampant and there is little to no chance for upward mobility; there are enormous expectations on the young to provide money for their entire family and the fantasy of establishing an emotional and physical connection with a western individual; who is affluent and could provide entry into the US, is a legitimate hope).

28 Bowes, *supra* note 2 at 12.

29 Olga Grosh, *Foreign Wives, Domestic Violence: U.S. Law Stigmatizes and Fails to Protect "Mail- Order Brides*, 22 HASTINGS WOMEN'S L.J. 81, 88 (2011).

30 *Id.* at 85, 88 (engaging themselves in the process of visiting the immigrant bride in her home country and then the IMB facilitates the process to obtain the required visa to allow the woman to enter the U.S.); see also Bowes, *supra* note 2 at 16.

31 Bowes, *supra* note 2 at 19.

32 *Id.*

33 *Id.* (testifying about his foreign bride: " She is spoiling me, though, with all of the attention I get, all of my nails manicured, gives me a shower daily, body massage nightly, shines my shoes . . . . She is well worth the price of your catalog"); see *Id.* at 14; see also Marcia Zug, *The Latest Victim of GOP Intransigence? Mail Order Brides*, THE NEW REPUBLIC (May 17, 2012) available at <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/politics/103338/vawa-brides-violence-women-adams#> (commonly many individuals deal with abuse, forced labor, coercion, and rape within their own homes, inflicted by a person that they are legally married to; it isn't long before these women realize that their new consumer spouse has sexually perverted tendencies, are physically and verbally abusive, or have a controlling nature where they limit their spouse's ability to do anything on their own).

34 Bowes, *supra* note 2 at 20.

35 *International Dating Services- Men Can Find Love and Companionship*, IMMIGRATION SERVICES BLOG (April 9, 2013) <http://www.immigrationpac.org/tag/national-divorce-rate>.

36 Bowes, *supra* note 2 at 13; see also U.S. CONST. amend. XIII, § 1, (stating, "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction").

37 Mail Order Bride Act, Pub. L. 109-162 § 1375 (repealed 2006).

38 International Marriage Broker Regulation Act of 2005, Pub. L. 109-162 § 1375, Subtitle D of Title VIII (Sec.831-834) (regulating IMBs by prohibiting underage marketing and doing extensive background searches of the consumer husband and sharing that knowledge with the bride before obtaining her consent); *see also* Bowes, *supra* note 2 at 10; Filipinokisses.com, *supra* note 3 (seemingly consensual IMB online services portray both the men and women participating in these sites. Western men are advertised on the site as well, so Filipina women have the chance to reach out to them and read their profiles); Bowes, *supra* note 2 at 6.

39 Bowes, *supra* note 2 at 5 (subjecting Filipina women to evasive personal questions, medical examinations and background checks, while conversely potential consumer husbands only have to pay a fee to sign up for the service; unless the IMB is within the jurisdiction of the U.S.).

40 U.S. CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION SERVICES, INFORMATION ON THE LEGAL RIGHTS AVAILABLE TO IMMIGRANT VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN THE UNITED STATES AND FACTS ABOUT IMMIGRATING ON A MARRIAGE- BASED VISA (April 25, 2013), *available at* <http://www.uscis.gov/USCIS/Humanitarian/Battered%20Spouse,%20Children%20&%20Parents/IMBRA%20Pamphlet%20Final%2001-07-2011%20for%20Web%20Posting.pdf> (K-1 visa requiring an individual that is a fiancée of a US citizen to (1) marry within 90 days or depart the US, (2) file an Application to Register Permanent Residence, (3) Wait 2 years as a conditional permanent resident. If individual does not marry or marries someone other than the designated fiancée, they will be in violation of the terms of the visa and can be subject to deportation or other penalties; K-3 visa requiring an individual that is a spouse of a US citizen they are allowed to enter temporarily while waiting for approval of a family-based visa petition that will garner green card status, or permanent residence).

41 Bowes, *supra* note 2 at 15.

42 Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013, Pub. L. No. 113-14, 127 Stat. 54 (2013).

43 Katherine Chon, U.S. DEP'T OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES, PRESIDENT OBAMA SIGNS THE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ACT: WHAT IT MEANS FOR VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING (March 8, 2013), *available at* <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/blog/2013/03/president-obama-signs-the-violence-against-women-act>.

44 OFFICE OF REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT, U.S. DEP'T OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES, FACT SHEET: FEDERAL EFFORTS TO ASSIST VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING (September 27, 2012), *available at* <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ortt/resource/fact-sheet-federal-efforts-to-assist-victims-of-human-trafficking> (HHS funding is provided to trafficked victims to be eligible for benefits and services provided to refugees and community action groups address the problem of trafficking within their own communities; USCIS provides relief to trafficked victims through the T Visa, which allows victims to remain in US for up to four years, and the U Visa, which provides immigration protection to trafficked victims who have suffered from mental or physical abuse from a criminal act; and ICE actively investigates cases of trafficking and provides Continued Presence (CP) that grants relief for victims of trafficking that could be potential witnesses).