Conference Report

Cyber trafficking and Mail-order Brides

VIDC Panel discussion as part of the conference “Joining Forces against Human Trafficking” organized by the Task Force on Combating Human Trafficking (established by the Austrian Federal Government; coordinated by the Federal Ministry of European and International Affairs) on the occasion of the EU-Anti-Trafficking Day.

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Dear ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues, I would like to welcome you to the afternoon panel discussion. My name is Nadja Schuster and I am working with the VIDC – the Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation. We are very pleased that we have been invited by the Task Force on Combating Human Trafficking to cooperate for the organization and conceptualization of this conference because we believe that a close cooperation among different stakeholders as well as an interdisciplinary approach are critical for combating human trafficking in its complexity and multi-dimensionality. The VIDC is also member of the Regional Research Network, which was established some months ago by Helga Konrad and the University of Krems as well as of the Regional Implementation Initiative that aims to improve transnational cooperation and analyze bad and good practices.

The topic of our panel discussion is cyber trafficking and mail-order brides. A very warm welcome to the distinguished experts Athanassia Sykiotou and Yulia Zabyelina who will examine the link between cybercrime and human trafficking and analyze the phenomena of the mail-order bride industry.

With regard to the 4p approach for combating trafficking in human beings, the VIDC is predominantly dealing with the first p that stands for prevention.

What do we mean by prevention? In our understanding prevention encompasses sensitization and education measures, the creation of alternative income-generating activities in the countries of origin as well as addressing the demand side in countries of destination.
Furthermore, prevention should also include policies and legislative measures promoting social inclusion and anti-discrimination. For the elaboration and implementation of these measures, trainings, awareness raising activities and knowledge-sharing mechanisms for all actors involved are necessary in order to make duty-bearers aware of their obligations and victims of their rights. Related to the latter, GRETA, the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings of the Council of Europe (CoE), recommends that victims should be involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation of mechanisms.

In addition, the VIDC is interested in exploring new developments and trends such as human trafficking in cyberspace and is dealing with the investigation of the root causes of human trafficking such as socio-economic inequality between countries of destination and of origin, the international division of labor, the feminization of poverty and gender-inequality.

When elaborating anti-trafficking measures, we have to take both into account: the pull-factors in industrialized countries and the push-factors in the countries of origin. Concerning the mail-order brides we have to ask what makes women offer themselves as “brides”.

Trafficking in human being is a severe transnational human rights violation. Having said this, we should recognize the rights of victims and ensure their protection. In this sense anti-trafficking laws should strengthen the role of the victims and not penalize them or increase their vulnerability.

Although human trafficking for labor exploitation and the percentage of male victims is on the rise, the majority of the victims are women, young girls and children, who are trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Trafficking in women is a form of structural violence against women.
Last year the VIDC organized a panel discussion on “sex trafficking” from Nigeria to Austria and one of the main results was that the society structure, cultural and religious aspects are also crucial when trying to understand why a particular region is more affected than another with similar poverty levels.

In order to analyze the root causes, human trafficking has to be seen in a global context recognizing the fact that it is closely interlinked with dependence and power relationships.

Moreover, it is imperative to address human trafficking as a phenomenon that is interrelated with migration, which is manifested as an intersection of economic, social and political developments determined by gender, ethnicity and class inequality.

Restrictive immigration and asylum laws will not prevent people from crossing borders; on the contrary, it will rather promote human trafficking by enhancing the power of exploiters. The role of migrant workers from the South or the East is generally seen by filling labor shortages in the EU, mostly in the health and cleaning sector but also in domestic services. In this perspective, women are not only seen as compliant and cheap workers but they also “serve” for the entertainment and regeneration of men.

As regards pre-ordered “wives”, they are often engaged in the care economy as housewives, child care givers and private caretakers, leaving behind their own families.

Misleadingly migrants are associated with an emancipation deficit. They represent traditional society structures and femininity concepts. These traditional concepts are perpetuated by residence and labor rights as well as by the demand of women-specific services. However, I would like to emphasize that in this context
we have to clearly distinguish between self-perception and social perception and that I do not question the emancipatory potential of migrants or their options for action.

However, in general the opinion prevails that women from the East or the South are better in reproductive work than women from industrialized countries. This belief is accompanied and reinforced by the increase of female employment in Western countries. Experts also talk about a new labor division between women.

In the context of the mail-order bride industry, pre-arranged marriage agencies attract clients with slogans such as “feminine instead of feminist”. Women are reduced to the role of an undemanding wife and housekeeper or to the function of an exploitable and available object of men’s desire.

Therefore, as regards the elaboration and implementation of anti-trafficking measures it is indispensable to analyze human trafficking in the context of international and gender-related labor division. Thank you for your attention. Now I would like to hand-over to my colleague Alexandra Toth who will give you a first insight into cybercrime and the mail-order bride industry (MOB industry).

First insight: Alexandra Toth

Thank you Nadja, I also want to welcome you to this panel discussion. My Name is Alexandra Toth and I work for the VIDC - the Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation. As already mentioned today, the topics are cyber trafficking and mail-order brides and before we start
I would like to introduce you to these topics. The technological revolution and particularly the appearance of the Internet have increased our knowledge and the overall process of communication. These developments provide a lot of advantages for private and professional life. But when we look at the advantages we also need to observe the disadvantages and potential dangers which technological developments entail. With regard to human trafficking and referring to experts the online environment can provide an area for trafficking in human beings, a phenomenon which is called cyber trafficking.

There is no official definition of cyber trafficking. The term is used by scientific researchers and describes the connection between cybercrime and human trafficking. Cyber trafficking covers the recruitment of victims, the advertisement of victim’s services and the attraction of clients. The traffickers are using the World Wide Web by reason of various benefits, like low “business” costs, easy access to the Internet, high degree of contactability and much more. In the context of cyber trafficking the exploitation of victims occur in different forms and also new types of exploitation can arise.

Our first expert and guest Assistant Professor, Dr Athanassia Sykiotou will give us a detailed insight on this issue. We are very glad that she could come today to talk about cyber trafficking. Ms. Sykiotou will among other things explain how exactly the Internet is used by traffickers, how recruitment of potential victims work, what forms of exploitation occur in the context of cyber trafficking and how racist and sexist stereotypes are produced in this context.

To explore the broad field of cyber trafficking we have decided to take a closer look at the mail-order bride industry and its possible connections to human trafficking. We know that the mail-order bride industry is a very complex concept
where interrelations between human trafficking can exist. This industry moved from printed catalogues to cyberspace. Since then the debate of relations between trafficking in human beings and the mail-order bride industry has been raised. Our second guest and expert, Yulia Zabyelina, will analyze the field of mail-order brides and will discuss why this industry is often associated with human trafficking and what role the Internet plays in this context. We are very happy that Ms. Zabyelina is present today and will share her expertise with us.

This panel discussion will be moderated by Sibylle Hamann. Ms. Hamann is working as an author, moderator and independent journalist. Her latest publication: “Saubere Dienste”, deals with the framework conditions of female domestic workers. And before I will hand-over to Ms. Hamann, I would like to thank the Austrian Development Agency for making this panel discussion possible by their financial support and also to thank you all for coming and your interest.

Panel discussion: Sibylle Hamann

Thank you. Let me start with introducing the speakers. Yulia Zabyelina has recently started teaching as a Post-doctoral Lecturer in International Relations at the Masaryk University, the Czech Republic. She has been a Visiting Scholar at various institutions in Russia and in the United States. Her areas of expertise include various forms of transnational organized crime and illicit trafficking, corruption, economic crime and crime in failed states and conflict-torn societies. Athanassia Sykiotou is Assistant Professor in Criminological Sciences at the Faculty of Law of Democritus
University of Thrace (GR) and international consultant for different UN organizations as well as for the Council of Europe. She is an Attorney–at–law at the Supreme Court of Greece and since 2002 independent expert of the Hellenic Ministry of Justice and member of the Central Scientific Council for prisons. Ms Sykiotou has conducted different research on trafficking in human beings (THB) and cybercrime and has published several articles/books. Besides THB her main research areas are Anti-crime Policy, Criminal Justice and Justice for Children.

Let me start by asking Professor Sykiotou: What exactly is cyber trafficking?

Athanassia Sykiotou: Cyber trafficking

The topic of trafficking is huge and impossible to be discussed entirely in one conference. I will therefore try to be as concise as possible. To give you an idea of the severity of this problem, let me tell you that almost on a daily basis new trafficking forms are developing through the Internet. Currently we know more than ten, and new forms are entering the field constantly. Sexual exploitation is the most commonly known type of trafficking, but there is also trafficking for use in domestic labor, for begging, trafficking for use of children in armed conflicts, forced marriages, trafficking of mail-order brides and surrogate mothers, as well as trafficking of babies for illegal adoptions etc.

As far as cyber trafficking is concerned, 10 years ago it was only associated with child pornography and sexual exploitation. Now we know that also victims of
many other forms of trafficking, such as labor exploitation, organ trade and others, are also recruited via Internet, as well as that babies for illegal adoptions are sometime auctioned on well known sites.

Generally speaking, cyber trafficking can be defined as trafficking that uses Internet either in the recruitment of victims or in advertisement of victim services for attracting clients. Any crime that uses Internet as a part of its commitment is considered cybercrime. Here we must distinguish crimes that can be committed only in the cyberspace (such as illegal access to data) and traditional crimes that can use Internet, i.e. “real” crimes that use the Internet at some point.

It is estimated that around 70% of abusive Internet sites are completely invisible, which means that they cannot be located with traditional searching methods or they have a very short life. In order to measure the impact of Internet on the victimization of a person we need to know how many persons use the Internet, what kind of use they make of it, what is the frequency of the use, what kind of preventive measures (if any) are taken at personal and governmental level to prevent victimization and revictimization through Internet as well as if the victim (or his/her environment if the victim is e.g. a child) understands that she/he is being victimized.

Nothing has been done in the area of cyber trafficking in this regard. Traffickers are not only using chat rooms or social networking sites; they also use spam emails, as well as phishing – leading people to fake websites that look exactly like the real popular sites such as Facebook, Yahoo etc. Another very common way to recruit victims is fake advertisements for jobs or dating/marriage and modeling agencies.
Sibylle Hamann: Do the traffickers send out spam emails randomly or do they target specific groups?

Athanassia Sykiotou: Traffickers are not naive. They know very well where to hit. The Internet offers traffickers a broad audience, which is also becoming more and more targeted (for example in Facebook they can easily know your profession or your age). People are making a lot of their personal data public. Because of that, it is possible to spot vulnerabilities and facilitate recruitment. In general, Internet allows traffickers to use very little resources in the recruitment of victims and is increasingly convenient.

Sibylle Hamann: Could you describe the most vulnerable groups?

Athanassia Sykiotou: It is hard to name specific vulnerable groups. For example, children are very vulnerable. They cannot ask for help because often they do not realize they are victimized. We cannot make a typology of the usual victims. There are street children recruited in the street and pictures of them sold on pornographic sites as there are also children from a protected family environment but who are recruited in chat rooms. What can be distinguished are the methods of recruitment – victims can be recruited on the Internet and then exploited traditionally, or they can be recruited in traditional ways and exploited on the Internet or both.

Victims sometimes contribute to their own victimization by believing that nothing bad will happen to them even if they know of danger. That is especially common when looking for a job or marriage.

Sibylle Hamann: Is it possible to make a typology of customers?
Athanassia Sykiotou: There is no typology either. Customers are a different type of users compared to victims and traffickers. However, they contribute to the increase of the phenomenon. A problem area when it comes to customers is that their behaviour does not always appear illegal at first sight and sometimes the customer himself/herself cannot tell the difference. For instance, if someone visits a site offering sexual services of children, this person should know that this is illegal and be pursued. But when visiting sites offering sexual services of adults, it is quasi impossible to know if these persons are forced to offer such services - which makes them victims of trafficking.

Sibylle Hamann: To touch the legal side, what can be done to address the problem? Are the existing conventions and laws enough?

Athanassia Sykiotou: There has been very little done so far. There is no official definition of cyber trafficking, because there are no texts relating cybercrime with trafficking. The only text at supranational level that makes reference to trafficking through its form of child pornography is the Council of Europe Convention on Cyber Crime (CETS No 185) that does not give any definition on cyber trafficking. We need to really understand that there are problems on multiple levels: the governmental level, the level of law enforcement and the judiciary.

In 2010, states at the level of UN attempted to draft an international convention. The attempt failed, because the USA, Russia and China could not reach an agreement with the EU. The reason for that can be sought in the fact that around 55% of the sites connected to cyber trafficking are located in the USA; 28% of them are located in Russia and 8% in Asia. The nature of cyber trafficking makes it very hard to locate the traffickers.
Cyber trafficking has also changed the traditional relation between the victim and offender. Victims often do not know who the offender is, since Internet offers anonymity to offenders.

For prevention, it is necessary to raise awareness, starting from the kindergarten. We must fight against indifference. We live in selfish societies, where we do not care who lives next door. One passes every day by people who could be victims of trafficking without saying a word. We should also educate boys that they should respect girls and women and not treat them as objects.

International cooperation is crucial, especially on the level of police, as well as judicial cooperation. The private sector also needs to be involved in prevention measures. The media are contributing to this phenomenon because they may advertise fraudulent services related to trafficking. It also needs to be added that many of these deals are done through credit cards and so financial institutions need to be implicated in the fight against trafficking. It is estimated that there has been a 50% decrease in child pornography in USA after credit card companies started cooperating with law enforcement.

Systems that monitor the Internet are needed. That is of course a very difficult and sensitive issue. But let me mention the case of advertising of kidneys. It is estimated that 10% of transplantations are made through trafficking procedures. If 68,000 transplantations are done per year as indicated by official statistics, that means that 6,800 are the result of trafficking of organs.

To sum it up, the first step should be creating adequate supranational legislation, second step raising public awareness, and the third step establishing and maintaining cooperation at all levels.
Sibylle Hamman: Thank you very much. I would like to move now to Yulia Zabyelina, who will tell us more about the field of mail-order brides. Maybe you could start by giving us a definition of mail-order brides?

Yulia Zabyellina: Mail-order brides

Thank you for this opportunity and the introduction. I am going to concentrate on marriage agencies and mail-order bride industry. I will mostly focus on Eastern Europe, where I have studied this industry over the past 10 years. There are various labels that we need do explain. What is primarily known as the mail-order bride industry in the West, in the East is called marriage agencies. Regardless of how you call it, the idea of the industry is making a profit on Internet catalogues of women. Companies take photos of women and list them in the Internet. Men pay for access to the catalogue and the possibility of communicating with the women. The underlying idea is to find an appropriate wife for the paying customer.

The services offered by these companies range from selling contact information of women in the Internet and translation services to providing travel assistance to men who wish to travel to Eastern Europe to meet the women of their choice in person. Agencies also organize introduction parties, where 50-100 women and 30-40 men from abroad can meet and socialize.

How can one make a difference between a marriage agency and a dating agency? The most obvious criterion is the fact that women do not have to pay for
membership to enter a marriage agency. The agency invites women for free and even organizes a free photo session for them. Their pictures are posted online to attract men. Male customers of marriage agencies usually pay 50 € for a monthly membership. When it comes down to dating sites, what is important is that both male and female clients pay for the membership, so their investments are more equal. It is also worthy to be noted that marriage agencies in Eastern Europe are often presented as purely friendship oriented sites, aimed at providing people with casual company, and not a serious relationship.

The industry of mediated marriages is not new; it has existed for many centuries. During the 17th and 18th centuries, women from Europe were moving across the Atlantic to North America. From 1663 to 1673, King Louis XIV subsidized the travel of nearly eight hundred marriage-aged women, known as filles du roi, to Canada to marry eligible Frenchmen. At the turn of the 20th century, Japanese male immigrant workers in California and Hawaii found themselves in need of female companionship. Their remoteness from Japan made it nearly impossible to marry a Japanese woman. Catalogues of Japanese women were used to introduce women from Japan to them, having served an important role in the formation of the Japanese Diaspora in the United States. Later, the tradition of “picture brides” practiced in the Japanese immigrant community expanded to include Korean women who immigrated to California in the 1930s.

The boom of the mail-order bride industry came about the 1990s, after the break-up of the Soviet Union. At that time, a large number of Russian marriage agencies were founded. “Russian” is a general term that refers to the majority of marriage agencies from the former Soviet Union. The label a “Russian bride”, thus, refers to women from Ukraine, Belarus and countries in Central Asia.
How are marriage agencies connected to the perpetuation of stereotypes? Russian brides are typically presented as beautiful ladies prepared to serve men; they are more subordinate and affectionate than an average Western woman. Most images of online brides are extremely sexualized and also employ many stereotypes. For example, some of the pictures are captioned “Will I offend the American women if I am not overweight” and “Russia is famous for good sex and crime. I don’t do crime.”

Even though not explicitly mentioned in the agency advertisements, sex often appears as a topic in the initial courting rituals. In my interviews I talked to many women who said that they found themselves in situations, such as video chats, where there was no physical threat to participate in a sexual activity but they felt that if they refuse, they will lose the interest of the man. Thus, they felt obliged to fulfill requests from men whatever they may be.

The issue of naïve women and exploitative men is however one that may be assessed from a few different viewpoints. According to a radical feminist approach primarily promoted by advocacy groups, most international marriage agencies are abusive in that they promote sexist, patriarchal and racist stereotypes. Radical feminists suggest that marriage brokers are also exploitative. In search of a better life, women profiled by marriage brokers oftentimes become victims of violence and sexual or domestic servitude. Cases of violence and exploitation against mail-order brides have built the grounds for such statements. One of the most often documented examples of such violence has been the case of Ms. Anastasia Solovieva, a 20-year-old Kyrgyz woman married to Mr. Indle King, a 38-year-old man from Seattle, murdered in 2000. According to the court proceedings, Mr. King ordered a tenant in his home to kill Anastasia. Together, they strangled her with a
The court ruled them guilty and convicted of second-degree murder and witness tampering in the death to a 29-year prison term.

The *libertarian approach* to international marriage brokerages argues that women ultimately benefit from the MOB industry. When landing in a foreign land, they are in a better or more prosperous condition compared to their home country. The libertarian perspective argues that, although with some frequency of violence and divorce, marriages via international marriage brokerage provide an access to financial resources and social security available in the West.

It should be mentioned that sometimes those are not women but men who are subjects to various kinds of exploitation. They may be deceived or abused finally. Deception takes place, when marriage brokers, for example, post photoshopped beyond recognition or absolutely fake pictures of women. Serious financial exploitation often takes place as well. For example, men pay for visas for women to come visit them and the visit never happens.

It is very important to rethink whether this industry of international marriage brokerage is anyhow connected to human trafficking and domestic labor. Naïve girls who can hardly speak English looking for Western husbands are easy preys and have been found trapped in the sex trade. In a recent report, a representative of the External Migration Department under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kushtarbek Aitmatov, stated there were 25 cases of human trafficking in the republic in 2009. More than a hundred of trafficking victims, all of whom were involved in the sex industry, were returned to Kyrgyzstan from Russia, China, Turkey, the UAE and Kazakhstan that year. According to a Kyrgyz MP, Tursunbay Bakir Uulu, more and more women are going abroad through such agencies where they fall into the hands of sex traders or abusive husbands. According to the
Kyrgyz MVD, marriage agencies make USD 10,000-15,000 for each of the successful “transactions” – when a Kyrgyz woman lands abroad following all of the bride immigration paperwork. Marriage agencies as such are in my opinion usually not directly connected to trafficking but they facilitate it in many ways.
Public discussion

Question 1: What are your ideas how to address the situation of human trafficking via social networks from the legal perspective and how to use social networks for prevention?

Athanassia Sykiotou: Nothing is impossible. We can start with a small framework and then expand it. We should start with agreeing that we should tackle this issue and get set for drafting an international convention. We also need a global reporting system. If we cannot have a global reporting system, we could have several reporting systems that are coordinated. As far as prevention is concerned, social networking can surely act as a preventive tool. Above all, we need to work on raising awareness and strengthening solidarity among people in order to be able to recognize and react to exploitative situations.

Yulia Zabyellina: I think that we especially need awareness-raising in the East, where many women don’t know anything about the dangers of trafficking and potential traps in job and marriage ads. In Eastern Europe, the understanding of the risks entailed in this industry is still low among the general population as well as the authorities should be controlling the business. When using social networks as a tool of prevention, I think we definitely need more control of advertisements.

Question 2: Is the shame of women who were victims contributing to the lack of awareness in the East?

Yulia Zabyellina: Most of the girls that I talked to were happy to share experiences about how much money they made and where they travelled with their men, but only a few girls shared that they were exploited for sexual purposes or promised a marriage which they never got in the end. Facts show that only 20% of women
actually get to marriage, which clearly illustrates that this industry is not about marriage.

Marriage agencies may also promote labor exploitation, as women sometimes get into a situation where they are forced to domestic work. That is also a legal problem, as it is very difficult to investigate such exploitation because the abuser is her legal husband and whatever he does is removed from public scrutiny.

At the same time, immigration laws make it impossible for these women to divorce, as they would be sent back. There should also be stricter standards for marriage agencies. Some marriage agencies are registered as businesses and some are not registered at all. They should all have a physical office space in addition to virtual chancellery and contact information of those who may be held responsible in cases when a problem emerges.

**Question 3: What is the possible role of the recently established European Cybercrime Centre (EC3) at Europol in fighting cyber trafficking?**

**Athanassia Sykiotou:** Under the Convention of Council of Europe, there are 4 large categories of cybercrimes: first there are crimes related to the confidentiality of data, second are computer crimes such as fraud and forgery, third there is infringement of copyright and fourth there are content related crimes such as child pornography. Cyber trafficking falls in the latter category and so all trafficking cases and can be prosecuted under this Convention. But I do not know if people in the field really relate cyber trafficking cases with the Convention. Awareness on the seriousness of this type of crime needs to be raised also on the law enforcement level.

**Comment from the audience:** Romeo Bisutti: It is very important to note that this problem can only be solved if gender equality and women’s rights are
implemented around the world. This is only achievable if we also involve men in this struggle. Women cannot stand alone against patriarchy; we need to get men with clear feminist attitudes involved in the fight against these structures, which greatly contribute to the problem of trafficking.
Profiles

Athanassia Sykiotou
Athanassia Sykiotou is Assistant Professor in Criminological Sciences at the Faculty of Law of Democritus University of Thrace (GR) and international consultant for different UN organizations as well as for the Council of Europe. She is an attorney–at–law at the Supreme Court of Greece and since 2002 independent expert of the Hellenic Ministry of Justice and member of the Central Scientific Council for prisons. Ms Sykiotou has conducted different research on Trafficking in Human Beings (THB) and Cyber Crime and has published several articles/books. Besides THB her main research areas are Anti-crime Policy, Criminal Justice and Justice for Children.

Selected publications on THB:
- The Impact of Internet on THB, prepared for UN.GIFT, for the 12th UN World Congress on Crime Prevention in Salvador, 2010.
- The European Convention against Trafficking of Human Beings in Relation to the Case-law of the European Court for Human Rights on Art.4 of the ECHR and the Case-law of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia on Enslavement, in M. Kranidiotis, (Edit.), Volume in honor of Prof. Aglaia Tsitsoura, Sakkoulas Publs., 2009, pp.103-140.

Yuliya Zabyelina
Yuliya Zabyelina is a Post-doctoral Lecturer in International Relations at Masaryk University, the Czech Republic in September 2012. She holds a doctoral degree in
International Studies from the University of Trento, Italy. She has been a Visiting Scholar at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York (2012), at George Mason University in Washington D.C. (2010) and at Carnegie Endowment for Peace in Moscow (2010). Her areas of expertise include various forms of Transnational Organized Crime and Illicit Trafficking, Corruption and Economic Crime, and Crime in Failed States and Conflict-torn Societies. She has published academic works including the following monograph:

- Mail-order Brides: Content Analysis of Eastern European Marriage Agencies.
  VDM Verlag Dr. Muller Aktiengesellschaft & Co. KG, 2010.

**Sibylle Hamann**

Sibylle Hamann is author, moderator and independent journalist. She writes weekly columns for the newspaper “Die Presse”. Her articles are published in the weekly newspaper “Falter” and in the magazine “Emma”. She is chief editor for the “Liga. Zeitschrift für Menschenrechte” and lecturer at the Journalism Seminar at the College of Higher Education of Vienna.

Her latest publications (in German):