Yuliya Zabyelina: Brides or victims? Some contentious points of the debate on the mail-order bride industry

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The “mail-order bride” (MOB) industry is a very emotional concept that does not automatically come with a clear connotation. In most general terms, it refers to profit-oriented marriage brokering agencies that mediate communication between a man and a woman from different countries. The matrimony, however, may or may not take place. Women attempting to immigrate through the MOB industry do not always achieve the objective. The man she is to marry may change his mind or he may have never had the intention of getting married at all.

The principle idea of today’s matchmaking landscape is not much different from several centuries ago. The practice of pre-arranged marriages conducted through a third party, is not new and can be documented centuries back. Historically, mail-order brides were women who listed themselves in picture catalogs and were selected by foreign men for marriage. 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-age women, known as filles du roi, to Canada to marry eligible Frenchmen. At the turn of the 20th century, male Japanese 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.

Filipinas came to dominate the transnational bride scene from the end of World War II until the 1980s. Such a prolonged presence of foreign men in the Philippines produced significant instances of intermarriage between US servicemen and Filipino women. These marriages and the war-ravaged life in the Philippines laid the foundations for the formation of a large-scale MOB industry in Asia that followed in the 1960s. In the early 1990s, the collapse of the USSR constituted a critical opportunity for Eastern European and Central Asian women faced with harsh economic conditions and tough visa controls to immigrate to more affluent Western Europe and North America. The techno-informational revolution, the Internet and other information communication technologies provided the most favorable environment for the solidification of the MOB industry as a proliferating global enterprise.

The general debate among scholar, policymakers and advocacy groups with regards to the MOB industry has been diverse and provocative. The entire corpus of arguments can be roughly divided into three groups that have adopted distinct postures towards international marriage brokerage.

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. Within this perspective, marriage brokers are mediators of highly sexualized images of women depicted as sexual objects – easily accessible and compliant. 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 controversial cases has been the one of Ms. Anastasia Solovieva, a 20-year-old Kyrgyz woman married to a 38-year-old Mr. Indle King 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 necktie. The court ruled
them guilty and convicted of second-degree murder and witness tampering in the death to a 29-year prison term (US Senate 2004: 8-9; Brooks 2001).
The libertarian approach to international marriage brokerage argues that women ultimately benefit from the services and opportunities provided by 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 available in the West. “The act of brokering a bride seems exploitative on the surface, but the women knowingly engage in the business because they foresee personal, social, and economic gain in it... [t]he end result is usually in the best interest of the women who seek a better life for themselves and later for their children,” writes The Independent Review (Merriman 2012: 92).

One of the most critical approaches to the MOB industry, the criminological perspective, is the one that builds on establishing connections between the MOB industry and organized crime. Behind this perspective is the concern that women marketed by marriage brokers are not only attractive for lonely middle-aged man somewhere in Italy, Britain or the United State, but also to offenders seeking opportunities for enrichment. This approach aims to explore the prospects for sexual abuse of women and children, the use of deceit and coercion to lure victims from their home into servitude and the potential of marriage brokers to serve as recruiting tools for organized crime specialized in human trafficking (Sykiotou 2007: 31; Aronowitz 2009). Given the opportunities provided by the ICTs, one may be particularly alert about the connection between marriage brokers and cyber trafficking. It is very likely that the ICTs have paved the way to bigger, wider, cross border and syndicated trafficking operations in real life as well as in cyber space. From this point of view, the role of marriage brokers either as trafficking organizations in themselves or, at the very least, a way for traffickers to easily obtain access to women for the purposes of further exploitation. The application of marriage brokerage for criminal purposes provides multiple challenges to the law enforcement.

When rethinking the role of international marriage agencies in the contemporary practices of matrimony, gender relations and criminal activities, one should not get caught into radical generalizations. There is a need to review various types of international marriage brokers, carefully explore their practices and methods of entrepreneurial activities. One should keep in mind that the idea of mediated marriage has had a long history and does not directly relate to exploitative and abusive practices. It is, however, fundamental to pay attention to recurrent instances of violence, exploitation and abuse that have taken place or may emerge in the future (6th September 2012).

References

Book recommendation

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