

# Dissenting Voices

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Volume 6 | Issue 1

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9-7-2017

## Oppression or Opportunity: The Selling of Mail-Order Brides

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### Recommended Citation

Wilk, Amber (2017) "Oppression or Opportunity: The Selling of Mail-Order Brides," *Dissenting Voices*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/dissentingvoices/vol6/iss1/10>

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# Oppression or Opportunity: The Selling of Mail-Order Brides

*It is the memory of my aunt that inspired my research of mail-order brides. I was curious as to what factors encourage women to leave their families and home to come to another country as a mail-order bride. The international trafficking of mail-order brides is not a new phenomenon, but since the advent of technology the capitalistic industry has exploded. In this paper, I discuss the oppressions and opportunities that the potential mail-order brides have to consider. Since the mail-order bride industry is continuously growing, it needs to be monitored to minimize the violence against women.*

## Introduction

Women from economically underprivileged backgrounds in developing countries are targeted by marriage brokers and sold into the “lavish life” of a mail-order bride. Gender discrimination in these countries has left women with three choices for work: A migrant worker, a prostitute, or a mail-order bride (Lloyd, 2000). The prospective brides are marketed to men as possessing hegemonic femininity (Liu, 2015). Hegemonic femininity is a social construction that women maintain the hierarchy of gender, which enforces the belief that men are dominant and women are subservient (Velding, 2014). This structure creates a power imbalance in which men have full control. The men are led to believe that the women they choose to marry are family-oriented, have no interest in education or working, and do not believe in divorce (Lloyd, 2000). This heteronormative patriarchal entitlement can draw in men who are abusive and can be

potentially dangerous for women who step outside of their gender role (Webber, 2009). The potential brides are not always cognizant of domestic violence risks.

Upon entering the United States, the new brides may feel isolated due to the sudden immersion in an unknown culture and language. The women are at a disadvantage by having little to no knowledge of the deportation or domestic violence laws (Lloyd, 2000). Only having their husbands to turn to for help, the women are in danger if their husbands are the reason they need help. There are times that mail-order brides end up in a healthy and positive situation, but many find themselves being physically or mentally abused (Lloyd, 2000).

My aunt was a mail-order bride. My research objective was to find out what factors push women to leave their families and home to come to another country. Do the women feel the information they are told before they consent to become a mail-order bride is accurate to the experiences they have when they begin their new life? In this paper, I am going to look at the mail-order bride industry, specifically mail-order brides that are exported to the United States from the Philippines and Russia.

## Looking In

I am going to tell the personal story of my aunt's experiences. Before I begin telling her story, I want to explain my privileges and where I stand as an outsider looking in. I am a white woman who was raised in a middle class family in the suburbs of western New York. I was not aware of the feminist movement at the time of this story, but I was aware of my own desire for equality for myself and my loved ones. My own privilege and western views leave me with biases when looking into my aunt's situation. I am not judging her, but I am being critical towards my uncle, her husband, as we come from the same family and cultural background.

My uncle was in the Navy and for a period of time he was stationed in the Philippines. There, he learned of Filipina women. He observed that their cultural values placed women in a submissive role as selfless caretaker of the home and children (Demanarig & Acosta, 2016). The presence of the American military in the Philippines can serve as a way to glamorize life in the United States and reinforce the idea of white dominance over Southeast Asian women (Lloyd, 2000). I wonder, did my uncle's immersion in Philippine culture influence his desire to marry a Filipina woman?

After my uncle was discharged from the Navy, he married a woman who was a mail-order bride from the Philippines. Growing up, I did not know my aunt was a mail-order bride, but I was aware that she was not originally from the United States. In my early twenties I was in need of an inexpensive babysitter for my daughter. My Grandmother knew that my Aunt was looking to make her own money in order to visit her daughter in Florida, so arranged for her to watch my daughter. My aunt watched my daughter 50 hours a week and I paid her \$75. Most of the daycare services in my area cost \$250 per week. The arrangement with my Aunt was an unheard of price. My aunt was a great caregiver for my daughter and treated her as if she were one of her own children.

I felt lucky to have a babysitter who was inexpensive and an excellent caregiver. When I no longer needed my aunt to babysit, she thanked me for paying her a generous amount of money each week. My aunt saw this amount as generous because babysitting had allowed her the chance to make her own money. The opportunity to make money was one my aunt never had, and she was excited to pay her own way to visit her daughter whom she had not seen in a few years. Now that I am older I realize that I was exploiting my

aunt by using her as cheap labor. This was not my intention. I justified the situation by telling myself we were family helping each other out. At the time I was a young single mother making minimum wage and my aunt was looking to make her own money. Paying my aunt \$75 was a means of survival for me.

Even though they were not poor, my aunt and uncle lived in a small house located in a neighborhood in the inner city of Rochester, NY. The neighborhood had a high poverty and crime rate. There was garbage scattered along the road and in the grass. The majority of the houses in the neighborhood had boarded up windows, broken glass along the sidewalks, and driveways that were crumbling apart. Their house was nice inside, but set up to meet the needs of my uncle. They owned one vehicle because my aunt did not have a license and my uncle did not want her to drive anywhere on her own. Their house consisted of a small living room with an oversized blue sectional couch that had a built-in cooler for my uncle to put his sodas in. The couch took up the whole living room, leaving only enough room to put a television in the corner. Off of the living room was a small dining room. My uncle comes from a large family so there was a large table that

could seat up to ten people. In order to maneuver around the table, you had to push the chairs out of the way. In the back of the house was a tiny kitchen where my Aunt spent most of her time. This kitchen was small with limited space for her to cook, but she made do with what she had.

I often witnessed how cruel my Uncle was to his wife. I will never forget the time I went into their bedroom to help put laundry away and noticed that my Aunt had minimal space for her belongings. There was the bed they slept on, a closet that had been turned into a pantry for my Uncle's snacks, and a keyboard hooked up to the computer with a microphone for my Uncle to record music. I asked my Aunt where she kept her things, as it was clear to me that she didn't have a spot in their bedroom. She explained that there was a small dresser set up in the hallway for her use. Seeing the setup of the room was very unsettling to me, but my Aunt was unbothered by her living conditions. Another instance where I saw how unfairly my Aunt was treated was when I was picking my daughter up. My Aunt, who barely stood 5 feet tall, was struggling to carry the garbage out of the house to the garbage can. My Uncle saw her and yelled, "Hold on a minute." I thought to myself, "Aww, how sweet he's going to help her."

Instead, he walked up and handed her another bag and said, "Don't forget this." Witnessing this interaction left me feeling shocked and angry. I looked to her for a reaction, but she kindly took the bag and walked outside.

In talking with my Aunt, she explained to me that her life in the United States has been great compared to the life she had experienced in the Philippines. My Aunt's cultural view was that she was expected to sacrifice her needs to benefit her family. She explained to me that this expectation was reinforced by her family throughout her childhood. My Aunt wanted to show her appreciation to my Uncle by being a good wife and mother. It was implied that my Uncle had saved her from the poor conditions she experienced in the Philippines. It was in this conversation that I found out my Aunt was a mail-order bride. I tried to understand her point of view, but growing up where I did, this was hard to do. I left that day curious about how horrible her experience in the Philippines must have been if this life is glorious to her. I wondered: did being able to leave the Philippines as a mail-order bride make her feel empowered? This was a question that has been left unanswered.

My Aunt passed away from cancer shortly after visiting with her daughter

in Florida. In less than a year my Uncle ordered a new bride from the Philippines to come live with him, repeating the cycle. I do not speak to either of them. This is mostly due to my Uncle's mistreatment towards my late Aunt and also because Uncle speaks poorly about her since her passing. I do not agree with my Uncle's opinions of my Aunt, I witnessed her dedication in trying to please him. Even though my Aunt was happy, I still feel anger towards my Uncle for treating her as an object that could simply be bought and owned, instead of treating her as an equal human being.

### **Literature Review**

A mail-order bride is a woman who lists herself on a website with the intent to move and marry a man from a different country. Women who want to become mail-order brides use a marriage broker to facilitate the process in finding potential husbands. The reason women choose to become mail-order brides is because it may be their only chance at class mobility or it may be an only means to escape a poverty-stricken nation (Lloyd, 2000). This can be seen as empowering as the women are taking charge of their futures. Marriage brokers are people who seek out women, typically living in developing countries, and capitalize on

their economic inequality (Lloyd, 2000). Marriage brokers market the women to potential husbands from economically advanced countries (Liu, 2015). The prospective brides participate because they are hoping to move into a safer, more stable environment.

The process of selling or purchasing women can be viewed as openly trafficking women to men (Lloyd, 2000). The definition of human trafficking is the exploitation of a vulnerable human being for profit or personal gain (Hume & Sidun, 2016). The process of trafficking consists of the recruitment, transportation, purchase, and sale of a person (Huda, 2006). The United States human trafficking law does not apply to mail-order brides; this is because the women or their families give some form of consent (Lloyd, 2000). Once in their new lives, mail-order brides may realize they were trafficked by deception. The women lack the resources to verify anything their potential husbands tell them before they move out of their country.

The mail-order bride industry is a capitalistic-driven \$2 billion international industry. There are an estimated 2,700 mail-order bride agencies worldwide, with about 500 of them operating in the United States (Lloyd, 2000). This industry continues

to grow. From 2012-2013, the mail order bride industry saw a 29% increase (Health Research Funding, 2014). According to Health Research Funding (2015), approximately 10,000 mail-order bride marriages occur in the United States every year. This continued growth shows that the demand for mail-order brides will only continue to increase. The industry has expanded to include mail-order grooms and mail-order brides for same sex marriages. While this essay focuses on heterosexual men purchasing heterosexual brides, this substantial industry growth across diverse categories of identity warrants more research in this area.

The regions that most mail-order brides are imported from are Russia, Eastern Europe, Asia, and Central America, but the largest supplier of mail-order brides is the Philippines. Mail-order bride companies charge an average \$6,000-\$10,000 per bride, however, prices can go up to \$15,000 (Lloyd, 2000). The mail-order bride does not receive any money from this exchange.

In order for a woman to become a mail-order bride, she is required to provide the marriage broker information such as: Weight, measurements, interests, and photographs (Lloyd, 2000). This

information is used to create a profile that will capture the attention and approval of potential suitors. Prospective husbands are able to flip through digital pictures and pick out the women they want as if they are ordering out of an electronic department store catalog (Lloyd, 2000). This way of marketing women superficially allows men to pick out women like a commodity. This capitalistic approach sells feminine sexuality for profit. Men are not buying wives based on their personalities, but based on external features and sexual fantasies. This way of marketing women as mail-order brides can make men feel like they are entitled to own the women they purchase. This objectifies women, but the idea of being chosen by looks could also be empowering as well by giving them confidence.

Before the advent of the Internet, bride profiles were put into catalogs, but because of the explosion of technology, they are added onto Internet websites such as; loveme.com, fantasybrides.com, anastasiadate.com, and rosebrides.com (Sarker, Chakraborty, Tansuhaj, Mulder & Dogerlioglu-Demir, 2013). Technology has made the industry more visible and productive by providing email as a source of advertising and decreasing the turnaround time in communication. For

instance, anastasiadate.com averages about 2.6 million visits per month (Heath Research Funding, 2015). You may see advertisements in your own email with a caption like, “come pick up the lady you deserve”.

Once a woman is chosen as a potential mail-order bride, the couple corresponds via mail or email. The exchanges typically go through a translator since the man and woman may speak different languages. Because the potential brides are not fully involved in the communication process, translators sometimes take the liberty to eroticize the conversation or objectify the women in an effort to make her seem more alluring and sexually eager (Liu, 2015). Once the connection has been made, the agency sets up travel arrangements for a week long “romance tour” for the man to come meet his potential bride (Liu, 2015).

The “romance tour” step of meeting face-to-face is an important part of the United States immigration law (Lloyd, 2000). If the couple decides to marry, the agency applies for a fiancé visa. According to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (2015), once approved, the fiancé visa allows the woman to enter the United States for 90 days so that a marriage ceremony can take place. This process does not

allow the couple to fully get to know each other.

Even though the mail-order bride industry is virtually unregulated in most of the world, the United States has passed laws protecting the mail-order brides who used U.S.-based mail-order bride companies (Lloyd, 2000). In 2005, the United States passed the International Marriage Broker Regulation Act (IMBRA), requiring mail-order bride industries to do a background check on men wishing to purchase a bride. The law also requires the industries to provide foreign brides with informational domestic violence pamphlets (Webber, 2009). This law requires men to provide financial information, criminal arrest records, number of previous marriages, and number of children. Other immigration regulations have been placed on these marriages, such as the husbands have to sponsor the bride’s citizenship over a period of time (Lloyd, 2000). This delayed citizenship gives the men full control over the women who want to stay in the country. The laws tends to criminalize the mail-order brides more than protect them from abusive relationships and exploitation (Lloyd, 2000).

This industry is unregulated because proponents argue “there is no justification for state intervention”



(Lloyd, 2000, p. 351) that infringes on personal freedom and rights to privacy. Many mail-order brides are victims of fraud or fake marriages. They end up in forced prostitution, loveless marriages, or oppressive labor. The lack of regulations has allowed the industry to grow and treat young women as commodities to be exploited (Cullen, 2002). “From what I’ve seen in the Internet bride trade, the happy stories are the exception,” says Dorchen Leidholdt, director of the Center for Battered Women’s Legal Services of New York City’s Sanctuary for Families (Webber, 2009). Available reports show that the divorce rates for mail-order marriages are about 20%, which is about half of the average American divorce rate (Health Research Funding, 2014).

Attorney Layli Miller-Muro runs the Tahirih Justice Center in Virginia, and has tracked problems in the mail-order bride industry for years. The Tahirih Justice Center, an international women’s rights group, has surveyed 175 legal-aid groups in the United States. More than half of these groups reported clients who had been abused by husbands met through marriage brokers (Briscoe, 2005).

Although information showing that mail-order brides are being isolated and abused is publicized, lawmakers are

ignoring the open trafficking of women as mail-order brides (Lloyd, 2000). Instead of the United States government focusing on the consequences of immigration, there should be more laws in place to help protect mail-order brides. Lawmakers must be careful not to push the industry underground, creating a situation where there is no protection for these women.

### **Nataliya**

In 1998, Nataliya, 26 years of age, was a college student from Ukraine who wanted a husband. She met a Russian-American woman named Natasha Spivack, who ran an internet matchmaking site called “Encounters International”. Spivack told Nataliya she had just the man for her. He was a successful handsome American businessman named James Fox. Nataliya and James met in the United States and married two months later. Soon after their marriage, James started physically abusing Nataliya (Briscoe, 2005).

Nataliya turned to Spivack for help but she was told that all American men were crazy. Spivack explained to Nataliya that if she did not remain complacent, her visa would be revoked and she would be sent back to the Ukraine. Nataliya did not want to go back, so she did what she was told.

Shortly after, her husband physically abused her while she was breastfeeding their child. He hurt her so badly that she had to go to the hospital. Her husband was charged with attempted murder. It was from there that she was able to escape to a women's shelter (Briscoe, 2005). Once safe from her abusive husband, Nataliya decided she was going to sue Spivack and Encounters International. She hired a lawyer named Randall Miller who represented her in the lawsuit. After hearing the case, the court ruled in Nataliya's favor (Briscoe, 2005).

The jury's ruling was based on the failure of Spivack to tell Nataliya about a provision in the immigration law that protects foreign women from deportation if they are leaving abusive husbands (Briscoe, 2005). This provision is called the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 (Belleau, 2003). This law was created to protect women and children who are victims of domestic violence from being deported if they cooperate with law enforcement against their abusers (Belleau, 2003).

The judge also stated that Encounters International did not properly vet James Fox as they had led Nataliya to believe. A jury awarded Nataliya \$433,500. Spivack still denied she had done anything wrong because her

involvement ended when Nataliya and James were wed (Briscoe, 2005). James was initially charged with attempted murder, however, the charge was lowered to assault. James was mandated by the court to take an anger management course. At the completion of the anger management course, the assault charge was expunged from his record. Because of this, James was able to pass a background check and marry another Russian mail-order bride (Briscoe, 2005). This story is a horrific example of how violent men can easily obtain mail-order brides.

### **Lera**

The next story is about Lera Loeb, a young woman from the Ukraine. She grew up in a one-bedroom apartment with her parents and brother-. Lera's parents were doctors, but being a doctor does not make you wealthy in the Ukraine. Living a life of poverty and crime was something Lera did not want, so she worked hard academically. Because of Lera's hard work, she was able to come to the United States with a scholarship and study in New York City, New York (Loeb & Pilot, 2009).

Unfortunately, Lera's visa was not renewed for the following school year and she had to return to the Ukraine. When she returned home she became very depressed and could not assimilate

back into her old lifestyle. She and her parents came up with the solution of her becoming a mail-order bride. Unlike the United States, becoming a mail-order bride is an acceptable alternative for impoverished women (Loeb & Pilot, 2009).

Lera noticed the ways that women posed themselves seductively on the website in order to appeal to American men (Loeb & Pilot, 2009). She did not want to do the same thing and decided to take modest photos. In her biography, Loeb (2009) wrote that she was looking for an open-minded man who would be supportive of a career-driven woman. Lera realized some men were blatantly looking for a subservient wife, and she even received correspondence from a man telling her that he was looking for a Ukrainian woman to take care of him in the bedroom (Loeb & Pilot, 2009).

After days of looking at profiles, Lera found a man named Steve who was a music producer and art collector. He was from New York City, where she had attended school on her academic scholarship. His profile excited her and so she contacted him. Steve and Lera corresponded for two months before Steve booked a flight to the Ukraine and meet Lera face to face. Lera felt safe with him and was desperate to get out of the Ukraine (Loeb & Pilot,

2009). Lera came to New York City, and two days after her arrival she and Steve were married. After a week Lera started looking for jobs to establish herself. Her first job was not successful, but she found a job as an assistant with a fashion designer. She was able to return to school and finish her degree while writing a blog about the fashion industry. Her blog exploded with approximately 10,000 hits per day (Loeb & Pilot, 2009).

In “Yes, This Woman is a ‘Mail-Order Bride’”, Lera wrote about her experience as a mail order bride. She stated that the potential dangers of becoming a mail-order bride are not as known in the Ukraine as they are in the United States. She was not worried about her safety when becoming a mail-order bride (Loeb & Pilot, 2009). The story of Lera exemplifies that not all mail-order brides end up in an abusive or unhappy situation. Lera felt empowered as a mail-order bride. She was able to escape the harsh conditions of the Ukraine and come to the United States to become a successful career woman (Loeb & Pilot, 2009).

### **Consent**

What does consent mean as a mail-order bride? First, I am going to describe United States consent laws. Then, I am going to apply feminist

theory as it plays a critical role in understanding consent in this context. I will compare radical-cultural feminism and radical-libertarian feminism to provide multiple perspectives. In order for consent to be legitimate in the United States, there needs to be freedom from violent threats, competence, and sufficient knowledge as to attitudinal consent (Simons, 2006). These conditions allow the person who gives consent the opportunity to set their boundaries. Feminist and legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon (2005) was extremely influential in setting the standards of consent laws. Economic differences, the lack of political representation, and physical power of women hinders their ability to give consent. In other words, all women, not just mail-order brides, cannot give consent.

Legal consent is ambiguous, meaning it is open for interpretation by attorneys and the judicial system. Consent is viewed by the courts on a case by case basis, sometimes not ruling in the favor of the victim (Simons, 2006). Radical feminists have been instrumental in redefining consent in a variety of different situations. Radical feminists are a population of revolutionary women who do not believe in system reform, as liberal feminists do. Radical feminists believe that men oppress

women, and the truest form of oppression is sexism. Radical-cultural feminists believe that heterosexual relationships are oppressive, and that pornography and prostitution are exploitive. On the other hand, radical-libertarian feminists believe that pornography and prostitution can be empowering for women (Tong & Botts, 2017). According to radical-cultural feminist beliefs, women cannot consent to being a mail-order bride because women are not treated as equals in society, and this inequality causes coercive relationships between women and men (McGregor, 2005).

Capitalism, gender hierarchy, and dominance allows American men to use their privilege to dominate and take advantage of women in vulnerable situations. Most women who become mail-order brides are doing so because they are in a dire situation. This position leaves them at a disadvantage, and powerless to their potential husbands, the American government, and the mail-order bride industry. All of these factors inhibit the bride's ability to give consent.

Claiming that all mail-order brides are exploited can be problematic. Consent is performative; it is an action that one does (McGregor, 2005). So, if a person becomes a mail-order bride, they are performing that action and therefore

are consenting. Arguing that all mail-order brides are oppressed is a form of victimization. This victimization sabotages equality by saying that they cannot take care of themselves, which creates a need for protection by men (McGregor, 2005). Mail-order brides are viewed by some as an expression of agency or a form of liberation, meaning that the women act independently and make an autonomous life decision. We cannot judge other cultures due to our own cultural biases. Women should be able to choose which relationships and life choices are better for them without interference. When women become mail-order brides, they are offered opportunities such as having a higher standard of living and more women's rights. Women also have the opportunity to send money to their families (Sarker, et al., 2013). Having economic power allows women to have more control over their lives within a patriarchal society (Lerner, 2006).

In "Selling Sex for Visas", Denise Brennan (2002) points out that women are involved in an economic strategy that is exploiting and capitalizing on the very system that seeks to exploit them in return. Becoming a mail-order bride can be seen as a necessary survival strategy for economic advancement (Brennan, 2002). The mail-order bride industry is seen as a way out of a poor

economic situation, making it an empowering experience for the mail-order bride. This could be the only opportunity women have for class mobility. Marrying a man means you marry into his social class and privilege (Lerner, 2006).

### **Conclusion**

Through my research, I discovered that being a mail-order bride can be both oppressive and liberating. The mail-order bride industry is growing and fueled by capitalism and patriarchy. The industry capitalizes on women's economic vulnerability, leading them to believe that they are being saved. It is my hope that the mail-order bride industries will become legally liable to help women who turn to them when they find themselves in an abusive marriage. From Nataliya's story, it can be concluded that the mail-order bride companies offer no assistance or guidance to the brides once they enter the United States. The mail-order bride industry should not feel their duties end with "I do".

I have found little to no statistical data on the potential spousal abuse, domestic violence, or other harm the mail-order brides may face. This could be due to numerous reasons: Many mail-order brides fail to come forward with abuse, the mail-order bride

industry can justify someone's abuse by providing statistics on couples who are happily married, and lastly, the government may feel since the couples enter a contract voluntarily they have no jurisdiction over the relationship. I hope that this knowledge will bring more awareness to the issue, and more

research and statistical studies will be done as a result. I feel that the exponential growth of the industry warrants more scholarly research. Based on what I have learned, I now have a better understanding of my Aunt's situation and why she found comfort and safety in marrying my Uncle.

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