



**Real Love or the Dark Reality of Human Trafficking?  
A Literature Examination of Filipina Mail-Order Brides**

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***Abstract***

This paper examines available literature of the practice of the mail-order bride industry, both within historical and contemporary contexts, with particular emphasis on Filipina women. With thousands of women immigrating to Western countries annually through the unregulated market of the marriage-order industry, scholars offer differing perspectives on the legitimacy of the arrangements. This paper analyzes the arguments made by scholars that the practice is inherently abusive, subjecting women to human trafficking. It also considers the arguments that mail-order marriages can be an empowering opportunity, citing the economic and social advantages afforded by immigrating to Western countries. Lastly, through available research which conducted interviews with mail-order brides, this paper examines women's firsthand experiences and thoughts regarding the industry and their satisfaction within their marriages.

Keywords: Filipina, immigrants, women, marriage, human trafficking

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## ***Introduction***

Mail-order brides have become a hot topic for media and scholarly outlets within recent years. In 1995, Susana Blackwell, a mail-order bride from the Philippines, was awaiting her divorce proceedings at a Washington courthouse when she was shot by her husband, Timothy Blackwell (Consalvo, 1998, p. 188). Similarly, in 2000, Anastasia King, a mail-order bride from the former Soviet Republic of Kyrgyzstan, was murdered by her husband (Fisher, 2002). Both stories brought light to the unregulated market, spurring congressional hearings on the practice, as well as academic debates over the legitimacy and dangers of transnational marriages (Starr & Adams, 2016, p. 956).

When searching the term “mail-order bride” on an internet search, results such as the murders of Blackwell and King come up as well as a magnitude of dating websites with alluring messages such as “Life-Mates Proudly Proclaims its Latest Special: “400 ladies for only \$79.95” (Vergara, 2000, p. 1555). Angry penned letters to the industry also appear as do differing definitions of the term mail-order bride. Dictionary.com defines a bride as “a woman who solicits or accepts a contractual marriage arranged by an agency or brokerage after a period of long-distance courtship, traditionally by written correspondence” (2022) or “a formal transaction between a [Canadian] man and a woman from... countries [of the South], usually brokered by an agent, who is part of the mail-order bride industry, via catalogues or the internet”; a definition that scholarly authors tend to utilize (Brigham & Abidi, n.d, p. 22).

The ease of simply signing into one of over two thousand available international dating websites and browsing through catalogs of single people looking for companionship has caused a great deal of speculation into the practice and legitimacy of mail-order marriages (Lloyd, 2000). Many questions have been raised about whether this practice is blatant exploitation of women (likening it to human trafficking) and if it produces higher rates of abuse or, as others have speculated, whether this creates opportunities for women abroad in which they don't have access to in their home countries, thus being an empowering thing women can do to achieve more rights and freedoms. In both cases, there is speculation whether true love can arise from these arrangements.

Marcia Zug, author of the book “Buying a Bride, An Engaging History of Mail-Order Matches”, estimates that between four thousand to six thousand women enter the United States each year as mail-order brides (2016, p. 195). Of those, most of the women who immigrate through the mail-order marriage industry come from the Philippines (Vergara, 2000, p. 1556). Emily Starr and Michele Adams, through their research, estimate that 20,000 Filipina women leave their country for foreign men annually, with an estimated 131,000 women moving abroad for marriage over the last thirty years (2016, p. 13). The Philippines Centre for Women of British Columbia estimates that 3,500 women from the Philippines have entered Canada through spousal or ‘fiancée’ visas, however it is unclear how many of those marriages were facilitated by mail-order broker agencies (Brigham & Abidi, n.d, p. 24).

This is not a new phenomenon brought on by the expansion of the Internet in recent years- the mail-order bride industry has been active for centuries, with the first mail-order brides being

utilized for population efforts to colonize Canada and the United States. Zug states that the first mail-order brides were introduced in 1609, when the Virginia Company of London began a marketing campaign for young women to immigrate from Europe to Jamestown in order to encourage men to create permanent settlements in America as well as to discourage marriages with Indigenous women. Likewise, between 1663 and 1673, there were efforts to create permanent settlements in Canada to help promote the population of the land (Zug, 2016, p. 30). Young women, known as “Fille du Roi”, or “King’s daughters”, were sent to Canada to marry European men to promote immigration as well as discourage intermarriage with the Indigenous women who lived there. To be recruited for the opportunity, the women had to fit certain criteria, such as being within a procreative age, being in good health, having experience with household chores, and additionally, being deemed attractive. The women were given monetary incentives as well as material items such as stockings, shoes, food, and shelter, as well as a promise to marry freemen (Zug, 2016, p. 21).

Similarly, Japan utilized a “picture-bride” system for colonization efforts in North America, Australia, and other nations (Langevin & Belleau, 2000). Like arranged marriages, where families facilitated the relationship, picture-bride marriages included the exchange of photos of a potential groom and bride by friends and families. If a wedding took place, usually another man would step in to represent the groom for the ceremony before the bride would be able to immigrate. Like the previous mail-order bride systems, most couples never met face to face before commencing their relationship (Zug, 2016).

Historically, all kinds of women were considered to be brave - moving from the familiarity of their home country to an unknown land. This practice continued for population efforts but also became widespread to facilitate more local marriages with the development of Matrimonial ads. These ads, which appeared in all of London’s major newspapers by 1710, allowed for individuals to advertise themselves as well as the ideal characteristics of their future partners. This practice was seen as beneficial to both men and women, as it provided companionship as well as opportunities for women to improve their social and economic circumstances. For African American women, they were benefited even more, with the ability to gain more freedoms, such as the ability to vote (Zug, 2016).

Today, current research estimates that more than 150,000 women use available broker agencies to advertise themselves online for marriage to Western men (Starr & Adams, 2016) and that most of the men utilizing this service are looking for wives with “good old-fashioned values” (Perez, 2003, p. 221). Many of the men who utilize these services hold the belief that following the American Women’s Rights Movement, American women became too liberal and career oriented, while foreign women would share their conservative beliefs (Perez, 2003)

With the rise of feminism and media attention called to cases of abuse and murder of mail-order brides, many scholars have joined the conversation to give their opinions of the practice. However, with limited statistically data available, it is hard to create a concrete answer as to whether this practice is solely exploitive or empowering for women. Nevertheless, through the available literature and research, a picture emerges: the unregulated market of mail-order brides creates the possibility for dangers associated with exploitation and abuse while at the same time it allows women to obtain freedom from the political and economic constraints of their home coun-

ries. A limitation to much of the research that exists is the lack of input from women who have participated within the industry. However, two studies have been found which spoke directly to women who married via the mail-order industry, which provides us with first-hand perspectives about their experiences and satisfactions.

### ***Exploitation***

Many scholars have been quick to label the mail-order marriage industry as exploitive and link the practice to human trafficking. Human trafficking, as defined on the Government of Canada website (2022), involves the “recruiting, moving, or holding victims to exploit them for profit, usually for sexual reasons or forced labour”. Beverly Perez argues that “the mail-order bride industry, like the institution of slavery, reprehensively profits from the trade in human bodies. The American desire to move away from a part marred by the legacy of slavery may lead to the refusal of many Americans to acknowledge that the trade in human capital, this time in the form of domestic workers and mail-order brides, is not a thing of the past” (2003, p. 220). This argument is based on the financial aspect of the mail-order industry, in which men must pay to access the profiles of women online and communicate with them (Starr & Adams, 2016, p. 956). This leads to the belief that the men are purchasing or “buying” their mail-order brides, facilitating the trafficking of women (Constable, 2006). In addition, many scholars often point to the economic conditions of the women that utilize these services stating that Filipina women are forced to enter the industry due to poverty and the patriarchal systems within their home country. As such, conclusions are reached that they are not willing participants (Langevin & Belleau, 2000).

According to the Philippine Women’s Centre of B.C, “seventy percent of the population lives below the poverty line” with high levels of unemployment (2000, p. 11). Due to this, many women enter the “sex for hire” market, making the Philippines home to the “highest number of prostitutes in Southeast Asia” (Philippines Women Centre of B.C, 2000, p. 12). An alternative to breaking out of their socioeconomic status is the mail-order bride industry. Through studies, it has been found that the average Filipina domestic worker in Canada earns an income of only \$700. With the emphasis on financially supporting their families but also the necessity of becoming financially independent themselves, many women opt to engage in transnational marriages instead (Philippines Women Centre of BC, 2000, p. 48).

Additionally, patriarchal views are ingrained in the Philippines. The Philippine state as well as the Catholic Church prohibit divorce, declaring that “marriage [is] an inviolable social institution [that] is the foundation of the family and shall be protected by the State” (Lauser, 2008, p. 90). Women are additionally held to higher expectations; expected to act proper, not engaging or acting in a promiscuous fashion, while accepting that it is the norm or acceptable for men to have a second wife. Men who have a mistress or a second wife are actually admired for being a

“real man” as this promotes a sense of masculinity within the culture. The wives, on the other hand, are often ridiculed and blame for not maintaining their husband’s dedication (Lauser, 2008). In addition, emphasis is placed on the women for upholding their family’s reputation. One of the women interviewed by the Philippines Women Centre of B.C for their report stated that when she was hesitant about marrying her foreign husband, her father told her “You are bringing shame to this family. If you don’t go through with this marriage, I will kill you” (2000, p. 44).

Another factor that many scholars point to is the age difference between the mail-order brides and their husbands. In the book, “Mail-Order Brides: Women for Sale”, Mila Glodava discusses her findings from the couples she met through her research into the industry. She found that “of the 30 couples, only two brides were close in age to their... husbands, i.e., there was a difference of 4 to 6 years. The other 28 couples had an average age difference ranging from 20 to 50 years. (Langevin & Belleau, 2000, p. 110). It was found in the Philippines Women Centre of B.C that their participants averaged 10 to 20 years in age difference from their husbands (2000, p. 41).

As Zug asserts, “many of the harshest critics of their marriages argue that there is no such thing as a consenting mail-order bride; mail-order marriage is simply another name for human trafficking” (2016, p. 197), however, she also states that “there is little evidence that American mail-order brides are trafficked or subject to higher rates of domestic abuse” (p. 199). Likewise, Starr and Adams acknowledge through their research efforts that “no study has ever shown that spousal abuse, domestic violence, or other harm is any greater between couples who have met through mail-order bride agencies than other couples (2016, p. 33).

Ultimately, exact data about mail-order brides in Canada is not available to the public (Brigham & Abidi, n.d, p. 24). Because of the Canadian immigration process, and the mail-order marriage industry being unregulated, it is unclear how many women immigrate through mail-order marriages compared to relationships established through other means (Zug, 2016). As Langevin and Belleau assert: “The absence of empirical studies and statistics on the subject prevents us from finding out how many women, or how many consumer-husbands, are involved in this international trade” (2000, p. 94). However, what is known, is that and there is no specific legislation within Canadian law in regard to the mail-order practice and regulation (Langevin & Belleau, 2000). However, the policies within the Canadian Citizenship and Immigration framework do offer protection against the “migration of minors; restrict sponsorship from Canadians who have committed violent crimes; and require that a relationship must have existed for at least one year for internet relationships/marriages to be considered for approval” (Brigham & Abidi, n.d, p. 24). These policies might mitigate some of the dangers associated with the mail-order industry, however many scholars argue there is not enough safe-guarding in place.

### *Conscious Choice*

Other scholars who have engaged in the debate over the ethical nature of the mail-order marriage business have commented on the opportunities that these women are afforded by marry-

ing a foreign man and moving to Western countries. Like in the early colonization efforts of America, mail-order brides sought international marriage as a way to get ahead economically; they would be financially compensated for moving and marrying aboard, which meant “an alternative to years of servitude” (Zug, 2016, p. 23). This is still persistent today, like mentioned before, where a woman may see a transnational marriage as a way to immediately improve her financial situation rather than trying to financially support herself and her family on a low monthly income (Philippines Women Centre of C.B, 2000, p. 48).

Additionally, through the practice of posting matrimonial ads, women had an opportunity to be clear in their expectations of their ideal partners and be able to choose between those who responded (Zug, 2016). Likewise, today, women on broker agency websites have the ability to speak with and date many men. According to a study by Glodava and Onizuka, mail-order brides on average spend anywhere from three to fourteen months corresponding with men before they decide to get engaged. Through the correspondence, many women receive gifts such as flowers, jewelry, and even money. Mail-order marriage broker agencies also recommend becoming acquainted with prospective partners by offering prenuptial trips, usually in the woman’s home country. Through this, the women are able to spend time face-to-face with potential husbands before committing to marriage. Additionally, many men opt to meet the woman’s family during the trip (Langevin & Belleau, 2000).

Additionally, due to strict patriarchal views within the Philippines, women who seek to immigrate to a Western country via a mail-order marriage are often afforded greater gender equality (Zug, 2016). Rather than viewing mail-order marriages as a last resort and out of desperation to improve their lives, many women view this practice as “a way to achieve respect and equality in their marriages” (Zug, 2016, p. 214). Furthermore, when women marry and move abroad and are able to send money back home to support their families, they are often viewed as heroines for their efforts (Langevin & Belleau, 2000).

### ***First-hand Perspective***

As scholars argue back and forth whether the mail-order industry is exploitive of women or whether it affords them the opportunities and freedom however many of the scholarly articles cited here did not include interviews with mail-order brides, and if they did, it was often with only a few participants. However, two of the studies cited in this paper, one by the Philippines Women Centre of B.C and the other by Demanarig and Acosta, did conduct their research through directly speaking with Filipina women who utilizes the broker agencies to facilitate mail-order marriages and below are their findings.

The Philippines Women Centre of B.C spoke with forty Filipina women across Canada (2000). One of the major themes that emerged from their research and speaking directly to these women were that their husbands’ traditional, conservative beliefs trumped their goals of pursuing work outside the home, as their husbands saw domestic care (such as housework and tending to children) as the women’s responsibility (Philippines Women Centre of B.C, 2000). This aligns

with Langevin and Belleau's findings that most of the women on the broker agencies' websites are advertised as "domestic worker[s]" (2000, 94). The Philippines Women Centre of B.C also found that some women felt they were treated like a slave by their husbands' children (2000, p. 55). However, conversely, the study conducted by Demanarig & Acosta found that their participants felt by engaging in the domestic work and childcare practices helped them better hold onto their cultural values (2016, p. 5). This belief that Filipina women are the perfect "domestic wife" is perpetuated by racialized stereotypes, such as being "obedient, docile, subservient and old fashioned" (Philippine Women Centre of B.C, 2000, p. 4). Although some women may feel empowered by the role of being a domestic housewife, like in the case of the Demanarig and Acostas study, others felt this undermined their individuality and sense of purpose.

Another finding from the Philippines Women Centre of B.C report was that the women felt objectified. Many of them felt that their husbands sexualized them (Philippines Women Centre of B.C, 2000, p. 52) which stems from stereotypes displayed by broker agencies, in that Filipina women are meek, shy, passive, childlike, innocent, and naïve, yet surprising in their sexual prowess and desire to please their male master" (Starr & Adams, 2016, p. 957) as well as "[expecting] to learn about sex from their husbands" (Vergara, 2000, p. 1558). Langevin and Belleau (2000) state through their research that many men expect sex from their wives to compensate the price they paid to emigrate and marry them, with some even boasting about having paid less than they would for a prostitute. The study by Demanarig and Acosta also confirmed that many of the women they interviewed were also subjected to sexual stereotypes when they were advertised on broker agencies' website (2016, p. 1).

Lastly, the reports into the women's happiness in their marriages differed between the Philippines Women Centre of B.C and Demanarig and Acosta's study. The Philippines Women Centre of B.C found that the majority of the women they interviewed were unhappy and even regretted their marriage (2000, p. 54). Many of the women stated they felt isolated from their family in the Philippines by their husbands, especially when their husbands did not permit them to send money home. Many of them also struggled with depression. The women that described their marriages as "okay" or "good" held the belief that that they had to make the most out of a "lifelong commitment" (2000, p. 54). The women in Demanarig and Acosta's study, however, reported that the majority of their participants were satisfied with their marriages, stating they felt "lucky to have husbands who treated them well despite what other Filipina women experienced as... internet brides" (2016, p. 12). Participants of both studies, however, experienced racism and exclusion by their husbands' families (Demanarig & Acosta, 2016, p. 18; Philippines Women Centre of B.C, 2000, p. 52).

## ***Conclusion***

The mail-order industry played a big part in the early colonization efforts of the United States and Canada, as well as been another avenue for immigration in recent years. The multi-million-dollar industry has been responsible for the immigration of thousands of women, espe-

cially for Filipina women (Vergara, 2000). Some scholars argue that the women who enter the industry are in search of a partner “who will save them from their life of poverty and oppression”, idealizing the American man as their “knight in shining armour” (Langevin & Belleau, 2000, p. 92), when in reality (they argue) they are being put at a great risk of human trafficking and domestic violence. Others contend that this industry as an opportunity for women to take charge of their lives and gain empowerment, with the chance to improve their socioeconomic position. Women are able to forgo working years in servitude, struggling to make ends meet and support their families, by entering a marriage that is already economically sound.

It is clear through literature reviews and current research that the men who utilize the broker agencies tend to hold conservative, traditional values, which they expect their wives to share. Some Filipina women interviewed found that the traditional lifestyle expected from their husbands actually helps them stay connected to their own culture, which provides comfort amid the discomfort of moving away from their home country (Demanarig & Acosta, 2016). However other women find this creates unequal power distributions within the marriage, with women feeling unable to express themselves and their own goals (Philippines Women Centre of B.C, 2000, p. 52). Differing reports show that some women find real love through the mail-order marriage industry (Demanarig & Acosta, 2016, p. 12), while others regret participating (Philippines Women Centre of B.C, 2000, p. 54).

Ultimately, what is undebatable, is that the mail-order marriage industry feeds into stereotypes which promotes racism and commodification of Filipina women who seek to improve their lives abroad through transnational marriages. Agency brokers “appear to be sympathetic to men fed up with the women’s movement” (Langevin & Belleau, 2000, p. 94) by advertising women as old-fashioned, traditional, and eager to pleasure their husbands with their sexual prowess (Starr & Adams, 2016). This stereotyping is not only damaging to Filipina women, but particularly Filipina women who embark on an unknown journey across continents to improve their lives, the lives of their children, and their family back home. Nicole Constable, author of the paper “Brides, Maids and Prostitutes: Reflections of the Study of ‘Trafficked’ Women” (2006), provides an exceptional point of view, stating “the terms ‘trafficking’ and ‘mail order bride’ are linked to certain assumptions about women’s victim status and their commodification. They fit with and reinscribe pre-existing demeaning images of Asian women as submissive ‘lotus blossoms’ or sly ‘dragon ladies’. It is thus important to ask whether those we write about identity with the label we use, and if not, what are the implications of using them anyways?” (Constable, 2006, pp. 11-12). With this, Constable argues that the commodification of the women ultimately positions them as “victims”, highlighting an assumption of structural inequalities within their marriages, as well as undermines their own personal choice to participate (Constable, 2006, p. 14).

In conclusion, further research with the women who participate in the mail-order industry is needed to provide more clarity of their experiences to guide future legislation that can address immigration policies and the concerns of human trafficking to ensure the safety of the women who make the choice to enter transnational marriages.



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