

### The Marriage Trap

By Nancy Traver - Chicago Tribune

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For a number of immigrant brides, life in the States comes with high stakes.

The woman was a divorced single mother bringing up a young daughter in Manila when she received an e-mail from an online marriage broker saying that a "good, kind, honest American man" seeking a wife wanted to meet her. She was thrilled.

After meeting once, the two married in May 2002 and, six months later, the woman moved into her new husband's home on an isolated country road in rural Indiana.

"After one week, he changed a lot. I was confused. He unplugged the phone when he went out so I couldn't call anyone," she recounts, asking that her name be withheld because she fears retaliation from the man.

He called her obscene names, forced her to have sex on demand, withheld money and forbade her to call family members in the Philippines. When she complained, he threatened to withdraw his petition on her behalf for a residency permit that would enable her to remain legally in the United States.

Calling on help from a woman friend, she managed to escape with her daughter. They took a train to Chicago, where they moved into a shelter for battered women.

Officials who work with immigrant women in Chicago-area shelters say the story is not unusual. Foreign women make contact over the Internet with American men who bring them here and sometimes some of the men abuse them, experts say. Some men specifically look for wives in countries in which girls and women are expected to be passive and submissive toward their husbands.

"It's terrifying for these women," says Sherizaan Minwalla, staff attorney at the Midwest Immigrant & Human Rights Center in Chicago. "They don't know the language, they're isolated and alone, they don't have friends, they don't know the legal system here and they don't have

any money."

At least two women who entered the country through online marriage brokers have been killed by their husbands, both in Washington state. One of them, Susana Blackwell, a Filipina, was in the process of obtaining a divorce from her abusive husband when he arrived at a Washington courthouse in 1995 and shot and killed her and two of her friends.

In another case, Anastasia King came to Washington from Kyrgyzstan in the former Soviet Union. After her husband abused her, she returned to Kyrgyzstan in an attempt to end the marriage. Her husband followed her, persuaded her to accompany him back to the U.S. and killed her upon their arrival in Washington in 2000.

Regulations sought

The cases led the Washington legislature to pass a bill in 2002 regulating international marriage brokers.

Sen. Maria Cantwell and Rep. Rick Larsen, both Democrats from Washington, rewrote the state law and put it before Congress in July 2003. The International Marriage Broker Regulation Act would require brokers operating in the United States to obtain information about a client's (a U.S. citizen or legal permanent resident who uses the services of an international marriage broker) marital and criminal pasts and provide that information to a prospective bride who seeks to contact the client.

Brokers who violate the law would be fined up to \$20,000.

The proposed law says that if a foreigner applies for a fiance visa at any U.S. consulate, a consular official must explain, in the language of the applicant, that domestic violence is illegal in the United States.

The U.S. official also is required to explain protective orders, crisis hotlines, free legal advice and shelters that are available to victims of domestic violence.

Also, the official must discuss the Violence Against Women Act, passed by Congress in 1994. Under this law, when an immigrant marries a legal U.S. resident, if he or she commits a crime against the applicant, the foreign national may file for legal status here as an individual. The law also protects dependent children.

Rep. Jan **Schakowsky** (D-Ill.) supports the proposed legislation that would regulate international marriage brokers.

"Many immigrant women, including those who may have come here through international marriage brokers, find themselves in abusive homes with no place to turn in order to escape the violence," she said in an interview. "We must expand current protections."

A 1999 study by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, now called the U.S.

Citizenship and Immigration Services, a bureau of the federal Department of Homeland Security, found there were about 200 for-profit international marriage broker services operating online in the U.S. About 4,000 to 6,000 marriages take place every year through the online services, according to the 1999 study.

Most international marriage brokers would say their businesses are legitimate; they say many Americans have met life partners online.

Elena Petrova operates Russian Brides Cyber Guide, an international Web site for men seeking Russian wives. Petrova, who is based in Australia, says the process of obtaining a man's criminal and marital history and then translating it into Russian would be too time consuming and expensive.

She has launched a petition in St. Petersburg, Russia, to oppose the proposed U.S. law that would regulate online services. She also said the 1999 study by the INS, now the USCIS, which reported 200 online international marriage brokers is outdated; instead, she estimates there are at least 1,000 online services in the United States.

### Illegal actions suspected

Some victim advocates consider the online brokers a legalized form of international trafficking and sexual slavery.

Sandy Davenport, director of Friends of Battered Women and Their Children, a Chicago non-profit counseling and support service, says three immigrant women--from Romania, Pakistan and a Somalia--have come to the agency in the past 18 months seeking protection from abusive spouses.

"Typically, the woman has no contact with anyone. She's not even allowed to go shopping or leave the apartment without him--virtually, she's his prisoner," Davenport says. "He chooses her clothing, takes her to church, tells her what to cook, won't let her make phone calls. He's destroyed her sense of self. She becomes very confused about who she is."

Davenport says there are many more cases of foreign women suffering abuse by their spouses than the three who sought help from her agency.

"If we see three here, imagine how many more there are who don't get help," she says.

Chicago-area shelters help their clients get legal advice from immigration attorneys who are well versed in federal law.

The woman from Manila has applied for a green card under the Violence Against Women Act. She has not yet filed for a divorce in Cook County, as that would alert her husband that she is living in the Chicago area. The district attorney's office where her husband lives confirms that he has been charged twice with misdemeanor battery against his first wife; he served 30 days in jail and was ordered to undergo counseling and two years' probation, according to the district

attorney's office.

Law offers protections

The U.S. Department of Justice also began issuing in 2002 T visas, created under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000.

The law protects women, children and men who are the victims of human trafficking and trapped in modern-day slaverylike situations such as forced prostitution. Victims issued a T visa may remain in the U.S. for three years while the crimes against them are being investigated; after three years in T status, they may apply for permanent residency.

Cleo Kung, an attorney with the Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago, has filed several petitions on behalf of immigrant women under the Violence Against Women Act, passed by Congress in 1994. Under the act, a battered spouse married to a U.S. citizen may file for permanent residency as an individual; while the USCIS studies the application, the battered spouse may remain in the country for two years or more.

"If she holds a valid green card, she can petition by herself and not rely on her abusive husband," Kung says.

Kung, who speaks Mandarin, says she has helped many immigrant women from China.

"In these situations, he has all the power and he speaks English," she says. "Chinese victims don't want to go to shelters. They don't speak English. They find the environment very frightening and the whole concept of a shelter is very alien to them."

Many officials who work with immigrants say women will brave a foreign culture, a language barrier and other risks to come to the United States. Because they are so eager to immigrate, they may not get to know their American boyfriends as well as they should, says Elsie Sy-Niebar, assistant to the commissioner at the Chicago Department of Human Services.

Sy-Niebar is from the Philippines and knows many Filipinas who have immigrated to the U.S.

"America is considered the greatest country in the world and many people want to get here, by hook or by crook," she says. "The quickest way to come is to get married."

Sy-Niebar said that when a Filipina finds an American boyfriend, "She is immediately somebody, like a trophy, like she's found a pot of gold."