Something Borrowed, Something (Black and) Blue
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The business of matching American men with foreign women looking for a better life is booming, thanks largely to Internet operations that promise love and companionship for both.

In many cases, that's exactly what each finds. But growing evidence also suggests that some "mail-order brides" in the United States are suffering from physical, sexual and psychological abuse.

An estimated 15,000 women, some with children in tow, put their trust in these businesses each year and enter the United States to join American husbands. Success stories are easily found; Web sites that profit from international matchmaking trumpet them.

But the sales pitch isn't all about finding true love. As one site chillingly boasts, a "Russian woman will rarely leave a bad (really bad) husband because of the fear that she won't find another one. For many years, the state and men have been oppressing them, and they don't think much about themselves."

That kind of message, painting would-be brides as docile, compliant and uncomplaining, is raising fears that these businesses are appealing to men no woman should be saddled with - those with a history of violence and abuse.

Adding to the danger is the vulnerability of many of the women. Many turn to international marriage brokers (or IMBs) to find an American husband who will help them escape poor economic and social conditions in their home countries. Often they speak little or no English, are much younger than the men, and have no idea what the customers are being led to expect of them.

And how are these women being marketed? IMB Web sites offer men dozens of images of so-called "traditional" women who are "eager to serve and please." Some even allow customers to put women's profiles into an online shopping cart. Others organize romance tours for men to preview hundreds of women in person at events held in different cities.

The flawed expectations cut both ways. Just as many of the men think they are getting a more traditional bride than they can find in the United States, the women assume their American husbands will be more progressive and egalitarian than eligible men at home. That dynamic can result in tragic mismatches that would-be brides are in no position to predict before leaving home.

The risks are not just theoretical. Two young women were murdered in Washington state by abusive husbands they had met through IMBs, prompting the state to pioneer industry regulation in 2002. Two years later, a Ukrainian-born woman successfully sued an IMB after the violent husband it had paired her with beat her for hours (he was charged with attempted murder) and misled her to believe she had no choice but to stay in the marriage and endure the abuse.

At least a dozen cases of mail-order-bride murders or attempted murders and scores of abuse cases have come to light in recent years, and many similar cases likely have escaped public attention.

Domestic violence is not the only risk. A senior State Department official has called the potential for human trafficking through seemingly legitimate marriage brokers "real and serious." Among the fears is that brokered marriages may be a convenient method of importing housecleaners or sexual servants.

Congress has begun to take action. The International Marriage Broker Regulation Act of 2005 (IMBRA), signed earlier this year by President Bush, is a solid first step.

The law prohibits IMBs from profiling girls under age 18. It also requires that they search sex offender registries and give prospective brides the results, along with other background information supplied by the client; obligates brokers to tell women about the rights and resources available to all domestic violence
victims in this country; requires the U.S. government to share with the foreign fiancee the criminal background check it performs on any American trying to get a visa for a foreigner; and makes it illegal for Americans to simultaneously seek visas for multiple fiancees.

For now, IMBRA needs to be fully implemented and enforced. Legitimate marriage brokers have nothing to fear from the new law.

The next step is to raise awareness about the unique risks and dangers these women face, and to improve their access to current legal and social supports. Solid research is also needed on the prevalence of violence in brokered marriages. In addition, we know less than we should about the industry or the size, structure or business practices of particular IMBs, including whether a firm engages in deceptive marketing, how it recruits foreign-born women, or what contracts it requires women to sign.

The women take it on faith that their prospective husbands won’t hurt them. We should not.

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Other Publications by the Authors

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