



WHITE PAPER: Unhappily Ever After: The plight of child and mail-order brides

Introduction

The institution of marriage can be found in every society throughout the world. Historically, there was a near universal stress on the necessity of marriage; while to not marry was considered unnatural and subject to contempt or ridicule.¹ For example, in ancient Israel every healthy person was expected to marry, those who were single were despised; in ancient Rome, laws were passed compelling people to marry, while unmarried persons were financially penalized; in imperial China, marriage was strongly encouraged and single persons received very little respect.²

In the 21st Century, marriage remains a commonplace occurrence in one's life. In developed and westernized parts of the world, marriage is typically viewed as a celebratory event associated with love and romance and starting a family. Once married, one imagines a happily-ever-after life. These positive expectations and associations seem so natural and well-justified that it is hard to believe that marriage is often experienced quite differently. In fact, our present associations with marriage are relatively new and are by no means universal.

Rather than originating from love and free-will, the origin of marriage is one of economics. Before the 16th Century, not only was romantic love not expected, it was widely considered irrelevant. Women were pawns in an economic exchange between men used to perpetuate wealth and power and to secure alliances not only between families, but sometimes entire nations.³ The historical institution of marriage promoted and perpetuated vast inequalities and power imbalances between men and women.⁴ Women were viewed as the property of men – of fathers and husbands, even of brothers and uncles. Marriage was also understood in terms of economic duty and responsibility; it was the husband's duty to support his wife and the wife's duty to reproduce and work for her husband, who maintained power and control over the family.⁵

It wasn't until the mid-20th Century that societies, both east and west, began to utilize the concepts of human rights and personal happiness to advocate for free-will and equality within marriage. Article 16 of the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states: "Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are

¹ Edward Westermarck and Martin White. *The History of Human Marriage Vol 1 and Vol. 2.* 1921.

<http://www.questia.com/library/book/the-history-of-human-marriage-vol-1-by-edward-westermarck.jsp>
<http://www.questia.com/library/book/the-history-of-human-marriage-vol-2-by-edward-westermarck-martin-white.jsp>

² Hirschfeld

³ Erwin J. Haeberle. *The Sex Atlas.* Magnus Hirschfeld Archive for Sexology. 1981.

http://www2.hu-berlin.de/sexology/ATLAS_EN/html/marriage_and_the_family.html

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Edward Westermarck and Martin White. *The History of Human Marriage Vol 1 and Vol. 2.* 1921.

<http://www.questia.com/library/book/the-history-of-human-marriage-vol-1-by-edward-westermarck.jsp>
<http://www.questia.com/library/book/the-history-of-human-marriage-vol-2-by-edward-westermarck-martin-white.jsp>

entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.”⁶ The article also states “that marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.”⁷

Contrary to these newly articulated notions, marriage historians have noted that it will take more than a couple of decades to rewrite a marital playbook that is thousands of years old.⁸ The institutions of child marriage and mail-ordered brides are two examples of remnants of marriage past. Men who practice these types of antiquated marriages adamantly resist and reject contemporary notions of marriage as a partnership of equals based upon mutual love and free-will. The practices of child marriage and mail-order brides rely upon the historical, social and cultural assumptions and beliefs that support marriage as an economic transaction, whereby a woman, or girl, is merely an object for exchange between one man and another.⁹

These practices inflict great harm upon women and girls. Child marriage traps young girls in relationships that deprive them of their childhood and education while making them vulnerable and at risk for abuse, disease and even death; while mail-order brides, who “consent” to marriage and may view it as the promise of a better and happier future, also face similar fates.¹⁰ As domestic violence remains an international concern in both child and mail-order bride marriages, marriage for these women and girls is often nothing less than slavery, their lives revolving around a series of physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse.¹¹

Child Brides

Child marriage traces its roots back to ancient Greece when men in their thirties often married girls still in adolescence. These girls, under complete ownership of their father, had no say in the matter. It was the prerogative of a girl’s father to arrange the most advantageous marriage. Even as norms about marriage changed in subsequent centuries to include, fathers were still able to control the marriage of their young daughters by coaxing the necessary consent out of them – regardless of their age.¹² In these cases, the age of the bride was not a cause for concern and the notion of ‘child bride’ or ‘child marriage’ did not exist. Today, however, in accordance to Article I of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, child marriage refers to any marriage of a child younger than 18 years old.¹³ Following, if a girl under 18 were to marry, her marriage would be considered forced since minors are deemed incapable of giving consent due to a lack of understanding.¹⁴ Moreover, there is now a recognition that child marriage

⁶ United Nations. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. 1948.

<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Cynthia Kling. *I Don’t: A Contrarian History of Marriage*. Huffington Post. August 6, 2008.

<http://www.alternet.org/module/printversion/94044>

⁹ Erwin J. Haeberle. *The Sex Atlas*. Magnus Hirschfeld Archive for Sexology. 1981.

http://www2.hu-berlin.de/sexology/ATLAS_EN/html/marriage_and_the_family.html

¹⁰ International Women’s Health Program. *Til Death Do Us Part: Understanding the Sexual and Reproductive Health Risks of Early Marriage*. http://iwhp.sogc.org/index.php?page=early-marriage&hl=en_US

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Erwin J. Haeberle. *The Sex Atlas*. Magnus Hirschfeld Archive for Sexology. 1981.

http://www2.hu-berlin.de/sexology/ATLAS_EN/html/marriage_and_the_family.html

¹³ Foundation for Women’s Health, Research and Development (FORWARD). *Child and Forced Marriage*.

www.forwarduk.org.uk/key-issues/child-marriage

¹⁴ Department of Justice Canada. *Annotated Bibliography on Comparative and International Law relating to Forced Marriage*. March 11, 2009. www.justice.gc.ca/eng/pi/pad-rpad/rep-rap/mar/chap1.html

involves varying degrees of force, coercion or deception, ranging from emotional pressure by family or community members to abduction and imprisonment.¹⁵

Nations around the world have come to view child marriage as a manipulative and harmful practice akin to slavery. As a result, many countries have instituted laws making marriage without consent illegal. In addition, as of December 2008, 193 countries have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, including every member of the United Nations except the United States and Somalia.^{16 17} Yet there are still many countries that continue to participate in the practice of child marriage, thus forcing millions of girls to undergo this form of slavery.¹⁸

At first Fatoumata of Mali ran away and moved from friend's house to friend's house hiding. But her brothers went to look for her, and when they found her, they gave her a "good beating." They tied her up. They delivered her at age 15 to her husband feet and hands bound, legs held apart so he could consummate the marriage. She tried several more times to escape then finally accepted her fate. She gave birth to a boy who died a year later.¹⁹

It is difficult to determine the number of child marriages because many are unregistered and unofficial, but there are an estimated 51 million child brides worldwide; and 100 million girls will be married before age 18 in the next ten years.²⁰ The majority of child marriages occur in West and East Africa and in South Asia,²¹ with Niger having the highest rate of child marriage in the world – 77 percent of girls are married before the age of 18.²² Often, girls as young as 8 or 10 years old are forced to be married, often to older men.²³ Worldwide, an estimated 3,500 girls marry each day before their 15th birthday and another 21,000 before they are 18.²⁴

Causes of Child Marriage

Poverty and Economics. Poverty is one of the major factors underpinning child marriage.²⁵ Almost all countries in which more than 50 percent of girls are married before the age of 18 have a Gross Domestic

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Amnesty International. *Children's Rights. Convention on the Rights of the Child*. 2007.

http://www.amnestyusa.org/children/crn_faq.html

¹⁷ Ratify Now. *Ratify Now FAQ*. <http://ratifynow.org/ratifynow-faq/>

A convention, or treaty, is a legally binding document between two or more countries. A human rights convention is a treaty that deals specifically with human rights. A country that signs the Convention becomes a signatory, and a country that ratifies the convention becomes a States Party. Becoming a signatory qualifies the state (nation) to proceed toward ratification, and establishes an obligation to refrain from any acts that violate the principles of the Convention. Becoming a states party (ratifying nation) means that the country agrees to be legally bound by the treaty. If a nation both signs and ratifies at the same time, it is said to "ascend".

¹⁸ BBC World Service. *Article 16: Right to marriage and family and to equal rights of men and women during and after marriage*. www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/people/features/ihavearightto/four_b/casestudy_art16.shtml

¹⁹ "Too Young to Wed: Child Marriage in Their Own Words: International Center for Research on Women." www.icrw.org

²⁰ USAID Women in Development. *Child Marriage: Overview*. March 11, 2009. www.usaid.gov/our_work/cross-cutting_programs/wid/dg/child_marriage.html

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Reuters Foundation AlertNet. *Big risks for rising number of child brides-report*. September 2, 2008.

www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/L4289355.htm

²⁵ UNICEF. *Early Marriage Child Spouses*. March 2001. Page 6. www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/digest7e.pdf

Product (GDP) per capita under \$2,000 per year.²⁶ In West Africa, as a whole, a recent UNICEF study shows that economic hardship is encouraging a rise in child marriage, even among some population groups that do not normally practice it.²⁷

Where poverty is acute, a young girl may be regarded as an economic burden and her marriage to a much older – sometimes even elderly – man is a family survival strategy.²⁸ Parents who cannot provide for the basic needs of their children may give a young daughter in marriage so they have one less mouth to feed.²⁹ In addition, a global food crisis is making matters worse by pushing more families to send young daughters into marriage to deal with poverty.³⁰

*Rebeca is from Bangladesh. Her family did not consider her husband to be a particularly good match for her. But they agreed to the wedding because they were desperately poor, and he was willing to waive the customary dowry requirement. So at 14, Rebeca was forced to leave school to marry a 39-year-old man who had been married twice before. She did not consent to the marriage and was appalled by the age of her husband.*³¹

A daughter may be the only commodity a family has left to be traded and sometimes girls can be used as currency to settle debts.³² For example, the monetary value of bride price – or bride wealth – in Africa is linked with both marriage and poverty. Bride price is a sum, either in cash or kind, used to purchase a bride for her labor and fertility.³³ In Niger, where there has been a significant decline in slave labor, child brides are used as a viable replacement: husbands are known to force their child brides into domestic slave labor.³⁴ In the context of poverty and declining slave labor markets, the practice of exchanging a girl for money, not only encourages early marriage, it renders girls an object of economic transaction whereby their parents attain greater financial stability and their husbands acquire slave labor.³⁵

Lack of Education. Many studies have shown that child marriage is universally associated with low levels of schooling. Illiteracy and lack of education mean many girls and their families see few alternatives for the future. Uneducated girls often lack the life skills and self-confidence to be economically independent and so, feel they have no other choice than child marriage.³⁶ Neither parents, nor girls, are educated enough to realize the tremendous risks of child marriage. In addition, the cyclical nature of child marriage causes low levels of education and life skills for the girls' children. After

²⁶ International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). *Child Marriage in Developing Countries*. Sept. 14, 2005. Page 3. www.icrw.org/docs/speeches/9-14-05%20Child%20Marriage%20State%20Dept.pdf

²⁷ UNICEF. *Early Marriage Child Spouses*. March 2001. Page 6. www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/digest7e.pdf

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ World Vision. *Before She's Ready: 15 Places Girls Marry by 15*. 2008. Page 5.

[www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/early-marriage.pdf/\\$file/early-marriage.pdf](http://www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/early-marriage.pdf/$file/early-marriage.pdf)

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ "Too Young to Wed: Child Marriage in Their Own Words" International Center for Research on Women. www.icrw.org

³² Foundation for Women's Health, Research and Development (FORWARD). *Child and Forced Marriage*. www.forwarduk.org.uk/key-issues/child-marriage

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Barbara M. Cooper. *Marriage in Maradi: Gender and culture in a Hausa Society in Niger, 1900-1989*. Oxford: James Currey and Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. 1997.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ World Vision. *Before She's Ready: 15 Places Girls Marry by 15*. 2008. Page 10.

[www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/early-marriage.pdf/\\$file/early-marriage.pdf](http://www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/early-marriage.pdf/$file/early-marriage.pdf)

marriage, young girls' access to formal and even informal education is severely limited because of domestic burdens, childbearing and family pressures.³⁷

Gender Discrimination. Many societies endorse values that discriminate against girls and women. Gender discrimination is another major cause leading toward child marriage. Girls are socialized to assume low status, while boys are socialized into rigid roles to take charge of females.³⁸ In addition, girls may be married young to ensure obedience and subservience within their husbands' households and to maximize their childbearing.³⁹ This devaluation of girls reinforces many of the factors driving child marriage, including lack of education and practices such as the bride price.⁴⁰ A lack of role models also compounds discrimination. In many communities, girls have no one to emulate and show them alternative paths they may take in life outside of child marriage.⁴¹

Lack of Law Enforcement. Laws prohibiting child marriage exist in most countries, addressing minimum age and consent, but they are rarely enforced in developing nations.⁴² Child marriage violates a myriad of rights, including the right to equality on grounds of sex and age; the right to marry and start a family; the right to life; the right to the highest attainable standard of health; the right to education and development; and the right to be free from slavery that are guaranteed in the following United Nations' documents:

- the Convention on the Rights of the Child⁴³
- the Convention on the Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages⁴⁴

³⁷ UNICEF. *Child Marriage and the Law: Legislative Reform Initiative Paper Series*. January 2008. Page 36.

www.unicef.org/policyanalysis/files/Child_Marriage_and_the_Law.pdf

³⁸ World Vision. *Before She's Ready: 15 Places Girls Marry by 15*. 2008. Page 5.

[www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/early-marriage.pdf/\\$file/early-marriage.pdf](http://www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/early-marriage.pdf/$file/early-marriage.pdf)

³⁹ UNIFEM. *Gender Advocacy in Afghanistan*. September 2005. Page 1.

www.irandokht.com/images/GAT_Final6.pdf

⁴⁰ World Vision. *Before She's Ready: 15 Places Girls Marry by 15*. 2008. Page 15.

[www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/early-marriage.pdf/\\$file/early-marriage.pdf](http://www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/early-marriage.pdf/$file/early-marriage.pdf)

⁴¹ Ibid, Page 16.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ UNICEF. *Early Marriage Child Spouses*. Innocenti Digest No. 7. March 2001. Page 3.

www.reliefweb.int/library/documents/2001/unicef_earlymarriage_07mar.pdf

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has been ratified by all countries with the exception of the United States and Somalia. A number of articles within the CRC hold relevance to child marriage, where...the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration, including: Article 19: The right to protection from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parents, guardian, or any other person. Article 24: The right to health; and to access to health services; and to be protected from harmful traditional practices. Articles 28 and 29: The right to education on the basis of equal opportunity. Article 34: The right to protection from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. Article 36: The right to protection from all forms of exploitation prejudicial to any aspect of the child's welfare.

<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>

⁴⁴ Ibid.

The Convention on the Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages Article 1: No marriage shall be legally entered into without the full and free consent of both parties, such consent to be expressed by them in person...as prescribed by law. Article 2: States Parties to the present Convention shall ... specify a minimum age for marriage ("not less than 15 years" according to the nonbinding recommendation accompanying this Convention). No marriage shall be legally entered into by any person under this age, except where a competent authority has granted a dispensation as to age, for serious reasons, in the interests of the intending spouses...Article 3: All marriages shall be registered...by the competent authority.

<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/recommendation.htm>

- and the Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery⁴⁵

Despite numerous national laws and international agreements prohibiting child marriage, millions of girls in the developing world are married, and as a result, denied the ordinary experiences of childhood and adolescence.⁴⁶

Culture. Cultural traditions are powerful factors driving child marriage in Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Central America.⁴⁷ In fact, child marriage predominates in traditional societies around the world where the desires and needs of parents and the community may override considerations for the individual development and well-being of the girl child.⁴⁸ In many cultures, the value of virginity at marriage is so high that families have their daughters marry at or before puberty in order to uphold family honor and to avoid the risk of pregnancy outside of marriage.⁴⁹ In addition, in many cultures the status of the family is connected with the success of the children. As such, a daughter's marriage often represents her success and in cultures where childbearing are associated with success and respect, social pressures push girls to have children early.⁵⁰

Concern about the Protection of Girls. In many families in many cultures, marriage may be seen as a way to provide male guardianship for their daughters, protect them from sexual assault, and to avoid pregnancy outside marriage.⁵¹ Many parents expect that married life will shield girls from exposure to strangers or rape and other attacks. In places where life expectancy is short, some parents marry off daughters hoping to provide them with stability before their own deaths.⁵² In addition, parents may fear that a girl who becomes pregnant outside of marriage will lose respect and fail to secure a husband later, or that her bride price will decrease.⁵³

Consequences of Child Marriage

Poor Health. When a child bride is married, she is likely to be forced into sexual activity with her husband. Forced sex causes skin and tissue damage that makes a female more susceptible to contracting sexually transmitted infections.⁵⁴ She has little or no say in protecting herself against pregnancy or

⁴⁵ Ibid.

The Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery includes in the institutions and practices similar to slavery: Article 1 (c): Any institutions and practices whereby a woman without the right to refuse, is promised or given in marriage on payment of a consideration in money or in kind to her parents, guardian, family... <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/slavetrade.htm>

⁴⁶ International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). *Forum on Child Marriage in Developing Countries. Remarks by Dr. Geeta Rao Gupta.* September 14, 2005. Page 2. www.icrw.org/docs/speeches/9-14-05%20Child%20Marriage%20State%20Dept.pdf

⁴⁷ World Vision. *Before She's Ready: 15 Places Girls Marry by 15.* 2008. Page 12.

[www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/early-marriage.pdf/\\$file/early-marriage.pdf](http://www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/early-marriage.pdf/$file/early-marriage.pdf)

⁴⁸ Broken Bodies – Broken Dreams. *Child Marriage.* <http://brokendreams.wordpress.com/2006/09/12/child-marriage-part-2/>

⁴⁹ World Vision. *Before She's Ready: 15 Places Girls Marry by 15.* 2008. Page 12.

[www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/early-marriage.pdf/\\$file/early-marriage.pdf](http://www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/early-marriage.pdf/$file/early-marriage.pdf)

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ UNICEF. *Child Protection Information Sheet: Child Marriage.* May 2006. Page 1.

www.unicef.org/protection/files/Child_Marriage.pdf

⁵² World Vision. *Before She's Ready: 15 Places Girls Marry by 15.* 2008. Page 8.

[www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/early-marriage.pdf/\\$file/early-marriage.pdf](http://www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/early-marriage.pdf/$file/early-marriage.pdf)

⁵³ Ibid, Page 18.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

diseases, and her husband may be sexually active outside the marriage.⁵⁵ As a result, child brides suffer vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. Being young and female in Africa is a major risk factor for infection and young girls are being infected at a considerably disproportional rate to that of boys.⁵⁶ In fact, the greatest risk is the child bride contracting HIV/AIDS from her husband because he is often considerably older and more sexually experienced.⁵⁷

Because adolescent females are not yet fully developed emotionally and physically, pregnancy and childbirth are often life threatening. Child brides are likely to become pregnant at an early age and there is a strong correlation between the age of a mother and maternal mortality.⁵⁸ Research findings indicate that younger adolescents have a higher risk of delivering babies with low birth weight and delivering prematurely than older adolescents and persons who are 20 to 34.⁵⁹ In addition, girls aged 11-13 are five times more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth than women aged 20-24, and girls aged 15-19 are twice as likely to die.⁶⁰

While good prenatal care reduces the risk of childbirth complications, many young wives are unable to access health services because of distance, fear, expense or the need for permission from a spouse or in-laws.⁶¹ These barriers increase the risks of maternal complications and mortality for pregnant adolescents.⁶²

Obstetric fistula is one of the most devastating consequences for child brides, with more than 2 million girls and young women affected by this treatable and preventable reproductive health complication.⁶³ Fistula is a health risk commonly associated with child marriage because of the mother's physical immaturity at the time of childbirth. A girl whose pelvis and birth canal are not fully developed at the time of delivery often endures labor that lasts for many hours or days, creating tears of the vagina, bladder and rectum, causing uncontrollable leakage of urine or feces.⁶⁴ These girls and women are perpetually soiled and live in shame. As a result, they are usually ostracized and many are abandoned or divorced by their husbands.

There is also a clear link between Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and child and early marriages.⁶⁵ Communities that practice FGM are also more likely to practice child marriages and in some FGM practicing communities "FGM is carried out at puberty and then marriages are arranged immediately afterwards."⁶⁶

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Foundation for Women's Health, Research and Development (FORWARD). *Child and Forced Marriage*. www.forwarduk.org.uk/key-issues/child-marriage

⁵⁷ International Women's Health Program. *Early Marriage*. http://iwhp.sogc.org/index.php?page=early-marriage&hl=en_US

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). *Policy Advisory on Child Marriage*. Page 4. www.icrw.org/docs/childmarriage0803.pdf

⁶⁰ Human Rights Defense. *Child Marriage as a Human Rights Issue*. October 19, 2008. www.humanrightsdefence.org/child-marriage-as-an-human-rights-issue.html

⁶¹ Foundation for Women's Health, Research and Development (FORWARD). *Child and Forced Marriage*. www.forwarduk.org.uk/key-issues/child-marriage

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). *Policy Advisory on Child Marriage*. www.icrw.org/docs/childmarriage0803.pdf

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Foundation for Women's Health, Research and Development (FORWARD). *Child and Forced Marriage*. www.forwarduk.org.uk/key-issues/child-marriage

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Denial of Education. While lack of education is a risk factor for girls entering into child marriage, denial of education is also a direct consequence of early marriage.⁶⁷ A lack of education means that young brides often lack knowledge about sexual relations, their bodies and reproduction, exacerbated by the cultural silence surrounding these issues.⁶⁸ This denies the girl the ability to make informed decisions about sexual relations, planning a family and her health.⁶⁹ In addition, the children of young, uneducated mothers are also less likely to attain high levels of education, perpetuating cycles of low literacy and limited livelihood opportunities.⁷⁰

Psychosocial Trauma. Child marriage inflicts an enormous psychological burden on a young girl. Once married, a girl is typically forced to leave behind her family, friends and community and move to her new husband's home.⁷¹ Confinement and the resulting social isolation hinder a girl's ability to forge her own identity and limit her access to services and programs that may benefit her.⁷² In addition, painful early initiation to unwanted sexual activity can cause long-term psychological and emotional trauma.⁷³ For reluctant child brides, "the marriage amounts to legally sanctioned sexual abuse."⁷⁴ Ultimately, child marriage results in loss of childhood and loss of dreams. Young girls forced into marriage are violated and lose the ability to choose how their life is fulfilled.⁷⁵

Poverty. In many developing countries, child marriage is linked with poverty, as both a cause and consequence. Because it affects the poorest in the population, child marriage helps to reinforce the cycles of poverty.⁷⁶ Having children may decrease already scarce resources in a poor family. In fact, child brides are significantly more likely to have more children than women who marry later, while being less able to provide for them.⁷⁷ As they grow older, abandonment and divorce are also common among girls who married very young.⁷⁸ Husbands may also leave a marriage to find work elsewhere, seek additional wives and abandon their young wives.⁷⁹ This often plunges child brides into poverty as they assume sole responsibility for dependent children.⁸⁰

⁶⁷ World Vision. *Before She's Ready: 15 Places Girls Marry by 15*. 2008. Page 12.

[www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/early-marriage.pdf/\\$file/early-marriage.pdf](http://www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/early-marriage.pdf/$file/early-marriage.pdf)

⁶⁸ Foundation for Women's Health, Research and Development (FORWARD). *Child and Forced Marriage*.

www.forwarduk.org.uk/key-issues/child-marriage

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ International Planned Parenthood Federation and the Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls. *Ending Child Marriage: A guide for global policy action*. September 2006. Page 14.

www.unfpa.org/upload/lib_pub_file/662_filename_endchildmarriage.pdf

⁷¹ International Women's Health Program. *Til Death Do Us Part: Understanding the Sexual and Reproductive Health Risks of Early Marriage*. http://iwhPagesogc.org/index.php?page=early-marriage&hl=en_US

⁷² World Vision. *Before She's Ready: 15 Places Girls Marry by 15*. 2008. Page 21.

[www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/early-marriage.pdf/\\$file/early-marriage.pdf](http://www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/early-marriage.pdf/$file/early-marriage.pdf)

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ International Women's Health Program. *Til Death Do Us Part: Understanding the Sexual and Reproductive Health Risks of Early Marriage*. http://iwhPagesogc.org/index.php?page=early-marriage&hl=en_US

⁷⁶ International Planned Parenthood Federation and the Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls. *Ending Child Marriage: A guide for global policy action*. September 2006. Page 15.

www.unfpa.org/upload/lib_pub_file/662_filename_endchildmarriage.pdf

⁷⁷ World Vision. *Before She's Ready: 15 Places Girls Marry by 15*. 2008. Page 24.

[www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/early-marriage.pdf/\\$file/early-marriage.pdf](http://www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/early-marriage.pdf/$file/early-marriage.pdf)

⁷⁸ Irin. *Niger: Where childhood ends on the marriage bed*. Afrik.com. December 19, 2007.

<http://en.afrik.com/article12410.html>

⁷⁹ World Vision. *Before She's Ready: 15 Places Girls Marry by 15*. 2008. Page 25.

[www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/early-marriage.pdf/\\$file/early-marriage.pdf](http://www.worldvision.org/resources.nsf/main/early-marriage.pdf/$file/early-marriage.pdf)

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Abuse. Because girls have low bargaining power in the household, they are more likely to experience violence by an intimate partner.⁸¹ In Peru, for example, where more than half of women report having experienced physical or sexual violence, child marriage increases a woman's chances of being abused.⁸² In addition, child brides are the least likely to take action against this abuse and to believe that it is "justified for a man to beat his wife."⁸³ In Kenya, 36 percent of girls married before 18 believe that a man is sometimes justified in beating his wife.⁸⁴

Mail-Order Brides

The term "mail-order bride" refers to a woman whom a man marries after paying to obtain her contact information from a company.⁸⁵ A transaction takes place, facilitated by a marriage broker, establishing the husband as consumer and wife as commodity. Mail-order marriages can most often be characterized as "servile marriages" wherein the woman is legally bound with no reasonable opportunity for the dissolution of the marriage.⁸⁶ Mail-order brides are similar to child brides in that they are a commodity exchanged in an economic transaction made most often between men; only in the case of mail-order bride arrangements brokers have replaced the father as the facilitator of the transaction.

The practice of mail order marriages originated in 17th Century Europe when agencies published mail-order catalogues selling foreign women to early European settlers seeking wives. The Internet has revolutionized the 21st Century mail-order bride system, making introductions and transactions much faster.

Today, young women and girls from poor families in economically struggling nations are transported from their homes, like products, to men of economically advantaged nations under the supervision of companies known as mail-order bride agencies or international marriage brokers.⁸⁷ The modern mail-order bride industry has successfully grown into a multimillion-dollar business by exploiting the power disparities between men and women and between the rich and the poor.⁸⁸

It is estimated that mail-order bride companies make as much as \$6,000 to \$10,000 per client, with some agencies claiming to serve as many as 15,000 clients per year.⁸⁹ The majority of mail-order bride websites are based in Western countries, overwhelmingly in the United States and United Kingdom.⁹⁰

⁸¹ International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). *Child marriage and domestic violence*. (2007). Page 2. www.icrw.org/docs/2006_cmtoolkit/cm_all.pdf

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ World Population Foundation. International Humanist and Ethical Union. *Stop Child Marriage!* April 1, 2007. www.iheu.org/node/2563

⁸⁴ International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). *Child marriage and domestic violence*. 2007. Page 1. www.icrw.org/docs/2006_cmtoolkit/cm_all.pdf

⁸⁵ Perspective. *Cash on Delivery. The mail-order brides industry exploits women*. www.digitas.harvard.edu/~perspy/issues/2002/nov/mae.html

⁸⁶ Abigail Stepnitz. *Male-ordered: The mail-order bride industry and trafficking in women for sexual and labour exploitation*. The POPPY Project, Eaves for Housing for Women. February 2009. Page 4.

⁸⁷ Kathryn A. Lloyd. *Wives for Sale: The Modern International Mail-Order Bride Industry*. Northwestern Journal of International Law and Business. 2000. Page 341. www.popcenter.org/problems/trafficked_women/PDFs/Lloyd_2000.pdf

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Abigail Stepnitz. *Male-ordered: The mail-order bride industry and trafficking in women for sexual and labour exploitation*. The POPPY Project, Eaves for Housing for Women. February 2009. Page 19. http://www.eaves4women.co.uk/POPPY_Project/Documents/Recent_Reports/Male-ordered.pdf

Brides entering the United States and Canada currently come from Russia, Eastern Europe, Asia and Central America. The largest supplier of brides is the Philippines, which exports an estimated 20,000 women to foreign husbands annually.⁹¹

The mail-order bride industry remains one of the most sexist and degrading businesses operating legally today.⁹² It is an industry designed solely to market and sell human beings, favoring the interests of its paying clients while degrading and exploiting women.⁹³ Whether or not a woman gives her alleged consent does not excuse the fact that she is being bought and sold as a commodity.⁹⁴ Once married and in their new country of residence, mail-order brides face isolation and powerlessness and often experience domestic violence and sexual abuse. Some, like Anastasia King, have been murdered. A Russian in search of the American dream, Anastasia used an online mail-order bride service to meet and marry Indle King, an American businessman. She was unaware that King's former wife, also a mail-order bride, had divorced him citing domestic abuse a few years earlier.⁹⁵ Soon into his second marriage, King began physically abusing Anastasia. When she tried to end the marriage King hired a convicted sex offender to murder his mail-order bride from Russia. At the time of the murder, King was putting in his "order" for "bride number three."⁹⁶

Why do Women become Mail-Order Brides?

Poverty. While proponents of the mail-order bride industry claim that women in these transactions enter willingly and agree to have their information placed in online catalogues, many women feel compelled to do so because of poverty. As such, many women, especially those from poorer nations, feel that a viable option to economic hardship is to become part of a "mail-order" contract.

In the Philippines, for example, unemployment rates, particularly for women, have soared in recent years and gender roles place the burden of household maintenance and family support on women.⁹⁷ As a result, impoverished women must seek survival outside the formal wage economy. For many women, this means the choice between work as a migrant laborer or as a prostitute.⁹⁸ The mail-order bride industry has provided them with an additional option.

The majority of mail-order bride transactions occur between men from wealthy and industrialized economies and women from developing economies.⁹⁹ A mail-order bride becomes financially dependent

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Michele A. Clark. *Mail-order Brides: Exploited Dreams* (TESTIMONY). The Protection Project of the Johns Hopkins University School of International Studies. 2004. <http://www.protectionproject.org/commentary/brides.htm>
Abigail Stepnitz. *Male-ordered: The mail-order bride industry and trafficking in women for sexual and labour exploitation*. The POPPY Project, Eaves for Housing for Women. February 2009. Page 9.

http://www.eaves4women.co.uk/POPPY_Project/Documents/Recent_Reports/Male-ordered.pdf

⁹⁴ Ibid, Stepnitz only.

⁹⁵ Lewis Kamb and Robert L. Jamieson Jr. *Mail-order bride's dream of a better life ends in death*. Seattle Post-Intelligencer. February 2001. <http://www.seattlepi.com/local/brid02.shtml>

⁹⁶ Marielena Zuniga. Soroptimist Best for Women Magazine. *Looking for love in all the wrong places*, June/July/August 2006. Page 13. www.soroptimist.org

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Kathryn A. Lloyd. *Wives for Sale: The Modern International Mail-Order Bride Industry*. Northwestern Journal of International Law and Business. 2000. Page 341.

www.popcenter.org/problems/trafficked_women/PDFs/Lloyd_2000.pdf

⁹⁹ Michele A. Clark. *Mail-order Brides: Exploited Dreams* (TESTIMONY). The Protection Project of the Johns Hopkins University School of International Studies. 2004. <http://www.protectionproject.org/commentary/brides.htm>

on her husband. This economic dependence is what historically characterized marriages arranged by bride price. What results is an unequal power dynamic between man and wife which often leads to abuse.

Stereotypes. Mail-order businesses and brokers often market stereotypes to both men and women and feed unrealistic expectations. Mail-order bride relationships begin when a company travels to an economically troubled country to recruit women for its catalogues or website. Bolstered by the promise of a glamorous life in the United States, companies convince women to list themselves.¹⁰⁰ Many women are pushed into mail-order arrangements not only by poverty and the desire to find a supportive, stable husband, but also because of the Hollywood-tinted visions they've long nurtured. Television and movies give them stereotypical images of American men as treating them better than the men in their own countries. Additionally, deeply ingrained cultural notions of the patriarch providing for his family allow marriage brokers to successfully market the idea of a faithful spouse who will provide for the brides.¹⁰¹ In Singapore, potential brides were described as looking "not for a man of their dreams, but for a man of means."¹⁰²

On the other hand, mail-order bride businesses market stereotypes of women to their paying male customers. Most women are advertised explicitly, in suggestive and submissive poses like wearing towels, posing nude on the hoods of cars, and consuming alcohol.¹⁰³ Infantilization is also a common practice in the promotion of mail-ordered brides; to emphasize their vulnerability and passivity, young girls or women are dressed like children. Women are not only promoted to provide sexual services to their future husband, but also to be docile, faithful, and loving housewives.¹⁰⁴ Mail-order bride businesses aim to market a typified male fantasy: a bride as both the good and bad girl; one who can perform just as well in the bedroom as in the kitchen.¹⁰⁵

There is also significant racial stereotyping of mail-ordered brides fueled by the descriptions and promises made by agencies.¹⁰⁶ Overall, the majority of male consumers desire brides from Eastern Europe, Russia, and Asia. However, studies have shown that men report their preference for Russian women with pale complexions and hair color because they believe they will have a higher level of acceptance when assimilating into Western culture.¹⁰⁷ One site explains that "Russian women 'are much more patient' and tolerant than their Western counterparts" and that "they are more considerate and dependable. They are partners, not competitors."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁰ Kathryn A. Lloyd. *Wives for Sale: The Modern International Mail-Order Bride Industry*. Northwestern Journal of International Law and Business. 2000. Page 15.

¹⁰¹ Michelle J. Anderson. *A License to Abuse: The impact of conditional status on female immigrants*. Yale Law Journal. Vol. 102. 1993. <http://www.law.cuny.edu/faculty-staff/MAnderson/AndersonPublications.html>

¹⁰² Abigail Stepnitz. *Male-ordered: The mail-order bride industry and trafficking in women for sexual and labour exploitation*. The POPPY Project, Eaves for Housing for Women. February 2009. Page 17.

http://www.eaves4women.co.uk/POPPY_Project/Documents/Recent_Reports/Male-ordered.pdf

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Michele A. Clark. *Mail-order Brides: Exploited Dreams (TESTIMONY)*. The Protection Project of the Johns Hopkins University School of International Studies. 2004. <http://www.protectionproject.org/commentary/brides.htm>

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 9 and Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Abigail Stepnitz. *Male-ordered: The mail-order bride industry and trafficking in women for sexual and labour exploitation*. The POPPY Project, Eaves for Housing for Women. February 2009. Page 20.

http://www.eaves4women.co.uk/POPPY_Project/Documents/Recent_Reports/Male-ordered.pdf

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 14.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 15.

¹⁰⁸ Victor Malarek. *The Natashas: Inside the New Global Sex Trade*. Arcade Publishing. 2003. Page 91.

Consequences of Mail-Order Bride Marriages

Isolation and Powerlessness. Many mail-order brides have to adapt to unfamiliar situations, with different cultures and traditions, language, beliefs and family values. Once enticed to leave their home country to begin a new life with a husband in the U.S. or other country, women in the mail-order bride industry are powerless to change their situation. Mail-order brides are relying on their husbands for their immigration status and are typically uninformed and unfamiliar about their new country's laws.

Many women experience complete economic dependence on their husbands. They have little or no resources to take action and often learn that "the situation they are in is not what they were promised or had anticipated."¹⁰⁹ They often lack equal power to demand information on the details of the marriage contract or to find the services and help they need in order to break it. A husband often threatens to deport his mail-order bride and often controls her life. Because no one, not even the mail-order bride companies, track the progress of these women once they reach the United States, these women are often invisible.¹¹⁰

Commodification of Women. At its root, the mail-order bride industry is one based upon the marketing and selling women to men. When a woman enters a mail-order bride marriage, she loses personal autonomy over her life.¹¹¹ Both the marriage broker business and the men using its services view the bride as a commodity. At one site, clients are urged to "Add Olga (#48772) to their cart."¹¹² Another site dismisses the \$10,500 fee as "less than the price of an economy car."¹¹³ Women who are mail-order brides enter a long-term commodification situation that is difficult for them to leave.¹¹⁴

Like all commercial businesses, both the customer's and corporate executive's interests are favored in the mail-order bride industry. The mail-order brides are merely viewed as objects of an economic transaction meant to satisfy customers and financially reward executives. Within such a framework, it is not the quality of marriages made that is important, but the quantity.¹¹⁵ As the paying customers in a mail-order bride transaction, men are of the "satisfaction guaranteed, or your money back" mindset.¹¹⁶ A husband holds the power to return his wife, compromising her immigration status and economic security.¹¹⁷

Violence and Abuse. After finding a spouse through an international marriage broker, the immigrant wife is often economically and psychologically dependent upon her husband, limiting her alternatives in the relationship and placing her at increased risk for domestic violence.¹¹⁸ In an industry where women

¹⁰⁹ Marielena Zuniga. Soroptimist Best for Women Magazine. *Looking for love in all the wrong places*, June/July/August 2006. Page 13. www.soroptimist.org

¹¹⁰ Kathryn A. Lloyd. *Wives for Sale: The Modern International Mail-Order Bride Industry*. Northwestern Journal of International Law and Business. 2000. Page 354. www.popcenter.org

¹¹¹ Ibid. Page 357

¹¹² Andrew Marton. *Brokered brides: Web sites pair American men with Russian women*. Fort Worth Star-Telegram. November 11, 2007. www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1924161/posts

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Kathryn A. Lloyd. *Wives for Sale: The Modern International Mail-Order Bride Industry*. Northwestern Journal of International Law and Business. 2000. Page 358. www.popcenter.org

¹¹⁵ Michele A. Clark. *Mail-order Brides: Exploited Dreams (TESTIMONY)*. The Protection Project of the Johns Hopkins University School of International Studies. 2004. <http://www.protectionproject.org/commentary/brides.htm>

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Abigail Stepnitz. *Male-ordered: The mail-order bride industry and trafficking in women for sexual and labour exploitation*. The POPPY Project, Eaves for Housing for Women. February 2009. Page 13. http://www.eaves4women.co.uk/POPPY_Project/Documents/Recent_Reports/Male-ordered.pdf

¹¹⁸ Kathryn A. Lloyd. *Wives for Sale: The Modern International Mail-Order Bride Industry*. Northwestern Journal of International Law and Business. 2000. Page 358. www.popcenter.org

are advertised, bought, and sold as commodities, the paying customers or future husbands will most likely treat their human purchases as objects to do with as they see fit.

Maria of the Dominican Republic,¹¹⁹ for example, married a U.S. citizen, immigrated to this country and could remain legally in the U.S. provided she stay wedded to her spouse. Soon after, he began to brutalize her physically.

One time I had eight stitches on my head and a gash on the other side of my head and he broke my ribs... he would bash my head against the wall while we had sex. He kept threatening to kill me if I told the doctor what happened.” Afraid of the risk of deportation, Maria endured her husband’s treatment for months. After she finally fled, her spouse demanded that she return to his apartment for her immigration documents. At first, she told him no. Then she realized she had to go because she needed the papers. When she returned, she said, “He beat me on the head. He sat on my stomach. He put a knife to my throat and raped me. Then he threw me naked on the street.”¹²⁰

Brokered brides leave familiar support networks and rely on near-strangers for financial security and immigration status. Without speaking the language or knowledge of the country’s laws, many do not know that they can leave an abusive mate without being deported. Additionally, it is not in the interest of the mail-order bride business to monitor the men who seek their services. Focused on profits, these companies have little incentive to check the criminal and marital records of potential customers.¹²¹

Trafficking. At one end of the spectrum, some view the mail-order business as an international personal ad service used by “consenting adults [and] competent people.”¹²² However, the other end of the spectrum challenges the mail-order business as an international industry that trafficks women.¹²³ When a woman is deceived by stereotypical notions of a romantic Hollywood-like life, bought into marriage, and exploited in sexual and domestic servitude, she has been trafficked.¹²⁴ Although, so-called consensually arranged marriages do not fall within the trafficking rubric, the conditions in which a young bride may find herself once she has entered the marriage may amount to trafficking.¹²⁵

The largely unregulated trade of mail-order brides follows traditional trafficking patterns.¹²⁶ Brides from impoverished countries within the former Soviet Union, Asia and Latin America are sent to paying clients in the United States, Canada, Europe and Japan. These clients, like traffickers, expect a form of

¹¹⁹ Michelle J. Anderson. *A License to Abuse: The impact of conditional status on female immigrants*. Yale Law Journal. Vol. 102. 1993. <http://www.law.cuny.edu/faculty-staff/MAnderson/AndersonPublications.html>

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Michele A. Clark. *Mail-order Brides: Exploited Dreams* (TESTIMONY). The Protection Project of the Johns Hopkins University School of International Studies. 2004. <http://www.protectionproject.org/commentary/brides.htm>

¹²² American Immigration Lawyers Association InfoNet. *INS Mail-order bride report*. March 9, 1999. www.aila.org/content/default.aspx?bc=1016%7C6715%7C16871%7C17119%7C13775

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Abigail Stepnitz. *Male-ordered: The mail-order bride industry and trafficking in women for sexual and labour exploitation*. The POPPY Project, Eaves for Housing for Women. February 2009. Page 5. http://www.eaves4women.co.uk/POPPY_Project/Documents/Recent_Reports/Male-ordered.pdf

¹²⁵ Broken Bodies-Broken Dreams. *Violence Against Women Exposed*. <http://brokendreams.wordpress.com/category/mail-order-brides/>

¹²⁶ Ibid.

repayment for ‘rescuing’ these women from poverty, most often sex and labor.¹²⁷ If mail-order brides refuse to consent to their husbands’ wishes, they are susceptible to violence and immigration complications.¹²⁸ In the most extreme scenario, a mail-order bride client may go so far as to solicit “immigrant women to supply new recruits for prostitution rings.” In this case, he will “hold the bride in debt bondage because he paid for her to immigrate to North America, and then force her to participate in prostitution in order to obtain her freedom.”¹²⁹

Laws to Protect Mail-Order Brides

Abuse, domestic violence, murder and trafficking are issues increasingly drawing international attention and pushing advocates and lawmakers to create legislation to protect mail-order brides. The passage of the International Marriage Broker Regulation Act (IMBRA) of 2005 in the United States, as an example, was a historic step toward protecting the thousands of foreign women who fall prey to the predatory abusers who use international marriage brokers to find their next victims.¹³⁰ IMBRA became federal law in January 2006 attached to the bill to reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). The bill provides foreign women with critical information to protect themselves from violent abuse by men they meet through international marriage brokers.¹³¹

Specifically, the act requires international marriage brokers to:¹³²

- collect the marital and criminal histories of prospective husbands;
- provide female clients, before their names are released to prospective husbands, with advice on their rights in relation to domestic violence and to obtain their written consent to the release of their information;
- advise the prospective husband that he will be subject to a criminal check and to provide the female client with a copy of the background information collected; and
- requires U.S. consular officers to provide information on legal rights regarding domestic violence and resources for protection in the United States.¹³³

On a global level, international regulation is necessary because the forces of supply and demand exist beyond any one country’s national borders. The demand in the U.S., for example, is unaffected by a Filipino law, the “Anti-Mail Order Bride Law,” which criminalizes commercialized international marriage. Mail-order bride agencies in the Philippines, however, continue doing business in breach of that country’s laws and when arrested, use bribery in many cases to settle the problem.¹³⁴

Conclusion and Recommendations

Throughout history, women have long been considered inferior to men and confined to the home where they were viewed as a resource for reproduction and labor with the sole responsibility of managing the household and obeying their husband.¹³⁵ Women were destined to live a life of subservience to men,

¹²⁷ Abigail Stepnitz. *Male-ordered: The mail-order bride industry and trafficking in women for sexual and labour exploitation*. The POPPY Project, Eaves for Housing for Women. February 2009. Page 5.

¹²⁸ Broken Bodies-Broken Dreams. *Violence Against Women Exposed*.

<http://brokendreams.wordpress.com/category/mail-order-brides/>

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Tahirih Justice Center. *Summary of the International Marriage Broker Act*.

[www.tahirih.org/legal/docs/SummaryofIMBRA2005passed\(Final\).pdf](http://www.tahirih.org/legal/docs/SummaryofIMBRA2005passed(Final).pdf)

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Hendrik Hartog. *What Gay Marriage Teaches about the History of Marriage*. April 4, 2004.

<http://hnn.us/articles/4400.html>

being transferred from one man to another during an economic transaction otherwise known as marriage. Marriage was motivated by the need to conserve wealth, power and status and was characterized by gross inequalities and power imbalances.

However, as chronicled in the introduction, notions and meanings of marriage change over time. As social customs and gender expectations change so to do our understandings of marriage. Although marriage is now associated with free-will, love, romance and equality, the practices of child marriage and mail-order brides defy these new notions and remain firmly rooted in ‘traditional’ meanings of marriage.

In one form or another, these outmoded and detrimental marriage practices will survive into the future unless challenged and preventative measures taken to assuage their continued existence. Some recommendations for preventing child and mail-order bride marriages include:

Research, Development and Support. Adequate data must be collected documenting the horrific effects of these practices upon women and girls. Research must be updated regularly in order to inform the most effective means of action – both social and legal.¹³⁶ Adequate resources must then be allocated in order to implement recommended actions. While many governments and local communities want to end child marriage and mail-order bride practices, many countries lack the resources to implement, coordinate and expand efforts to reduce them.¹³⁷ Community-level women’s organizations need support to act as effective advocates and educators, for parents, families and communities.¹³⁸ Policy makers and program planners also could benefit “from improved coordination across countries to share program and advocacy designs, experiences and lessons from their work.”¹³⁹

Access to Education. Education for girls has emerged as the most significant factor in delaying girls’ age at marriage.¹⁴⁰ Higher levels of education significantly decrease the risk of child marriage, with secondary education especially strong in stalling age at marriage until a girl is 18 or older.¹⁴¹ Women who have had little or no education and therefore little or no job prospects, turn to the mail-ordered bride industry, believing that it is their only hope for a better future – especially when media images depict wealthy lifestyles in developed nations.¹⁴²

Governments and community organizations fighting against child marriage and mail-ordered bride practices should keep their focus on education and making parents aware of the benefits of allowing their daughters to go to school. They need to know that education provides alternatives for their daughters that can lead to employment, earnings and an economic future that will benefit not only their daughters, but their family and community as well. Furthermore, research shows that the education of girls and mothers

¹³⁶ Abigail Stepnitz. *Male-ordered: The mail-order bride industry and trafficking in women for sexual and labour exploitation*. The POPPY Project, Eaves for Housing for Women. February 2009. Page 31.

http://www.eaves4women.co.uk/POPPY_Project/Documents/Recent_Reports/Male-ordered.pdf

¹³⁷ International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). *How to end child marriage: Action strategies for prevention and protection*. 2007. Page 4. www.icrw.org/docs/2007-childmarriagepolicy.pdf

¹³⁸ UNICEF. *Early Marriage Child Spouses*. March 2001. Page 16. www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/digest7e.pdf

¹³⁹ International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). *How to end child marriage: Action strategies for prevention and protection*. 2007. Page 4. www.icrw.org/docs/2007-childmarriagepolicy.pdf

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 2.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Abigail Stepnitz. *Male-ordered: The mail-order bride industry and trafficking in women for sexual and labour exploitation*. The POPPY Project, Eaves for Housing for Women. February 2009. Page 13.

http://www.eaves4women.co.uk/POPPY_Project/Documents/Recent_Reports/Male-ordered.pdf

leads to sustained increases of educational attainment from one generation to the next.¹⁴³ It is therefore imperative that we increase girls' access to, enrollment in, and completion of primary and secondary education and vocational training.¹⁴⁴

Income-Generation and Job Opportunities. Because girls who earn wages are less dependent on others for their survival, they are less likely to marry early.¹⁴⁵ Likewise, most women become mail-order brides to escape a life of poverty; they desire a better life and the freedom and opportunity portrayed by mail-order bride industries. If given employment training and job opportunities, women would be less likely to become mail-order brides. It is imperative that women have access to employment opportunities that include skills training, microcredit programs, and job placement services.¹⁴⁶ Jobs should be in safe, non-exploitative environments, governed by labor laws, with reasonable working hours and decent wages.¹⁴⁷

Challenges to Gender Stereotypes and Male Demand. As has been repeatedly noted, gender stereotypes and traditional views of marriage are intimately intertwined with the practices of child marriage and mail-ordered brides. These practices rely on the belief that women must be rescued, protected and provided for by men in exchange for their deferential obedience to them – which often entails forced labor, sexual exploitation and domestic violence.

There are currently no laws that directly address the demand side of the mail-order bride industry. Too often laws and social services focus more heavily on victims' services rather than perpetrators, especially in cases of gendered and sexualized crimes. To this end, more progress needs to be made in educating young men about healthy, consensual relationships, respect for oneself and others, and acceptance of women as equal partners. From a legal standpoint, the economic exchange of women in any capacity should not be tolerated and brokers and customers who engage should be held legally accountable. Until there is a societal shift of views of women as unequal subordinates of men to equal partners in life, the practices of child marriage and mail-ordered brides will continue.

How Soroptimist Works to End Child Marriage and the Mail-Order Bride Industry

Soroptimist is an international volunteer service organization for business and professional women who work to improve the lives of women and girls, in local communities and throughout the world.

Soroptimist clubs undertake a number of different projects to confront local realities facing women and girls. Many projects indirectly help prevent child marriages and mail-order marriages and help women vulnerable to those types of marriages by providing direct aid to women and girls, and giving women economic and educational tools and skills to achieve financial empowerment and independence. As an organization, Soroptimist supports the following programs:

Soroptimists STOP Trafficking. Each year, significant numbers of mail-order brides are recruited through trafficking because broker agencies are connected to commercial sex trafficking operations. Soroptimists launched a public awareness campaign to address the sex trafficking of women and girls in 2007. Soroptimist clubs around the world distribute printed materials, hold community events and panel discussions, partner with non-governmental organizations, negotiate with government legislators, offer direct services to trafficking victims, and engage in media outreach in order to raise awareness about this

¹⁴³ International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). *How to end child marriage: Action strategies for prevention and protection*. 2007. Page 4. www.icrw.org/docs/2007-childmarriagepolicy.pdf

¹⁴⁴ International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). *Policy Advisory on Child Marriage*. www.icrw.org/docs/childmarriage0803.pdf

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). *How to end child marriage: Action strategies for prevention and protection*. 2007. Page 3. www.icrw.org/docs/2007-childmarriagepolicy.pdf

¹⁴⁷ International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). *Policy Advisory on Child Marriage*. Page 6. www.icrw.org/docs/childmarriage0803.pdf

devastating issue. For example, SI Coronado, California attended a presentation given by a local non-governmental organization on sex trafficking and was inspired to start an emergency needs gift card support project for victims. The project started with \$500 in gift cards to purchase bus passes and secure educational support for sex trafficking victims.

Women's Opportunity Awards. The Women's Opportunity Awards program is Soroptimist's major program. The awards improve the lives of women by giving them the resources they need to improve their education, skills, and employment prospects. Many Women's Opportunity Award recipients have overcome enormous obstacles in their quest for a better life, including poverty, domestic violence, substance abuse, and in some cases, trafficking. Additionally, women receiving the award serve as role models for their daughters who will less likely become child or mail-order brides. Each year, more than \$1 million is disbursed through the awards at various levels of the organization to help women achieve their dreams of a better life for themselves and their families. Since the Women's Opportunity Awards program began in 1972, it is estimated that \$20 million has been disbursed and more than 22,500 women have been assisted. In 2007, the Women's Opportunity Awards received the Summit Award from the ASAE & The Center, its highest honor, bestowed on associations that implement innovative community-based programs.

Soroptimist Violet Richardson Award

The Violet Richardson Award is a recognition program for young women ages 14-17 engaged in volunteer action within their communities or schools. The award is given to young women whose volunteer activities make the community and world a better place. This award is not a scholarship and applicants need not be at the top of their class academically or be a star athlete. Rather they must simply be committed to improving the world around them. By honoring young women for their volunteer efforts, this award encourages them to be powerful female agents of change. As a result, the Violet Richardson Award helps ensure that these young women develop a healthy sense of self-esteem and a confident understanding that they are important and valuable members of society—worthy of only the happiest and healthiest of relationships.

Soroptimist Club Grants for Women and Girls. Often the abilities and ambitions of Soroptimist clubs exceed their financial resources. Soroptimist introduced the Soroptimist Club Grants for Women and Girls in 1997 to assist with community projects that improve the lives of women and girls. Each year, grants are given to clubs working on projects that help foster economic independence, provide job skills training and education, and provide women with the resources necessary to move themselves and their families out of poverty. Projects of this type give women economic alternatives to migratory work and mail-order marriages and keep them out of the hands of traffickers. For the 2008-2009 club year, Soroptimist is funding \$175,000 in club grants. Since the program's inception, nearly \$1.6 million has been awarded and clubs have assisted more than 100,000 women and their families.

Clubs have used Soroptimist Club Grants to support projects that raise awareness about trafficking. For example, the members of SI Eastwood City in the Philippines launched a sex trafficking awareness campaign targeted at high school students and teachers in their community. They held an event for over 150 students involving an MTV special narrated by a well-known singer, an open forum, and a pledge to stand up against sex trafficking. The event was immediately covered online and as a result, millions of people joined the pledge.

Several other clubs have developed projects and initiatives that benefit trafficking victims, among them:

- Eight clubs in the Japan Minami region partnered together with the director of the non-governmental organization Asian Women Empowerment Center to organize a seminar on how to stop sex

trafficking. They also launched a signature campaign collection advocating for legislation provisionally titled “Protection of Sex Trafficking Victims Act.”

- SI Gallup, New Mexico launched a campaign and website called “Pennies for Protection.” The campaign aims for 1000 women to donate 1000 pennies to help fund a trafficking victims’ shelter in southern New Mexico.

Soroptimist’s Disaster Grants for Women and Girls. The Soroptimist Disaster Grants for Women and Girls provide financial assistance to regions affected by natural disasters or acts of war. Women and girls are hardest hit by acts of war and natural disasters, and poor women and single mothers—the poorest of the poor—who lack access to support services and aid following disasters are especially vulnerable to traffickers who may be involved in the mail-order bride industry. Following the 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia, for example, there were many documented cases of rape, sexual abuse and trafficking. Many poor women lack the necessary resources to escape acts of war and natural disaster, and because of pre-existing poverty and gender inequality, are less able to recover from their losses and rebuild their lives after disaster has struck. Many of these women and girls are left vulnerable to traffickers and the trafficking industry.

Because relief efforts targeted to women are often overlooked during a crisis, and because women and girls have special needs in times of crisis and disaster, Soroptimist’s Disaster Recovery Fund supports projects that specifically assist women and girls.

Soroptimist International of the Americas is a 501(c)(3) organization. In December 2004, Soroptimist received the Pennsylvania Association of Nonprofit Organizations (PANO) Seal of Excellence for its successful compliance with the Standards for Excellence program. Soroptimist was re-certified in 2007.