



Mail Order Brides: Choice or Constraint?

Hannah Middle

Since the 1980s, “mail order brides” have risen in prevalence. The term refers to women who are advertised and then selected by men for marriage. In today’s information society, characterised by the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), online websites and agencies are the dominant platform to find “love”. Typically, white, Western, older men desire younger, Asian women (Seeking Asian Female, 2016). This piece will focus specifically on brides from the Philippines, as the Philippines is the leading source of mail order brides. Approximately, 20,000 women are exported as brides annually (Lloyd, 2000). Significantly, mail order brides are a unique and to many, a bewildering artefact of global inequality across social structures. Filipino women are constrained by inequality such that they seek a subordinate role as it is preferable to poverty and destitution.

Mail order brides are dependent on ICTs which aid globalisation, marking the era of the information society and expansive migration. Global structural inequalities like poverty and patriarchy are pivotal factors for brides registering to these websites. As a result, the commodification of women in a consumer society emerges. These concepts will be critically evaluated.

Mail order brides in the broadest of terms can be understood as males ‘consuming’ women. In contemporary society, every

aspect of our life is consumed. Western societies are no longer based upon production, rather consumption is at the core. Hence, it can be argued that society itself has been re-organised around this change, giving rise to a consumer society (Bauman, 2005; Grint and Nixon, 2015). Consumer societies are centred around the autonomy of choice (Bauman, 2005, Featherstone, 2007; Grint and Nixon, 2015).

In line with this, mail order bride websites are based around freedom of choice, as men can select the woman they please, in contrast to the women themselves who are to be gazed upon as inanimate objects. This phenomenon is an extension of consumer culture, and the fact that human bodies are not exempt shows how embedded these practices are. Mail order brides elicit emotion and pleasure from their prospective bidders, which allure to people’s desires and dreams (Featherstone, 2007). Therefore, in contemporary consumer society, mail order websites constitute places of consumption, which directly produce physical excitement and pleasure for their male users.

Following from consumerism, there is the commodification of love and intimacy (Bauman, 2003; Barraket, 2006). The brides and “love” are treated like a commodity, as something which can be bought and owned. On an individual level,

this process dehumanises and objectifies brides. More significantly, on a social level, this commodification of women further reinforces patriarchal values and sexism. Hence, it is evident the widespread demeaning effect mail order brides generate.

The effect of globalisation on the rise of mail order brides is imperative. Globalisation, as defined by Held et al (1999, p.2) refers to the increasing “worldwide interconnectedness” which influences all aspects of society, including relationships, technology and economies. Specifically, globalisation impacts migration, as time and space are compressed, resulting in freer movements of people (Harvey, 1989). Subsequently, a marker of globalisation on migration is a rapid upsurge in cross border flows of people (Castles and Miller, 2009). Additionally, advances in ICTs facilitated the rise of globalisation. In turn, mail order bride websites and email systems, enabled communication from other sides of the world, explaining the increase and ease of these marriages. Thus, Filipino brides migrating to the west as a migration pattern, is strongly guided by globalisation.

Pivotal to mail order brides is the wider context of feminization of poverty. Feminization of poverty denotes to the augmenting gap between men and women suffering from poverty. Goldberg (2009) reports women are predominantly poor and living in poverty. For instance, according to Inequality.Org (2020, n.p.) “in 2016, 13.4 percent of women...were living

in poverty, compared to 9.7 percent of adult men”. Reasons women are more probable to be poor include high unemployment rates, social and cultural norms and supporting a child alone. In response to poverty, there is the feminization of survival. Feminization of survival refers to forms of labour which are “built on the backs of women” (Sassen, 2003, p. 2).

The brides are an example of a survival circuit. For instance, brides send remittances back to family members or friends still in the Philippines. Feminization of survival is increasing, as women’s labour becomes imperative to the household, due to growing male unemployment as a result of deindustrialisation, globalisation and mechanisation.

Therefore, choosing to be a mail order bride is an opportunity (albeit one born out of desperation) to gain profit, make a living and escape poverty.

However, this raises the question who is gaining the most from these exchanges? Arguably, it is the host websites which charge a monthly subscription for users to

chat and meet potential brides. Additionally, the Philippines is a country with substantial debt. This is implied on the websites themselves, which to an extent alerts users to the desperation of these women to escape poverty. For instance, ‘Filipino Brides’ (n.d.) explain to users “the Philippines is a poor country”. As such, the government reap the benefits of remittances revenue (Parreñas, 2003; Sassen, 2003). Furthermore, Sassen (2003) notes remittances recently in the



Philippines were the third largest source of foreign exchange.

Extending this point, Parreñas (2003) reports up to 50% of the Philippine population is supported by remittances from migrant workers. Thus, remittances from brides are in the Philippines governmental interest. More deliberately, the Philippine government actively encouraged mail order brides, by approving regulations which made the marriages a contractual agreement (Sassen, 2003). This governmental effort can explain the vast increase in the industry. Subsequently, it is evident the main beneficiary of the transaction is not the brides themselves.

Notably, in regard to poverty, migrant women like mail order brides are frequently not from the poorest class of their society (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003). Demonstrating, whilst poverty is evidently a fundamental factor constituting to mail order brides, rising in prevalence are highly educated brides marrying undereducated and low wage grooms (Thai, 2003). Therefore, there is a new identity of brides forming, challenging the dominant stereotype.

Stemming from the feminization of poverty and survival, we can see the feminization of migration, as innumerable women migrate in search of a better life. The websites themselves recognise the women “don’t have many chances for a decent life” (Filipino Brides, n.d.). Feminization of migration as defined by Castles and Miller (2009) refers to women’s pertinent role in virtually all types and forms of migration. For instance,

around two thirds of Filipino migrant workers are women (Parreñas, 2003). Following the new economics of labour migration approach, “migration is a collective action”, where decisions are made by families or in some cases communities, not simply the individual migrating (Castles and Miller, 2009, p. 20).

Subsequently, a bride’s family is likely to have supported, encouraged or even enforced the marriage. Significantly, this may explain why brides stay in the marriage, regardless of happiness or domestic abuse; to avoid casting embarrassment, shame and disappointment onto their families. Alternatively, migration can relieve brides of the local patriarchal values which dominate in the Philippines. As such, brides remain married in order to hold on to the experience of living with comparatively more freedoms than would otherwise be accessible.

As a consequence, migration should be analysed in terms of social groups, rather than individuals. The feminization of migration is likely to expand, as pressures for a globally integrated world increase. Accordingly, widespread demographic changes in both sending and receiving countries are expected.

Alongside poverty as a driver, women’s subordinate position and Western men’s desire for this is a fundamental factor. Migrant women are portrayed to embody stereotypical and patriarchal feminine qualities, including docility, obedience and a willingness to please (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003; Castles and Miller, 2009). As such, Filipino brides treat men as the leader of a



household, embodying what Philippine culture promotes. These brides treat their husbands like a “real man”. Hence, brides undertake household and domestic labour, as well as raising children. The websites advertise it like this: “Filipino women are great mothers and excellent housewives” (Filipino Brides, n.d.).

As opposed to Western women, who desire an equal division of labour, both in the home and in paid work. Thus, the commodification of migrant Filipino women supports racist assumptions. This eagerness to please applies to sex also (Castles and Miller, 2009; Filipino Brides, n.d.). Filipino Brides (n.d.) notes how brides will “comfort you in any way that you'd like”.

In this sense, brides can be seen as a glorified extension of human trafficking and prostitution, simply hidden in the private sphere of the home and concealed by the respected institution of marriage. Brides are treated as maids, nannies and sex workers, embodying several elements of prevalent migrant female labour. Accordingly, there are evident power relations at play, fundamentally between privileged men of the global north, taking advantage of underprivileged women of the global south.

The extent to which husbands can take advantage is vast. In the most contemptible of instances, power advantages emerge in the form of domestic violence. Sassen (2003) reports increasing rates of violent husbands. Brides vulnerability to violence partially originates from their legal status, as the women do not have full citizenship rights unless they are married. Brides can be detained if they do not remain married for

at least two years (Sassen, 2003). Therefore, this leaves the husband with coercive power, to threaten or perform violence. This led to the Philippines' government making mail order brides illegal after 1989 (Sassen, 2003). However, when there is a demand a supply will follow. Consequently, mail order bride's commonness is likely to rise reciprocally with domestic abuse.

While ordering a bride is an inconceivable concept to some, the benefits should not be ignored. For the brides themselves, the 'relationship' offers a way out of poverty and economic security. For the Western husband, he gains a housewife. The Philippine government through remittances, gains a major source of foreign exchange reserve (Sassen, 2003).



However, more pertinent, is how the industry is built on patriarchy, exploitation of migrant women,

racism, globalisation and consumerism, resulting in high levels of domestic violence in the marriages.

The interplay of gender and culture are key reasons for brides signing up to websites. Arguably, gender is the most instrumental factor for women joining the industry, since it is *always* women, but not always poor women. Taking this into account, it is evident that mail order brides are a group motivated by constrained choices. In the future, amended policies and further regulations need to be implemented to eradicate the phenomena of the mail order bride.

Bibliography:

Barraket, Jo (2006). 'Online Dating and Intimacy in a Mobile World'. **TASA Conference Proceedings**, [Online] Available at: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/2949/482f2730e1401f04644490c05dec81eaa61d.pdf> [Accessed 8th December 2019].

Bauman, Zygmunt (2003). **Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds**. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bauman, Zygmunt (2005). **Liquid Life**. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Castles, Stephen and Miller, Mark (2009). **The Age of Migration: International population movements in the modern world**. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Ehrenreich, Barbara and Hochschild, Arlie (eds) (2003). Introduction. **Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy**. London: Granta Books.

Featherstone, Mike (2007). **Consumer Culture and Postmodernism**. 2nd ed. London: Sage.

Filipino Brides (n.d.) 'Filipino Women from A to Z: Everything You Should Know in One Article.' [online]. Available at: < <https://filipino-brides.net/about-filipino-women> > [Accessed 8th December 2019]

Goldberg, Gertrude Schaffner (2009). **Poor Women in Rich Countries: The Feminization of Poverty Over the Life Course**. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Grint, Keith and Nixon, Darren (2015). **The Sociology of Work**. 4th ed. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Harvey, David (1989). **The Condition of Postmodernity**. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Held, David et al. (1999). **Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture**. Oxford: Polity Press.

Inequality.Org (2020) **Gender Economic Inequality**. [online]. Available at: <https://inequality.org/gender-inequality/#gender-poverty-gaps> [Accessed 30th March 2020].

Lloyd, Kathryn (2000). 'Wives for Sale: The Modern International Mail-Order Bride Industry'. **Northwestern Journal of International Law and Business**, 20: 341 – 367.

Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar (2003). **The Care Crisis in the Philippines: Children and Transnational Families in the New Global Economy**. In: Ehrenreich, Barbara and Hochschild, Arlie (eds.) **Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy**. London: Granta Books.

Sassen, Saskia (2003). **Strategic Instantiations of Gendering: Global Cities and Survival Circuits**. In: Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierette (ed) **Gender and U. S. Immigration: Contemporary Trends**. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Seeking Asian Female (2016). Directed by Debbie Lum. Available from: Kanopy. [Accessed 2nd December 2019]

Thai, Hung Cam (2003). **Clashing Dreams: Highly Educated Overseas Brides and Low Wage US Husbands**. In: Ehrenreich and Hochschild (eds.) **Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy**. London: Granta Books.

Pictures:

https://live.staticflickr.com/748/33315916581_748897e4b_b.jpg

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/dd/Women%27s_March_on_Washington_-_1-21-17_%2832448792744%29.jpg

https://live.staticflickr.com/8643/16612099676_54da29f230_b.jpg