e-Brides
The Mail-Order Bride Industry and the Internet

JULIE PEHAR

L'auteure examine la façon dont Internet a accéléré et facilité le trafic des femmes et des enfants à travers l'industrie des mariages par correspondance. Elle établit une relation entre les industries du tourisme sexuel sur Internet et la pornographie qui sont au cœur de et la violence contre les femmes et les enfants.

The Internet of today bears little resemblance to the primitive military inspired, free-net communications network of the 1950s and '60s. The involvement of corporations in the control of the Internet has encouraged a capitalistic undertone that has redirected the rather simple and questionably inclusive intentions of the early Internet. Instead, corporate ownership and control have manifested and glorified the acquisition of none other than a healthy bottom line. Quite simply, there are commodities for sale and privileged purchasers. This, in turn, has fueled a cyberworld which embodies favorable advances for some while simultaneously exposing the repugnant underbelly of racism, misogyny, classism, and heterosexism. Some researchers have asserted that the Internet has demonstrated an accelerated growth that mimics colonization of the past where western, English-speaking dominance has created extreme and often insurmountable power differentials between western and developing countries (Sciachitano). Nevertheless, the Internet has become a ubiquitous reality.

Globally, issues of sexism and adherence to traditional gender normative behaviours have provided a basis for much discourse on the subordinate role women play in cyberspace. To further exacerbate inequality, the obscurity of cyberspace and its utopian image both serve to mask the transference of real world-inequality

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to cyber-inequality as the Internet merely reflects societal values, social structures and power hierarchies. Compounded by almost complete lack of regulation and enforceable legislation around safe and equitable usage, the Internet has become a breeding ground for exploitation.

In particular, the sexual exploitation of women and children has experienced an unprecedented explosion due to the enabling structure of the Internet. The Internet is now considered the preferred space for the buying and selling of women and children (Sciachitano; Coopersmith; Hughes 2000; Plasencia). Pre-existing widespread sexism, lack of formal regulation and increasing lack of control, but for only a few, have enabled sexual exploiters to become the commercial champions of the cyber-world (Hughes 1999). Within a democratic and capitalistic framework, the championing of successful, though morally repugnant practice is rationalized and normalized. Though certainly not limited to the business of sex trafficking, many researchers have identified a conscious partnering between tech savvy entrepreneurs and vulnerable third world countries (Schiachitano; Coopersmith; Hughes 2000, 1997).

In this paper I will examine the "mail-order bride"[1] industry and the sanctioning effects of the Internet and associated technologies in the exploitation of women and children. I will identify the inseparability between mail order brides, sex tourism, and pornography. I will challenge the notion that the Internet represents inevitable progress and democracy and I contend that the espoused knowledge, consensus and integrity the Internet claims to have, should and can be fiercely challenged.

An Overview of the Mail-Order Bride Industry

The agents of the mail-order bride industry have moved from print magazines to the Internet as their preferred site of business. The Internet enables web pages to be updated regularly, inexpensively and with higher quality than print. The Internet reaches a wide global audience faster and more cheaply than any other medium. The on-line catalogues feature women, mostly from the Philippines, Asia and Eastern Europe shown with names, addresses, height, weight, education and hobbies. Some sites offer breast, hip and waist measurements and the ages of the women

vary between 13 and 40 years old (Plasencia; Hughes 1997). The agents offer men assistance in finding a *traditional wife* who will put her husband and family before herself (Clark).

According to Marian Sciachitano, "there are well over 10,000 links to sites on the World Wide Web (WWW) featuring mail-order brides or mail-order bride products and services" (57). It is estimated that each year between 2,000 and 3,500 American men will find wives through the mail-order bride industry (Anderson).

Currently, the vast majority of mail-order bride purchasers are heterosexual men from wealthy industrialized countries and the vast majority of the supply women are young, non-western, desperately poor women (Sciachitano). Most grooms are seeking "youthful brides, often as young as thirteen" (Plasencia 24).

Whether one considers such migration as exploitive or not there is a patriarchal and heteronormative undercurrent that presupposes the necessity for the industry at all. The gendered allocation of household labor including reproductive labour is a key element in the pervasive ideology of the mail-order bride industry.

Another important feature of the mail-order bride business is its relationship and inseparability from the sex tourism business. While proponents of bride trafficking claim that pornography and sex tourism are completely unrelated businesses, the marketing of *complete* services on the mail-order bride web sites tell a different story. Most companies that offer mail-order bride services also offer sex tours of third world countries (Plasencia). The Internet enables interconnectivity between the exploitation of minors internationally, positioning women and children both as *potential brides* and also as *escorts* while men tour third world countries buying sex whether the intention is to purchase a permanent woman or not.

Finally, there is little research on the social and cultural role for women who have migrated to a new country as a mail-order bride. It is widely recognized that migrant workers including mail-order brides are very vulnerable to physical, emotional, economic, and sexual abuse from their partners (Anderson). Furthermore, migrant women often have language barriers that compound their disenfranchised and subordinate position. Children of western men and mi-

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grant wives may be visibly of mixed race and may experience exclusive and racist attitudes. Children are often used by men to maintain domestic compliance from their wives and the threat of deportation is constant. If migrant women are allowed or forced to work, they are often relegated to low paying, insecure, unskilled work with little government protection, and they often experience high degrees of sexism and racism. Most mail-order brides are completely financially dependent on their husbands and have little legal recourse in situations of abuse or unhappiness (Anderson). The exploitive nature of migrant work is thus disguised in the illusion of the most palatable of cultural roles, that of wife and mother.

Further, many mail-order brides,

in the context of women as migrant reproductive workers, are "an instrument of economic activity and their remittances are regarded as a new form of capital accumulation" (Kojima, 205). As Yu Kojima points out, migrant women who send money to family in their homelands "create substantial foreign exchange" (205).

What Does Technology Have To Do With It?

Concurrently, the Internet and all sex trade, tourism, trafficking and pornography are experiencing unprecedented growth. Donna Hughes claims that "the Internet as a communications medium would exist without the sex industry, but the Internet industry would not be growing and expanding at its present rate without the sex industry" (2000: 36). In 1998, it was estimated that 69 percent of the total Internet content sales were related to adult content (Hughes 2000). Jonathon Coopersmith reminds us that what is driving the transformation of the sex industry technology has been "the great capitalist engines of innovation and the quest for profits" (28). Internet pornography has become the highest growth, highest profit market ever known (Hughes; Coopersmith).

Pornography previously in print form quickly adapted to the immeasurable advantages of going on-line. From 1994 to 1997, *Playboy* and other mainstream publications moved to the web and met with unprecedented growth (Hughes 2000). The Internet however, did a lot more than simply boost pornography sales. According to Coopersmith, "the environment and nature of a pornographic experience has altered" (28). The previously passive experience of print images has been replaced by live person-to-person videos and audio transmissions. Suddenly, live sex shows, virtual fantasies, and consumer-directed sexual scenarios are right in our homes and offices at the touch of a mouse. Consumers can choose a woman or child

from anywhere in the world and demand and view live sexual acts. As Donna Hughes concludes, "the electronic merger of pornography and prostitution has arrived" (2000: 38). The Internet has decreased the cost of accessing pornography while increasing the interactivity, speed, ease and privacy for users.

Within this framework, the global properties of the World Wide Web have created a market where there is an insatiable demand for the commodity of sexualized women and children. Moreover, children worldwide are now at greater risk than ever before as the Internet facilitates a communications medium which allows sexual predators to network, encourage and support each other. As Madeleine Plasencia explains:

The Internet has provided the horizontal parallax over which all can participate in communication and transaction, education and entertainment. The rise of this advanced technology has led to a new *red light district* where children worldwide are now at greater risk. (16 [emphasis mine]).

Defunct of moral accountability, the business practices of the sex industry are tough to match. The industry has mastered privacy, security and fast payment transactions as well as data base management expertise (Hughes 2000).

A Look at Racism, Culture and Othering

Ellen Rose asserts that a marginalized "Other" is created that does not necessarily involve a physical exertion of power but a hegemonic power enforced by a few at the expense of many. She continues, "what we see today is a different kind of power struggle and conquest: a global renegotiation of margins and centres, in which authority is imposed on the basis of demonstrated technological superiority" (24).

Popular discourse on information technology often refers to the creation of a digital divide or in other words, information *haves* and *have-nots*. Ellen Rose concludes, "on a wired planet, the third world suddenly becomes not a place but a condition, an Othering based on an inability to maintain technological currency" (25).

Issues of racism and sexism permeate the cyberworld. Susan Hawthorne agrees when she states that:

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whiteness is not visible to the powerful, because they themselves are white. They notice bodies that are not white and they impute a difference of those imaginations. They notice them as *cultural*. But whiteness to the white, is the norm. It has a normative status in the same way that man has a normative status. (Hawthorne and Klein 122)

The concept of *difference* feeds the sexual curiosity of some. Sciachitano relates the concept of difference to people living in first world countries who feel familiar with the role (though paternalistic) of missionaries civilizing and rescuing primitive "others." Actually, this reinforces the

Orientalist male-power-fantasy

and considering the subjective locations of Asian and Pacific mail-order brides, their female bodies are being positioned as exotic products to be trafficked via these newly established electronic commerce trade routes. (Sciachitano 63)

As bell hooks contends:

The mail-order bride web sites are now the contemporary virtual vehicles for re-enacting and re-ritualizing this U.S. imperialistic fantasy of power and desire for seduction via a neocolonial cyberspace journey. White males claim the body of the colored Other instrumentally, as unexplored terrain, a symbolic frontier that will be fertile ground for their reconstruction of the white, western, heterosexual masculine norm. (cited in Sciachitano 65)

What About the Women?...Women's Global Agency

It is clear that around the world women and children remain increasingly vulnerable to sexual exploitation in light of an exploding Internet sex industry. Compounding their vulnerability as women and children, refugee and migrant women are at increased risk especially considering most are suffering from devastating poverty, racism, and economically impoverished home lives. However, many sex-industry owners claim that women choose to participate in the sex trade work or bride trafficking as a means to make money or improve their social status. They further claim that women gain empowerment from making their own decisions (Clark; Sciachitano; Kojima). I do not impose judgment on anyone's decisions whether I feel they are made without fair knowledge and advantage or not. However, according to Hughes,

the men buying women and

posting the information see and perceive the events from their self-interested perspective. Their awareness of racism, colonization, global economic inequalities and, of course, sexism, is limited to how these forces benefit them. A country's economic or political crisis and the accompanying poverty are advantages, which produce cheap women for the men. (1997: 2)

Moreover, as Sciachitano states, "while it may appear to be a better alternative to the options available at home, from both first and third world perspectives, it is mired in U.S./Western cultural mythologies and imperialistic nostalgia" (63).

What is problematic for me as a white woman living in Canada is attempting to impose an ethnocentric perspective on women coping with circumstances that are completely foreign to me. I am not neutral and I acknowledge my limitations. What seems most useful to me is to respect and value the resilience, honour, and strength of all women who, for whatever reason, choose to work in the sex trade or bride trafficking industries and get down to the difficult business of making meaningful long-term change. I believe that all women need helpful, protective strategies to ensure dignity and safety in their lives until large-scale change begins. Structural change is imperative. We also need to hear from women. There is little research that includes personal accounts or sharing of perspectives from women who have lived this experience.

It is time to look at how the Internet has developed and the conditions that have made access to the Internet so easy for some and so difficult for others. We need to ensure that both men and women, boys and girls have educational initiatives in their schools to ensure equal understanding of the technology as an analytical forum, not simple a tool of communication. Inequities of language, control, access, and usage need

to be common knowledge so that the advancement of technology will be met with scrutiny and caution. I believe that much accountability lies with those who control and manage the Internet. Certainly universal misogyny and racism are central to the sexualization of women and this, in turn, supports sexual exploitation. These changes will be slow and must be attacked from many directions. In the mean time, recognition of the partnership between technology, exploitation, and the enabling features of globalization should be paramount.

Vigilant evaluation and challenge to the patriarchal structures that maintain prescriptive ideologies around reproductive and family roles must continue. We need to encourage a reversal of the gaze, the stare, the curiosity about the "othered" women and issue a challenge to ourselves, our political policies, our educational policies, our family structures, our entertainment, and our use of technology in the exploitation of women.

Identifying prostitution, pornography, sex tourism, and bride trafficking as connected through the commonality of violence against women is a crucial factor. Without the acknowledgement from societal institutions that they are linked, women's agency will be compromised. Every level of government and all societal institutional pillars must understand the selling of women's and children's bodies as an affront to their human rights. Unbridled commitment toward effective and safe laws for women and children around the world must be a priority.

We can stop advertising the selling of women and children if we choose. We can attempt to legislate and criminalize the smuggling of women and children from country to country. We can destroy or make difficult the cyber communities of men who fuel and spread misogynist information about women as dispensable sexual objects. We can stop protecting the identity of sex trade users. We

must continue to fight at every level so as to protect all children from sexual predators. We must protect women when they come here to live. We need to understand what makes a woman vulnerable when she is here, her language barriers, cultural differences, financial dependence, and offer access to support and friendships. Lastly, we must have compassion and respect for the millions of women who find themselves in positions as sex workers or trafficked brides. They deserve our continued commitment for seeking understanding and effective and practical laws to keep them, and their children, safe.

Julie Pehar is a first year Masters of Education student in the department of Sociology and Equity Studies at OISE/ UT. She is the co-owner of Equity Vision, an educational consulting firm dedicated to Human Rights Education. She would like to thank Dr. Alyson King for encouraging her to submit this research to CWS.

[1]Mail-order brides (MOBs), cyberbrides and bride trafficking appear, in research, to be common and interchangeable terms. These or any other terms are not intended to be offensive descriptors. "Cross-cultural dating" is what some proponents call it, while some opponents refer to it as "sexual slavery" (Plasencia 24). In fact, with the inception of the Internet, *mail order* has become an inaccurate description. Historically, mail-order marriage did not involve crossing cultures or nationalities. It has in large been the inception of the Internet that has enabled wealthy men to shop cross culturally for women (Plasencia). The term *bride trafficking* or *e-bride* seems to me, to best reflect the commercial and exploitive nature of this industry as I understand it.

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