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Donna M. Hughes, Dr., *University of Rhode Island*



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The Role of “Marriage Agencies” in the Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking of Women from the Former Soviet Union¹

Donna M. Hughes
Professor & Eleanor M. and Oscar M. Carlson Endowed Chair
Women’s Studies Program
University of Rhode Island

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Introduction

Each year, tens of thousands of women leave the countries of the former Soviet Union for destinations all over the world. Driven by poverty, unemployment, and media images of Western lifestyles, women accept risky offers of employment and marriage in hope of finding a better life (Hughes forthcoming). Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) report that in many cases, once a woman decides that the solution to her problems is to go abroad, she will try every agency or strategy, regardless of the risk. A woman interviewed by The Angel Coalition in Russia said:

I want to live separately from my parents. I want to buy things. I’m sick and tired of everything. Why should it be a bad experience? I will go illegally. I will be fine. Even if it is not easy, I will try. One of my friends went abroad with this agency. She went to Germany on a tourist visa (Video, Angel Coalition, St. Petersburg, Russia).

Although some women may find the jobs, romance, and opportunities they seek, many become victims of violence, sexual exploitation, and sex trafficking. There have been many documented cases of women being deceived by traffickers after the women responded to advertisements for employment abroad. There are also cases of women being abused and/or murdered after marrying a man they met through “marriage agency” correspondence. In a well-publicized case, an American man was convicted of murdering his “mail-order-bride” from Kyrgyzstan. Previously, he had another Russian “mail-order-bride” before the wife he murdered. She had divorced him. The murderer said that the second wife would not be allowed to leave (Foster 2002).

¹ The author thanks Kelly Brooks (graduate major in Psychology) and Amy Potenza (undergraduate major in Women’s Studies and History) at the University of Rhode Island for their dedicated assistance in collecting data for this paper.

Some activists and NGOs suspect that women who find Western partners through marriage agencies are at higher risk of becoming victims of violence and exploitation, but there is not enough data or research to substantiate that. In the United States, there is no agency tasked with collecting this type of information. The exact number and portion of women who become victims are unknown.

One of the most visible signs of the recruitment of women from countries of the former Soviet Union is the Web sites of “marriage agencies.” In 1998, there were an estimated 200-250 “marriage agencies” operating in the United States and 80 of them offered women from Russia or Eastern Europe (Sun 1998). The larger agencies advertise thousands of women. In 1997, 747 U.S. fiancée visas were issued to Russian women, and 282 to Ukrainian women (Sun 1998). According to one immigration lawyer in California, USA, one third of the women who come to the U.S. on fiancée visas return to Russia (Maganini 2000).

This paper addresses the involvement of “marriage agencies” in recruiting women from the countries of the former Soviet Union, and their role in the women’s subsequent abuse and sexual exploitation.

In discussing this topic, the terms “sexual exploitation” and “sex trafficking” are used. For the purposes of this research and discussion these terms are defined as follows:

Sexual exploitation is a practice by which a person achieves sexual gratification, financial gain or advancement through the abuse or exploitation of a person’s sexuality by abrogating that person’s human right to dignity, equality, autonomy, and physical and mental well-being; i.e. trafficking, prostitution, prostitution tourism, mail-order-bride trade, pornography, stripping, battering, incest, rape and sexual harassment (Hughes, 1999, p. 1).

Sex trafficking is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act (Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000).

Some NGOs consider the “bride trade” to be a form of trafficking in women in and of itself because its operation depends on an inequality of power between men and women. The profit for the “marriage agencies” is based on recruiting women from regions of poverty and high unemployment, and marketing the women to men based on sexual, racial, and ethnic stereotypes. The men seeking companions or wives through this route often express their desire for women who are interested in fulfilling traditional family roles. A review of the “marriage agencies” that operate on the Internet reveals the often blatant, sexualized photographs of the women that are used to advertise the women. The descriptions of the women claim they are oriented towards pleasing men.

This paper reports the findings of research on the recruitment of women from countries of the former Soviet Union by “marriage agencies.” There is no known previous research that quantifies and maps the numbers of women recruited by “marriage agencies.” The goals of this research was determine the following:

1. How many Internet-based “marriage agencies” are operating in the countries of the former Soviet Union?
2. How many women have been recruited by these agencies?

3. Are there particular countries, regions, and oblasts² from which women are being recruited?
4. Are these the same countries, regions, and oblasts from which women are known to be trafficked into sex industries?
5. How are “marriage agencies” implicated in the abuse, sexual exploitation, and trafficking of women and girls?

This paper maps the number of women recruited from specific countries, regions, and oblasts of the 15 countries that comprised the former Soviet Union. It describes the types of sexually exploitative services that the “marriage agencies” offer to men, and the likely role of “marriage agencies” in the recruitment and trafficking of women for the commercial sex industry. Known examples of abuse and sexual exploitation are described.

Methods

A variety of sources were used to determine the involvement of “marriage agencies” in the sexual exploitation of women. Web-based “marriage agencies” were a source of information on the numbers and location of recruitment of women from the 15 different countries of the former Soviet Union. Additional sources were interviews with representatives from NGOs in Russia, research interviews in Ukraine, media stories, research literature, and content analysis of Web-based “marriage agencies.”

During summer 2001, searches on the Web found almost 500 “marriage agency” sites with women from former Soviet republics. Two hundred and nineteen (219) of these Web sites were indexed into a database. Sites that were non-functional were excluded. Some “marriage agencies,” the largest ones, advertised women from almost all of the former Soviet republics. They listed 1000s of women. Other agencies were regional and included only women from one city or oblast. They generally listed a few dozen women. An effort was made to index web sites that were a representative range of those found on the Web. Agencies from diverse locations, especially those outside large cities, were included.

From each of the Web sites, the number of women from each city, oblast and country was entered in the database. The larger web sites had search tools that enabled the researchers to sort the women by home city or oblast. For smaller web sites, counts were made manually. There were several Web sites that compiled women from other sites or agencies. These duplications were not counted.

² An oblast is an administrative division in countries of the former Soviet Union, roughly equivalent to a province or state. Ukraine is comprised of 24 oblasts and one autonomous republic. Belarus is made-up of six “voblasts,” and the Russian Federation is made up of 49 oblasts, 21 republics, 10 autonomous okrugs, six krays, two federal cities, and one autonomous oblast. For simplicity, this paper will refer to administrative divisions as “oblasts” in the generic sense.

Recruitment of Women by “Marriage Agencies” in Countries of the Former Soviet Union

The 219 Web-based “marriage agencies” had a total of 119,649 women on their sites. There was a large range of numbers of women recruited from each oblast and country. (See Table 1 and Map 1) The fifteen countries of the former Soviet Union can be divided into three distinct categories for the recruitment of women by “marriage agencies”: HIGH, MEDIUM, and LOW. Although there are large differences in the size and populations of these 15 countries, there are still noticeable differences in the recruitment of women by marriage agencies in these countries. The HIGH category with the largest numbers of women contained the Russian Federation with over 62,000 women, followed by Ukraine with almost 32,000, and Belarus with almost 13,000. There were a few MEDIUM range countries with a few thousand women: Kazakhstan (3,037), Kyrgyzstan (4,190), Latvia (1,760), and Uzbekistan (1,139). The rest in the LOW category had less than 1000 women, Azerbaijan (204), Estonia (551), Lithuania (626), Moldova (884), and a few countries had less than a couple of dozen women, Armenia (23), Georgia (7), Tajikistan (8), and Turkmenistan (25).

[Table 1 about here]

By far the highest number of women recruited by “marriage agencies” comes from the Russian Federation (62,605), which also greatly exceeds the other 14 countries in size and total population. Still, the number of women recruited in Russia exceeds that of the next closest country, Ukraine, by almost 100 percent. The other two top countries in recruitment of women by “marriage agencies”-Ukraine and Belarus (31,837 and 12,683, respectively)- are in eastern Europe. The central Asian countries overall show a lower level of recruitment of women. These countries are in the MEDIUM (Kyrgyzstan, 4190; Kazakhstan, 3037; Uzbekistan, 1,139) and LOW (Azerbaijan, 204; Turkmenistan, 25; Armenia, 23; Tajikistan, 8; and Georgia, 7) categories. The only two oblasts in eastern Siberia or the Far East with even moderate numbers of recruited women are Primorskiy (645) and Khabarovsk (313), which are on the Pacific Ocean. Given the relatively low numbers of women from eastern Russia and central Asia, the recruitment of women by “marriage agencies,” is clearly oriented towards Europe, not Asia. This may be a result of more Western oriented marketing strategy of advertising wives to Western European and American men through “marriage agencies” and “introduction services” on the Internet. Little is known about Internet “bride markets” for Asian men.

The three countries in the HIGH category (Russian Federation, Ukraine and Belarus) were subdivided by oblast and the number of women recruited mapped by oblast.

In the Russian Federation, there were large differences in the number of women recruited from each oblast. (See Table 2 and Map 2) The oblasts of Russia with the highest number of recruited women are in the western half of Russia, mostly in Europe (St. Petersburg, 15,694; Volgograd, 4897; Moscow, 3642, and Yekaterinburg, 2003-which straddles the European-Asian continental divide). Only ten oblasts had more than 1,000 women. St. Petersburg, with by far the highest number-almost 16,000- represented over three times the number of women recruited compared to the next closest oblasts – Volgograd in southwestern Russia with almost 4,900 and Moscow, the capital, with over 3,600. Some of the oblasts of southwestern Siberia (Omsk, 731 and Novosibirsk, 655) are the home of a moderate number of recruited women. Fewer than 100 women were recruited from 41 of the oblasts. Fewer than ten women were recruited from eleven

of the oblasts (Dagestan, 8; Khakassia, 7; Alania, 4; Karachay-Cherkessia, 4; Birobijan, 3; Chita 3; Chukot, 2; Kalmykia 2; Yamalo-Nenets 2; Komi-Permyak, 1; and Tuva, 1).

[Table 2 about here]

There are considerable differences in population among the oblasts in Russia. The size of the difference in the number of women recruited-for example Moscow city oblast compared to oblasts in central Siberia-may partially be a reflection of the population size and density, but the numbers of recruited women are not always in direct proportion to total population.

There were sizeable differences in the number of women recruited by oblast in Ukraine also. (See Table 3 and Map 3.) In Ukraine, there are a few distinct patterns for the recruitment of women by “marriage agencies.” The Crimea, the southern most oblast in the Black Sea, has the largest number of women recruited (5,515). Oblasts with large cities, such as the capital Kyiv (3401), Odessa (3225), and Dnipropetrovsk (2742) also have large numbers of women in the marriage agencies. Generally, the oblasts with the lowest numbers of recruited women are in the western Ukraine. Seven of the nine oblasts with less than 50 recruited women were in western Ukraine (Zakarpats’ka, 46; L’viv, 41; Khmelnyts’ka, 28; Volyns’ka, 24; Ternopil, 12; Ivano-Frankivsk, 10; and Rivnens’ka, 2). There is a trend that the farther east, towards Russia, you move, the more women are recruited by “marriage agencies.” Also, the southern oblasts on or those on the Black Sea have fairly high numbers of women recruited from them.

In Ukraine, generally speaking, there are cultural differences between western and eastern Ukraine. Western Ukraine is more traditional and Ukrainian nationalist, while eastern Ukraine is more identified with Russian culture (Wanner 1998). How this might influence the operation and recruitment of women by “marriage agencies” resulting in increased recruitment of women from more Russian-identified regions is a question for further research.

Southern Ukraine has many popular resort areas. Interviews with 160 young women from Southern oblasts of Ukraine, where there was high recruitment by “marriage agencies,” found that two-thirds of them wanted to go abroad. Forty percent of them said they knew there was a risk of being forced into prostitution, but they were sure that it would not happen to them. In Yalta, a resort city, 97 percent of those surveyed said they wanted to go abroad. A few-six percent-said they were so eager to go abroad that they would agree to be in prostitution, even to being “sex slaves,” in order to have a rich life (Hughes & Denisova 2002). An earlier survey conducted in ten urban regions of Ukraine with 1,189 women and girls, aged 15 to 35, found that 40 percent of women and girls were interested in emigrating or seeking employment abroad; yet none of them considered “a job in the sex industry” an “acceptable job abroad” (International Organization for Migration 1998). The finding of the later survey that so many young women in this southern resort area want to go abroad, and the indication of some of them that they are willing to put themselves at great risk or do not recognize the risk of being a “sex slave” could explain why traffickers are able to recruit young women.

[Table 3 about here]

The oblasts of Belarus also show considerable variation in the number of women recruited, with a low of 33 in Hrodzyenskaya to two oblasts, Homyelskaya and Minsk, having over 4,000. (See Table 4 and Map 4). In this case, the two oblasts of highest recruitment of women are the location of the two largest cities in Belarus.

[Table 4 about here]

The mapping of the numbers and location of women recruited by “marriage agencies” reveals some distinct patterns. Clearly, there is not uniform recruitment of women across the 15 countries or within the countries. Some of the variation may be explained by population size in each of the areas, but the operation of recruiters for “marriage agencies” also must play a role. Likely factors contributing to the presence of recruiters are urban areas, especially tourist areas, where people have more interaction and connections to Western Europe and the U.S.-the markets for the women. This is an area that warrants further investigation.

Sexually Exploitative Services Offered Through “Marriage Agencies”

The marriage agencies use sexist stereotypes of “Russian”³ women to market them to Western men. The descriptions of the advertised women emphasize their willingness to serve men and put themselves in a subservient role. According to the owner of a Moscow-based “introduction service”:

The attraction of Russian girls is that they’re not so feminized, not so business minded, they think about home, kids, and their appearance. Western women want to have careers, demand cash, have expensive divorces, but Russian women are very pretty, there are plenty of them, they’re not spoiled and not too demanding (Moscow Times 1995).

The web based European Connections “marriage agency” explained to potential customers why women from the former Soviet Union are so eager to meet them:

[Russian women’s] views of relationships have not been ruined by feminism... Russians are enamored with everything Western, especially American, and the ladies consider it quite an honor to have a Western boyfriend... [Western men] represent everything a Russian man is not: sophisticated, energetic, financially secure and SOBER...all seek to extend friendship from... the darkness of an ‘outdoor prison’ to the daylight of the open, free West (Moscow Times 1995).

Although alcoholism, unemployment, and domestic violence are serious problems in former Soviet countries, the bride agencies often exploit these conditions to explain why Western men, who are presumed to be free of these problems, are attractive to women. “The reasons [women] give [for signing up with the bride agencies] are that the men of their country are extremely lazy alcoholics who beat their women” (Cengal 1999).

After women are photographed by a “marriage agency” or modeling agency they lose control of how the photographs will be used, resulting in a form of sexual exploitation. There are cases of women being photographed as models, whose pictures are then used by “marriage agencies.” They do not always know their photographs have been put in catalogs or posted on the Internet. One woman, a model, whose nude pictures appeared in the American-produced “From Russia” catalog claimed that a photographer for whom she had worked sold the pictures to the agency, along with her address and phone number without her permission. She said, “They’re still printing my picture, and I still get hundreds of letters and calls from ill, dirty men.” She said she has met with some of the men: “This is insulting; if Russian ladies knew how these Americans saw them they would be horrified” (*The Moscow Times* 3 June 2000). The owner of one

³ The “marriage agencies” often refer to all the women as “Russian.”

modeling agency that specialized in pornography (“erotic models for men’s magazines”) admitted that he sold a bride agency photographs of women for \$5.00 each.

Most “marriage agencies” make money by selling women’s contact information to men. For example, men pay \$8.00 per address (with a minimum \$100 payment) to the bride agencies. Other agencies charge \$1000 for 15 personal introductions. The letters the men write to the women are often computer-printed, photocopied form letters. In their letters, some men are quite explicit about their sexually exploitative motives. One wrote:

“[Send me] at least three polaroids [photographs] of yourself in the nude showing me all of your body. ...How do you like sex? Toys? What do you enjoy doing? And having done to you? ... I will send you \$500 for a flight” (The Moscow Times 3 June 1995).

There are a few agencies that operate only as “introduction services.” With these agencies, men have to travel to the city, and then the agency will introduce them to women. An example of this is MarriageTrip.com in Tver, Russia (<http://www.marriagetrip.com/index.cfm> Accessed 6 July 2001).

Of the 219 “marriage agency” Web sites analyzed, 78 of them offered men tours to meet women. In many cases, the men who buy the “romance tours” seem to consider them “sexual exploitation” tours. The men often expect to have sex with the women as part of getting acquainted. One man admitted, “We’re not here to get married” (*The Moscow Times* 3 June 1995). Some of the women, naively thinking that the men were really interested in taking them home to the U.S. or Western Europe were distressed at being treated “like pieces of meat.” One man claimed to have spent over \$20,000 to travel to 20 countries in search of a woman to be his wife. He had a map of Eastern Europe and Russia marked with red dots indicating where he has been. Interviewed while in Moscow, he said that on his last trip there he met about 200 women and had sex with 30 (*The Moscow Times* 3 June 1995).

While some of the agencies have a narrow focus of advertising women as potential marriage partners, other agencies offer pornography and prostitution services. Several of the Web sites include nude photos of the women. The following are some examples:

- The Darling Marriage Agency in Sebastopol, Ukraine also offers “escort services” (<http://darling-agency.hypermart.net/> Accessed 25 June 2001).
- The Allure Marriage Agency in Astrakhan, Russia offers “private nude photosessions of Russian models from the Russian Model Agency.”
- The Savva La Belle Web site offers to take photographs or/and videos of a woman including “nude” and “skin flick.”

Some of the Web sites seem to be fully integrated into the sex industry. One example is the Russian Girls on the Web that offers Russian “brides,” escort services, “Russian” pornography, and Russian amateurs (pornographic photos of Russian women). The site claims that “Only REAL Russian girls from Saint Petersburg can be seen on our website” (<http://girls.incom.ru/> Accessed 15 July 2001). There are links that connect to typical pornographic sites from these Web sites. A number of the Web sites are quite explicit about offering services that sexually exploit women. The connection between “marriage agencies” and men’s expectation that the women can be used like prostitutes can be found on “marriage agency” Web sites ABC’s of

Russian Women and Russian Brides, where one of the keywords used to index the site in search engines was “prostitution.”

A number of the Web sites that are part of or connected to “marriage agencies” provide models for pornographers. The Russian Erotic Model Agency offers men the opportunity to come to Russia on “erotic tours” and take pornographic pictures of the women. The following is an excerpt from a promotion on the Web site offering men the opportunity to photograph women, even if they have no experience with photography. The men are assured that the women will be compliant with the men’s wishes.

If you are a photographer or an artist or just an ordinary person who appreciates beauty and can enjoy it, then our Russian Erotic Tour is your chance. It’s a great opportunity to take photos of our models. Visiting Russia you’ll be able to get acquainted with a great amount of Russian girls. It’ll allow you to take photos of many pearls. Even if you don’t know how to use a camera, our tour will include special Photo Training Course, our top models will pose for you. They’ll do everything you wish of desire. Your photo cameras will imprint the most intimate sites. Our girls are not flippant or professional models. They are just beautiful, charming and sexy girls who will value you. They are not simply beautiful and traditional in their values, they want to guess your desire and give you the greatest revelation. Russia is great because women here haven’t been spoiled, there are no other businesses like Russian Erotic Model Agency here and 80% of our girls have never even talked to a Western man. The women in our agency are well-educated Russian girls with good manners. They will make you feel wonderful... (<http://rema.nm.ru/> Accessed 26 June 2001).

There are a number of aspects of these types of agencies that indicate that they are likely to be involved in trafficking in women for prostitution abroad: 1) They have recruited a number of women who have indicated a desire to travel abroad or emigrate; 2) The women are single and able to move, although some of them have children; 3) The women may have tried corresponding with men, meeting Western men on tours at “socials” sponsored by the agencies, and now be willing to go abroad if the agency makes them an offer. Research in Ukraine found that traffickers often have databases of women, which includes their names, addresses, photographs, body measurements, interests, etc, which have been collected from beauty pageant participants and “marriage agencies” (Hughes & Denisova 2002).

Also, some of the agencies on the Web site are operating other types of businesses that facilitate the travel and trafficking of women. In Ukraine, women are most frequently trafficked through travel agencies. Most of the agencies were legally registered. There are some travel agencies that are not legally registered and do not have a license. When questioned by police they claim that they only provide consultation services and therefore do not need a license. By working with corrupt officials, the traffickers are able to buy visas, so the women travel with official documents. The women appear to go abroad voluntarily and legally on tourist visas, but they do not return (Hughes & Denisova 2002). In Chelyabinsk, Russia, an NGO representative said that the traffickers operate in travel agencies, with each agency specializing in one particular country where trafficked women are sent (Larisa Vasileyeva 15 August 2001). In St. Petersburg, an NGO representative said that “marriage agencies” are well-organized business and “well protected” legally and by the political-business-criminal networks. The Psychological Crisis Center for Women reports that they have heard of women recruited by “marriage agencies” being trafficked into the sex industry (St. Petersburg Psychological Crisis Center 18 August 2001). As in

Chelyabinsk, the same people who own marriage agencies also own foreign travel and employment agencies, some of which are known to be traffickers.

On some of the Web sites, multiple services are provided for men: correspondence with women, tours to meet women, introduction and escort services, and travel agencies. Virginia! is an agency that offers a combination of services, most of which are aimed at facilitating men's access to women. For example, the agency offers a service that monitors the women and makes reports to the men. In the Mari-El Republic, Russia, the Maksim Introductions Agency also operates the Virginia Mari-El Travel Agency (<http://www.yoshkar-ola.com/travel/other/thoughts.html> Accessed 19 June 2001). The tour agency offers tours for Russian women to Turkey, Cyprus, Europe, Jamaica, and Bulgaria. The marriage agency offers to assist men by arranging travel for their choice of women. The agency assists the women in obtaining visas. Almost all of these services are marketed to men; the men pay for all the services for the women and the travel expenses to meet them.

The agency offers English language and custom courses for local women. Men can pay to enroll women in the classes. The agency also enables men to monitor the women's performance by sending periodic progress reports to the men.

Dear gentlemen, You have a great opportunity to follow your lady's schedule of her English classes. You can also address any questions or comments you have directly to your lady's English teacher about her progress and curriculum.

Another service the agency runs is a "digital studio" to provide photographs and videos of the women to the men. The service offers to follow the woman for one week to photograph her in "the world, which surrounds her every day. According to the Web site, "You can see what books she likes to read, what films she likes to watch, what juice she likes to drink, what place she likes to walk at." Men are also offered personalized pornography of the women.

If you order 'sexy' photos of a lady (in lingerie, in a swimming suit, or even without it), you are responsible for any consequences. We explain women that this word does not have a negative connotation in English (as in Russian) and means 'attracting men, pointing out woman's figure and beauty'. Most women, especially younger ones, understand the difference, however the agency is not liable for any changes in your relationships which may be caused by your request for 'sexy' photos. You may order them only if you have a firm agreement with your lady.

The Mari-El Travel Agency offers to send women to meet men in other countries. If men do not want to travel to Russia, or do not want to get a visa, the agency will arrange to send a woman to another country to meet the man. Under the heading "Meeting CIS women in a third country," a British man describes paying the agency \$1000 to "arrange the travel and accommodation for ten days together in our chosen 'mid-point'" (<http://www.yoshkar-ola.com/travel/other/thoughts.html> Accessed: 19 June 2001). The Web site also suggests that men can avoid the extra effort of getting a visa for himself and the woman by meeting the women in a country where neither of them needs a visa, or can get a Schengen visa.⁴ This type of "service" could also be a scheme to send women abroad in which the woman is sexually exploited and/or forced into prostitution. In Ukraine, survivors of trafficking indicate that they

⁴ Schengen Visa are issued for stays up to 90 days and are valid for the following countries: Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Portugal and Spain.

were sent abroad alone with the expectation of meeting someone. The women are given a phone number and address for a contact in a destination or transit country (Hughes & Denisova 2002).

One can see how this combination of services could easily be used for trafficking women into prostitution. According to the Global Survival Network, most of the “marriage agencies” have links to Russian organized crime groups. Trafficking recruiters take part in the “socials” or parties and build databases of women who are eager to travel, work abroad, or emigrate (Richard 1999).

The recruitment of women by “marriage agencies” may be a way to facilitate women’s access to the Internet. For example, in Riga, Latvia one of the largest “marriage agencies” in the world, Foreign Affairs, has a franchise in Mystic Café, where women access the Internet to correspond with men who have subscribed to the service. Other marriage agencies provide Internet access at their offices so women can correspond with men who pay additional fees for conversations with women. In these cases, marriage agencies themselves may not be involved in trafficking, but are providing access to the Internet and contacts in the West that may increase the likelihood of women corresponding with or meeting traffickers.

Recruitment of Vulnerable Populations

There are a few marriage agencies on the Web that either specialize in or include women or girls from especially vulnerable populations.

One agency offering “marriage agency” services is a Russian government social service agency. The Family Social Assistance Center, a subsidiary of the Ministry of Social Assistance, has a typical “marriage agency” Web site linked to it. The agency, located in Rostov-on-Don, provides medical and social assistance to “families with disabled children, single-parent families, large families, and other vulnerable layers of the population.” Services provided include “psychological consulting both to children and adults” and “legal assistance to the women suffering domestic/sexual/societal” violence. The agency also provides “assistance to the lonely people inside Russia and all over the world in creating families through Internet” (<http://www.fsac.don.ru/marriage/> Accessed: 22 August 2001). The descriptions of the women do not say they have been abused previously, but it is not an unreasonable assumption that some will have been from the connection to the social service agency. On this particular Web site, there are a number of women whose average age is higher than most marriage agency Web sites. Someone in this government agency appears to be exploiting their clients by advertising these women and families to a Western market.

Several of the Web sites have underage girls listed as potential correspondents or wives. The “marriage agency” Valerie! in Chisinau, Moldova has a 14 year old girl on the Web site (<http://www.fortunecity.com/marina/pitcairn/89/english/index.htm> Accessed: 29 June 2001). The Romeo and Juliet Ukrainian Marriage Agency located in Kherson, Ukraine has girls listed as being 15 and 16 years of age (<http://romeojuliet.com> Accessed 6 July 2001). The Informedia Marriage Agency has contact addresses for girls aged 10, 14, and 16 (<http://members.tripod.com/infmedia/> Accessed 10 July 2001). The Premier Matrimonial Agency in Odessa, Ukraine had contact information for several underage girls (aged 10, 12, 14 and 15) and a boy (aged 15). The 14-year-old girl is described as a “young and slim girl” (<http://premier-agency.hypermart.net/Odessa.htm> Accessed 6 July 2001).

Women and orphans with disabilities are extremely vulnerable (Curry; Hassouneh-Phillips & Johnston-Silverberg 2001). The loss of the social supports following the collapse of the Soviet Union has worsened the circumstances for many. There are Web sites offering “introduction services” and pornography of women with disabilities. One site called Frantana Russian Amputee Ladies is a “marriage agency” advertising women with missing limbs (<http://www.frantana.aha.ru/> Accessed 6 July 2001). The services are marketed to men with fetishes for missing limbs and stumps of amputated limbs or congenital malformations. According to an amputee pornographer, “The shorter the stump is, the sexier an amputee” (Mohel 2000). The photographs on the Web site range from modest to sexualized. The descriptions of the women often include pledges of loyalty to a man who will take care of them. On the same Web site are photographs of orphans with disabilities. Viewers are urged to send gifts or adopt them. The vulnerability of some of the children is emphasized by descriptions that say that the child is not expected to live very long.

One Russian woman amputee describes going to the U.S. to marry a prison guard who wanted a wife with a disability. After meeting him in Moscow, she returned to the U.S. with him on a tourist visa. Upon her arrival in the U.S., he locked her in the house. She could not speak English and did not know the address of the house. She said he eventually sent her back to Russia. Now, she has a business of exploiting other Russian women with disabilities by recruiting them to making disability pornography. She advertises the introduction service and pornography using her Web site:

Special match making agencies to meet disabled appeared in the countries of the West with Internet's development... it became a real industry: videos are made by professional movie makers and cameramen. Volkova arranges “match-making meetings [for] foreigners [who] pay her money (Mohel 2000).

Tatiana Volkova specializes in introduction services and videos for men she refers to as “sexual minorities.”

These people aren't maniacs or freaks. We didn't meet dangerous or crazy among them, although many of them seem to be strange, even unpleasant. They are frightened a little bit. They are a little bit ashamed of their special attraction. Many of them try to make us believe that they are not interested in amputees, they just came to Russia to visit our country. But we can read everything on their faces (Mohel 2000).

In an interview, Volkova says her “real dream” is to set up a brothel in Sochi, Russia with “amputee prostitutes.”

She'll make it in a nice way for it not to look like it really is and she'll find the girls who'd like to be there. She'll buy land near Sochi, where she'll open a free “rehabilitation center” for amputees. She'll hire teachers of music and foreign languages for girls not to look so cheap, they'll have good meals and entertainments, and to pay for all these things they'll have only to spend time with their guests and to stay in this house for a couple of years. She already hired a lawyer and her agents started to look for candidates ... (Mohel 2000).

Cross border “marriage camps”

There is much cross-border travel between Norway, Finland and Russia by men and women for the purpose of marriage. Lyubov Romanovna Vertinskaya, Department of Family, Youth and Children’s Issues, Murmansk Oblast, said that 150 women per week go to Norway to find a husband (TCCC et al. 1999). Norwegian men are seeking non-threatening women. One man said:

Norwegian women are very independent...[they] do not need men any more.... I am hoping the Russian women will be more like Norwegian women used to be –keeping the home nice and looking after the family (Bhattacharya 2000).

In 1997, a Norwegian man set up a “marriage camp” in the village of Evie in southern Norway (Bhattacharya 2000). Another site like this one has also been established in Lillesand. The operator, Alf Loining, has advertised Russian women through “bride catalogs” for years, but in this operation he brings Russian women into Norway on tourist visas. Norwegian men then come to the “marriage camp” to meet and select a woman. Around 20 women from northeastern Russian—Murmansk and St. Petersburg—arrive at a time during the summer months. Most of the women are in their late 30s. Some bring their children with them. The women do not speak Norwegian, so communication during the introductory period is limited. The men may select a woman to take home for the three-month period of her tourist visa, or if they marry and remain married for three years, she can obtain Norwegian citizenship. If she is divorced in the three-year period, she will have to return to Russia.

The Norwegian men pay approximately US\$125 for one month’s access to the “marriage camp.” If they decide to take a woman home, they pay an additional US\$530. The proprietor of the “marriage camp” claims that the women only pay a fee of US\$300 and that he pays for their return flights travel expenses and stay at the camp free of charge. Others, such as his ex-wife and representatives of women’s organizations who have taken an interest in the “marriage camp” tell a different story. They claim the women pay large sums to attend the “camp.” A Russian physician who formerly worked as the “camp’s” secretary claims that Loining has agents working for him in Murmansk who charge the women US\$2000 to find them a foreign national husband. She also claims that during the year she worked for him he made two million kroner (US\$263,000).

The Norwegian men often treat the women like exchangeable commodities. One man visited the camp in 1999 and took home a 20-year old woman, but returned in 2000 for another woman. He said the relationship with the 20 year old hadn’t worked out because she “she was too young for me, and, coming from St. Petersburg, she didn’t like the quiet country life” (Bhattacharya 2000).

The manager of the women’s crisis center in Arendal, Norway says that each year they get women who were previously at the camp coming to them for assistance. She says the “worst kind of men—alcoholics, unemployed, and those with psychological problems”—go to the “marriage camp” to select women (Bhattacharya, 2000). She said that the Norwegian men view the Russian women at the “marriage camp” as prostitutes that can be bought, sold or sent back to Russia if they don’t please the men. Many times, the women have given up their flats in their hometowns, and they have no jobs. Consequently, become “like slaves or sex toys” (Bhattacharya, 2000).

Conclusion

In countries where recruitment of women by “marriage agencies” is popular, the general public does not understand the risk of signing up with these agencies. A NGO worker in St. Petersburg said that her mother was urging her to sign up. She said her mother told her, “Why waste your time with that work. Why not correspond with a Western man and find a better life?” The NGO worker said she knew of cases in which mothers accompanied their daughters to marriage agencies to sign them up, when the daughters are too afraid to go alone (St. Petersburg Psychological Crisis Center 18 August 2001).

Linking significant numbers of trafficking cases to “marriage agencies” is difficult at this point for two reasons: firstly, discovering all the details of trafficking cases is difficult, and secondly, official record keeping on cases of trafficking is poor or non-existent. For example, trafficking of women is not a crime in the Russian Federation; consequently, there are no official cases. In Ukraine, there has been a law against trafficking since 1998, but few traffickers have been convicted. However, NGOs in countries of origin and destination report knowing that women are trafficked through “marriage agencies.” Many “marriage agencies” also operate tour agencies that are known to be the mode of operation for many women who are trafficked from the former Soviet Union

The research and findings of this research study show that recruitment of women by “marriage agencies” varies widely among the 15 countries of the former Soviet Union and within each country. Further research needs to be done to discover the factors that determine the operation of recruiters for “marriage agencies.”

Content analysis of the “marriage agency” Web sites indicates that many of them engage in practices that sexually exploit women by offering tours for foreign men, escort services, and pornographic photography services. The advertisement of these sexually exploitative services shows the interconnectedness of “marriage agencies” and the sex industry. Considering how the sexualized and sexist ways the women are marketed to Western men and the apparently causal way the men evaluate, select, and discard the women, the romance veneer of “marriage agencies” is quickly exposed. The presence on “marriage agency” Web sites of vulnerable women and underage children, especially those with disabilities, soliciting correspondence and marriage partners suggests that these women and children could become prey for violence men or sex offenders.

Much more needs to be known about the number and portion of women and children who are abused and sexually exploited as a result of being recruited by “marriage agencies” and leaving home to join men abroad. The findings of this research create a framework for further research on the links between “marriage agencies,” sexual exploitation, and trafficking of women. More research needs to be done to make explicit connections among the advertised practices of the agencies and the harm to women.

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Table 1**Women Recruited by Marriage Agencies
from Countries of the Former Soviet Union**

Armenia	23
Azerbaijan	204
Belarus	12,683
Estonia	551
Georgia	7
Kazakhstan	3037
Kyrgyzstan	4190
Latvia	1760
Lithuania	626
Moldova	884
Russian Federation	62,605
Tajikistan	8
Turkmenistan	25
Ukraine	31,837
Uzbekistan	1,139
Unknown	70
Total	119,649

Table 2**Women Recruited by Marriage Agencies in the Russian Federation by Oblast**

Adygea	18	Moscow	3642
Alania	4	Murmansk	43
Altai	73	Nizhniy Novgorod	178
Amur	25	Novgorod	502
Arkhangelsk	253	Novosibirsk	655
Astrakhan'	429	Omsk	731
Bashkortostan	440	Orel Oblast	72
Belgorod	86	Orenburg	96
Birobijan	3	Penza	311
Bryansk	69	Mordovia	14
Buryatia	15	Perm	221
Chelyabinsk	474	Primorskiy	645
Chita	3	Pskov	55
Chukot	2	Rostov	1044
Chuvashia	154	Ryazan'	282
Dagestan	8	Sakhalin	178
Irkutsk	133	Samara	1510
Ivanovo	32	Saratov	2344
Kabardino-	22	Smolensk	23
Balkaria			
Kaliningrad	295	St. Petersburg	15694
Kalmykia	2	Stavropol	365
Kaluga	72	Tambov	111
Kamchatka	27	Tatarstan	2165
Karachay-	4	Taymyr	31
Cherkessia			
Karelia	49	Tomsk	235
Kemerovo	173	Tula	43
Khabarovsk	313	Tuva	1
Khakassia	7	Tver	1373
Khanty-Mansi	41	Tyumen	159
Kirov	26	Udmurtia	317
Komi	203	Ul'yanovsk	280
Komi-Permyak	1	Vladimir	58
Kostroma	10	Volgograd	4897
Krasnodar	834	Vologda	60
Krasnoyarsk	175	Voronezh	121
Kurgan	82	Yakutia	21
Kursk	27	Yamalo-Nenets	2
Lipetsk	82	Yaroslavl	64
Magadan	22	Yekateringburg	2003
Mari-El	1869	Not Known	14967
		Total	62605

Table 3**Women Recruited by Marriage Agencies in Ukraine, by Oblast**

Cherkas'ka	149	Mykolayiv	533
Chernivhivs'ka	35	Odessa	3225
Chernivitsi	268	Poltava	368
Dnipropetrovsk	2742	Respublika	5515
		Krym	
Donetsk	1055	Rivnens'ka	2
Ivano-Frankivsk	10	Sums'ka	1994
Kharkivs'ka	1188	Ternopil'	12
Khersons'ka	1053	Vinnytsya	440
Khmelnys'ka	28	Volyns'ka	24
Kiev	3401	Zakarpats'ka	46
Kirovohrads'ka	10	Zaporizhzhya	539
Luhans'ka	281	Zhytomyr	125
L'viv	41	Unknown	8753
Total			31837

Table 4**Women Recruited by Marriage Agencies
in Belarus, by Oblast**

Brest	202
Homyl'skaya	4905
Hrodzyenskaya	33
Mahilyowskaya	229
Minsk	4303
Vitsyebskaya	740
Unknown	2271
Total	12,683

Map 1

Women Recruited by Marriage Agencies in Countries of the Former Soviet Union



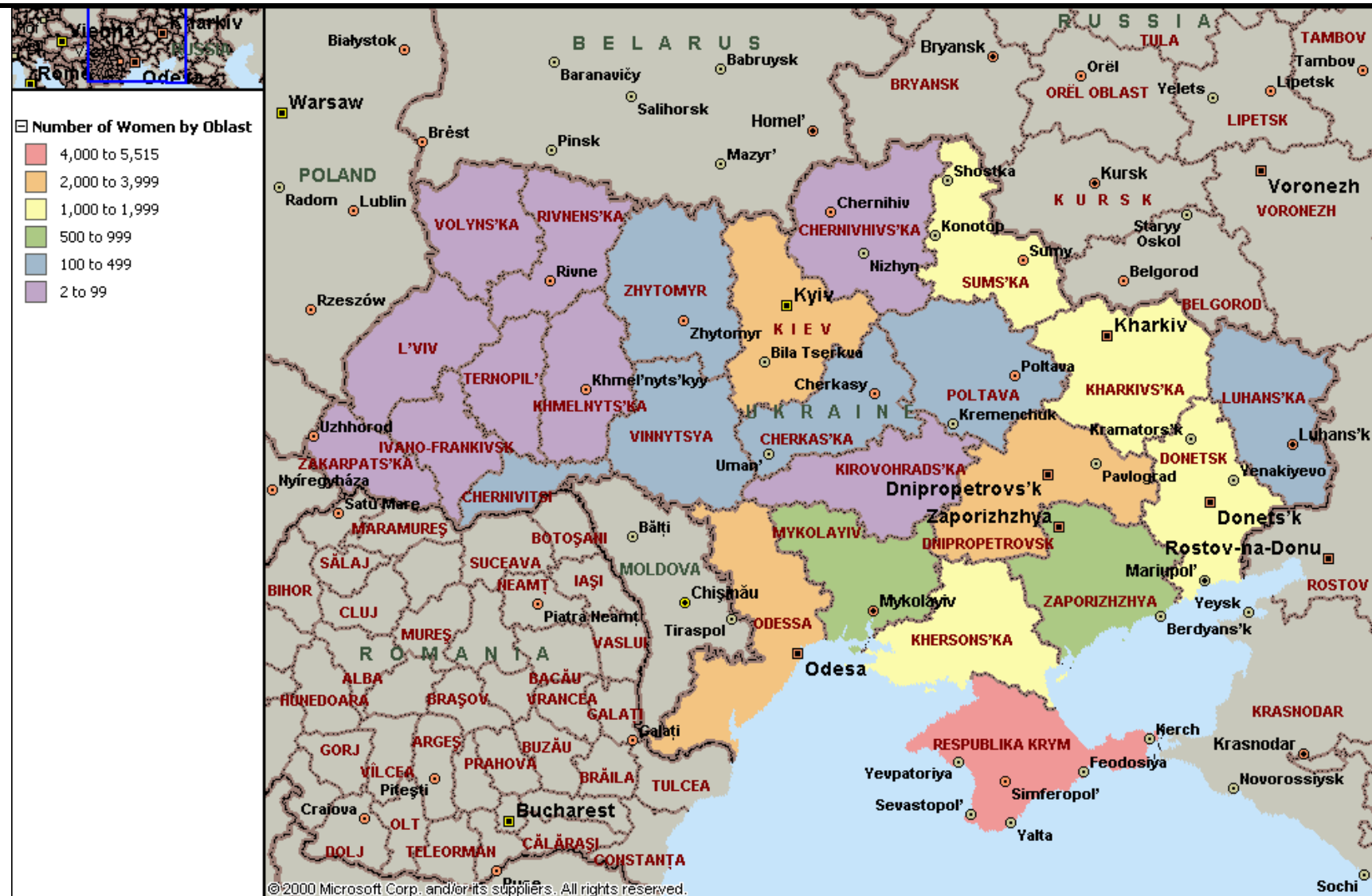
Map 2

Women Recruited by Marriage Agencies in the Russian Federation, by Oblast



Map 3

Women Recruited by Marriage Agencies in Ukraine, by Oblast



Map 4

Women Recruited by Marriage Agencies in Belarus, by Voblast



