



National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum NAPAWF

PROTECT ASIAN WOMEN WHO UTILIZE INTERNATIONAL MARRIAGE BROKERS FROM DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

THE NUMBERS

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (INS) conducted a study in 1999 and estimated over 200 international marriage brokers (IMBs) operate in the United States. These estimates are likely conservative because of underreporting and growth of the industry. Current estimates suggest tremendous growth in the industry with 400 brokers arranging 8,000 to 12,000 marriages between American men and foreign women, a significant portion from Asian countries, like the Philippines.

WHAT IS AN IMB?

International marriage brokers connect American men to foreign women known as “mail-order brides” via catalogs and the internet. IMBs are international businesses that operate in many countries in addition to the US, including Canada, Australia and Taiwan, to name a few.

ORIGINS OF THE CAMPAIGN

Though not all IMB relationships end in abuse, the repeated homicides and abuse of “mail-order brides” prompted activists and legislators in Washington State to pass legislation in 2002. The legislation provides protection to IMB foreign women who find themselves victims of domestic abuse by their American husbands/partners. Representative Velma Veloria led the charge as sponsor of the legislation and sought bi-partisan support for the bill.

PERSONAL STORIES

Susana Blackwell, a Filipina, married a Washington State man she had met through an IMB. Throughout their ten day marriage, Blackwell physically abused Susanna, forcing her to leave him. A year later, awaiting annulment proceedings outside a courthouse, Susanna and her two friends were shot and murdered by Blackwell.

Myong Chong married Jack Reeves of Texas. She was Jack's third wife after his second wife “committed suicide.” Myong died after an “accidental” drowning on an outing with her husband. Reeves was later convicted for the death of his fourth wife, Emelita, a Filipina.

Helen Clemente, a Filipina, married retired Seattle policeman Eldon Doty. Doty divorced his wife in order for him to petition for Clemente to enter the U.S. However, Doty and his “ex-wife” continued to live as a married couple, making Clemente their servant. Three years later Clemente was able to escape.

FEDERAL LEGISLATION PROPOSED: THE IMB REGULATION ACT OF 2003 (IMBR)

Last summer, Senator Cantwell and Representative Larsen (D-WA) introduced federal legislation to provide protection for foreign women who utilize IMBs. The IMBR would:

- Prohibit the disclosure of personal contact information of the potential foreign client without written consent.
- Require the American client to undergo a criminal background check and disclose information to the foreign client.
- Inform the foreign client the number of marriages the American client has had and the reason behind the dissolution of the marriage(s).
- Limit the American client to one petition per year for a foreign spouse.
- Inform the foreign spouse (in her native language) of her legal right to self-petition for legal permanent residency, and the resources available to her if she becomes a victim of domestic violence.

BRIEF ANALYSIS

The 1999 INS study notes a power imbalance that exists in IMB relationships between an American husband and foreign spouse and that this power imbalance could be a “plausible” reason for the existence of domestic abuse in the relationship. Without the knowledge of her legal rights under VAWA, a foreign spouse relies on her husband for legal protection against deportation and his cooperation in securing legal permanent residency. For many Asian immigrant women, the chance to seek a better life is a strong incentive to utilize IMBs. NAPAWF and other organizations seek through the IMBR legislation protections from harm, abuse and coercion for these immigrant women.