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Woman Seeking Superhero, Man Seeking Playdough

Each year, hundreds of thousands of women advertise themselves to foreign men as prospects of marriage. In the past couple of years, the online demand for these prospects has risen phenomenally. For the women of the Dominican Republic, these services serve as a way to escape from poverty and unemployment. For the Western man, these women seemingly meet the demand for an ideal. But looking at the issue closer, one has to look at why these women are searching for these particular services, why these men seek for these women, and what are the implications of all of these actions.

The Dominican Republic is a beautiful island between the North Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. With its tropical temperature and mystic terrain, it seems like it could be paradise. The country itself however, has been plagued with war since the beginning of its existence. With everyone from Spain to France to the United States and even Haiti laying claim to the country at one point or another, the country has fought for its own identity since it was discovered. Today, the country is besieged with unemployment and poverty. According to the United States' Central Intelligence Agency's website, "the country suffers from marked income inequality; the poorest half of the population receives less than one-fifth of the [Gross Domestic Product] while the richest 10% enjoys nearly 40% of the GDP" (The World Factbook). As of 2004, 42.2% of the population was below the poverty level.

The custom of exchanging money for brides has seemingly always existed with the first recorded brideprice going back to 3000 B.C.E. The two most commonly and historically known forms of payment were either a brideprice which was paid by the groom to the woman's parents or a dowry which went from the parents to the future groom (Economics of Dowry and Brideprice). Today, the legality of Mail Order Brides differs from country to country. In the U.S. for example, mail order brides are perfectly legal as long as they go through immigration procedures. On-line websites are overwhelmingly popular, simple and easy to use and a Google search of Dominican brides alone provides over 100,000 hits.

According to Robert J. Scholes in his article "The Mail-Order Bride" Industry and Its Impact on U.S. Immigration" there are two ways men can connect with their future brides. The first is an online service which provides pictures, biographies, and information to men who are charged two to five dollars for each email or mailing address they wish to obtain. The second are online email "pen-pal" groups which are usually free of charge and connect men and women based on the type of relationship they wish to obtain. According to Scholes, approximately 100,000 and 150,000 women from a variety of countries advertise themselves annually as being available for marriage. The oldest of these sites, Cherry Blossoms, reports that they serve over 1,000 men a month who pay up to \$200 each.

In my own searches, I found it extremely simple to find profiles of young Dominican women. On sites like "Dominican Senorita" women as young as eighteen were clad in sexy outfits, bikini's, or even simply bra's and underwear posing for pictures of men "regardless of age" whom they are willing to relocate for. The majority of the women only spoke Spanish and their profiles, written in perfect English, sounded like broken recordings of young women who are fun and are looking for a stable guy to settle down with. Most of them enjoy cooking, talk

about their small physique, and ask that men call, email, or visit them on a tour. I found it particular that the ages of the women did not always match the year they were born, the age of the man was always indicated as being “not important”, the girl was always willing to move, and when asked if the girls smoked they always said no and when asked if they cared if the man smoked, they always said they didn’t mind.

So why are so many young Dominican women willing to move thousands of miles away to marry foreign men? According to Scholes, the general consensus from the women is the search for a “better life” (The “Mail Order Bride Industry”). Foreign women see, particularly American men, as being “movie stars” who are more kind and faithful to their women as opposed to native men who are cruel and cheat on their wives. Machismo beliefs among some Dominican men might also be a factor. According to “Machismo and the Dominican Republic” traditional male perspectives is that man is supposed to be a “conquistador” of women. Being both aggressive and charming, these men find it a game to see how many women he can seduce. Women themselves, however are supposed to be child-bearers and housewives who attend to the needs of her husband. “Her voice within family decisions is silenced in the presence of her husband’s. Moreover, extramarital affairs are extremely common within the Dominican Republic, as men feel it is their right, and in some cases their duty as men, to seek the companionship of other women” (Machismo and the Dominican Republic).

Another part to this issue is the men themselves who seek the available brides-to-be. Scholes found the majority of the men seeking wives to be white, successful, politically and ideologically conservative, with a median age of thirty-seven. Fifty-seven percent of the men had been married at least once before. The number one reason given by these men for seeking a foreign wife was the “traditional values” they are perceived to have. Scholes believes that

although these men say they seek a life partner; “those who have used the mail-order bride route to find a mate have control in mind more than a loving, enduring relationship” (The “Mail Order Bride”Industry).

The ultimate question is however, whether or not these women are going to genuinely authentic men who are looking for a lasting relationship or if they are going to be exploited either emotionally, physically, or sexually. Unquestionably, on the women’s part, the desire for a husband may not outweigh the desire for citizenship in a different country. However, the greater threat is undoubtedly to the women. With Human Trafficking being one the second highest and fastest growing illegal activity in the world, this has to be taken into consideration. Are these women being given fraudulent promises or being unknowingly coerced into undesirable situations? In his report Scholes states that “Authorities agree that abuse in these marriages can be expected based on the men's desire for a submissive wife and the women's desire for a better life. At some point, after the alien bride has had time to adjust to the new environment, to make new friends, and to become comfortable with the language, her new independence and his domination are bound to conflict” (The “Mail Order Bride”Industry). The circumstances in which the Dominican women reside put forth a desire to get out in any way possible. According to The International Organization for Migration, as of 1996 the Dominican Republic had the fourth highest number of women working overseas in the sex trade at an estimated 50,000 women or more. The sex trade is seen as an alternate for the young women to their poverty who can expect about eighty dollars a month working at home in one of the better jobs if, that is, they can find one. Another factor to these numbers is the amount of women who know friends, relatives, and other women who have gone overseas in search of a better life (Trafficking in Women from the Dominican Republic).

The men themselves are overwhelmingly seeking these “traditional values” in the women they seek. Goodwife.com complains about Western women being “feminazis” who after marriage, let themselves go, try to “fix-up” their men, be the boss in the marriage, and put her career ahead of her man. The Intellectual Conservative gives advice to men to not marry because Western women are simply after their money through divorce. They said, “The divorce industry thus makes it very attractive for your spouse to divorce you and take your children” (Advice to Young Men). The 1950’s ideal woman who cooks, cleans, and always has her man on her mind seems to be the stem of the aspiration for the perfect foreign wife as opposed to the woman who’s aspirations seem to center around her own hopes and dreams. The Dominican woman appears to be for these men, women that they can mold into the perfect wife. In their act of “saving” them from their current situation, they hold the power to shape them into the wife that they dream of.

The Dominican women are seeking through Mail Order Services, an opportunity to make a better life for themselves outside of their impoverished country. Although their actions may be seen as deplorable by some, it’s worth thinking about the situation that would make a young woman leave her home, her family and friends, and everything she knows behind to marry a complete stranger in a foreign land. As for the men, although their services are providing a vehicle for the women out of poverty, the inhibitions with which some men enter is really what is unacceptable. Under what circumstances is the Western World raising their men to seek for women with which they can mold into an ideal?

The Dominican women meet the supply for the Western man’s demand. Along with so many other women from all around the globe, the Dominican women seek the Mail Order Bride services to try and find an escape from the circumstances in which they live. However, the

exploitation of these women with a stereotype of having a moldable quality to fit the desires of men who are unsatisfied with a more dynamic perspective in a Western woman is detestable.

The women of the Dominican Republic are simply trying to find a way out and the Western man is simply trying to find the perfect mate. In the end, everyone is searching for an ideal instead of looking at the causes and effects of their current situation.

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