"They're the Same as Any Woman:" Professionals' Awareness of the Unique Needs of Mail Order Brides Who Experience Domestic Violence

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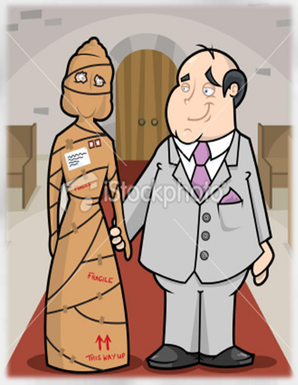
Abstract

Mail order Brides (MOBs) are women who marry men through international marriage brokers. Usually, MOBs come from less developed countries than their husbands. In recent years, domestic violence in mail order marriages has been brought to public awareness. Although legal protection from government is in place, it is not always sufficient. Community resources, on the other hand, can be helpful for MOBs to escape from domestic violence. Therefore, in order to find out what community resources are available to MOBs who experience domestic violence, the author has conducted 10 interviews with professionals who work in different domestic violence service organizations in the Twin Cities area. This research suggests that only a small number of MOBs have utilized existing community resources. Cultural and language competency as well as an awareness of the unique needs of MOBs who experience domestic violence vary among organizations. Most professionals categorized MOBs as "Immigrants" and saw no difference between the needs of MOBs and those of either all women in general, or immigrant women in particular. Funding cuts and access to MOBs are the main barriers for most organizations in providing appropriate services. One interesting finding from the interviews is related to the term "Mail Order Brides;" as some who were interviewed saw MOBs as victims or other unwitting participants in the sex trafficking industry. This paper adds to our understanding of the unique needs of MOBs who experience domestic violence and whether or not community professionals are adequately prepared to assist them.

Introduction

•8000 to 12,000 marriages are arranged by international marriage brokers each year in US (U.S. House of Representatives, 2005).
•A national survey conducted by Tahirih Justice Center in 2003 of legal service providers found that half of them had assisted abused mail-order brides (2010).
•Foreign wives are three times more likely to be abused by their American husbands than the national average in United States (Hass, Ammar, & Orloff, 2006).



•In 1994, Violence Against Women Acts add a section for battered immigrant a woman, which allows immigrant women to do self-petition when they can demonstrate they are the victims of domestic abuse (The Alabama Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2000).
•In 2005, the International Marriage Broker Regulation Act (IMBRA) was passed by the US congress, which requires native males to provide an extensive personal history prior to communicating with foreign women (Jehle & Miller, 2010).

Objective:

This research is to identify and interview domestic violence professionals in the Twin Cities to assess their level of service provided to MOBs as well as their understanding of the needs of MOBs who experience domestic violence.

Method

- Hour-long interviews with professionals from 10 different domestic violence organizations.
- Participants were located and selected through online research and snowballing
- 13 open-ended questions created by the researchers. Samples below:
  - Do you believe MOBs would deal with issues that are different from those of other women experiencing domestic violence?
  - Do you think that international brides would have similar rights as US citizens in DV cases?
  - What resources could MOBs who experience domestic violence benefit from if they were to access your organizations?

Analysis & Results

Qualitative analysis of all interview transcripts revealed three major themes from the data.

- Organizations competency to provide services to MOBs.
- Organizations' awareness of MOBs
- MOBs vs. Sex Trafficking: No Consensus

Organizations/ professionals	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
Number of MOBs worked with /Time duration (years)	3/5	9/ last year	3/in total	>3-4 /year	3-5/last year	1/year	7/in total	9/9	0	0
Final Disposition (Leave or stay with husband)	Mostly leave	Less likely to flee	Leave	Leave	Leave	50% leave	Leave	80% Leave	N/A	N/A

Table 1
Organizations' experience with MOBs from the number of MOBs they had worked with and the organization's understanding of the final outcome and disposition of the MOBs' marital relationship.

I. Organizations' Competency to provide Service for MOBs

Most organizations increase their competency by building partnerships with other organizations and utilizing interpreter services. Most organizations receive trainings not specific to MOBs. In providing services to MOBs, most organizations have barriers: reaching out, losing funding, lack of language competency and outside resources.

"I think it is really important. definitely. cause we try with our staff...we have different ages and different backgrounds, because that's who our clients are. We try as much as possible to have a variety of staff too. You understand differently. It think it is important for women to be able to speak their own language, whenever possible, people from their own culture who understand them"—E

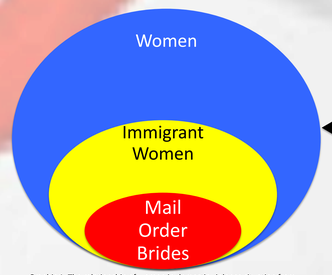
II. Organizations' awareness of MOBs

MOBs' Barriers in Domestic Violence situations—Dependency

MOBs legally, financially, and socially depend on their husbands, which become barriers for them in escaping domestic violence.

"…with immigration [there is always the fear and] threat that the husband can hold over them that I am going to have you deported, if you say anything negative about me."—F

"It is not easy for them to find help if they are just depending on their sponsors as their resources…If their spouses are American, they are gonna know the system here... the women come here with barely any [English] language, so she is at disadvantage to him who can manipulate her and the whole system to his advantage."—E



Graphic 1. The relationship of women in domestic violence situation from different contexts: women in general, immigrant women, and MOBs.

Rights conversations with MOBs

MOBs lack legal awareness, so most organizations advocate for their basic human rights, as well as their rights under the legal system.

"What are your rights as woman and as a human being? For equality, and to not be battered, and not have to be treated differently. Cause a lot of times they feel like they have no rights."—D

MOBs' rights as equal as US citizens?

•Most professionals believe MOBs should have the same rights under subjective laws, regardless of their citizenship. However, in the criminal justice system, the bias and trainings of judges, police, and lawyers would make a big difference.
•Immigration status limits MOBs from becoming economically independent.

"we all have the same laws, but I think sometimes, particularly in the criminal justice system, it really is the system where, from the level of the first response …911, police officer, all the way up to the judges… that whole process needs to be very informed about victims' rights. Cause at any point, that can break down, and someone can really [harm the victim] if they are not aware or don't really believe the victim."—F

MOBs' concern of rights assertion

Although it is possible to stay in the US without being dependent on their abusers, MOBs have concerns in asserting these rights due to the uncertainty of the outcome of self-petition (laws).

"the US is not always compassionate with immigrant people right now… people think that 'okay, you are here, you don't want to be in that relationship anymore, you should go back the country you came from.' as supposed to being open and helpful to that person… it (applying for [assistance through] VAWA) takes a long time to go through that system...there are a lot of barriers they have to go through. I think that there is not a lot of pushback, there is not a lot of people standing in the way of having it go through. But just to the outsider of that system, people are not always supportive of immigrant women and families."—C

III. MOB vs. Sex Trafficking: No Consensus

- Most participants reacted skeptically to the term "Mail Order Brides." Specifically, some suggested that these women were involved in the Sex Trafficking industry, typically without knowledge or consent. However, there was only moderate consensus on this among participants.

"in my opinion, it is the same as women who have been trafficked for sex...the women know nothing. They think 'oh, my gosh. He is a nice man. he simply looks for a wife. I would like to go to US. My family is here and we're under a lot of stress financially. It is better for everyone.' [But] … they are abusive. They simply want those women to take care all of their needs. [They've] no concept of her as a person with individual rights and needs...obviously, there are some situations where it's legitimate, and this person is really looking for someone potentially...but the women we work with…these men were looking for someone they can control" –A

"As far as sex trafficking, I don't think that it is intended to be sex trafficking. I think that there are definitely situations that somebody came over with the idea that they are going to marry somebody...but I do think there is a percentage of woman who do end up with sex trafficking…or they ended up having to prostitute to support themselves…or family. But I don't think that is the large population of mail order brides that are. I think a lot of them do come over to be married to a specific person."—C

Discussion

Most of the professionals interviewed tried to categorize MOBs with other types of women such as women in general or immigrant women, who may have experienced domestic violence. This categorization suggests that certain organizations lacked an awareness of the MOB phenomenon. This can be a disadvantage for MOBs when accessing services. In fact, research suggests that MOBs do differ from women or immigrant women in domestic violence cases.

Limitations

•No direct contact with mail order brides due to human subject restrictions and sensitivities
•Other professionals also provide services to MOBs who experience domestic violence but were not interviewed.
•The sample is limited to a metropolitan area, while other MOBs may live in more isolated areas.

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