

## Testimony

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### Human Trafficking: Mail-Order Bride Abuses

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## Introduction

Each year, thousands of women marry men they have met through marriage agencies. Driven by poverty, unemployment, and media images of Western lifestyles, women accept risky offers of marriage in hope of finding a better life. Although some women may find the romance and opportunities they seek, many become victims of violence, sexual exploitation, and sex trafficking.

In the 1980's, the mail-order-bride industry was small and brokers had to use printed catalogues or advertisements in the back of magazines to reach male customers. At that time, most of the women were recruited from Southeast Asia, particularly the Philippines and Thailand. In the early 1990s, two historical developments coincided to turn the mail-order bride market into a profitable, global business: the first was the collapse of the Soviet Union with the opening up of the borders for people, particularly women, to migrate, and the second was the digital information revolution of the Internet. The marriage brokers quickly moved to the Internet, which enabled them to expand and update their catalogue offerings and reach a global market of men quicker, easier, and less expensively.

Women who find partners through marriage agencies are probably at higher risk of becoming victims of violence and exploitation. From examining the web sites of marriage agencies, one can see that the women are marketed using sexual, racial, and ethnic stereotypes. The web sites often include sexualized and semi-nude pictures of the women. The descriptions of the women claim that they are dedicated to a subservient role, solely oriented to pleasing men. The women are clearly being marketed to men who have been failures at establishing relationships with American women. These men frequently blame their failed relationships on the character of American women. One agency said it was there to assist men in finding a *"loving and devoted"* woman whose *"views of relationships have not been ruined by unreasonable expectations."* The advertisement on this agency's web site said that these women were *"known to be pleasers and not competitors. They are feminine, NOT feminist."* The following is another example of how Filipina women are marketed to American men:

*"It is less common to find an American woman who is interested in having a permanent marriage and family including a Husband. One easy way to see this is to look at ANY publication containing "personals" ads. The women want someone who looks a certain way, and who has*

*certain "social skills" such as dancing or clever conversation, someone who is interesting and exciting and seductive. Now go to my Web page (www.filipina.com) and look at what the girls say they want. It's all pretty simple, really. Over and over they state that they are happy to settle down FOREVER with a MAN who is willing to try to hold down a steady job and be a loving and understanding husband and father. This will get you exactly NOWHERE with an American girl !!!!!"*

From my contacts with domestic violence service providers, I have heard about numerous cases in which mail-order-brides ended up being battered, imprisoned, and sadistically sexually abused. There are documented cases of women being abused and/or murdered after marrying a man they met through a "marriage agency." 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. There have been other cases of women who met American men through these agencies being seriously victimized and murdered.

## **Deceptive Practices**

There have been documented cases of photographs being used on marriage agency web sites without the women's knowledge or permission. In one case, a model, whose nude pictures appeared in an American online catalogue claimed that a photographer, for whom she had worked, sold the pictures without her permission to the marriage agency, along with her address and phone number. Upon investigation, the owner of a modelling agency that specialized in pornography admitted that he sold nude photographs of women to the marriage agency.

## **Underage Children on Marriage Agency Web Sites**

On marriage agency web sites offering women from Asia and Eastern Europe, I found blatant and subtle marketing of children for sexual purposes.

One mail-order-bride agency from the Philippines had 19 girls aged 17 or younger. The following are descriptions of three of the youngest girls:

*ID # V001-Hazel; Age: 13; Height: 5'3" (160 cm); Weight 95 lb. (43 kg); Children: none; Looking for a mate in age range 20-35. 'I am now a freshman student at Saint Pius School. ... I like outdoors having fun. I like to read magazine which is nice to me, especially to religious books. I sometime love to see a movie but not so.... I really want to have a penpal who is loving, caring, honest, and family-oriented person. I am a marriage minded woman.'*

*ID # Y011-Eddy Mae; Age 14; Height: 5;2" (157 cm); Weight 98 lb. (45 kg); Children: none; Looking for a mate in age range 18 to 25; 'Currently, I'm a second year student of San Lorenzo Ruiz Academy of Polomolok; ... My hobbies are writing, painting, and reading books. I love reading Valentine Romance and any love story pocket books. I like watching TV Patrol and Million Dollar Movies.'*

*ID # 1F12-Edrilyn; Age: 15, Height: 5'0" (152 cm); Weight 95 lb. (43 kg); Children: none; Looking for a mate in age range 20 to 30. 'I am working in my neighbor's house as a servant. At the same time I am studying at public school – as a sophomore student...I like playing (as I am a sportsminded), dancing, reading, writing. I am fond of reading magazines, especially Movie Star*

*and Teen Star. I love to watch TV shows such as Bay Watch and Power Rangers, which is interesting too. I am self-supporting.'*

Several of the marriage agencies offering women from Russia, Ukraine and Moldova have underage girls listed as correspondents or future wives. A marriage agency in Chisinau, Moldova had a 14 year old girl; an agency located in Kherson, Ukraine had girls listed as being 15 and 16 years of age; another Ukrainian agency had contact addresses for girls aged 10, 14, and 16. And an agency in Odessa, Ukraine had contact information for several underage girls (aged 10, 12, 14 and 15) and a boy (aged 15).

One marriage agent offering women and girls from the Philippines complained on his web site that the US government will not allow his youngest brides on offer, who are under age 16, into the country. *"The service itself is not restricted by the American government, although they are real picky about getting your bride into the states—they won't give a visa to a bride under age sixteen."*

There are images and texts on marriage agency web sites that have raised my suspicions that paedophiles may seek a foreign wife with children as a way to have sexual access to children. One web site had photographs of naked children from the Philippines. Although the images were seemingly innocent – the pictures were of naked boys playing in a fountain – when juxtaposed alongside mail order brides, they conveyed a message that these children were available as well. Also, another marriage agency allowed viewers to sort the available women by whether or not they had children.

## **The Marketing of Extremely Vulnerable Populations**

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

One marriage agency operates from inside a Russian government social service agency that provides medial and social assistance to “families with disabled children, single-parent families, large families, and other vulnerable layers of the population.” Services they provide include “psychological consulting both to children and adults,” and “legal assistance to the women suffering domestic/sexual/societal” violence. The web site appeared to be a typical marriage agency, and claimed that its purpose was to provide “assistance to the lonely people inside Russia and all over the world in creating families though Internet.” The descriptions of the women do not say they have previously been abused, although there are a number of women whose average age is higher than most marriage agency Web sites.

There are also marriage agencies offering introduction services and pornography of women with disabilities. One site from Russia markets women with missing limbs. The services are marketed to men with fetishes for missing limbs, amputated limbs or congenital malformations. According to an amputee pornographer, “The shorter the stump is, the sexier an amputee.” The photographs on the marriage agency 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 agency site are photographs of orphans with disabilities. Viewers are urged to send gifts or adopt them.

Women and orphans with disabilities are extremely vulnerable. The loss of social supports following the collapse of the Soviet Union has severely worsened the circumstances for many. It would be wonderful to think of ways that people could support these women and children, but after viewing this site, one is left with a sick feeling for how they maybe exploited and abused by men who offer to marry or adopt them.

## Marriage and Sex Tour Agencies Banned in the Philippines

In the 1990s, the government of the Philippines banned the operation of marriage agencies and sex tour agencies. I don't know if there have been any prosecutions, but this new law did cause American operators of marriage agencies to move their agencies out of the Philippines. One man who operated a marriage agency complained on this web site about this new law: *"The Philippines government is ... definitely working against the interests of their own people. These girls **want** and **need** to leave that country."* Yet, he did not want to risk arrest under the new law so he withdrew from the Philippines and moved his operation to the United States. He continues his marriage agency business by using his own Filipina wife to contact and recruit women and girls in the Philippines.

## Marketing Multiple Forms of Sexual Exploitation

Many of the marriage agencies are part of larger commercial operations that offer a number of services, some of which are blatantly connected to the sex industry or involve the sexual exploitation of women. These multiple services include: the marriage agency, tours for men to meet women, escort services (prostitution), modelling agencies, production of pornography, and travel agencies. A number of the marriage agency web sites have links to pornographic web sites and prostitution services.

I documented the involvement of one marriage agency in the Philippines with sex tourism and prostitution:

At the top of the first page of the web site is a picture of a Filipina inviting the men to *"Come explore the Philippines with me!"* The advertisement describes the Philippines as an *"exotic and interesting place to visit."* Information is given on tickets, lodging, food and water, money changing, nightlife and the tour schedule. Prostitution is briefly mentioned as being *"everywhere,"* and a price range for prostitutes is listed. Men are told, *"You can partake or not, it's up to you. Most do partake."* Marriage is also briefly mentioned: *"As most of you know, the Philippines is the happy hunting ground for men seeking a wife. There are all kinds of women of every description. It's hard to go to the Philippines and not get caught up in the idea of marriage. The whole lifestyle seems to revolve around love, marriage and kids."* On the next linked page the man is asked *"would you like to have a beautiful female companion as a **private** tour guide?"* or *"would you like to have introductions to 'decent' marriage minded ladies?"* If he chooses the private tour guide he is directed to the *X-Rated Escorted Tours*. At the top of this page a picture of the same Filipina from the introductory page appears, this time with her breasts exposed. The woman invites the men to *"Come explore the Philippines and Me!"* Much of the same travel information is repeated, but here the man finds out how much it costs to have an "escort" during his trip. The fee is paid to the travel agent-pimp, not the woman. The agent suggests that the sex tourist tip the woman. The viewer can also choose the marriage option and he is then directed to the linked page on *Over Seas Ladies*. There he is asked if he is tired of watching TV and having women make him jump through hoops. He is told that the women here *"respond to every gesture and kindness, no matter how small."* He is reassured that these women are not concerned about his age, appearance, or wealth. Here the man is presented with pages of pictures of women from which he can choose. The agency sells the addresses of the women to the man. For an extra fee the buyer can have a lifetime membership that entitles him to the addresses of all the women, those currently available and those in the future. (If the man is seeking a permanent relationship, why he might want or need a lifetime membership is not explained.) One the next linked page is *Escorted Wife Seeking Tours*. The man is told: *"You will meet a lot of beautiful women there. Your penpals that you have been writing to will be happy to see you. The new women you meet*

*will be generally 'good' girls, but there are plenty of bar girls there too and you will surely encounter some."*

Marriage agencies in Russia and Ukraine also have this type of combination of services for sexual exploitation. In addition to selling addresses of women for possible marriage, they offer to facilitate the travel of men to meet women. These agencies offer escort services (prostitution) along with the "romance" tours. Several agencies advertise that men can come and photograph women in "private nude photo sessions of Russian models" from their modeling agency. Another agency offers to take "nude" and "skin flick" photographs and videos of the women they are interested in meeting.

Several of the Russian agencies include nude photos of the women on their web site. Some of the agency sites seem to be fully integrated into the sex industry. One example is a site that offers Russian brides, escort services, and Russian pornography. There are links on many of the agency web sites that connect to typical sex industry (prostitution and pornography) sites.

Some of the marriage agencies and introduction services appear to operate as little more than prostitution tour agencies. The men often expect to have sex with the women. One man admitted to a reporter: "We're not here to get married." They use the marriage agency "romance tours" as sex or prostitution tourism.

## **Marriage Agencies and Sex Trafficking**

It is easy to document how marriage agencies are involved in many forms of sexual exploitation and put vulnerable women and children at risk. It is harder to prove involvement of these agencies in sex trafficking as the crime is defined by law, which requires proof of force, fraud, or coercion.

Workers in the St. Petersburg Psychological Crisis Center for Women in Russia report that they have heard of women recruited by marriage agencies being trafficked into the sex industry. In Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union, there have been so few trafficking cases prosecuted that getting detailed information on how the women were recruited is difficult. Although, information from non-governmental organizations working in these countries indicates that marriage agencies are involved in sex trafficking as well as other forms of sexual exploitation.

Some of the marriage agencies operate tour agencies that facilitate the travel and potential trafficking of women. In Chelyabinsk, Russia, an NGO representative said that the traffickers operate in travel agencies, with each agency specializing in one particular country where women are sent. In St. Petersburg, an NGO representative said that marriage agencies are well-organized business and "well protected" by the political-business-criminal networks. 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.

One multiple service Russian agency offers to send women to meet men in other countries. If men don't want to travel to Russia, or don't want the problem of getting a visa, the agency will arrange to send a woman to another country to meet the man. It is easy to see how this could be a front for trafficking and even a way to deceive the woman into thinking she is going abroad to meet a particular man.

There are a number of aspects of these types of agencies that indicate that they are likely to be involved. 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 may have children; 3) The women may have tried corresponding with men, meeting Western men on tours sponsored by the agencies, and now be more willing to go abroad if they agency makes them an offer; and 4) the agencies

have extensive personal information about the women and their families that is often used to coerce women into prostitution once they are abroad.

One can see how an agency offering a combination of services could be involved in trafficking, especially those that essentially have a data base of information on women who are single and expressed an interest in going abroad. It is difficult to know how many of these agencies are providing the services they claim of selling addresses, and how many are involved in activities that meet the criminal definition of trafficking in women.

## **Quantitative Research on Marriage Agencies in the Former Soviet Union**

A few years ago, I conducted a quantitative study on the recruitment of women by marriage agencies in the countries of the former Soviet Union. There is no known previous research that quantifies and maps the numbers of women recruited by “marriage agencies.” The goals of this research were to determine: 1) How many Internet-based “marriage agencies” are operating in these countries? 2) How many women have been recruited by these agencies? 3) If there are particular countries, regions, and oblasts<sup>1</sup> 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?

The search 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. The 219 marriage agencies had a total of 119,649 women on their sites.

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. (See Table 1 and Map 1) The countries with the largest numbers of women were the Russian Federation with over 62,000 women, followed by Ukraine with almost 32,000, and Belarus with almost 13,000. Countries with a few thousand recruited women were: Kazakhstan (3,037), Kyrgyzstan (4,190), Latvia (1,760), and Uzbekistan (1,139). The other countries had less than 1000 recruited 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).

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 Noosibirsk, 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).

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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 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. 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).

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.

This study was not able to link specific trafficking cases to marriage agencies 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 was not a crime in the Russian Federation when this research was done; consequently, there are no official cases. In Ukraine, there has been a law against trafficking since 1998, but relatively few traffickers have been convicted. However, NGOs in countries of origin and destination report knowing that women are trafficked through marriage agencies.

## 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 said, "Why waste your time with that work.

Why not correspond with a Western man and find a better life?” She said she knew of cases in which women are afraid to go to the agencies alone, so mothers accompany their daughters to sign them up.

There is an abundance of evidence that marriage agencies are involved in activities that result in the sexual exploitation of women and children. It is harder to make links between specific marriage agencies and sex trafficking as defined by law. There are many anecdotal reports from NGOs about the involvement of marriage agencies in the sex trafficking of women, but more investigations and collection of evidence into official cases are needed to firmly document their involvement.

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

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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
<b>Total</b>	<b>119,649</b>

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

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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-Balkaria	22	Smolensk	23
Kaliningrad	295	St. Petersburg	15694
Kalmykia	2	Stavropol	365
Kaluga	72	Tambov	111
Kamchatka	27	Tatarstan	2165
Karachay-Cherkessia	4	Taymyr	31
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
		<b>Total</b>	<b>62605</b>

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

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Cherkas'ka	149	Mykolayiv	533
Chernivhivs'ka	35	Odessa	3225
Chernivitsi	268	Poltava	368
Dnipropetrovsk	2742	Respublika Krym	5515
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
		<b>Total</b>	<b>31837</b>

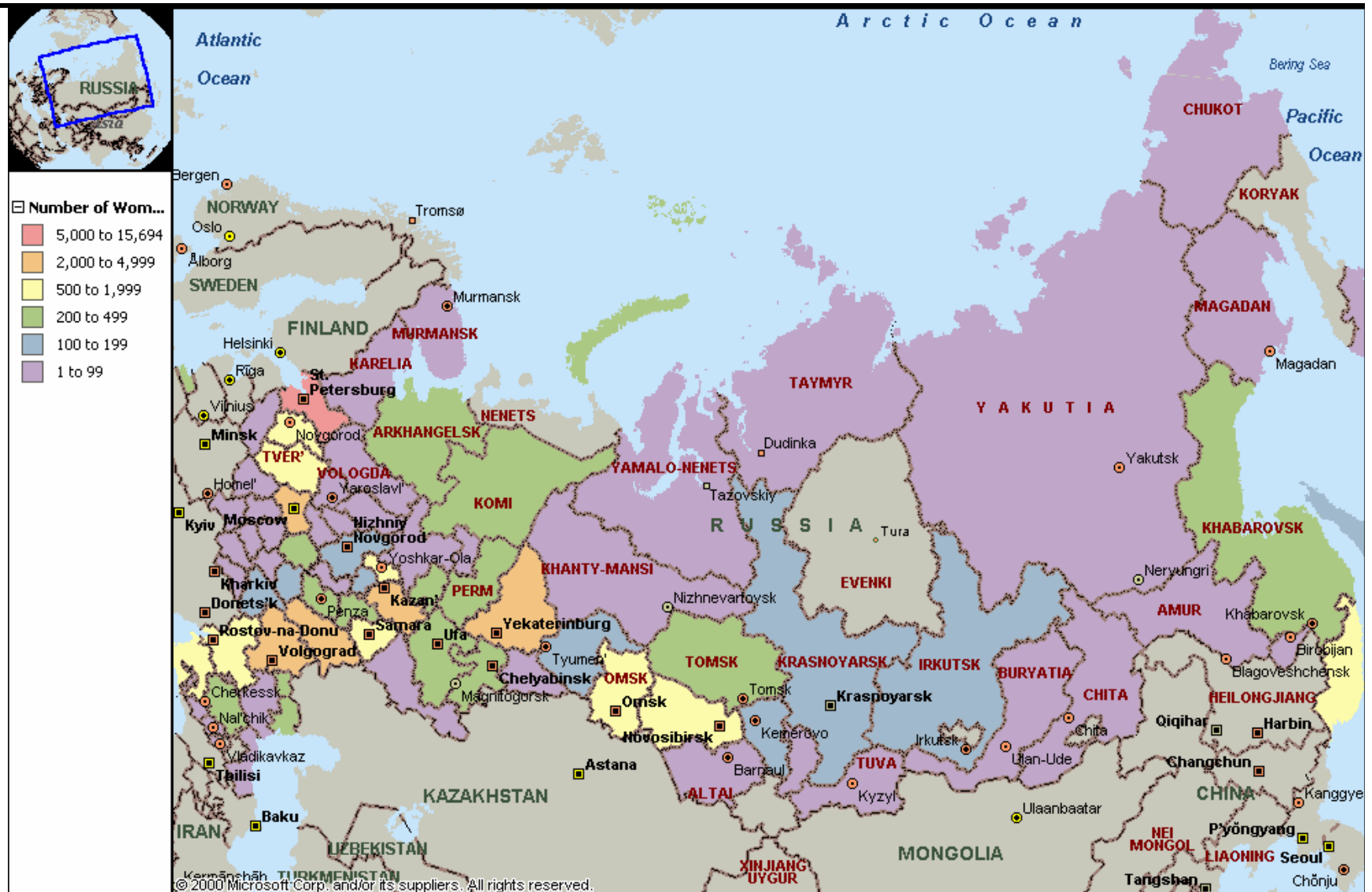
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Map 1

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

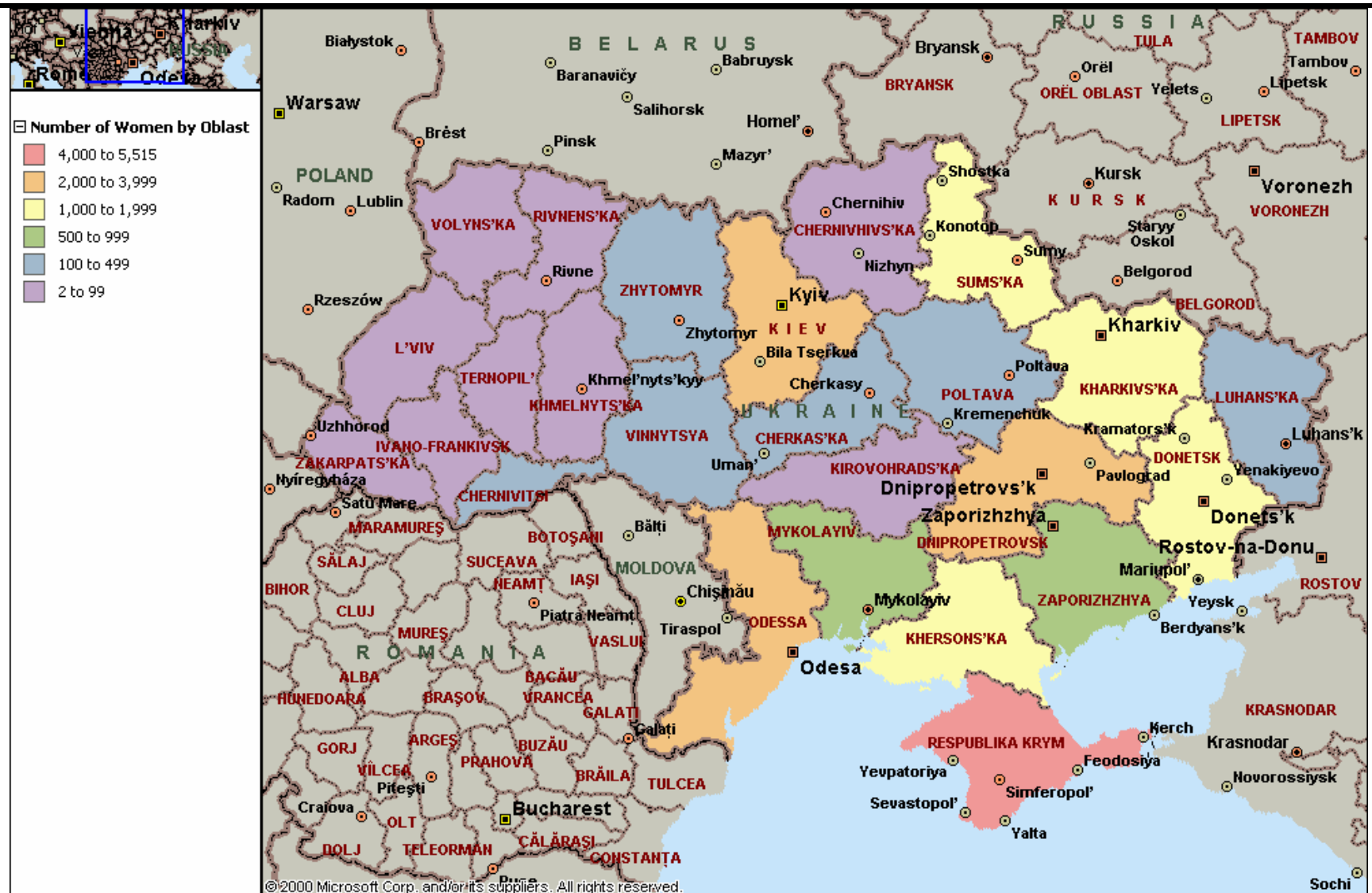


**Map 2**  
**Women Recruited by Marriage Agencies in the Russian Federation, by Oblast**



Map 3

Women Recruited by Marriage Agencies in Ukraine, by Oblast



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