

**Exploring Potential Links Between
Human Trafficking and International Marriage Brokering**

Testimony by John R. Miller
Director
Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons
Department of State

Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs

July 13, 2004

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is an honor to appear before you. You have devoted great energy to making America a leader in the global effort to eradicate trafficking in persons, and you have made a tremendous difference in the lives of many people around the world. I salute you for your humanitarian work.

I also salute Senator Cantwell for her humanitarian concern and for introducing the International Marriage Broker Regulation Act.

Today, as we approach the topic of international marriage brokering and its potential links to human trafficking, it is important for us to remember the humanity of the trafficking issue — not just the legalities — because it is, after all, real people we seek to protect.

I have met men, women, and children around the world who have been recruited, deceived, forced, and coerced into unimaginable situations where they are deprived of their freedom, stripped of their dignity, and abused into hopelessness. I have seen and heard of people who have been bought and sold into domestic servitude, commercial sexual exploitation, child soldiering, forced labor, and camel jockeying. These modern-day forms of slavery are brutal not just to the minds and bodies of victims, but to their souls.

That's why the United States, under the leadership of Congress and President Bush, is taking strong action, in cooperation with other nations, to end human trafficking. We have 11 U.S. government agencies executing strategic anti-trafficking in persons plans through the President's Interagency Task Force on Trafficking in Persons. The U.S. devoted more than \$70 million in the last fiscal year to anti-trafficking programs abroad to prevent trafficking, protect victims, and prosecute traffickers. We issue the most comprehensive report on trafficking in persons in an effort to stimulate greater government action around the world, and we are aggressively stepping up prosecution and public education efforts here at home.

It is from a worldwide perspective, however, that I am here to speak with you. Without a doubt, there are many things we still are striving to understand about this criminal phenomenon known as human trafficking. But as we get further into our research and examine trends, we certainly are identifying common threads that bind disparate trafficking scenarios together.

Vulnerability of victims

First, we know that in a vast majority of human trafficking cases, the victims are from vulnerable populations. Traffickers prey on those they deem easier targets: those with little or no financial means who might be lured by promises of food, money, and shelter; innocent children who have no means of physically defending themselves; and people who have been given few or no educational opportunities. In many cases, traffickers rely on psychological coercion to take advantage of vulnerable people, but they also use physical force to profit in human misery. Our most recent estimates reveal that 80 percent of trafficking victims worldwide are female and 50 percent are children.

Deception as a key tool of traffickers

Second, through data collection and research conducted as part of our preparation of the congressionally mandated *Trafficking in Persons Report*, we find that most traffickers offer victims false promises of better lives. Taking advantage of the financial vulnerability I just mentioned, human traffickers deceive victims with non-existent job opportunities, financial windfall, and much improved living conditions. Victims often believe these lies because they have seen glimpses of other cultures in the media or have heard supposed “success stories” from others who have left the country to pursue their dreams. Sadly, deception is even sometimes used by people they trust who get money for signing friends or relatives up for human trafficking situations.

Corruption as a contributing factor

A third thread we have identified in the fight against human trafficking is the role of systemic corruption, which provides valuable cover for those who trade in people. Where governments are not trusted and not perceived as upholding justice, citizens lose confidence in their ability to thrive in those nations. They become more desperate and willing to take unwise risks, making them more prone to trafficking schemes. Furthermore, when they get in difficult or potentially criminal situations, victims fear, rather than seek out, government intervention. This cycle of corruption and distrust fuels economic instability, destroys confidence in the legal system, and undermines the rule of law.

So how do vulnerability, deception, and corruption relate to a potential link between marriage brokering and human trafficking?

Traffickers rely on the vulnerable, and taking a woman out of her community, transporting her from her country, and making her dependent on a foreign man in a foreign land makes her ripe for exploitation.

Many women in less developed countries long for a move to a more developed country where life is thought to be easier. One way “out” for women in economically depressed communities is to marry citizens of more developed countries. And where governments offer no civil protections, this option leaves women with little information about their prospective marriage matches and whether they have been married before, have criminal records, etc.

Traffickers are documented to have used offers of marriage to recruit women for the sex trade and for forced labor. From rural villages in Asia to slums in major South American cities, women are deceived into leaving their homes and traveling across international borders in the hopes of marrying men who can provide them better lives. This vulnerability of disadvantaged women is well known to traffickers.

Some human traffickers recruit victims through direct offers of marriages, negotiating directly with the woman or her family for a promise of marriage, after which she is delivered to a brothel or a sweatshop by the “husband,” who is rewarded with a cash payment from the brothel keeper or sweatshop manager for the delivery of his slave.

This was the case with a woman I met in Asia in February. Pou was 17 when a man came to her village and arranged through her sister to marry her. Shortly after the marriage, the man took Pou to a fishing village and sold her to a brothel. After years of abuse and torment, Pou was released by the brothel. Today her body is ravaged by disease, and this woman in her 20s looks decades older than her real age. Yet she wants her story told.

To further illustrate the prevalence of this scenario, I’d like to tell you about the effort of a non-government organization in one Asian community. The NGO began a program to prevent human trafficking by taking Polaroid photographs of each man who comes to a particular community to take a bride. These photos are then used to identify men who return to the community for brides multiple times, revealing some men to be traffickers who have no interest in real marriages to the women they claim to be picking up as brides.

Other villains in this trade, however, use more organized mechanisms for deceiving women with offers of marriage. We believe marriage brokers — legal brokers who, for a fee, introduce prospective brides to wealthier foreign men —

are used to facilitate trafficking in persons. Documenting this trend, however, is not easy.

NGOs and other sources provide anecdotal evidence of this connection. Recent reports reveal trafficking of women from Vietnam to Taiwan in which many Vietnamese women are married legally to Taiwanese men whom they do not know until they are transported to Taiwan. In these cases, marriage brokers appear to be used — advertising and recruiting women seeking a foreign marriage as a means to improve their lives, only to be forced into sexual servitude in brothels in Taiwan.

While the examples presented here deal with Asia, they are stories repeated around the world. It is important to note that this is a worldwide phenomenon that likely touches many countries and every continent.

The potential for similar trafficking of foreign women to the United States using ostensibly legal and legitimate marriage brokers is real and serious. I applaud your efforts, Mr. Chairman, Sen. Cantwell's efforts, and the actions of others to tighten oversight of marriage brokers operating in the United States in order to prevent the abuse of vulnerable women and children.

I am now happy to take your questions.