The annual rate of foreign women immigrating to the United States through match-making companies, also known as “mail-order brides,” is increasing each year at a rate which cannot be ignored. The majority of these women are migrating from Russia, various parts of Asia, the Philippines and Latin America. This paper focuses on these four ethnic groups and observes the women’s various motives for wanting to leave their native land for the United States, their preferences in traits when seeking a western spouse, American male’s preferences in a potential wife as well as their own motives for seeking a mail-order bride (M.O.B.), and finally the increased rates of domestic violence that these arranged relationships risk producing and why these situations are occurring.

It is important to understand what various parts of the world the majority of mail-order brides are migrating from. The countries tend to be second or third world and the women are usually quite poor, in search of escape from her native country to a better life that only a western man could provide her. “During the 1970’s, Western Europe and Australia were common destinations for South-East Asian brides. In the 1980’s and 1990’s, migration movements diversified to include women from Latin America, Mexico, China and the Philippines who traveled to the U.S.A.” (Plambech, 2008; p. 32). While many of the M.O.B.’s no doubt come from poor and impoverished communities and social backgrounds in their respective countries: “currently, the vast majority of mail-order bride purchasers are heterosexual men from wealthy industrialized countries and
the vast majority of the supply women are young, non-western and desperately poor” (Pehar, 2003; p. 173), an interesting trend of women from the middle-class in their countries applying to the matchmaking industries is on the rise. The popularity of the internet has made it possible for industries to not only promote and potentially exploit poor women but to now tailor their websites and services to appeal to women from wealthier backgrounds. However, there does not seem to be as clear of an economic distinction between the male clients who are seeking these future wives. The emergence of the middle-class M.O.B. who does not seem so desperate and exploited has left many researchers wondering how the matchmaking industry should now be viewed. Should the women still be viewed as victims of a patriarchal society that is legally allowed to “buy” them, or should the women (particularly the ones who come from middle-class backgrounds) be viewed as trailblazers who are shaking up the traditional notions surrounding M.O.B.'s? One researcher asserts: “This industry does not merely commodify relationships into binaries of the white male buyer and ethnic female seller...but involves a more complex and uneven historical moment of racial formation, nationhood, and understandings of masculinity and subjectivity” (Schaeffer- Grabel, “Planet-Love.” 2006; p. 331-332).

Despite the rise of middle-class M.O.B.'s who are not in situations of desperate poverty it seems that they still sign up with an industry for many of the same reasons that the poor women do. In general, foreign women from third or second-world countries, despite being poor or middle class, tend to view American men (as opposed to men from their own countries) as companions
that will treat them and their marriage in a far more egalitarian way. The women believe that American men will appreciate and value what they bring to the marriage and home duties far more than the men in their own countries would (Schaeffer-Grabel, “Planet-Love.” 2006) as the men from their respective countries tend to view the role of the wife in incredibly traditional and sexist terms and will perhaps devalue her contributions to the relationship. The women also believe that American men are far more likely than men from their own countries to be able to provide them economic stability and a comfortable, middle-class life. An additional factor in relation particularly to women from Mexico or Latin American countries is the pressure that they feel within their own country to be married by a certain age, the younger the better. “Women in their late 20’s and older hope to escape the stigma of being ‘older’ and single in Mexican society, a society that generally assumes they are past their prime. Although marriage symbolizes positive qualities such as happiness, achievement, opportunity, and advancement, the state of being single is stigmatized as the exact opposite: lack of achievement, solitude, stagnation and failure” (Schaeffer-Grabel, “Cyberbrides and Global Imaginaries.” 2004; p. 36).

In reality, many of the man who seek M.O.B.'s are looking for the same qualities that the men from the women’s countries are, the subordinate woman who will adhere to the traditional role of the wife. Many would acknowledge that women have made incredible strides the past few decades in terms of greater equality in romantic relationships, more equality in the workplace, less emphasis placed on fulfilling the traditional feminine role of wife and mother, and that this progress is a positive social change. However many of the men who are drawn to purchasing an M.O.B. do not share this enthusiasm for the
changing definitions and expectations of what it means to be an American female. Instead, they tend to view this shift of greater female power as a threat to the old American way of life and their status as the authority figure within the family, the expected role that the man is the head of the house. One match-making company advertised their Asian women as being the perfect ‘traditional’ woman and wife, one who will adhere to the culturally outdated American stereotype of the subordinate, dependent, stay-at-home wife and mother. Their ad stated: “She retains the best feminine Asian physical characteristics (small, slender), and personality traits (hard-working, humble, devoted to her husband and family), while being just ‘Americanized’ enough to be for the American male, the most desirable mate of all Oriental females.” In stating this, “The flyer positions ‘the Filipina’ as physically diminutive and culturally deferential to the U.S. male” (So, 2006; p. 401). Greater rates of unemployment have also left many men feeling de-masculinized within their marriages and may also feel uncomfortable with the growing trend of media portraying the unconventional family or the male in the labor force that does not have the traditional 'masculine' job. One website which offers middle-class women does so through 'vacation romance tours' which allow the men to come to the country and physically meet the various women in the agency. Thus the 'tour' allows them to be exposed to and get to know many potential mates. Because this sort of agency allows more contact with the women they also offer men to have contact with one another while they seek out wives. Chat room discussions between the men on these websites indicate that they do indeed feel more and more dis-empowered in the United States and a certain sense of detachment and alienation from their American culture and
their status as an American male due to the increasing professional and social strides that women are making. One man named Jason stated:

“My whole life is abstract...so on some level, going outside the country is an attempt to, you know, get past that cynical, detached experience that I have here” (Schaeffer-Grabiel, “Planet-Love.” 2006; p. 337).

Jason believed that the only way he would be able to achieve the 'American dream' of the wife, children and nice house was to travel outside of the country and find a woman that would make him feel like the true, original ideal of the American male and thus make him feel less detached from his own culture, a culture that is evolving to value the contributions of women more and creating this dis-attachment that he feels from what he perceives to be the advantages of the old way of life. He could achieve this life by marrying a woman who did not share the American female’s desire to obtain equality to men and this foreign wife would provide him with the 'attachment' to his masculinity and masculine American culture and family values that he yearns for. One match-making website advertises that “foreign fiancées are not tainted by the perversions that feminism has wreaked on the American family. Unlike American women, who are 'so belligerent, angry, selfish and confused,' these foreign women retain traditional (and somehow American) family values... her life is centered around her family, her husband, and children (similar to American women from generations past)” (Lindee, 2007; p. 551).

Men who are aware that foreign women are seeking out American males because they believe they will obtain a better lifestyle may use it to their advantage and thus adopt an
inflated view of their masculinity and status as an American who is in a position of power, both economically and sexually. The men adopt a “heightened moral and class status within the global world order as the ‘good guys,’ heroes, or sensitive ‘new men’ crafted against the macho Latin male stereotype... Men in the United States imagine themselves as the benevolent force saving globally 'disadvantaged' middle-class women abroad as well as saving the U.S. Nation from the so-called disintegration of the family brought about by feminism, women's entrance into the labor force, and U.S. Women of color, who are stereotyped as welfare recipients (viewed as unruly and lazy laborers)” (Schaeffer-Grabiel, “Planet-Love.” 2006; p. 333).

One study examined the characteristics that M.O.B.’s were seeking in an American spouse by comparing three groups of women from Russia, Colombia and the Philippines; the study sought to discover what foreign women prioritized as the most important traits that they desired in a western man. The study found many similarities between the groups of women in terms of their preferences of spousal characteristics. The women from all three countries cited social/financial status, ambition, monogamy and commitment as their most sought after characteristics in a mate with some variability as to which traits they placed first, second and third. Unlike Russian and Colombian women, Filipino women were less interested in fidelity/commitment than the other two groups were. None of the three groups of M.O.B.’s expressed need for specific religious/political beliefs in their spouse and only the Russian M.O.B.’s expressed significant desire for a mate who was physically attractive. The most obvious difference between the three groups was their mentioned desire of social skills such as a sense of
humor and openness. While not one Filipino M.O.B. mentioned this preference, 45% of the Russian correspondents did as well as 25% of the Colombian women. Due to the fact that the results of mate preferences were largely very similar within these groups (with the exception of slightly different priority orders of desired characteristics), it is concluded that these M.O.B.’s follow the pattern that we see cross-culturally in women’s preferences in characteristics of a spouse. This study shows that sex preferences hold up within nearly every culture such as the woman’s preference for a spouse that is older and thus exhibits economic stability, be committed to sharing this stability with her and to maintain a monogamous sexual fidelity with her. This study proves to be in line with other cross-cultural studies that have determined these to be mainly universal traits that women seek versus seeking out a mate who is attractive and sexually/reproductively competent as we see being the main preferences that men hold for a spouse (Minervini & McAndrew, 2006).

While many men seeking an M.O.B are seduced by the idea of a much younger woman willing to marry them, one trend seems to be the lust for the exotic, the belief that women from other countries are somehow more alluring and sexually desirable. For instance, “The predominant stereotype of Asian women in popular culture is the exotic sex object who is submissive to men- ‘concubine, geisha girl, mail-order bride; dragon lady, lotus blossom, precious pearl’” (Fuller, 2004; p. 8). The same belief in the exotic held by western men seems to also be true for Latin American women as well, that they are particularly more beautiful and younger than potential female partners from the United States. In particular, they believe that Latin American women will become better spouses and mothers than their less subordinate, American female counterparts. Because
of the stereotype that Latin women are more beautiful, many match-making companies use this to influence their male clients that these women have superior genes to American women. The men that do not exclusively seek Latin women still seem to have very similar preferences in their potential spouse. Not surprisingly, physical appearance and age seem to be at the top of the men's priority list in terms of important characteristics.

The match-making websites offer the usual social profile information such as name, hobbies, education level and address, but they take it a step further by not only providing a picture of the woman but also her exact physical measurements such as height, weight, and sometimes even waist, hip and breast measurements in order to further appeal to and attract the male client who highly values these attributes in his future mate (Pehar, 2003). The manner in which the women are presented on the matchmaking websites does not help to reduce men's stereotypical views on the role of women. Often they are encouraged to use seductive photos that make them appear quite attractive and descriptions of themselves that may make them appear willing to indulge the men in their desire for a traditional and submissive woman. The language barrier also serves to place the women in positions of greater subordinance as in the eyes of the men it may make her appear less aware of what is going on and more vulnerable to exploitation. “Men have few opportunities to understand women's perspectives, especially since Web sites promote stereotypical information about women as more family oriented, accustomed to larger differences, willing to please, and sexual objects for men's pleasure” (Schaeffer-Grabiel, “Planet-Love.” 2006; p. 332).
Because of the subordination that many men crave in these arranged relationships, it is quite common for the foreign born bride to be subjected to violence under the control of her husband. Whether it is physical, sexual, emotional or financial/economic abuse, there has been much research done on the fact that the migrant bride is much more likely to experience abuse in the relationship than a woman who was not ‘bought’ (Pehar, 2003). There are many threat tactics used by the American man in order to keep his wife in a position of subordinance under his control. As mentioned earlier, one such method of control that the men may exploit is the language barrier between him and his wife. The man is aware of her lack of fluency in English and thus is aware that this will make it difficult for her to seek help, articulate the abuse that she is experiencing and/or testify against him. “Russian-speaking women discussed at length their need for legal assistance regarding divorce proceedings and immigration...because language was often a barrier, translation services or availability of services in Russian were frequently cited as concerns. One participant explained:

'English is a very big problem... At first, I had difficulties to understand, she [the social service worker] said, 'I gave you information, why did not you go?' But it was written with scribbles, I could not understand!''


Another method of exploitation is that if children are involved they may be used as blackmail to demand 'domestic compliance' from his wife as he can threaten to have her deported and keep their children who have American citizenship with him. Also, many
M.O.B.’s do not have jobs due to the language barrier and thus are fully financially and economically dependent on their husbands. When she becomes economically dependent on her husband, she then has “little legal recourse in situations of abuse or unhappiness.” If she does obtain or is forced to work, her job is likely 'low paying, insecure, unskilled work with little government protection, and (M.O.B.’s often) experience high degrees of sexism and racism” (Pehar, 2003; p. 173). For the M.O.B.’s who are not allowed to work or who lack the skills to obtain any real job, many of them report feelings of extreme isolation or that they are simply forbidden by their husbands to interact with anyone outside of their own home. One woman stated:

“I practically did not communicate with anyone. I was lonely, never seen anyone. I was at home with my husband and his family, and I have only seen several friends of his”  

Isolation as a form of abuse is quite common in these relationships as it does not seem as severe as physical or emotional abuse although it can be equally as damaging to the woman who is in an entirely unfamiliar place and who is not allowed any access to the outside world. This of course will prevent her from seeking help or even being aware that help is available. “The mail-order bride industry exploits the economic inequality between poor countries and prosperous countries, as well as the most demeaning and discriminatory cultural and ethnic stereotypes of women. This phenomenon thus fosters subordination based on ethnicity, sex and social class within a country, between countries, and between individuals. These structures of subordination, which are closely
interconnected, contribute to the isolation and vulnerability of the women” (Belleau, p. 95; 2003; p. 95).

One striking and tragic example of violence toward a mail-order bride occurred in 1995, in Seattle, Washington at the King County Courthouse where the woman and two of her friends were shot dead by her husband whom she was trying to divorce. Referred to as “The Blackwell Murders,” these deaths occurred at the hands of Tim Blackwell who murdered wife Susana Blackwell, Phoebe Dizon and Veronica Laureta Johnson; even more shocking, at the time of her murder Susana was seven months pregnant. Blackwell had first met his wife Susana, a Filipino woman, when she was seeking a pen pal and put her profile in the catalogue “Asian Encounters.” A little over a year later they were married and not soon after Susana reported that the violence began, including multiple attempts of her husband trying to choke her. “Susana left Tim, fearing for her safety. After this, he demanded $10,000-$17,000 from her or he would have the marriage annulled. She wanted a divorce, in order to remain legally in the country. They were in the first day of legal proceedings when Tim shot and killed Susana, her unborn baby, and her two friends” (Consalvo, p. 188-189; 1998). The media portrayed the parties involved in this crime in very disturbing ways. First, Tim Blackwell was portrayed as mentally ill, a deviant (i.e., it was not really his fault), while at the same time his wife Susana was portrayed not as a victim but rather as somehow deserving of this crime against her due to the stereotypes that are held of women and particularly foreign women as subservant and somehow lesser beings (Consalvo, 1998). This is a startling example of how migrant woman are viewed and the crucial need for proper and accurate media coverage when crimes like this occur. “It seems that the more the female migrant’s role moves from the
‘public sphere’ of commercial sex, to the nether world of paid domestic labour, to the ‘private sphere’ of marriage, the more reluctant law becomes to speak about her” (Macklin, 1999; p. 25).

With growth of the internet comes considerable widespread growth and thus increased utilization of the match-making industry. The umbrella term for these companies is the “International Marriage Brokerage,” or I.M.B. In 2004 the Immigration and Naturalization Service (I.N.S.) stated that from anywhere between 9,500 to 14,000 foreign women are matched with American men each year. This is a tremendous growth from the reported 2,000 to 5,000 M.O.B.’s brought to America in 1997 (Lindee, 2007). Much of this growth can be attributed to the advantages of living in a first world country that allows and encourages one to learn how to use technology which does not exist for many others in impoverished countries. “Many researchers have identifies a conscious partnering between tech-savvy entrepreneurs and vulnerable third world countries” (Pehar, 2003; p. 171) indicating yet another area of disadvantage that these women face due to their third-world status.

Those who oppose the I.M.B.’s believe that by presenting the woman as a commodity, basically an object that can be sold and bought, they are placing her in a position of extreme disadvantage in relation to the man by making her into an object rather than a human being. One IMB advertised “Total cost for services: $10,500.00 U.S. A beautiful woman to sleep with at night, kiss in the morning, and love all day long, for so little less than an economy car” (Lindee, 2007; p. 551). This company has turned the woman into nothing more than a shiny, new, attractive object that does not think or feel real emotion.
This concept when broken down, of buying and selling the rights to disadvantaged property such as humans in a lower economic and/or social class is quite similar to an ideology that Americans long ago rejected; colonialism. “Quite simply, there are commodities for sale and privileged purchasers. This, in turn, has fueled a cyberworld which embodies favorable advances for some while simultaneously exposing the repugnant underbelly of racism, misogyny, classism and heterosexism” (Pehar, 2003; p. 172).

The I.M.B.’s carefully craft and advertise the image of the M.O.B. as 'submissive, dependent, and deferential.' This potentially “creates a presumption of power and a potentially very dangerous recipe for abuse... 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” (Lindee, 2007; p. 552). In fact, it is not that uncommon that the men seeking out the M.O.B.’s have past histories of domestic violence charges and have had multiple arranged marriages in the past that the agencies are not required to explain to the women. “Women found out that their husbands had histories of international marriages and abuse. Women discovered horrific histories of abusive behavior about which they had been completely uninformed before marriage. One woman reported learning that 'he was married six times, and I was his sixth wife’” (Crandall, Senturia, Sullivan, Shiu-Thornton, 2005; p. 947-948). It is reported by the women quite frequently that prior to their arrival in the U.S. Their husbands made many promises of a grand life and how well they would treat their wives yet the outcome upon their immigration was quite the opposite (Crandall, Senturia, Sullivan, Shiu-Thornton, 2005).
A study was conducted in 1999 in order to explore the pattern between the men who seek M.O.B.’s, their prior histories of abuse and the willingness of the agencies to accept the men as customers. International human rights organization Equality Now conducted an undercover study in which they posed as men seeking an M.O.B. and sent emails to various I.M.B.'s that explained their interest in being matched but also openly expressed that they had a history of domestic violence charges. The point of this study was to determine the willingness of I.M.B.’s to service men who had histories of past assault charges. The results were surprising, of the sixty-six returned emails an astounding fifty-nine I.M.B.'s were willing to accept the client who had a history of abuse. “Equality Now's research demonstrates what appears to be a pervasive willingness on the part of I.M.B.'s to match violent men with foreign women” (Lindee, 2007; p. 555). Equality Now also reported receiving several disturbing responses from the I.M.B.'s that accepted the business of the abusive man; one response:

“As far as sponsoring your alien fiancée, the government couldn't care less if you're Jack the Ripper, as long as you're out of jail and free to marry. As far as bitches go, I think I understand. They assert that 'No' means 'No' except when they're nagging, in which case, 'No' means, 'Keep nagging and try to get beaten.' I think the language barrier actually helps here; it's hard to squawk through a language barrier” (Lindee, 2007; p.555).

In 2003, the growing unease surrounding the increased violence towards M.O.B.’s and the fact that many who oppose the match-making industry believe it to be nothing more than a legal form of sex-trafficking prompted Senator Cantwell to proposed the
I.M.B.R.A., or the International Marriage Brokerage Regulation Act. During the hearings there was much concern expressed over the I.M.B.’s “knowingly placing women in potentially dangerous situations, therefore, I.M.B.’s appear to have exacerbated the informational imbalance that already contributes to the probability of domestic violence occurring in these relationships” (Lindee, 2007; p. 555). Eventually this legislation passed through the House and Senate as a revision and attachment to the Violence Against Women Act (V.A.W.A.) On January 5, 2006 President George Bush signed the I.M.B.R.A. legislation and it became a law (Lindee, 2007). While this was a victory for M.O.B.’s which promised to offer them some sort of increased protection from their abusive husbands, many started to feel that the I.M.B.R.A. was not addressing the potential sex-trafficking that may occur in a M.O.B. situation but rather was focusing more on the domestic violence side of the issue. Because they were focusing more on enforcing this aspect of the law, I.M.B.R.A. viewed the solution to the domestic violence as simply being a 'correction of informational imbalances inherent in the I.M.B. industry.' While this correction of 'information imbalances' did some good in that the I.M.B.R.A. now required I.M.B.’s to allow the women access to information on their future mates and to allow them to be better-versed in their rights as immigrants and the actual immigration process (prior to this law, I.M.B.’s were not required to allow their women any access to this information), opponents of I.M.B.’s argue still that because the I.M.B.R.A. hardly acknowledges the sex-trafficking aspect of the industry, the “I.M.B.R.A. may under-recognize or mis-recognize mail-order brides as a group” (Lindee, 2007; p. 553).

Opponents also argue that in spite of the I.M.B.R.A. many M.O.B.’s are still not fully or even mostly aware of U.S. Laws and their personal legal rights in terms of domestic
violence (Crandall, Senturia, Sullivan, Shiu-Thornton, 2005). Many of these women are coming from countries where domestic violence is considered 'normal' and has no legal consequences for the man if the woman reports it. Combining this element along with unfamiliarity of U.S. Law you end up with many foreign brides who:

A.) Believe that domestic abuse is somewhat common and therefore does not need to be reported.

B.) Want to report the violence but do not understand U.S. Law and how to go about doing so (or simply do not understand the law and so do not understand what will happen to them, their husbands, their children, etc. after the abuse is reported).

C.) Want to report the violence but the language barrier is getting in the way (language barrier can also be a huge factor in knowing how to/where to seek resources for women in need).

D.) A combination of any of these factors.

In particular, one study which focused on Russian M.O.B.'s found that many of the women were not even aware of what domestic violence meant. To them, it is somewhat of the 'norm' in their native country and it is simply expected of the woman that she put up with it. Resources in Russia for abuse are not widely or commonly used and so many of these women end up associating this as being true as well in the U.S. and so there is an apprehension or lack of knowledge about available resources that they could potentially seek out in the states. For Russian women it is also considered highly inappropriate to
discuss the matter with others and it is a generally uncomfortable topic that must be tip-toed around and simply not acknowledged. One Russian woman stated:

“Domestic violence is a normal thing. It is part of the destiny, and you have to tolerate it. It is shameful to us. We were raised differently. I do not know, maybe this is a very developed country, and maybe they think it is best if they tell everyone what is going on in their families, their lives and everything. We are not used to that. We were ashamed of that. But here it is all different” (Crandall, Senturia, Sullivan, Shiu-Thornton, 2005; p. 945).

Immigrant women face many challenges when coming to the United States but it can be argued that the women who come here as foreign brides face potentially larger hardships at the hands of their husbands and society. In order to understand why domestic violence is more likely to be experienced by these women it is important to observe the ways in which these women are being advertised and the preferences that the males who are buying them have. Increased access to the internet and the ease in which it offers romantic interaction enables the match-making companies to frame these immigrant women as submissive and eager to please the American man who seeks the traditional woman and wife. More importantly it should be questioned as to why our American society devalues the foreign woman and expect that she adhere to the submissive stereotype that surrounds her. Because the American man is in a position of greater power and wealth this somehow makes the immigrant wife a commodity, an object to be bought and sold who is entirely dependent on him and thus must comply with
his wishes. “While international dating and romance are not new, men insert themselves into the modern future as members of a global class where mobility is preconfigured by access to internet technology, English passports, and dollars, while women are conversely disadvantaged by their relative dependence on men in order to become mobile” (Schaeffer-Grabiela, “Planet-Love.” 2006; p. 337). While not all men who seek a mail-order bride hold these sexist views and go on to have healthy and loving relationships with their wives, the trend of men who do not is too problematic to ignore. If the matchmaking industry is going to continue to exist then the availability of resources (if she is experiencing abuse or unhappiness) for the foreign women must increase as sadly our society continues to devalue the immigrant that comes to our country.