

Migrating To Marry as a Strategy for Survival

When I first came to Germany, I had no idea that there existed such a thing as catalogue brides. I had been working at a University and Women's Center in the Northeast of Brazil with lower income women, but knew nothing about sex tourism. After being in Freiburg for only a few months (1993) I was asked to participate in a round table discussion on the subject and I had this funny feeling that somehow I was sitting on the other side of the table looking at the situation from the perspective of the 'auslaender' in Germany. At that point ,I realised that I was also a marriage migrant. A women who had moved to Germany because of her marriage to a German man. Since usually men are the primary bread winners-here we are!

Because I was supposed to give a short talk on this subject which was new for me, I did some research on the subject. That was how I found out that there was a 'feminist-political discussion' in certain circles about marriage migrants, catalogue brides and sex tourism. Today I am much more informed about migration trends and The consequences of globalisation, lack of international debt relief for "tri-cont "countries and the unequal distribution of wealth between the developed and under developed countries which has contributed to the ever increasing numbers of women who immigrate-as a strategy for survival. These women are not fleeing because of political persecution or war, but looking for a happy marriage and a better life in an economically privileged country. They hope to work and to send money back home to their family left behind. We all have many of the same problems related to adaptation, language learning, isolation, in-laws, being economically dependent and in general dealing with the strange and often difficult mentality of the locals. Most foreigners work here in jobs well below their training level and this loss of economic independence and status is even more difficult for male marriage migrants.

Sex tourism is certainly again something different. Although the reasons and dreams are often the same. To live happily ever after with 'our prince charming. In Brazil, the arrangements are mostly made on the beach or in Discos. Often young men are approaching Europeans with offers of female 'cousins' who are interested to meet them and take them around. The Women are looking for men who might be interested in a marriage proposal .They offer anything between a one night -getting to know you dinner +, or accompaniment during the gentleman's entire vacation stay

The hope is always that at the end there comes a ticket and invitation to Europe and after that a marriage proposal.

Traditionally, in Germany the women came from Thailand or the Philippines-the Filipinas were often better educated than their male partners. They were chosen not only because they are Asian and exotic, but coming out of a Catholic, patriarchal family structure. They all speak good English, because of the variety of dialects their school language is English. These characteristics made them brides of choice. The Germans got to know the Thai women after the Vietnam war where many women entered into the sex trade-as a strategy of survival. Then Latin American-Caribbean women were discovered and Brazilian women became very popular. They are warm and sexy and run around without much on and can move their hips to Latin music. After the fall of the wall, Eastern European women became very available. I even saw a video clip on a United Airlines flight-at the time(and wrote a written complaint)- which accompanied a group of US men going to Russia to look for a bride to bring home. It seemed –superficially harmless. Only I knew that it often is not.

Women were often trafficked and would find themselves virtual prisoners or promised marriage and forced into the sex trade. One woman who came to me at the Ehe + Familie Beratungstelle (where I work in Freiburg) arrived through a known ‘trafficker’ in the area. She was here on tourist visa and a three month trial marriage- only what she did not know is that she was the sixth woman he had imported. After using them for three months he hid their passport and return tickets and “sold” them to another interested user. Another woman told me she came and her husband forced her to work in clubs and massage parlours in order to bring her daughter here. With the new immigration laws (RAU) bringing children here from your home country has become even more of a problem. It is only possible if they are younger than 12 (before it was 16) or they must speak fluent German. Is that a joke or what?

Sometimes the path the path to a German husband is through friends or family. Sometimes, I am sure it works out well, but often the men are older, sick, live on a farm where they need someone to work and cook for them or they are not capable of having relationships with German women because they are too independent. One case I saw the woman’s two daughters were molested by this “generous” husband who was saving her from poverty.

I was motivated to write this article because I wanted us-the privileged English speakers- to reflect on our situations as “marriage migrants” and encourage

support for programs and groups which work against discriminatory policies towards female migrants . So many of us-independent of how we got here -often find ourselves in difficult marital situations or in divorce processes and need the support and understanding of our community.