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INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE MARRIAGES: THE SLAVIC CONNECTION

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International Correspondence Marriages: The Slavic Connection

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International correspondence (or mail-order) brides who are sponsored by Canadian husbands make up one group of Family Class immigrants to Canada. In this paper, I present findings from interviews conducted with Slavic women in urban and rural areas of Alberta. I discuss their expectations and the realities that they encountered following their arrival in Canada. I outline their language and settlement circumstances and make recommendations for effective responses to their particular situations.

The mail-order bride industry is attracting growing attention today and has provided an intriguing context for numerous documentaries, movies, novels, and media articles. At present, there are over 350 websites on the Internet that promote intercultural marriages and the eventual immigration of women to western countries (see, for example, <http://www.goodwife.com>). Of these, at least half provide virtual catalogues of Slavic brides, with photos and descriptive profiles (including age, height, weight, and often much more personal information). For a fee, one can acquire the contact information and often a video of one or more women, along with a variety of services to facilitate a relationship, such as provision of champagne, chocolates, flowers, and perfume; interpreting of telephone conversations; translations of written correspondence; and advice about traditions and immigration procedures. Internet websites and publications (e.g., Côté, 1992) provide guidelines to assist correspondents in writing

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successful advertisements and letters. Some web-based businesses also offer bridal tours, where men can meet dozens of women, choosing those with whom they would like to become better acquainted.

In the former USSR, international marriage agencies are booming following the break-up of the federation and the fall in standard of living for many citizens. With the proliferation of online advertisements, there have, however, been many abuses. The website <<http://www.Russian-scam.org>> warns against women who are perceived to have taken advantage of male clients by accepting or soliciting lavish gifts or money (for airline tickets, for instance) before abruptly terminating correspondence. Increasing concern has also been raised that international marriage agencies are not regulated – in other words, women as young as 16 may be recruited for marriage, and background checks are not conducted on male clients to determine if, for example, they have criminal records or a history of mental illness (Oxman-Martinez, Martinez, & Hanley, 2001). Many unsuspecting victims have been exploited and trafficked throughout the world as a result (e.g., Hughes, 2002; Malarek, 2003; McDonald, Moore, & Timoshkina, 2000).

Over the centuries, foreign brides have played an important role in the settlement of Canada: French *filles du roi* arrived in New France in the 17th century for the purpose of populating the colony; picture brides, selected for marriage by Asians building railways or working in mines in the early 20th century, helped to strengthen the Asian community; and arranged marriages are common to this day in many cultures (Langevin & Belleau, 2000). In all of these cases, Langevin and Belleau observe, the women who came to join husbands in Canada shared the language and the culture of their spouses. International correspondence (or ‘mail-order’) marriages, however, constitute a novel phenomenon, in that relationships are developed through correspondence between men and women who are often of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Most foreign correspondence brides who come to Canada lack (a) familiarity with their husband’s culture and (b) the supporting presence of their families; this makes them particularly vulnerable to emotional and physical abuse, economic control, and exploitation.

Most women from developing countries find it difficult to immigrate to Canada as independants. As correspondence brides, they arrive under the category of family-class immigrants, although the number of these sponsorships to Canada is unclear. Most of the research that has been done to date in Canada has focused on women from the Philippines, where international matchmaking was banned in 1990. A Status of Women Canada study (Philippine Women Centre of BC, 2000) of Filipino mail-order brides in five provinces showed that nearly half of the 40 brides interviewed in the study settled in rural areas, and nearly half were unemployed. Some were happily married; others were isolated, abused, and miserable. Overall, the findings painted a bleak picture of mail-order brides in Canada. Other related research on women immigrants to Canada has dealt with sponsorship (Côté, Kérisit, & Côté, 2001) and trafficking (Langevin & Belleau, 2000) issues. Several studies (Constable, 2003; Glodava & Onizuka, 1994; Piper & Roces, 2003; Simons, 2001; Visson, 2001) have been conducted with Asian and Slavic women immigrants to other countries, but I know of no existing studies to date that have focused on Slavic correspondence marriages in Canada. The present study was designed with the following objectives:

1. to examine the expectations of women from the former USSR before they came to Canada;
2. to determine the realities that these individuals encountered upon arrival;
3. to investigate the language and settlement education needs of these brides in Alberta;
4. to determine to what extent their needs are being met; and
5. to make recommendations for responding to ongoing needs.

Method

Participants

Ten women participated in this study (the husband of one additional rural woman who had volunteered to participate telephoned to notify me

that I was not to contact her for an interview under any circumstances). Three of the research participants were from urban centres and seven were from rural Alberta; five had immigrated from Russia and five from Ukraine. Although one woman had met her husband briefly when he was on holiday in the former USSR, they had all developed relationships with their husbands in Canada through international correspondence (via email, letters, and telephone). The participants had been in Canada for an average of 3.7 years (range: 4 months to 10.5 years). They averaged 37 years of age (range: 28 to 53 years), and their husbands averaged 46.3 years of age (range: 30 to 63 years). The difference in age between spouses varied from 2 to 17 years ($M = 9.1$ years).

The women corresponded with their suitors in Canada for 6 to 18 months ($M = 11$ months) before deciding to emigrate and marry. This was the first marriage for three of the female participants and for six of the husbands; five women and three men had been married once before; and two women and one man had been married twice previously. Five of the women had come on fiancée visas (which have since been eliminated by the Canadian government), which required them to marry within three months or return to their home country; two came as visitors; and three were sponsored spouses married overseas. Seven of the women and four of their husbands had children from previous marriages, and three couples in Canada had had children together since their marriage. Only two women were no longer living with their Canadian husbands at the time of their interview.

The participants in this study were highly educated: all had completed high school, and eight had completed at least one post-secondary degree. In the former USSR, nine of the ten women had been financially independent, but only five of these were financially independent in Alberta: four women were employed in Canada, and one was a government-funded student. The participants had been employed in a wide range of fields in their countries of origin: business (3), education (3), health (1), government service (1), finance (1), and technology (1). They aspired to jobs in business (6), education (2), health (1), and government service (1) in Canada.

Instruments

A semi-structured interview schedule was drafted, incorporating questions from interviews conducted with Philippine women (Philippine Women Centre of B.C., 2000), with immigrant women in Ontario (Côté, Kérisit, & Côté, 2001), and with refugees in Alberta (Abu-Laban, Derwing, Krahn, Mulder, & Wilkinson, 1999). The interview consisted of over 60 questions focussing on (a) the demographic background of the bride and her husband, (b) the bride's motivation for coming to Canada, (c) her expectations, and (d) her experiences in Canada. A Russian translation of the interview schedule was prepared for those women who preferred to be interviewed in that language.

Procedure

Because of the lack of sampling frames, the research study was advertised in English as a second language (ESL) programs, in settlement agencies, in adult literacy programs, and by cultural organizations in Alberta. Of the ten volunteers selected for the study, I interviewed four in person in a large urban centre, and the others by telephone in their rural communities to ensure their anonymity. The women all signed consent forms assuring them of confidentiality and anonymity. I was present for all interviews; a Russian interpreter conducted three interviews in Russian. The audio-taped interviews lasted from 60 to 90 minutes each and were transcribed, translated to English if necessary, and verified by research assistants. The women all received \$30 for their participation in the study.

Results

Expectations and Realities

Relationship

The major pull factor for the Slavic women was their developing relationship with their correspondents, although only six had met, in person, the men they had agreed to wed. They were interested primarily in companionship and a stable marriage. Many of the women were divorced, lonely, and had

difficulty meeting eligible men in their home country. As one explained, "Everything was just fine – just great - except for this special man in my life." Canadian men were perceived by some to be more desirable than men that the participants were familiar with:

I don't really like Ukrainian guys because they're lazier. They usually get married to do nothing. And society encourages guys to drink, to smoke, to cheat on their wives because there are more women in Ukraine than guys. And sometimes [the women] are much more aggressive than here, pursuing guys - and even married guys. So I thought I would have lots more problems there than if I married somebody from North America.

The women were, initially at least, pleased with their relationships. One participant burst into tears as she said, "Really, it was just a miracle. And we wrote each other, 'It is a dream.'" Another responded, "It was destiny that we met." A third said, "It's a match made in heaven. I think western men are more respectful and sensitive towards women than Russian men. Our relationship is getting better and better, closer and closer."

For some women, however, these initial impressions did not last. "The Canadian man was the man of my dreams. All through the letters, and when I met him, and even the first year of our marriage. And not further." A second bride described her decision to marry her husband shortly after her arrival in Canada as...

...my big mistake. We were together a little more than a year.... I wanted to find a good, simple and unpretentious man. I thought I did, but it turned out to be a mistake.... I think that men who are kind of defective and unwanted here try to meet Russian women.... North American women do not pay attention to them since they can see who they really are.... He didn't want to be with a normal Canadian woman, and he thought they wanted too much. So he brought a woman from abroad assuming... that I would not want too much, that I would not want anything at all. [He] brought me here as a slave to work.

Safety

One of the factors that motivated some participants to emigrate was a lack of personal safety. Those women who came with children from a former marriage were hoping for a safe living environment for their children and physical security for their family. As one woman explained, “I didn’t see any drunk people in the street like in Russia. This is a shock for me. In Russia, wherever you go, you will see drunk people everywhere. I feel very secure [here] and I like it.” Said another, “When I was going home [in Russia], I had to watch my back all the time.... I didn’t feel very secure for my kids because every time someone threatened me, they always said, ‘Well, you have kids, you have to think about it.’” The women had experienced danger in the former USSR, and their expectations of physical safety in Canada were realized.

Quality of life

Many brides were hoping also to escape poverty, crowded living conditions, and a polluted environment. The economic downturn in the former USSR appeared to affect families in a variety of ways. One bride stated, “My husband liked to drink, so I divorced him. He couldn’t support us financially. He had been working in a factory for many years. Then the factory went broke. We were left with nothing.” Women whose marriages dissolved appeared to be left with little recourse but to return to their family homes:

The Russian economy is in a terrible situation now. We had our own apartment with my first husband. But he took it when we divorced. I was left without an apartment and I came back to live with my mum. There are no laws, nothing. Women are being hurt there.

One participant described her former living conditions in this way:

My ex-husband, my mother, my sister [and my child and I were] in a two-bedroom apartment. It was only two rooms, you know. And [my mother] wanted [me and my child to] disappear because... everybody was going crazy.

Another described a similar situation: “We had enough rooms for everybody. I wouldn’t say it was a big, luxury apartment like some we have here, [where] everybody has their own room. I was sharing a room [in my parents’ apartment] with my children.”

Most of the participants in this study experienced an improvement in standard of living upon their arrival in Canada. Two of them thought that their life in Canada could not be worse than the one they were leading in the former USSR. One woman, who had to wait two years after her marriage to immigrate, found that her lifestyle improved even during her immigration waiting period: “[My Canadian husband] bought a three-bedroom apartment. He paid for everything. I mean, he sent money to us and we used it. We liked it.” She was particularly pleased with the conveniences in her new home in Canada:

I have the same responsibilities I had in Russia. I clean the house. I do the laundry. It’s much easier here, though. My husband likes the fact that I do all this. The best thing is that everything is mechanized in my house. It helps me to keep it clean. It makes my cooking faster; it helps to do the laundry faster. If I had had all this in Russia, I would have had a good life. I had financial problems there.

In some cases, although the standard of living was higher, women did not have the financial freedom that they had hoped for in Canada. Understanding the credit card system proved to be a challenge for some women:

I didn’t understand about credit cards. I didn’t know that I had to pay [interest] on everything.... My husband... said, “I told you!”, but I probably didn’t understand. [We] still have to pay maybe a year and a half of debts on [our] credit cards.

Another bride described her financial situation in this way:

We always had a problem with money. When I [wasn’t working], it was really hard on me. [My husband] never asked me if I needed money and he never gave it to me. I had... to explain to him what I needed it for. I was often told that he didn’t have

money. He had money before I came; it suddenly finished after my arrival in Canada. I understood that I had to work [to repay]... the money he spent to bring me here from Russia. He cut me off money, he didn't have money for anything, and he even complained that he had no money to pay the mortgage.

This participant appears to have been held in debt bondage until her husband had recuperated his expenses. Where adequate financial support was not sufficient following the break-up of her marriage, governmental support was available:

The best thing is that people here help immigrants like us; they help me as a single mother. I like the social assistance in Canada. You don't have to starve or live on the street. That is what I was not sure about in Russia. I like the fact that we have this help here. We are able to live; we are not dying. We are sure about tomorrow here.

Said another:

I was left with no money, empty fridge, nothing, and my lawyer told me to go to.... social services. It was... devastating for me to go and ask the government for help. But I got help within a second. And my fridge was full... daycare was paid, everything was done. I survived. The best point is they won't let you die here. They won't let you suffer.

Environmental conditions were also paramount for one participant with health problems:

It's a more healthy environment... people care more about the environment, about the future, about children, about everything. You know, there's still lots of pollution, too, but you can avoid it because it's manufacturing. But it's not the same as in Russia -- they dump everything in the river [there], you know.

Conditions related to quality of life in Canada met or exceeded the hopes of most of the women interviewed.

Opportunities

The participants in this study had expected to encounter few difficulties in second language acquisition and integration, and mothers were convinced that their move to Canada would increase opportunities for their children:

It was for my son. I know [there] is no future in Russia, especially for boys, because the government will take boys to Chechnya... the government will take the only son I have to war without asking, because [he has] to go.

Said another mother: "I think [Canada is] a country of opportunities.... [People] are coming for the sake of the kids, because.... if you're smart, if you work hard, you can get ahead in life and you can be very successful."

Some participants hadn't given much thought to their own personal aspirations:

I didn't really think about myself in terms of career and doing something. I knew that... I am still young and I am capable of doing many things. I would do just anything. The magic point was, at that time, [my husband's] career and him... to get where he wanted to be. And I just never thought about myself.

One rural woman said, "[My husband] read some information that... Russian or Ukrainian women make good housewives. He's really surprised now that I want to have a career here. Probably he wanted me to be a little bit more of a housewife."

Despite attempts to gain jobs, however, some of the women who settled in small towns found that they were unable to use their previous university education and experience. Two women hoped to be moving with their husbands to a large city in the near future. One of them had made numerous attempts to upgrade her skills in Canada, with little success:

In Canada, I was asking lots of organizations and universities from the States about how I can be a [professional], what I have to do for this – where I have to go, what I have to go through, and what it will take. And every single person when I called in the States... called me back, sending me information, and I was surprised. And I didn't get anything in Canada – nothing.

Two rural women lamented that before they could consider retraining, they would need to improve their English skills and that this would not be easy in their locales.

For urban immigrant children, opportunities were abundant, and integration into the elementary school system appeared to be relatively smooth. One mother reflected, "I couldn't understand why my son would come and say, 'It's too bad that school is not on Saturdays'. He was way ahead of other kids, so there were no challenges for him." In rural communities, at the secondary level, however, the experiences were quite different:

My daughter had kind of a hard time adjusting... it was very hard for her here. Teachers didn't even want to spend time with her. They said, "Well, you sit in the class and listen and learn English." She said, "How can I learn English if I don't know English? Somebody needs to help me, to start with something." And they said, "Well, you just sit and listen and learn." And she was crying and... crying and she said, "I can't handle it."... She was trying to do compositions and basically to graduate.... "I can't do this anymore because with this attitude to foreigners and with this knowledge that they're giving to me," she said, "I won't get a very good diploma."

Another rural mother concurred:

It's better for children to graduate from school in Russia. It's better, because if they don't, they will have big problems with education here. So my advice to women who come here with grown-up children is to let their children graduate from school first and then they can leave for America.

Language and Settlement Education Needs

English as a second language

The brides who settled in urban centres were generally much more proficient in English than were the participants in rural areas. The latter still required English language training when they arrived, and ESL

programs were difficult to find. The majority of the courses available were adult literacy classes, which did not provide adequate instruction: "I just take a small course in adult literacy school. Two hours a week. It's not enough." Some participants found that the volunteers, though well-meaning, lacked expertise in teaching English as a second language:

Well, some women visited me here; they wanted to teach English to me, but I couldn't understand them. They gave me new words. I mean, they didn't have any particular program. I didn't like that.... In a big city, there are different educational institutions where you can study, but here we don't have anything.

Another bride was convinced that tutors in her community were not sufficiently prepared, either:

When the volunteers started coming to me and teaching me... they didn't know English very good themselves. I mean grammar. Teach foreigners, they don't have a clue. They just telling you, "This is the book. You read it and if you don't know this word, go and check in vocabulary and find what this word means."... If I was asking some kind of question about grammar, if I didn't know how to use it, they didn't have a clue.

They said just, "Oh, I don't know, I don't know."

One woman, who had had two years of ESL training in a larger centre before moving to rural Alberta, said, "I'm just starving to go to college because I want a higher English level." Lack of opportunity to learn English limited the autonomy of another participant: "The only problem has been my English. I can't do anything in English. I can't read anything, understand anything. I am not completely independent."

Several Slavic brides, however, were too occupied with homemaking and family to take classes. Said a relative newcomer: "I didn't look [for ESL classes] yet, because, to be honest, I'm really busy." Another woman said, "I have no time to learn English by taking English courses or self-study. I have a very big house. I try to keep it clean. I cook. I am very responsible."

Employment opportunities

Employment opportunities were very limited in rural areas, and the participants in this study were either underemployed or unemployed. One woman felt stigmatized as a non-native speaker of English:

I couldn't find a job at all. Nobody wants to take you... if you speak with an accent.... I'm always saying to people, "Well, I *speak* with an accent, but I don't *think* with an accent." People from small communities have some kind of small town mentality syndrome. It's their own little, tiny, small world and they don't want anybody to get into it, nobody.

Another woman said, "I used to be independent... to go wherever I wished... now, without a car, without a driver's license, without a job, it's a little bit difficult." Said yet another rural wife, "I want to have a job and look forward to work each day, instead of looking forward to the day being over."

Social integration

Social integration in rural areas was also difficult for a number of reasons. Newcomers missed having compatriots nearby: "Some days really you can do nothing, you cannot control yourself. You just feel homesick and you need to communicate with someone in your own language. Just to communicate."; "Lack of friends – Russian friends... is the biggest problem I have here." Participants' lack of proficiency in English was perceived as a significant barrier to getting to know English speakers in their communities:

When I meet English-speaking people, I have a feeling that they do not take me seriously.... They treat me like a baby because I don't know English well enough. For me it's a very big problem. You [have to] ask them to repeat again what they've just said and you feel awkward. My English doesn't allow me to be very close to these people.

Confided another participant:

I was very shy. Since I didn't know English, I couldn't communicate with people. It was very stressful for me. I

couldn't sleep at nights; I couldn't relax during the days.... I don't like the feeling of loneliness. People keep their lives private; they're not as close here. Probably it's because I don't have close friends here like I did in Russia. I don't like being lonely; I'm very lonely here. I have no family, no relatives, and no good friends. I am home alone with my children, absolutely alone.... I feel like I'm going to have a heart attack any day....

Several women felt that a lack of intercultural understanding impeded their integration. One reflected: "I haven't figured out yet... how to approach people without really violating their privacy or without getting too much into something that they don't want me to get into, you know."

Participants who were living in the city seemed to have less difficulty making friends, particularly with colleagues at work or school. Others made contact with compatriots living close by, via electronic messaging programs such as ICQ and MSN Messenger. For rural women who experienced difficulty in their marriages, however, there was little support available in close-knit communities:

When I had just arrived here, people liked me and smiled at me. But when I started telling them about my problems, because I started my life here having problems, these people stayed away from me.... They stopped being my close friends, because they didn't want to be involved.

Although some husbands tried to create opportunities for their wives to meet friends in the community, others did not. Said one woman of her husband: "He never had friends of his own." Lack of social support in the community created additional stresses for this participant: "I went through depression and suffering inside... during the marriage." Even when sources of support in the community were identified, they were not always available to newcomers:

I had to start from zero; even the family doctor said: "Your husband's family doctor moved.... We will gladly give [him and his children] another doctor. But for you, no. [None of] our other doctors are [taking new] patients. You should find someone by yourself."

Knowledge of rights

Women who had immigrated to Canada from the former USSR were consistent in their claims that they had received little or no information regarding their rights, either in their country of origin or at ports of entry into Canada. One woman declared: "I have no idea about my rights. I've never asked... I know only about health services." As another woman explained,

I have no information about [my rights as an immigrant]. I know nothing. If something happens to [my husband], I don't know what to do. It's bad -- I have no information. I may even be left without a house. I've tried to talk to [him], but he postpones the conversation. I don't like it. I'm worried about it.

Yet another said: "I knew that he signed the sponsorship papers.... but it never occurred to me that I would need to know some things. I never anticipated anything happening in my marriage." A fourth woman declared, "I hope that [nothing] will ever happen [to my marriage], but if it does, I don't know what I will do." Lamented another:

My biggest problem was the lack of information. Nothing. I was coming here as a blind person. I knew nothing. I hadn't read the laws. I hadn't learnt English well enough.... Everything is a secret for me. The biggest problem I have is the lack of required information.... Regarding my problems with my husband, I turned out to be powerless. I don't have rights here.

Some of the participants were disappointed, too, with the reception that they encountered at Canadian embassies abroad:

The Canadian embassy in Ukraine is corrupt. That would be the worst thing about Canada, how they act towards potential visitors to this country. They see in every one of them a potential refugee.... The majority of the people who live here suffer because of this. They won't let their parents come, they won't let their friends come.

Said another Ukrainian:

When [my mother] got her immigration... they checked her

because they were concerned about [a health issue]. And they didn't find anything because she never had any problem.... They x-rayed her eight times, without any specific reason, and she just kept paying, because a person pays US\$15 for each x-ray.

Another bride explained:

The Canadian embassy [in Ukraine]... should give more information to people, be more friendly.... The security there are Ukrainian. They are horrible.... They're not friendly -- they scare you. They are not helpful.

A woman from Russia said,

When we invited [my parents] for a visit, [the embassy] refused their visa. They said, "You're just lying to us because you want to go live in Canada." They said, "No... we just want to see our daughter and [her family]".... They were very, very rude.... treating you like a criminal.

Awareness

All the participants were aware of the risks related to international correspondence marriages. One cited knowledge of women from the former USSR who had opted not to remain in rural areas with their Canadian husbands: "I've heard of some bad experiences of some women.... guys lied and said they had a good life here, and the women came and there was nothing. They had to provide for their husband from the beginning."

Another woman said,

I know lots of stories, like a wife living for 20 years with her husband and he's a serial killer. You'll never know another person's mind completely, you know. ... And all the time [I ask my husband] "What's in your mind?"... he tells me all the time, "It's empty. Nothing."

Prospective husbands also were warned to be wary:

It's happened many times that [women] are coming here and they find a younger, more handsome man and they leave....

Many [women] are divorcing their husband in Russia just because they want to get into Canada or the States. And when they get here, they marry to get permanent status. They divorce and they bring their husbands. That's what they're doing.

The participants in this study offered advice for those who might follow in their footsteps. The most frequent was that each bride should trust her future husband and be sincere about her love for him. However, the participants also recommended that women come for an extended visit before immigrating, in order to develop a sense of what their life would be like in Canada, and to have their correspondents visit them, as well. They warned against expecting the transition to be easy. One woman, reflecting on her life in rural Alberta, stated: "My advice to [others] is not to think that everything is perfect here. Life is very hard at the beginning." Another woman warned potential brides to be cautious:

They have to be careful and they really have to... identify potential problems. And not try to ignore them, but try to think, "What will happen once I am in Canada because I have to do lots of things by myself?"

To make integration easier, the urban participants advised others to learn English before coming and to go out and meet people, initially online if necessary. A former professional living in a rural setting made the following recommendation:

If you want to make your future, you have to go only in a big city where you can find a job and you can find friends and you can find all different kinds of possibilities to get better and higher education to adjust to this new system.

This may be the best piece of advice that international correspondence brides could offer.

One of the outstanding qualities of the immigrant women who participated in this study was resilience. As several participants pointed out, correspondence brides need to have courage and strength. One woman, whose Canadian marriage had failed, expressed the following hope: "In five years, I see myself doing what I like to do... having my kids

being successful at school... and of course, meeting a man [with whom] I can live the rest of my life happily.” Despite the enormous challenges that she had had to face in Canada, this newcomer, like the other participants in the study, maintained great optimism for the future.

What accommodation can be made to enhance the language and settlement education of international correspondence brides who are unable to access appropriate programs in their communities?

English as a second language

In urban communities, English language instruction for adult newcomers to Canada is available, although waiting lists may exist. In rural areas, however, there appears to be a need for Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) preparation for teachers, both in the elementary and secondary school system and in adult education. To partially address this need, reputable TESL training courses could be presented to teachers as in-service workshops, as distance modules, or at summer institutes at nearby universities. Adult literacy tutors are often the first people contacted by newcomers looking for ESL instruction; they would be ideal candidates for this training if they do not already have it. There has to be a perceived need for these resources, however; posting approved TESL professional development opportunities on provincial literacy and teachers’ association websites, and making presentations at related conferences would raise awareness of professional support that could be accessed.

Many more educational opportunities for immigrants are readily available in cities than in rural areas. Although distance education is a possibility for those women who have a high level of English proficiency and access to computers, the options are limited. Newcomers should have access in their communities to advisors who can provide educational and career counseling.

Employment opportunities

Five of the seven rural brides in this study had at least one university degree and professional experience. Without recognition of their foreign credentials, it was very difficult for them to transfer that expertise to their communities. Those who had hoped to use the skills they had developed were unprepared for the lack of opportunities in their areas. The initiatives for recognition and assessment of foreign credentials (for doctors, nurses, and engineers) announced by the federal government in May 2004 are vital in facilitating immigrants' access to suitable employment. The focus of these programs should be expanded to improve the integration into the labour market of other groups of professionals. Issues related to the recognition of foreign credentials need to be addressed with the support of employers, professional organizations, unions, and post-secondary institutions.

Social integration

According to the participants in this study, social integration was facilitated in larger centres where newcomers were working or studying, or where they had access to and familiarity with computer messaging programs. Services offered by cultural and settlement organizations also enhanced social integration for Slavic participants in urban centres.

Host programs, which match immigrants with volunteer hosts, would help to diminish the sense of isolation experienced by many newcomers to Canada, and to provide newcomers to all our communities with sources of information and support during their transition to Canadian society. All immigrants should receive written contact information for the Host program in their community. In those areas where the program is not available, local service organizations could initiate matches between newcomers and volunteer hosts in the community. Residents need to be made aware of the existence of all such programs for newcomers; advertisements should be posted in the offices of health providers, social services, and local businesses.

Knowledge of rights and freedoms

Canadian embassies abroad should provide, in visa application packages and in the recipients' native language, information regarding Canada, the rights and freedoms of newcomers, and the settlement services available to them upon arrival. Officials at Canadian embassies have an obligation to ensure that adequate information is provided to and fully comprehended by applicants. The tone of their interactions with potential immigrants creates a lasting impression, as reported here; care should be taken to ensure that all visitors to Canadian embassies are treated with respect and dignity.

In addition, the federal government should consider tracking spousal sponsorships. Personal follow-up contact should be made with spouses after their arrival to assess their ongoing need for support and/or information. If sponsors appear to be abusing the system or their spouses, limitations could be imposed on offending individuals. In Australia, for example, serial sponsorship of foreign spouses or fiancées has been limited to two per lifetime, separated by a minimum of 5 years.

Immigration officials at all ports of entry into Canada, and immigration offices and settlement agencies throughout the country should distribute information to all newcomers regarding their rights and freedoms. Furthermore, settlement agencies, as well as English as a second language and other adult education programs, should provide contact details on settlement, legal aid, and social services (including women's shelters) that can be accessed within communities if the need arises. Social service providers should receive intercultural training for working with clients from varied ethno-linguistic backgrounds.

Conclusion

The circumstances of the Slavic spouses interviewed in this study appear to be superior to those of Philippine pen-pal brides. When the findings are compared with those of East European women who have been trafficked for the sex trade (Hughes, 2002; Malarek, 2003; McDonald, Moore, &

Timoshkina, 2000; Oxman-Martinez, Martinez, & Hanley, 2001), the overall picture appears even brighter. However, the present study is based on the responses of only ten participants, six of whom had been here for less than five years. A longitudinal study of international correspondence brides would provide more accurate information on the evolution of their relationships, their experiences in rural communities, and the extent to which they become contributing members of Canadian society. Increased support during the settlement process to enhance foreign brides' language development, educational and employment opportunities, social integration, and knowledge of rights and freedoms is essential.

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