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## Happily ever after? From sham marriages to human trafficking

*The transnational project “Preventing human trafficking and sham marriages” (HESTIA), conducted under the European Union programme “Prevention of and Fight against Crime”, is the first systematic research on the phenomenon of exploitative sham marriages. The research, published by HEUNI, sought to shed light on a recently identified form of trafficking in human beings which is related to the organisation of sham marriages and the subsequent exploitation of persons. The research primarily utilised qualitative methods, such as expert and victim interviews in combination with statistical information, and it was carried out in Estonia, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania and the Slovak Republic.*

In a typical case a woman from an Eastern EU country is offered a job opportunity or direct payment of money in exchange for traveling to another EU country and marrying a non-EU citizen there. The purpose of the marriage is for the groom to receive an EU residence permit. In a typical marriage of convenience, the parties would later separate by common consent. However, in some cases the marriage can become exploitative, or even constitute human trafficking, when there are clearly circumstances of deceit, force, coercion, or abuse of power or vulnerability.

The methods of recruitment include luring the victims with false promises and fake job offers either via acquaintances or mass-scale advertising via the Internet. Sometimes the women know from the beginning that they are going to conclude a sham marriage but are deceived as regards the conditions of the marriage, the divorce procedures, living arrangements, the amount of remuneration, etc. In some cases, the women are unaware of the planned sham marriage and only after arrival find out that the promised job did not exist. They find themselves in a situation where the options become very limited and there is no other real alternative than to agree to conclude the sham marriage. Another type of exploitative sham marriage includes cases where women are given false promises of genuine relationships, and the deception becomes evident much later.

The travel arrangements are organised on behalf of the women and they are met by the organisers or the groom at the airport in the destination country. Victims encounter e.g. psychological control, sexual and physical violence, financial control and/or debt bondage. Also the children of victims are sometimes abused and used as an instrument of control. Furthermore, the national reports identified other exploitative elements, such as deprivation of personal freedom and restrictions of movement, confiscation of identification documents, and poor living conditions. In very few cases did the women receive any of the money promised to them.

The focus of the study was on the experiences of the women. Less information was available on the experiences of the third-country national spouses, and on the role of the recruiters and organisers of the activities. However, the recruitment seemed to be systematically organised and one identified group were the persons who themselves had concluded sham marriages in the past.

The research showed that the phenomenon of exploitative sham marriages is often not identified by the victims themselves nor the authorities. The project recommends among other things information campaigns and training for criminal justice authorities, teachers, health and social professionals and consular staff. Specifically, consular staff can have an important role to play in the identification of the phenomenon.

**More information:** Researcher Minna Viuhko ([minna.viuhko@om.fi](mailto:minna.viuhko@om.fi)), tel. +358 50 368 8348 and Researcher Anni Lietonen ([anni.lietonen@om.fi](mailto:anni.lietonen@om.fi)).

The report is available at: <http://www.heuni.fi/material/attachments/heuni/reports/ci5Y5cgbB/Nettiin.pdf>

Address: HEUNI  
POB 444  
00531 Helsinki, Finland  
Phone: +358 2956 65280  
Fax: +358 2956 65290  
Email: [heuni@om.fi](mailto:heuni@om.fi)