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## A VICTIM OF MARRIAGE FRAUD

# Duped and left with a broken heart

**For Lainie Towell, her marriage last spring was the start of a life-long commitment. But her husband saw it as a 'business transaction.' This was his ticket into Canada, writes DRAKE. LAURA**

PAT MCGRATH, THE OTTAWA  
CITIZEN



**Soon after she got married last spring, Lainie Towell, 36, started the application process to bring her husband, Mohamed Akra Soumah, to Canada. He arrived in Ottawa on New Year's Eve. Four weeks later, without so much as a note, he was gone.**

Lainie Towell's broad smile lights up her expressive face, beaming out from an inset photo on the cover of a thick yellow album. Inside, her smile is reproduced hundreds of times, her wide-set blue eyes permanently sparkling in each of the images in which she is standing with the love of her life, Mohamed Akra Soumah.

The album was meant to be a lifelong testament to that joyful day, April 20, 2007, when the couple wed in Mr. Soumah's West African home town of Conakry in Guinea.

Instead, the album now reminds the Ottawa dancer only of deceit and heartbreak. Less than a month after she brought her husband to Canada, his residency guaranteed by their marriage, Mr. Soumah left without so much as a note — only his wedding ring on the dresser.

"I married him in good faith and I thought that I was building a life with a good and decent man that I was in love with," she said yesterday, sitting in the New Edinburgh apartment they shared. She has rearranged the apartment since he left to try and help erase the memory of his presence, but it is still decorated with traditional Guinean dance masks, an art form to which she has devoted her life.

She met Mr. Soumah, a musician with a dance troupe, when she travelled to Guinea in 2004 to study dance. Their love grew over numerous successive trips and they decided to wed and start a life together in Canada.

After they got married last spring, Ms. Towell, 36, started the application process to bring her husband to Canada. He arrived in Ottawa on New Year's Eve, fireworks exploding in the sky as she drove him to their apartment. Four weeks later, he was gone. When she reached him on his cellphone, he refused to tell her where he was. Instead, he told her he wanted a divorce and angrily reminded her that he could collect welfare for which she would have to foot the bill.

As Mr. Soumah's sponsor, the contract Ms. Towell signed with Citizenship and Immigration Canada stipulates that she is responsible for him for three years, even if the marriage fails. Therefore, should Mr. Soumah collect any form of social assistance, Ms. Towell will be on the hook to pay that money back to the government.

"My husband played with my heart and used our marriage as a business transaction," she said. "It's incredible because basically, it's an issue of fraud."

Danielle Norris, a spokeswoman for Citizenship and Immigration Canada, said that clause is in the contract to ensure that sponsored family members won't constitute an immense burden on Canada's social assistance programs.

Since all permanent residents are eligible for social assistance, she explained, the government cannot stop them from applying. But if money is paid out, it is the contractual responsibility of their sponsor to pay it back.

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## Fraud: Sponsorship agreement set up to raise a red f lag

*From page C1*



**Lainie Towell and Mohamed Akra Soumah were married April 20, 2007, in Guinea, after dating for three years.**

It's a responsibility Ms. Towell wants waived in light of the fact that Mr. Soumah's vows were motivated not by love — as hers were — but by a permanent residence card.

"I want to right the wrong that's been done to me. I want to resolve this problem as quickly as possible," she said.

"As a Canadian citizen, I believe that other Canadians have the right to know there's a serious flaw in our system."

Raj Chouhan agrees. The British Columbia MLA is one of the few Canadian politicians who has looked closely at marriage fraud.

"It's very disturbing. The government is revictimizing these victims, so the policy has to be changed," he said.

In the past few years, he said, he has had people come to him who owe the government as much as \$63,000 in collected social assistance. He said the government should look at these cases on an individual basis, as well as put in place a system to notify sponsors if their family member applies for any government assistance programs. There is no way to know exactly how many times Ms. Towell's story has replayed itself across Canada.

"In an average week, we receive about four new victims," said Shah Moayed, a spokesman for Stop Marriage Fraud Canada, a group representing the victims of marriage fraud. Though queries to the group do not comprise scientific statistics, Mr. Moayed said it is representative of a growing loophole in Canada's immigration system, one that punishes Canadians for honestly falling in love.

Ms. Towell has spoken to officials at Citizenship and Immigration Canada, but has found them to be little help. One told her that if she located him, she should contact them so they could update the address in his file. Another referred her to the Stop Marriage Fraud Canada website as the best resource.

Ms. Norris said the sponsorship agreement is set up in a way that it raises a red flag with the person signing. It is meant, she said, to make a person think about whether they really want to be responsible for the person with whom they are in love.

"He was my husband, I loved him," Ms. Towell said, glancing at the yellow photo album. The only reason she decided to share her agonizing experience, she said, is so that one day the system might change so as to spare others her pain.

"I'm a university educated woman. I'm well travelled. I consider myself to be intuitive and it happened to me."