

Violence against Women under China's Economic Modernisation: Resurgence of Women Trafficking in China

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Trafficking in women was one of the 'oldest evil trades' to flourish in pre-communist China. At that time, parents and husbands were permitted by the law to sell their children or wives in the open marketplace. The early practice of women and children trafficking represented women and children's inferior social status before the law and generally reflected the society's values and attitudes toward victims of this evil trade in the traditional Chinese society. When political power changed hands in China in 1949, the new government quickly abolished such inhuman practices against women and children. They launched a public campaign that vigorously and swiftly eradicated the trade in slaves, prostitution and opium in the late 1950s. The government's triumph over these evil forces not only provided badly needed social stability for the revival of the national economy but also boosted public confidence in the newly established political entity, and eventually helped the communist party to consolidate power throughout China.

As China has undergone drastic political and economic changes in the past fifteen years, human trafficking has resurfaced. It has been reported in more than twenty of China's thirty provinces and autonomous regions since the early 1980s. Women and children have been the primary targets of abduction, illegal imprisonment, physical and sexual assault, and sale. Although no official statistics have been released on how many women and children were abducted and sold in the black market, the media and unofficial sources put their estimates at at least 10 000. The slave trade in women is particularly prevalent, and has not only affected hundreds and thousands of families in rural areas but also the population in cities. This paper is a preliminary report on the issues of violent crimes against women in this evil trade practice under China's economic and social modernisation program. To understand the enormous social impact of this crime on Chinese families and people, I begin with an assessment of the

prevalence of the abduction and sale of women and a description of trafficking network operating in China. Secondly, I shall discuss various violent acts against the slaves and their families. The third issue of this paper traces the historical roots of the trade and considers the social breeding ground that has allowed such crime to flourish under the economic reform. The final section is devoted to the official crackdown on trafficking.

Prevalence and Trafficking Network

The trade in women is particularly rife in villages in mountainous and remote rural areas of provinces such as Sichuan, Shandong, Hebei and Henan. For instance, between 1986 and 1988, there were 48 100 women sold in six counties of Xiuzhou region in Jiangsu Province. In one village, two-thirds of newly wedded brides were purchased through the black market peddlers. In a county of 100 000 population, peasants spent a total of US\$85 000 for purchasing nearly 700 women as wives from 1982 to 1988. 7424 cases of human trafficking were reported to police in Guizhou Province between January and September of 1988. Consequently, the police arrested 2535 offenders for alleged human trafficking and abduction. Law enforcement agencies in Shandong Province rounded up 2761 offenders and 267 gangs for operating trafficking rings and liberated 2035 abducted women and 158 children.

The slave trade affected the lives of thousands and generated lucrative profits for the abductors and dealers at various points of the process. For each deal that goes through, traffickers can make between US\$300 and US\$500. A trafficking ring with 40 members in the city of Xiuzhou abducted and sold more than 100 women and generated more than US\$100 000 profit within a two-year period in the later 1980s. Trafficking often involves a chain of abductors, with each one passing women on to the next link in their intricate network throughout the country. Most traffickers are young men between 22 and 37-years-old, peasants, unemployed, taxi, bus and truck drivers and railway workers. Traffickers usually organise their network along the railways. Once women are abducted, they are often stripped and lined up for sale in the rural free markets. The trade is often made under the eyes of the law and local cadres. The abducted victims in Xiuzhou, mainly aged between 14 and late thirties, were sold for between US\$400 and US\$800 depending on looks, age, virginity, physical condition, and previous marital status.

A preliminary investigation conducted by local and provincial law enforcement agencies found that, besides abduction, a significant proportion of victims of the slave trade was lured away by dealers through deception such as a job offer, an admission to college, or a promising marriage in big cities. Since many young women are eager to leave their isolated, impoverished small towns or villages for better opportunities and life elsewhere, they often fall into the trap of traffickers who pretend to help them with promises of college, jobs in big cities, and ideal marriages. Some of the women were sold voluntarily, hoping to escape poverty or an abusive husband for a better life elsewhere. Most of them do not understand the perils they are facing in this brutal and illicit trade. Tragically, some of the victims were sold to men who are mentally retarded,

physically disabled, elderly or were to be shared by several brothers within a family.

Criminal Violence against Women

In the slave trade, the commission of violence is a daily event. Many women were victims of kidnapping, rape, sexual slavery, psychological humiliation, physical torture or even mutilation and murder. According to victims' own accounts and those of witnesses, victims were held in inhuman conditions, with long-term solitary confinement, physical restraining, starvation and humiliation being used. Their eyes were blindfolded, hands tied, mouths taped, and they were kept in the dark for several days without clothing, adequate food or water. Forced virginity examination was also a common practice. When victims tried to escape from men who bought them, they were often recaptured, brutally beaten, imprisoned, mutilated or even murdered. In 1989, a women's magazine reported an incident in which a woman's eyes were gouged out by her husband, who bought her in a black market, so that she won't be able to escape again. What is even more devastating is that many escaping victims were recaptured and returned to the men who bought them by local law enforcement officers or public security staff in the village. Instead of viewing the slave trade as illicit and violent, many officials considered the men who bought women to be the legitimate owners. For instance, when a bride was known to be a victim of human trafficking and forced marriage, local officials would still issue a marriage licence. Many women committed suicide as the only way out of this tragedy.

Theoretical Analysis on the Causes of Slavery Trade in China

The selling women as wives or prostitutes has its historical roots in traditional values about men and women, but there are a number of reasons for the contemporary rise in the slave trade.

The practice in the early twentieth century of selling daughters to support a family or purchasing a woman to carry on a family line is still vivid in the memory of many people, particularly in underdeveloped rural areas. This old custom of carrying on the paternal line has come under siege as a result of China's one-child-family policy. In many cases, a husband sold his wife to a dealer simply because she gave a birth to a baby girl and his family has shunned the wife for being unable to bear a son. As a result of the clash between traditional values and the official one-child-family policy, female infanticide has also become prevalent in rural China. Again, government officials rarely take any action against offenders.

The rising cost of the traditional rural wedding, which frequently exceeds US\$2500 nowadays, makes marriage very expensive and often unaffordable, while purchasing a wife generally costs only US\$500 to US\$800. For the rural population, marriage is not a personal matter that involves emotional commitment and romantic affection but a family responsibility of prolonging their paternal line. Therefore, in many families, the marriage of their son is a

family affair and every member will have to work hard and save every penny for the dowry. If it is necessary, a family may sell its daughters to raise money to purchase a wife or to exchange with another family for a daughter-in-law. Arranged baby marriage also exists in many rural areas. Women are still regarded as the reproductive property of men, which can be purchased and sold at a market price.

The growth of prostitution as a by-product of the rapid expansion of tourism has provided another market for traffickers. Pimps control the prostitution industry while the traffickers supply sex slaves for high profits. Along with economic development, more and more young women left their poor villages to go to the big cities for opportunities of jobs, education and a better life. The sex industry has provided them with an alternative living in cities. According to the Public Health officials, the widespread prostitution problem has brought a rocketing rate of venereal diseases.

In addition, woman trafficking is believed to have increased as economic controls in the rural areas are eased and more people, both men and women, search for ways to be prosperous or escape poverty for a better life elsewhere while China moves towards a market-oriented economy. People now have more freedom to decide where they want to live or work. They can be self-employed and are subjected to less governmental scrutiny and official control. The partial emergence of a market economy has reinvigorated the slave trade, as travel and residence change become easier and peasants accumulate enough cash to purchase a bride. Although woman trafficking is strictly illegal under sections 140 and 141 of the penal law, the rapid decline in social and legal control has had a devastating impact on protecting women/children from these crimes. In addition, many participants of the slave trade, including some of the victims, view such activities primarily as a means of making business and achieving economic prosperity. Lastly, the high illiteracy rate among the female rural population has severely hampered victims' chances of seeking effective help from official agencies and private organisations.¹

Official Crackdown

The Government has recently launched a campaign against abduction and slavery trade by declaring it as one of 'six evils'.² On 4 September 1991, the National People's Congress passed two bills to prohibit solicitation of prostitution and to increase penalties for the crimes of women and children abduction and trafficking. The new laws criminalise such conducts as engaging in prostitution with sexually transmitted diseases, purchasing abducted women or children, and kidnapping for ransom. They create a group of serious felony crimes such as

¹ China still has more than 220 million people who are illiterate or literate at a socially dysfunctional level. Of this population, more than a half of them are women in rural areas. Chinese officials reported that in 1989, among seven million children who dropped out of school, 80 per cent were girls in rural areas.

² These were prostitution and women trafficking, pornographic publications and sales, manufacturing and trafficking in narcotics, illegal gambling and swindling through superstition.

operating a human trafficking ring and kidnapping women and children for the purpose of sale. The new laws have also increased the penalties for prostitution, for forcing women into prostitution, and for human trafficking.³ The bills require mandatory educational programs and medical tests of sexually transmitted diseases for those arrested for prostitution and solicitation. The new laws delegate the responsibility of inspection, suspension and full closure of hotels, taverns, bars and night clubs (where the owners may be involved in prostitution and the trafficking of women) to the local business licensing agencies. The new laws also affirm the legal responsibility of local, district, county and provincial governments to cooperate with law enforcement agencies' investigative efforts and help those victims of abduction and slavery to reunite with their families.

The official crackdown on human slavery trade began in the early 1990s. On 28 September 1990, a 27-year-old man was found guilty of selling his mother, wife, his three-year-old daughter and 18 other women and children. He was executed on 3 November 1990. In January 1991, six men were executed and seven others were imprisoned for abducting and selling women in the province of Henan. The execution was a result of crackdown on a gang of human slave trade. This group of men had abducted 70 women and sold 61 for a total of more than 138 000 yuan (US\$26 500). A similar case was also reported in Shanxi Province. In June 1991, the provincial court sentenced ten men to death for kidnapping and selling 91 women; the youngest one was only 13-years-old. These offenders had also raped at least 22 women before selling them to peasants who needed wives. The ten men, as a part of gang, had earned 210 000 yuan (US\$40 000) over several years. Recently, the traders have expanded their market and territory beyond the borders of China. For instance, Burma's authority has contacted Chinese official about young Chinese women rescued by the police from massage parlours. The reports suggest that these women were sold by Chinese smugglers to Burma. Chinese police have also repatriated at least 2716 Vietnamese women who were believed to be abducted, smuggled and sold to Chinese peasants. According to government reports, between 1990-91, 65 236 people were arrested for involvement in the sale of women and children. From 1993-94, another 50 000 traffickers were arrested in a further 33 100 cases. The authorities reported that 27 000 people, including 2700 children, were rescued. However, even the government admits that this was just the tip of the iceberg concerning the problem of women trafficking.

As China's economic development continues, the trade in women will continue to make its way back into rural and poverty-striking areas. The battle against women trafficking is far from over.

³ The new laws increase the penalty from the original 5 to 10 years of imprisonment to minimal 10 years to life or death penalty.