

THE "BRIDE TRADE" FROM MYANMAR TO CHINA



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The international community defines trafficking in persons as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons for the purpose of exploitation, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability. This exploitation includes exploitation arising from prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation.

Trafficking is a reality of violence that places women and girls in conditions of exploitation and subjection such that the UN considers it a form of modern slavery.

Multiple factors favour the occurrence of trafficking situations: living in countries with a high percentage of young people in extreme poverty and high unemployment rates with serious deficits in basic services such as health or security, domestic violence, belonging to an ethnic minority or a broken family, the feminisation of poverty, gender roles and women's

responsibility as the pillar of the family with unshared family burdens, inequality in access to education, training and the labour market for women compared to men, among many others.

In this context, a new trend is emerging in the last three years in Southeast Asia: "bride trafficking" to China. There is strong evidence that countries such as Myanmar, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Nepal, North Korea, Pakistan and Vietnam have become some of the sources of this terrible business.

According to a report by the NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW), entitled "Give Us a Baby and We'll Let You Go. Trafficking of Kachin "Brides" from Myanmar to China", the situation is particularly worrying in the troubled Kachin region, where the Chinese and Myanmar authorities are failing to stop the trafficking of teenage girls and young women into sexual slavery.

Myanmar: war, displacement and despair

Political and ethnic disputes in Myanmar date back to before the independence from Britain in 1948 and armed conflicts between the government and armed ethnic groups affect the whole country. Although cease-fire agreements are in force in most ethnic minority areas of the country, conflict persists, exacerbated by nearly 50 years of abusive military rule. The Myanmar armed forces and the Kachin State Independence Army (KIA) have committed serious abuses of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law. The conflict has caused massive long-term displacement. In September 2018, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) recorded 98,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs), hosted in the Kachin region, 75% of them women and children. Many refugees have fled to China, where they have experienced a lack of food, clean water, basic health care and education.

The shortage of women: effect of the "one-child" policy

In China there is a large and growing gap between the number of women and men, caused by gender discrimination, aggravated by the "one-child" policy imposed by the government from 1975 to 2015 and by the persistence of restrictions on women's reproductive rights. This gap has led to a severe "bride shortage" among the age groups most likely to be looking for wives. In fact, experts estimate that China is currently "missing" between 30 and 40 million women, which has sharply increased the demand for women smuggled in from abroad.

How many "brides" are trafficked from Myanmar to China?

It is very difficult to estimate the total number of women and girls who are trafficked from Myanmar to China but, according to the HRW report, the numbers counted are a fraction of the actual total number, as many victims, out of fear and/or shame, as well as lack of support from the authorities, do not dare to report. In August 2018, Myanmar anti-trafficking police reported 130 trafficking cases, 96 of which involved women sold into forced marriage in China.

In 2015, the Myanmar government reported to the UN that between 2008 and 2013, it had investigated and punished 820 cases of human trafficking, of which 534 were cases of forced marriage and 599 involved trafficking to China.

According to data from the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission (MNHRC), 226 cases of such trafficking were counted in 2017.

HRW research suggests that the number of women and girls being trafficked is considerably high and growing. An activist working on trafficking cases in Myitkyina (capital of Kachin State) with a population of about 307,000, estimates that between 28 and 35 women and girls of the city are trafficked each year.

Seng Moon's testimony

Young Seng Moon was trafficked at the age of 17. It all started with an innocent proposal: a friend's mother promised her a well-paid job as a babysitter in China. She then sold her to a Chinese family as a "wife". Once bought, she was locked up as a sex slave until she became pregnant:

"The family took me to a room. In that room, they tied me up again. (. . .) They closed the door, for a month or two. When it was time to eat, they gave me food. I cried (. . .) Every time the Chinese man brought me food, he raped me. Two months later, the father of the family took me out of the room and introduced me to my future husband, he said - I introduce you to your husband. You are now a married couple. Treat each other well and build a happy family. "

Seng Moon's "husband" continued abusing her until she became pregnant with a child. After her son was born, she asked to return home. He replied:

"No one plans to stop you. If you want to go home, you can. But you will not take my son. "

Seng Moon managed to flee to Myanmar, leaving behind her son and taking with her lifelong traumas and stigmata.

Seng Moon's is one of 37 testimonies of ethnic Kachin Burmese women who survived the horror of wife trafficking and to whom HRW gives voice in its report. All of them were sold to Chinese families for the equivalent of 3,000 to 13,000 USD. 12 of the interviewees were under 18 years and one of them was not even 14 years old. 22 of the women were held captive for a year or more.

The report calls on the authorities to do more to raise awareness of human trafficking, provide greater support to victims who manage to return and bring the perpetrators of such crimes to justice.

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