

Brides, Bruises and the Border: The Trafficking of North Korean Women into China

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Increasing poverty in North Korea is forcing many North Korean women to seek better lives in China. They become victims of cross-border trafficking through a number of means, including being sold by their families and acquaintances or illegally migrating into China. Women are often promised better jobs or a good life as a wife in China, but their situations rapidly deteriorate when they fail to find jobs or suffer abuse by their new husbands. Some women are kidnapped and forced to work in the highly exploitive sex industry. If a woman is able to extricate herself from the trade and return to North Korea, she is often treated as a criminal instead of a victim, in many cases being imprisoned and forced to do hard labor. If she finally returns to her village, she is treated as a social pariah, creating heightened vulnerability to re-trafficking. Both the Chinese and North Korean governments deny a problem exists, and, despite international pressure, are taking no corrective action.

“If you are a North Korean woman crossing the border, it’s almost impossible to survive without being abused or sold.”

—trafficked North Korean woman¹

Introduction

As a consequence of post-Cold War economic stagnation and widespread famine, more than 100,000 North Koreans have migrated illegally into China in the past decade to improve their situation.² Of those North Koreans entering China, it is believed that more than 80–90 percent of the women become trafficking victims.³ Furthermore, socioeconomic policies and trends in China have created a demand for young, marriageable or sexually exploitable women, which has exacerbated the trafficking of North Korean women. The desperation of North Koreans, coupled with Chinese demand for women, has generated a transnational market of selling and exploiting women.⁴

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North Korea's Downward Spiral and China's Upward Surge

North Korea has faced major economic upheavals engendered by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, changes in relations with China and Russia and internal economic policy reforms.

North Korea historically relied upon the Soviet Union's subsidies of food, fuel, and equipment to function, as it had limited natural resources and technology.⁵ When the Soviet Union collapsed, North Korea's command economy staggered, and economic output decreased by half.⁶ In addition, Russia and China established economic and diplomatic ties with South Korea, further straining their own relations with North Korea, which relied on preferential trade relations with its two allies.⁷ Faced with increasing food shortages from lack of production capabilities and minimal support from its Cold War allies, the North Korean government systematically reduced food rations for the general population.⁸

Severe agricultural disasters between 1993 and 1995 compounded the food shortage by debilitating the already crippled agricultural sector. Continued crop failures forced thousands to forage for food as the meager food supply was reserved for the city of Pyongyang, workers in critical industrial complexes, and military and government officials.⁹ Although the North Korean government sought international assistance for food supplies in 1995, more than 2 million North Koreans died from starvation between 1995 and 1998 because supplies were either mismanaged or reserved for certain populations.¹⁰ As a result, the famine launched an exodus of desperate North Koreans into China to find food and work.

North Korean economic reforms in 2002 to incorporate free-market policies only worsened the economic turmoil. Instead of creating new job opportunities, the policies devalued the currency and raised food prices by more than 50 percent.¹¹ In 2003, the average urban family spent 75-85 percent of its income on basic food staples. Workers were promised wage increases that failed to materialize. In several cases, defectors indicated that, after October 2002, they were never paid for the work they did.¹² The government also dissolved the food ration coupon system, relaxed price controls, and decentralized decision-making for factories to allow market-determined prices. Subsequently, many factories shut down production because of shortages in energy and raw materials and the lack of revenue to offset production costs.¹³

North Korean women's vulnerability to trafficking partially stems from the economic fragility of the country, but also from the traditional roles of women in Korean society. Women often fill low-level jobs that pay relatively poorly compared to men's wages. Those who marry are expected to leave the workforce and are subsequently cut off from state rations—forcing them to rely solely on spousal income.¹⁴ As factories shut down, many young North Korean women are also finding it more and more difficult to find jobs. With aging parents to care for, these women are expected to support their families however they can. In many instances, the only options to do this are by seeking work in China or marrying a Korean-Chinese or Chinese man who can then support her family.

China's gender imbalance and economic growth also have affected the business of trafficking North Korean women. Under the one-child policy, Chinese families often prefer to have a male child to carry on the family's name and inheritance. Many Chinese female newborns are aborted, abandoned, subjected to infanticide or adopted by foreigners.¹⁵ The result is a high ratio of 116 males for every 110 females in China. In some regions, the imbalance is as high as 14 males to one female.¹⁶ By 2020, there will be more than 40 million bachelors in China looking for wives.¹⁷ Of the few rural Chinese women, most have migrated to the cities for better economic opportunities that are less demanding than farming. This major shortage of marriageable women has left many Chinese men seeking North Korean brides from profit-minded traffickers willing to supply the women.¹⁸

Tricks of the Trade

Trafficking in persons is defined as the recruitment, transportation, or transfer of persons, accomplished by the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, the abuse of power or the victim's vulnerability, or giving or receiving payments to achieve control over another person for the purpose of exploitation.¹⁹ Commercial sex and labor are extracted from North Korean women through violence, deception, coercion, abduction, fraud, debt bondage and/or abuse of power in such a manner that consent, if any is given, is not meaningful.²⁰ As North Korean women migrate into China to search for work to support their families, they are vulnerable to being trafficked as brides or women for the sex industry. Between 80 percent and 90 percent of the women who cross the border are trafficked as a consequence of false promises of employment, pressure to marry for survival, abduction, or being sold by family or acquaintances.²¹ In the case of North Korean women, the majority of victims are either misled by the intentions of traffickers posing as benefactors, whose actual intentions are not made clear, or are forcefully kidnapped for the purpose of being sexually exploited.

In one common form of trafficking, marriage brokers promise better lives in China to North Korean women who are willing to marry Korean-Chinese or Chinese men. Women reluctantly agree to the arrangement because, as one victim noted, "it is better to find a man, any man, than to starve to death in North Korea."²² Although it appears that the victim voluntarily accepts this marriage arrangement, the situation often devolves into trafficking because the women end up in situations vastly different from the original agreement. They are often wed to husbands who are poor, disabled, abusive or some combination thereof.²³ Women sold as brides are often re-abducted by the marriage brokers or are sold by husbands who have tired of them. There have been cases in which North Korean women have been sold multiple times to different men by the same marriage broker.²⁴ Trafficking is so widespread that there have even been reports of other North Korean defectors and priests selling women as brides. For example, one defector explained that she was sold by an ethnic Korean-Chinese deacon after she refused to marry an ethnic Korean-Chinese.²⁵

Women are also lured by traffickers with false promises of employment opportunities (usually as a factory worker, maid, or similar position) in China.²⁶ In these instances, it is often the women's families who actually sell their daughters to traffickers to sustain the family's survival, thinking the daughter will be safely working to provide for the family.²⁷ Women are also brought into the trade forcefully after they have independently crossed into China, through abductions at places with a high concentration of illegal immigrants, including river crossings, railroad stations and markets.²⁸ There have been reports of actual Chinese border guards and policemen pretending to arrest women for illegal migration but in fact selling them to traffickers or directly to men.²⁹ Many of these women are then forced to work in the sex industry as a bar/karaoke hostess or as a prostitute in a brothel.³⁰ The women are priced around 5,000 Yuan (\$800); prices are often based on age, appearances and destination (for example, rural or urban areas).³¹

Traffickers work inside and outside of North Korea. Internal brokers and traffickers in North Korea collude with border guards, military officials and government officials who accept bribes in the course of transferring victims to China.³² Traffickers also may work with either organized crime syndicates or smaller trafficking rings in China that are making massive profits by selling women.³³ Within China, many of the preliminary brokers and traffickers are ethnic Korean-Chinese and are therefore able to speak Korean, which makes it easier to ensnare women in a foreign environment where they are unable to speak the local language.

Violence, Crime and Punishment

Similar to the experiences of other trafficking victims worldwide, North Korean women are exposed to physical and psychological violence from both the traffickers and the men to whom they are sold. Of those trafficked, more than 60–70 percent experience both physical and psychological violence.³⁴ Women are often locked up, physically abused, repeatedly raped, and emotionally manipulated by traffickers and buyers as a technique to break their spirit, shame them, and essentially mold them into complacent sex servants.³⁵ Those who refuse to comply are often severely beaten, starved, or even killed as a warning to other women.³⁶ North Korean women sold as brides are also subjected to severe domestic violence and are unable to escape or report the situation because of their illegal status.³⁷ In one case, a North Korean woman was chained up whenever her Chinese husband left the house to prevent escape.³⁸ Constant threats of exposing the women to law enforcement also allow traffickers and Chinese husbands to further control the women's movement and subordination. Many of the women fear repatriation because of harsh consequences for them and their families back in North Korea and are reluctant to cause problems for their husbands or traffickers.

When the trafficked North Korean women are caught by Chinese authorities and repatriated, they are treated as criminals rather than as victims of a crime. The women are immediately sent to either a *ka-mok* (police sta-

tion jail) or *ku-ryu-jang* (detention-interrogation facilities) along the North Korean and Chinese border for interrogation regarding their activities in China.³⁹ The interrogations often involve body searches, beatings, torture and rape.⁴⁰ The majority of women are sent to labor training camps for up to six months. Those thought to be conspiring with foreigners or religious groups are given harsher penalties, including longer prison sentencing. The incarcerated women are forced to perform hard labor, and the elderly or pregnant are not exempt from the hard labor.⁴¹ Pregnancies often end with forced abortions; women are either injected with drugs or subjected to beatings to induce abortion. There have been cases of infanticide, where other detainees are forced to participate in killing the newborns. One defector said that after babies were born, they were left to die, were buried alive or were suffocated with wet towels.⁴² The abortions and infanticides are solutions to remove state responsibility for supporting foreign-blooded children, especially when the state cannot even provide for North Korean children. After serving their time, the women are sent back to their villages, where their families and communities often treat them as social outcasts, making them vulnerable to re-trafficking. In the more extreme cases, women are executed as enemies of the state.

Pyongyang's Response

North Korea's current efforts to combat trafficking are minimal. Officially, North Korea denies there is a problem, claiming "human trafficking is not allowed on any account institutionally and legally [in our country] and such a thing does not exist."⁴³ The government further maintains that there has not been a trafficking-related case in over 50 years and so releases very little information to the public on trafficking and its social implications.⁴⁴ This lack of information dissemination creates an ignorant public that is more vulnerable to trafficking. The U.S. State Department's annual Trafficking in Persons report further notes that repatriated North Korean trafficking victims are treated as enemies of the state and punished as political criminals under the criminal code. No medical or counseling services are provided to the traumatized women.⁴⁵ Despite the public denial of trafficking, however, there has also been evidence that North Korea executes traffickers who have been apprehended. For example, Korean-American Church Coalition for North Korea (KCC) secretly filmed a series of trials where criminals, including traffickers, were executed in front of a public audience.⁴⁶

Beijing's Response

China continues to uphold its obligations under a 1986 repatriation agreement with North Korea whereby it does not recognize North Korean defectors as refugees.⁴⁷ This conflicts with China's obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention, which requires China to provide asylum for those who fear persecution if they are repatriated.⁴⁸ China argues North Koreans should not be given asylum because they are economic migrants, who are thus exempt from the 1951 Refugee Convention, and therefore the North

Korean migrants are forcefully deported without any opportunities for asylum.⁴⁹ Since 2002, the Chinese government has heightened surveillance and deportation of North Koreans after increased attempts by North Koreans to seek asylum by charging into embassies in China and other countries.⁵⁰ The Chinese government has also provided monetary incentives to the Chinese to turn in North Koreans and penalizes those who assist any illegal migrants with fines and prison time.⁵¹ China has unofficially allowed North Korean agents to enter China in order to detain North Korean migrants.⁵² The Chinese government also has increased its detainment and interrogation of humanitarian aid workers, religious activists and media, accusing them of espionage, trafficking and aiding North Koreans in China.⁵³ For example, Seok Jae-hyon, a freelance photographer filming North Koreans fleeing China, was arrested and charged for human trafficking in 2003 and is currently serving a two-year sentence.⁵⁴

China's refusal to acknowledge North Koreans as refugees and trafficking victims likely stems from its reluctance to publicly condemn human trafficking in North Korea since it too has a trafficking problem. Shortages in Chinese women for marriage, labor and commercial exploitation has resulted in domestic trafficking of Chinese women and children. Many more are smuggled out of the country and end up becoming trafficking victims, as they are no longer in control of their situations of indentured servitude. For those Chinese who are repatriated, they are heavily fined and punished by the government for illegal immigration.⁵⁵ If China were to condemn North Korea, it would bring further international attention to its own problem, which it would have to address before expecting compliance by North Korea.

International Pressure

The international response to the North Korean trafficking problem has had relatively little success due to sovereignty issues and lack of consistent international pressure on North Korea and China. In recent years, South Korea has become more reluctant to accept North Korean refugees because of its unsteady bilateral relations.⁵⁶

The international response to the North Korean trafficking problem has had relatively little success

Other countries, such as Russia and Vietnam, have denied asylum to North Koreans and have forcefully deported them.⁵⁷ The United States has continued to threaten non-trade and non-humanitarian sanctions against North Korea for its noncompliance to minimal anti-trafficking standards, but has yet to actually penalize North Korea for human trafficking.

Even after the passage of the North Korea Human Rights Act in 2004, the United States rejected a North Korean citizen's request for asylum.⁵⁸ The United Nations continues to seek access to North Koreans in China, but the requests have been denied repeatedly because of China's

refusal to give North Koreans refugee status. Furthermore, UN pressure on North Korea has produced few results because North Korea continues to deny the existence of trafficking and refuses to allow UN workers to investigate trafficking of its citizens. Further complicating the UN work in North Korea are North Korea's resistance to food aid and its announced intention to end UN humanitarian aid and have all foreign aid workers out by January 2006.⁵⁹ This would remove the small foreign presence now in place to report state-sanctioned human rights violations, especially with respect to human trafficking and state policies for dealing with those who are repatriated or caught trafficking.

Overall, North Korea has received little more than verbal condemnation from the international community in response to its human trafficking problem. Despite North Korea's continued denial of the problem and its lack of response, threats of sanctions by the international community have been inconsistent and weak. Despite some human rights rhetoric, the international community's response has been marked by inaction and hesitancy to compromise already shaky relations with North Korea, particularly when dealing with the issue of nuclear weapons. China, the country that should be placing the most pressure on North Korea, has opted to prioritize its 1986 repatriation agreement with North Korea. Furthermore, China has yet to sign the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children*, making it even more difficult to oblige China to pressure North Korea in addressing the growing trafficking epidemic. Essentially, the international community's reluctance to address the trafficking problem proactively has allowed more women in North Korea to become unsuspecting victims.

Recommendations for Change

North Korea is not a signatory to the the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children* (2000)⁶⁰ because of its continued denial of trafficking within its borders. The North Korean government should recognize human trafficking as a worldwide problem rather than as an attempt by other nations (for example, United States) to foul its already dismal reputation. It should sign onto the UN Trafficking Protocol to show its commitment to protect its citizens from exploitation, especially from citizen of other nations. North Korea also should discontinue its punishment of trafficked women as political enemies, continue receiving UN-sponsored humanitarian aid, allow humanitarian aid workers access to all parts of the country, and fulfill its obligation to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Instead of punishing those tricked into being trafficked, North Korea should run a nationwide anti-trafficking campaign to warn against the dangers of being trafficked and to preserve the integrity of its people and borders. Public awareness should include better medical and counseling services to women and children who have been repatriated because reintegrating them into society may lessen their chances of being

re-trafficked. North Korea must continue receiving humanitarian assistance because of its economic fragility and inability to feed its entire population. Lack of employment and starvation already have made many women and children victims of trafficking and exploitation. Increased instability will only encourage even more desperate people to risk the dangers of trafficking in order to survive.

China should sign the UN Trafficking Protocol as a proactive solution in combating trafficking of its own citizens. Instead of prioritizing its 1986 repatriation agreement with North Korea, China should encourage North Korea to develop an anti-trafficking public awareness campaign, discontinue deportations and classify North Koreans that have been trafficked as refugees. China also should develop a national anti-trafficking public awareness campaign, in partnership with North Korea to address the human trafficking problem prevalent in both countries. Additionally, Beijing should give the UN High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) access to North Korean refugees to bring humanitarian aid, punish corrupt officials and fulfill its obligations to the 1951 Convention Related to the Status of Refugees.

The international community must remain consistent with its condemnation of human rights violations by both North Korea and China. The United Nations should pressure China harder to stop the deportation of North Koreans and provide protection to them, particularly for those who have been exploited and abused while in China. The United Nations also should continue requesting access to North Koreans in China. Although these requests will be continually rejected by China, it will demonstrate UN member states' unwavering concern over human rights violations. South Korea can play a stronger role in initiating dialogue over trafficking with North Korea by offering economic incentives and economic cooperation projects in exchange for a North Korean promise of developing an anti-trafficking campaign.

The United States needs to move beyond threatening sanctions against North Korea for not fully complying with the Trafficking in Persons Report. The United States already imposes sanctions on North Korea.⁶¹ Attempting to sanction North Korea even more may prove counterproductive and disastrous because the common people will suffer the most and this may actually encourage more people to risk trafficking to better their situations. Instead of threatening aggressive action, the United States should open dialogue with China and North Korea to encourage proactive solutions, such as state-sponsored public awareness campaigns. This may slowly encourage North Korea to be less defensive on how it views and handles trafficking. Furthermore, the United States should stress that trafficking potentially could degenerate into a security threat for China and North Korea and not just as a human rights issue for the two countries.

Conclusion

In short, the trafficking of North Korean women has been a direct consequence of economic stagnation and political repression in North Korea. In the face of starvation, women are left with no choice but to risk crossing

into China. This has created a relatively consistent flow of women vulnerable to trafficking. When they are deported, they face harsh punishment from the state, instead of being counseled for their traumatic experiences. As a result, the women continue to face grave human rights violations from both countries. It is up to the international community to increase pressure on North Korea and China in order to protect the women and children.

Notes

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⁴ It is important to note that little is known about North Korea, especially on issues such as trafficking in women and children. In terms of trafficking statistics, most of the estimates are provided by humanitarian aid workers, activists and North Korean defectors. Many of the interviews with defectors are the closest picture of events and circumstances in North Korea. The majority of this paper is derived from research conducted by organizations (e.g., Anti-Slavery and Refugee International) that have come into contact with North Korean defectors who have experienced trafficking or had witnessed it.

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²² Muico, 2005, p. 6.

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