

# THE CROSS-BORDER TRAFFICKING IN WOMEN BETWEEN VIETNAM AND CHINA

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The People's Republic of China (PRC) is widely recognized as a destination market for many women trafficked in Asia, particularly from Vietnam. Trafficking in women in China is a sensitive and complex issue that threatens public health, security, gender equity and sustainable development. Elements such as uneven development, a huge gender imbalance and improved living conditions in some areas of the country have contributed to the expansion of China's human trafficking.

Confucianism plays a significant role in the trafficking in women between Vietnam and China because it strengthens an entrenched patriarchal mentality that relegates females to a subordinate position, where their personal realization is more likely to be sacrificed in favour of that of males. Confucian influence is particularly strong in remote areas of China, where underdevelopment, poverty and lack of job opportunities represent huge concerns. Here, parents often prefer to invest in the education and health of a son (rather than of daughter) because it is the son's duty to support them and to carry on their family line, his salary will be higher than a woman's, and his wife will take care of them. Women's role of

caregiver to their husbands and their husband's families leads women to be perceived as unprofitable investments by their own families. Consequently, a bride's parents are likely to ask for a considerable amount of money before giving permission for the marriage. Thus, for poor men living where the gender gap is most evident, the cheapest way to find a wife is by purchasing one.

In 2020, Zhongliang Huang and Wenguo Weng investigated the flows of trafficking in women within and across borders. Through analysis of 2,273 cases, they found that foreign victims made up approximately 40% of cases, and more than 55% of these were Vietnamese women trafficked to Yunnan, Hunan, Anhui, Henan and Jiangxi. Despite Chinese authorities' efforts to address this issue, trafficking will remain a serious concern for many years because of the skewed gender ratio in favour of males, amplified by the 'one-child' policy, which was implemented between 1980 and 2015. Indeed, gender imbalance affects Chinese men's demand for women and could lead to a growing number of men unable to find a wife, and a rise in sex-related crimes and antisocial behavior.

Social mechanisms that incentivize having children of one gender over another contribute to the expansion of trafficking in women by perpetuating the dynamics that lead to the commodification of women.

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According to [Qingfeng Wang](#), the family planning encouraged in China from the 1970s by the 'later, longer, fewer' policy to control population growth resulted in a severe contraction of the fertility rate. Then, in 1979, the new 'one-child' policy imposed reproductive limitations such as compulsory contraception and sterilization of women. Combined with a strong preference for sons, these measures led to a high number of gender-based abortions, heavily affecting sex ratio at birth and contributing to the significant gender imbalance observed in 2015. It is estimated that if the 'later, longer, fewer' policy had not been replaced with the one-child policy, the already unbalanced sex ratio at birth would have now reached 1.07 male births per female birth, instead of the current 1.16.

In the second half of 2020, I conducted several interviews with practitioners in Vietnam to investigate the dynamics of trafficking in women. The first interesting elements that emerged were that trafficking towards the PRC occurs throughout Vietnam, and that most of the detected cases involve women trafficked for forced marriage. In northern regions, victims are usually persuaded to cross the border by friends and acquaintances through lies or fake job promises, or by traffickers pretending to fall in love with them online. Victims are then sold to other traffickers for resale in China. In southern Vietnam, brokers frequently approach victims with fake proposals of marriage abroad. Lured by expectations of better living conditions in neighbouring countries, victims fall into the brokers' traps, believing that they finally have a chance to properly support their families.

Traffickers generally belong to a network of coordinated criminal groups: they exploit victims' economic and/or psychological vulnerabilities and often resort to the Internet to reach their prey. Yet, although the proportion of younger victims is increasing, there are still no official online safety education programmes or awareness-raising activities about human trafficking in schools.

Confucianism has also strongly influenced the traditional Vietnamese mindset, especially in remote areas. While in big cities families tend to have just a couple of children, and anyway having only a daughter is no longer such a problem, in rural areas families face difficult economic situations, have many children and prefer to invest in sons. Girls drop out of school very young, try to find jobs to provide financial support to their families, and get married and have children early. Furthermore, practitioners have also noticed an increasing gender imbalance among younger generations: about 1.11 male births per female birth. This trend is worsening, especially in remote areas, and could result in a growing

demand for trafficked women in the next fifteen years.

In 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak and the closure of borders led to a decrease in cross-border trafficking flows and a rise of domestic flows in both China and Vietnam. Lockdowns and restrictive measures worsened the trauma experienced by victims of trafficking due to more frequent episodes of violence, since victims were spending the whole time with their abusers. Consequently, there was a rise in calls for help, and conducting cross-border rescue operations was more difficult because of travelling restrictions. However, Chinese law enforcement checks in citizens' homes allowed many trafficked Vietnamese women to be detected. These were arrested as illegal migrants and repatriated after being quarantined in both countries in accordance with preventive safety measures. Once in Vietnam, the women received proper support, and if there was evidence of human trafficking it was possible to start investigations. The experts warned of the danger of a new expansion of human trafficking arising from the reopening of the China–Vietnam border, because many more Vietnamese – both female and male – are exposed to the risks of human trafficking. Indeed, the pandemic-induced crisis amplified inequalities,

poverty and further reduce the number of decent job opportunities. For this reason, many girls and boys looking for better chances have moved into the big cities, where traffickers could easily deceive them.

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Conducting research on this topic is extremely difficult due to the lack of official data. Human trafficking is an under-reported crime: victims often decide not to report their experiences to the authorities because of fear of stigmatization relating to sexual activities; victim blaming; shame and pressures from relatives or acquaintances who may want to avoid exposing their family to further judgments from society. In both countries, educating children about gender equity is necessary to dismantle the social mechanisms that incentivize having children of one gender over another. Besides economic development and legal improvements, awareness-raising activities and compulsory online safety education programmes in schools are crucial in order to provide young people with the tools they need to defend themselves and limit their exposure to the dangers of human trafficking in the coming years.

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