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Asia's expanding illicit market: brides

By Tharanga Yakupitiyage

IPS News Agency (25.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2FYygEM> - Paradoxically, the world's most populated countries are facing a population crisis: a woman shortage. And it's women who are paying a brutal price for it.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the natural sex ratio at birth is approximately 105 boys to every 100 girls.

However, decades of gender discrimination, which favoured having boys over girls, has left India and China with 80 million more men than women.

"When women lack equal rights and patriarchy is deeply engrained, it is no surprise that parents choose to not to have daughters," said Human Rights Watch's (HRW) Senior Researcher in the Women's Rights Division Heather Barr.

Now that there is a shortage of women doesn't mean that women become more treasured or valued, she noted. Instead, there are very harmful consequences.

"[Women have] become a commodity which is in demand, so in demand that people will use violence to acquire it," Barr told IPS.

"The stories we heard were really unbelievably shocking even after having spent many, many years on human rights issues," she added.

The "bride shortage" has triggered trafficking as women are lured under false pretences and sold as brides.

Bordering China is Myanmar's Kachin and northern Shan states which has seen iterations of conflicts over the last decade.

HRW found that traffickers often prey on women and girls in those regions, offering jobs in and transport to China. The women are then sold for 3,000 to 13,000 dollars to Chinese families struggling to find a bride for their sons.

Once purchased, women and girls are often locked in room and raped so that they can quickly provide a baby for the family.

Often times, women and girls are even sold by people they know—sometimes even by family members.

“The idea that there is a situation, a set of social pressures, a sense of lawlessness that is so extreme that it is causing people to sell their own relatives...it is shocking,” Barr said.

In India, bride trafficking has become common in the northern states such as Haryana which has only 830 girls to every 1,000 boys.

In a study, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) found in over 10,000 households, over 9,000 married women in Haryana were brought from other States.

Most of those women came from poor villages in Assam, West Bengal, and Bihar where their families, desperate for money, struck deals with traffickers. There are also cases of girls being resold to other people after living a married life for a few years.

According to the 2016 National Crimes Records Bureau, almost 34,000 were kidnapped or abducted for the purpose of marriage across India, half of whom were under the age of 18.

While the immediate consequences for women are clear, there may also be long-term consequences of the distorted sex ratio.

“Part of the reason that we should be worrying about it is that we simply don’t know what the long-term consequences of this are. We don’t know how this might change societies, but this is something that is going to have an effect through generations,” Barr told IPS, highlighting the need for action including better prevention efforts and law enforcement on trafficking and violence against women.

But at the end of the day, governments must do more to address the root cause of the imbalance—gender discrimination.

Though sex-selective abortion is illegal in India, it is still a widespread practice in the country. In fact, approximately five to seven million sex-selective abortions are estimated to be carried out in the South Asian country every year.

China’s now two-child policy may also continue to pose a threat to women and girls, as well as the future stability of the country’s population.

“The most fundamental problem is gender inequality and most fundamental solution to this is that you have to change the dynamics in society that makes sons valued and daughters not valued,” Barr concluded.

Uyghur woman details life inside Chinese 're-education camp' in Xinjiang

A Uyghur woman has detailed conditions she says were tantamount to torture inside one of China's "re-education camps" in far western Xinjiang province.

By Flint Duxfield and Ian Burrows

ABC News AU (08.01.2019) - <https://ab.co/2VCQSDy> - The UN has cited estimates that up to 1 million ethnic Muslim-minority Uyghurs may be held involuntarily in extralegal detention in Xinjiang.

China's Government says the camps are vocational training centres providing language training and re-education of extremists.

But reports from inside the centres tell a very different story.

Gulbahar Jelilova, who says she spent 15 months inside one of the camps, has given a rare firsthand account of the conditions.

"We were kept in dark rooms with rats and mice," she told the ABC's PM program.

"Sometimes they were tying up a weight of 5 kilograms to our feet as a way of punishment.

"If they wanted to punish even heavier, they would put handcuffs [on us] and we would be forced to look at the wall across for about 17 hours."

Ms Jelilova, who is originally from Kazakhstan, has spent the last two decades doing business on the Chinese-Kazakhstani border.

She said in May 2017 she was arrested in the Chinese city of Urumqi on charges of illegal transferring 17,000 yuan (\$3,500) between China and Turkey.

"While I was in the camp I told them that I was a foreigner and that I didn't have any wrongdoings," she said.

"We were told we didn't have any rights there. We didn't have any rights to make phone calls outside ... we were like dead people."

Most Uyghurs who have been inside the camps won't speak about their experiences because of fears other family members will be detained in retaliation.

Despite Ms Jelilova's concerns that Chinese police are keeping tabs on her in Turkey where she currently lives, she said she felt compelled to speak out on behalf of other young women currently in detention.

"I cannot eat comfortably when I think about those people. Under those circumstances how can I keep quiet?" she said.

Forced to take unknown medicines

Ms Jelilova outlined how the women were forced to take unknown medication while in the centre.

"While I was in the camp, they used to give us injections, take blood samples, give medications that we didn't know," she said.

"If we asked what medication it was, they would penalise for asking this question.

"And none of the female people were having monthly periods because they were giving us specific medication that was stopping the periods."

Ms Jelilova's accounts contradict the Chinese Government but they do match up with reports of other Uyghurs and human rights groups.

She said she was beaten inside the camp and when she first entered she weighed 76 kilograms but within a month had lost more than 20 kilograms.

"The total aim of those concentration camps is to eliminate the Uyghur people, the Muslims," she said.

Ms Jelilova said she was let out of the camp following a sustained lobbying effort by her family.

"I was released from the concentration camps three months ago, but every single day the situation in the concentration camps is in front of my eyes.

"The cries of the people are in my ears."

The ABC has repeatedly sought comment from Chinese officials but has received no response.

China has said Xinjiang faces a serious threat from Islamist militants and separatists who plot attacks and stir up tensions between the mostly Muslim Uyghur minority and the ethnic Han Chinese majority.

Other reading:

['I begged them to kill me', Uyghur woman describes torture to US politicians](#)

[I'm a Uyghur Muslim who fled China's brutal crackdown – it's time the world showed us some support](#)

[Police are reportedly cutting too-long dresses off ethnic minority women in the middle of streets in China](#)

China's 'bare branches': Unmarried men stuck between tradition and capitalism

The bitter fruit of the One Child Policy and the preference for sons is a female deficit of 20 million people in the coming decades for men of marrying age.

By Xuan Li

Scroll.in (29.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2kQnck7> - Chinese New Year, or the Spring Festival, is a highlight in Chinese society. But for many young people, the joy of vacation and family reunion is mixed with questions from parents and relatives about their achievements in the past year, including about their relationships.

This is a particularly stressful occasion for single men who – unless they choose to rent a fake partner or have a stroke of luck at the local marriage market – are forced to face the miserable fate of singlehood.

These involuntary bachelors, who fail to add fruit to their family tree, are often referred to as "bare branches", or *guanggun*. And the Chinese state has recently started to worry about the dire demographic trend posed by the growing number of bare branches.

The 2010 national census data suggests that 24.7% Chinese men above the age of 15 have never been married, while 18.5% of women in the same age group remain unwed.

The disparity in marital status between the sexes is particularly large in younger age groups. According to the same data source, 82.4% of Chinese men between 20 and 29 years of age have never been married, which is 15% more than women of the same age. The gap is approximately 6% among those in their 30s and less than 4% for those in their 40s or older.

Hiding in plain sight?

China's surplus of men is attributed, at least in part, to the family planning policy implemented in the country since 1979. The One Child Policy, coupled with the patriarchal tradition of son preference, has led many families to give up on their daughters. This has happened through gender-selective abortion, infanticide or by giving away girl children.

The bitter fruit of the preference for sons is a female deficit of 20 million people in the coming decades for men of marrying age.

But there is an argument that the sex birth ratio might not be as skewed as all that. It points out that many of the missing girls were unregistered at birth in official records. By examining multiple waves of census data, for example, researchers have found that millions of "hidden girls" turned up in later statistics.

That being said, the extreme 118:100 sex birth ratio still points to huge pools of bachelors in China in the decades to come.

What alarms the state is not the singleton status of these men, but their socioeconomic characteristics. China's wealth is unequally distributed across the population, with particularly huge income gaps between urban and rural populations.

As in most countries, men are expected to be the head and main provider for the family, and women are allowed and encouraged to "marry up" to males with resources. Caught between the patriarchal tradition and the widening social gap, Chinese men on the lower end of the socioeconomic ladder have a particularly hard time attracting brides.

The "marriage squeeze" would not be so devastating for these bachelors had the Chinese government been thorough and persistent with its gender equality policy. Gender equality has been written in the constitution since 1954 and has been proudly promoted by the socialist state.

New generations of Chinese women, who now make up 45% of the country's workforce and are almost on par with their male compatriots in education enrolments, no longer need to be financially dependent on future husbands. They have the potential to shake rigid gender roles that require men to shoulder the economic burden alone.

But the translation from educational attainment to earning power and equal status is not at all straightforward. The labour market in China has become increasingly hostile towards women in recent years and the gender gap in employment rate and income have expanded.

Many young women – especially those without promising career prospects – are looking again to marriage as their once-in-a-lifetime chance for upward social mobility. This is reflected in the increasing dating costs and rocketing "bride wealth" that women request from their male partners, which further disadvantage impoverished men.

Young men – economically disadvantaged and sexually frustrated – might eventually vent their anger through violence against others, thereby threatening public security and social stability. At least, that's what the Chinese government fears.

The conviction is not ungrounded. Social scientists argue that long-term bachelorhood not only compromises men's well-being, but also puts hormone-fuelled, underprivileged men at risk of gravitating towards aggression, as already observed in historical China and contemporary India.

Easy targets

Social gaps are so difficult to close that the Chinese authorities are firing at the easier target: women.

Over the years, the Chinese state has tolerated sexist representations of women in high-profile media outlets, put derogatory labels on unmarried women by calling them leftover and describing them as emotional and extreme, and curtailed women's rights after divorce.

But little is discussed in official channels about abandoned girls, domestic and international human trafficking, and supporting women in workplaces.

Of course, not all bare branches are disadvantaged because of socioeconomic reasons. Homosexuality was formally decriminalised in China as recently as 1997 and removed from the list of mental illness in 2001.

Still excluded from the institution of marriage or any civil union, many Chinese gay men either have to stay legally single or form a sham union – often with lesbians who have the same problem. But some choose to or have had to marry straight women, causing tremendous distress to both parties.

No longer wanting to spend their lives alone or to deceive innocent straight women, Chinese gay men are starting on the long, hard fight for marriage equality. Victory is still a long way away; China abstained from voting on the UN resolution on the rights of LGBT people in 2011. And in June 2016, a Chinese court dismissed a gay couple's lawsuit for their right to marriage.

Despite the conservative stance of the government and the dominating power of capital, there are signs of progress. In a recent survey on relationship values conducted by Tencent.com – one of the leading internet companies in China – both male and female respondents listed individual space (32.8%) and real connections (24.6%) as their top requirements for starting a marriage. Only 9.3% males and 16.6% females put house and car as a requirement, suggesting a rejection of the purely materialistic model of marriage.

Similarly, in a study on dating attitudes and expectations among Chinese college students, both sexes put "kind", "loving", "considerate" as the most desirable qualities in a romantic partner.

If they play nice and work with women to push for gender equality, perhaps there's hope for the bare branches yet.