**Lessons from Chinese gangs**

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It is such shocking news. For months, some Chinese gangs preyed upon hundreds of unsuspecting Pakistani women, trapping them in bondage and the sex trade under the pretence of legal cross-border marriages that were supposed to cement relations between two friendly countries. Pakistani criminals formed their own gangs to work as facilitators. While it all went on, Pakistani authorities remained totally clueless to the scale of the crime.

Let’s start with looking at the victims and their situation. This is important because specific cultural practices embedded in family and kinship relations encourage and rationalize the sexual trafficking of young women. A large majority of victims are Christian women from some districts of Punjab. In fact, most gangs specialised in targeting Christian families.

Recorded conversations between gangsters and families of victims, shared by some television channels, show that the gangsters felt no fear of retaliation or legal action. Christian women are undoubtedly one of the most vulnerable sections of our society. They face a quadruple jeopardy that is based on racial, religious, economic and gender discrimination. There is no place on earth, including their own homes and communities, where they are immune from discrimination and abuse.

Like the rest of Punjab, followers of the Christian faith in the province practice hypergamy – a cultural practice that involves a woman marrying a man of relatively higher social status. The flip side of hypergamy is the practice of dowry, essentially meant to reward a higher-status groom and make the match more attractive. In hypergamy, finding a proper match is always a struggle because the supply of suitable boys, superior to women and their families, is always less than the demand.

The prospects of marrying their daughters to highe- status Chinese men must have appeared like a godsend opportunity. The boys said they were Christians (or Muslims) and there was no reason to doubt them. After all, why would anyone call himself a Christian if he did not follow the faith. There was no need for dowry and the prospective relatives were so rich and generous that they were willing to bear the part of expenses that the bride’s family had to bear.

Who were the Chinese men? We have not seen any investigations from China yet. However, we have access to stories of many survivors who have been able to escape. Many human rights organizations has also published research reports on human trafficking in China.

It is clear that the families of the 'brides' in Pakistan had no idea what was happening on the other side of Himalayas. According to a report by Human Rights Watch: “The percentage of women in China’s population has fallen steadily since 1987, and the gender gap among men and women ages 15 to 29 is increasing. Researchers estimate that China has 30 to 40 million 'missing women', who should be alive today but are not due to preference for boys, exacerbated by the 'one-child policy' in place from 1979 to 2015….Some families cope with the lack of marriageable women by buying trafficked women or girls.”

According to a 2016 UN study on human trafficking from Cambodia to China, “the economically disadvantaged rural men in China look to women from other countries like Cambodia, Myanmar or Viet Nam [sic]. Despite transnational broker fees, the costs associated with arranged marriages of brides from abroad generally remain significantly lower than expenses for marrying a Chinese partner.” According to the same report, Chinese men paid brokers significant sums for marriages, ranging from around $10,000 to $20,000.

In fact, human trafficking is one of the worst forms of human rights abuses, whereby people are exposed to and maintained in conditions of severe exploitation by means of deception, coercion or force. According to a report by the International Labour Organization (ILO), it is one of the world’s largest criminal industries, affecting tens of millions of people in every corner of the globe and generating estimated annual profits in excess of $150 billion.

On April 26, Sophie Richardson, China director of HRW stated: “Pakistan’s government should be alarmed by recent reports of trafficking of women and girls to China. These allegations are disturbingly similar to the pattern of trafficking of 'brides' to China from at least five other Asian countries.”

Unlike countries neighbouring China, women from Pakistan were being trafficked 'legally'; marriages were registered and proper visas were issues. How did these cases remain undetected by Pakistani law-enforcement authorities for such a long time and why did the Chinese embassy not suspect any wrongdoing in this sudden spike of Sino-Pak marriages?

In fact, some rights activists became aware of trafficking last year and reported it to the FIA as far back as October 2018. The Naya Punjab police, like always, acted as a bunch of unsuspecting fools at best and conniving criminals at worst. One of the main Pakistani gang leaders is reportedly the son of a police officer and the head of the largest Chinese gang, who opened up the new route, enjoyed police escort till the very end – a facility that must have enhanced his credibility.

The government did not intervene until it had "fool-proof evidence", said Ejaz Alam Augustine, Pakistan's minister of human rights and minorities affairs. This is beyond ridiculous. It is not the job of the police to find fool-proof evidence before acting. The police always act on suspicion and go after leads as soon as they smell wrongdoing. The Punjab Police remains what it always was, despite the huge tabdeeli promises to turn it into the Scotland Yard.

More recently, the FIA has acted firmly against these gangs and media reports show that Pakistan’s embassy in Beijing is also helping Pakistani women trapped in China. Families and communities must also take the blame for neglecting the welfare of women and using them for their own economic agendas. Though these gangs employed local cultural practices, the families of the victims also acted with greed and failed to carry out due diligence, a normal practice when a girl is married outside the clan. Many families were lured through promises of constant support and visas for their unemployed sons.

Some nikahkhwan mullahs and Christian pastors also acted with greed and some reportedly became members of these gangs. Pakistani clergy, both Muslim and Christian, has a staunch belief in women’s servitude. Till a year ago, a good part of the Christian clergy was resolved to stick to the Zia-era 'Christian Shariah' law that allowed divorce to women only if they were accused of adultery. Thanks to this law, many Christian men used to convert to Islam only to dump their Christian wives and take a new spouse. A Muslim judge abrogated the clause in the Christian family law despite stanch opposition from the guardians of Christian souls.

Finally, while Pakistan is burning to open itself to tourism, it must be aware of the harms inflicted by unregulated international tourism flowing from rich countries to poor states. For two decades, Pakistan was like a hermitage. A whole generation has grown up without any experience of interacting with foreigners. As Pakistan slides further into poverty, poor families will become more vulnerable to exploitation by traffickers from within the country and abroad.

Pakistan must launch a proper parliamentary inquiry into the episode to learn lessons and enable its law-enforcing institutions, immigration authorities and welfare institutions to protect women from such exploitation in the future. This episode should also remind us that a similar kind of exploitation also happens within the country on a much larger scale.

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