North Korean Female Defectors in China: Human Trafficking and Exploitation

https://www.e-ir.info/2022/08/09/north-korean-female-defectors-in-china-human-trafficking-and-exploitation/

KRISTIN HYNES, AUG 9 2022

In stark contrast to their neighbors in South Korea, North Koreans struggle to survive under a totalitarian system of government. While little is understood about the daily life of the people who reside there, what is certain is that they are under a repressive regime that is notoriously known for murdering political dissidents. Malnutrition is rampant, as is forced labor. Leaving the country without permission is prohibited, and anyone caught doing so is either killed or forced to attend political prison camps or reeducation camps. As a result of the harsh living conditions, some North Koreans continue to take the risk and flee the country, usually to China.

Once inside China, they are amid another distressing situation as China does not grant asylum or refugee status to North Koreans. Instead, they are considered illegal immigrants and are deported back to North Korea if caught by Chinese authorities. Already in a vulnerable position, North Korean defectors, particularly women and girls, are susceptible to human trafficking. The trafficking of humans can take on many forms, but sexual slavery is especially problematic in China. London-based rights group Korea Future Initiative estimates that “60 percent of female North Korean refugees in China are trafficked into the sex trade” (Choe, 2019), and part of this is due to the massive gender imbalance in China, “with the male population exceeding the female population by more than 30 million” (Chen, 2020). Tragically, people have taken advantage of the exposed and vulnerable situation these women and girls are in and exploit them for their own gain.

This paper will first delineate the conditions of human trafficking as there are multiple forms it can take on. Next, the Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report will be explained, outlining what the report says about China. Then three of the ways North Korean female defectors in China are sex trafficked will be explored. Following that, this paper will look at what is being done to help these victims to then come to a conclusion.

What is Human Trafficking?

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, human trafficking “is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit” (Human Trafficking). While poverty is a compelling factor in the human trafficking industry, this does not mean that trafficking only occurs in developing nations. It occurs in developed nations far more often than people are cognizant of. In fact, the United States has been ranked one of the world’s worst countries for human trafficking numerous times, with as “many as 1 in 800 Americans” (Human trafficking in developed countries more common than previously thought, 2018) a victim.

Across the globe, men, women, and children of any age, race, nationality, or gender are subject to being exploited. For example, children have been forced to serve as soldiers, as well as cooks and guards in the armed forces. Other ways people can be exploited include being forced to work in factories, on farms, the sex industry, as domestic servants, or having their organs removed, but there are additional forms of trafficking as well.

Traffickers target people undergoing difficult circumstances “including psychological or emotional vulnerability, economic hardship, lack of a social safety net, natural disasters, or political instability” (What is Human Trafficking?,

n.d.) Additionally, undocumented migrants, people from dysfunctional families, or those in dire need of employment are typically targeted. Globalization has resulted in people being placed at even higher risk. As "corporations and companies [are] now competing in a global marketplace" (Haerens, 2012, p 16), they require cheap labor, which "means a rise in the number of dishonest employment recruiters and abusive and exploitative employers" (Haerens, 2012, p 16). COVID-19 and the 2009 economic recession have increased human trafficking as well, particularly in places where there are significant cases of unemployment. As people find it more challenging to obtain a job, "they are more willing to take high risks in the hope of improving their opportunities" (Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020, 2021). It is being in vulnerable positions such as these that people are most likely to be exploited.

Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report

The Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report is an annual publication by the United States Government that informs on "the efforts [made] by [the] governments of 188 countries and territories…. to combat human trafficking" (On Release of the 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report, 2021). Countries are assigned to one of four categories based on their efforts to combat trafficking. Tier 1 is the highest ranking, Tier 3 is the lowest, and Tier 2 and Tier 2 Watch List are in the middle.

In the 2021 TIP Report released this past July, China once again received the lowest ranking, Tier 3, as its government "does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so, even considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on its anti-trafficking capacity" (2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: China, 2021). The report mentions the forced labor of Uighurs and other Muslims in Xinjiang, the targeting of religious minorities in other provinces, the forced labor of Chinese nationals working on Belt and Road Initiative projects, and a wide range of other cases of human trafficking by the Chinese. However, it is not until the very last paragraph of the report that North Korean refugees and asylum seekers in China are moved into the focus of the report.

The document states that "traffickers lure, drug, detain, or kidnap some North Korean women upon their arrival in the PRC," but as previously stated, the Korea Future Initiative estimates that "60 percent of female North Korean refugees in China are trafficked into the sex trade" (Choe, 2019). This estimate is at the lower end, with another by Korean NGOs placing the number at "70% to 80%" (Zaugg, 2019). Therefore, this is a more significant issue than just "some" women being targeted. Since the TIP Report overwhelmingly focuses on the persecution of Uighurs and other Muslim groups in China, this essay hopes to bring greater awareness to the human trafficking of North Koreans, particularly the sex trafficking of women and girls, since it is a substantial problem. The next three sections of this paper will explore three ways North Korean females are involved in sex trafficking in China.

Cybersex Trafficking

The internet allows web users to create websites, interact with people from other countries, watch videos, shop, and do a number of other enjoyable things. Despite the benefits of the online world, there are also numerous drawbacks as the internet has a sinister side. Bank accounts can be hacked, personal information can be stolen, and murderers can even be hired on the dark web. Human trafficking is another pitfall, and the proliferation of social media has led to a tremendous number of victims. One form of human trafficking that occurs on the internet is cybersex trafficking.

These victims, who are known as cybersex slaves, are sexually exploited during live streams. "Unlike bars or brothels with a permanent address, cybersex trafficking victims can be moved to and abused in any location with an internet connection and a webcam, or just a mobile phone" (Cybersex Trafficking, 2016). As with other forms of human trafficking, people who are already vulnerable are the most likely to be targeted. For example, in China, women and girls who have defected from North Korea are among those who have been forced into online sexual exploitation where paying audiences watch their live streams.

In 2019, CNN reported on a North Korean defector using the alias Lee Yumi, who was tricked by a South Korean pastor. The man had promised to save her. Instead, a broker took her to an apartment where she was sold to the operator of a cybersex chatroom for "30,000 yuan (about $4,500)" (Zuagg, 2019). Lee and the other North Korean

women she lived with were forced to perform sexual acts on camera. When they were not "working," they were physically abused and sleep-deprived. The operator of the cybersex room would take the women outside once every six months to a park. Other than this, they were locked inside the sparsely furnished apartment where they would sit in front of a computer performing sex acts to male audiences.

Based on testimonies given to the nonprofit Korea Future Initiative, it is believed that among the North Koreans who are sex trafficked in China, "15 percent [are] forced to engage in cybersex" (Enos & Kin, 2019). Britain's parliament has found that the females "enslaved in cybersex dens are usually aged between 12 and 29 but are sometimes younger" (Batha, 2019). Another disturbing fact is that many of the clients who subscribe to these websites are South Korean men. It is disconcerting that they would enable this abuse of women since they are aware of the conditions under which North Koreans are forced to live. Moreover, as a consequence of the division of the Korean peninsula in 1945, North Korean accents differ from South Korean accents. Therefore, these South Korean men would notice the women on his screen were from North Korea, but they continually keep watching.

Bride Trafficking

China's long-standing one-child policy and a penchant for sons have resulted in a massive gender imbalance, making it challenging for Chinese men to find wives. This difficulty "combined with a lack of protections in China, is driving a brutal business of selling women and girls from neighboring countries" (Barr, 2019), most notably Myanmar, Pakistan, Vietnam, Cambodia, and North Korea. Although bride trafficking is illegal, many men are feeling the pressure to marry and have children. In addition to the gender imbalance, impoverished men from rural areas cannot afford the dowry needed to obtain a Chinese wife. Therefore, buying a foreign bride is a more affordable way to find a wife and a more rapid way of dealing with pressure from family.

In some instances, women are sold to marriage traffickers by their families "thinking the daughter will be safely working to provide for the family" (Starved of Rights: Human Rights and the Food Crisis in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), 2004). Instead of being safe, they are forced into marriage. Some North Korean women willingly marry Chinese or Korean-Chinese men to have financial support since they find it difficult to obtain jobs. However, once they marry in China, a sizable number encounter physical and psychological abuse.

The "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" (HP Boe, 2005). While some women may have agreed to an arranged marriage, "the situation often devolves into trafficking because the women end up in situations vastly different from the original agreement" (Davis, 2006, p. 133). Husbands sell their wives, or sometimes the wives are re-abducted by the marriage brokers. A common occurrence is for the men they marry to be poor, disabled, or poor and disabled. Since these are not what the women were promised, they are considered to be victims of trafficking.

Prostitution

Prostitution in China is illegal, but it is also ubiquitous, partly due to the influx of rural migrants into urban areas. Yeon Jung Yu, a professor at Western Washington University, found that many of the Chinese prostitutes she had spoken to "regarded sex work as their best option given their circumstances" (Yu, 2017) since they were from poor rural areas. These women, however, are in the sex trade out of their own volition. Prostitution in China is a serious problem with both Chinese nations and foreigners involved, but not everyone is a sex worker out of their own free will.

According to Human Trafficking Search, women from countries such as "the Philippines, Mongolia and North Korea, come to China in search for jobs but find themselves coerced into prostitution upon arrival" (Human Trafficking in China, 2014). Some women are even trafficked directly from North Korea where they are "prostituted for as little as 30 Chinese yuan ($4.30; £3.40)" (North Korean women forced into sex slavery in China – report, 2019). To put that in perspective, these women are being exploited for less than what it costs to purchase many of the drinks at Starbucks.

Previously, bride trafficking was "the primary pathway into the sex trade for North Korean women and girls" (Yoon, 2019), but that has now been overtaken by prostitution. It is estimated that among North Korean female refugees in China that have been trafficked into the sex trade, "close to 50% are forced into prostitution" (Yoon, 2019). The brothels they work for masquerade as another form of business, such as hair salons, karaoke bars, massage parlors, or hotels. It is at these clandestine brothels where they are taken advantage of by multiple clients each night, leaving them susceptible to abuse and sexually transmitted diseases.

Guanxi, a Chinese term that could loosely be translated as "interpersonal networks" or "connections," is essential to conducting business in China. While *guanxi* has its positives, such as the social connections that can be gained through friends and extended family, there is also an unethical side as it has aided in the conduction of illicit activities. *Guanxi* can involve reciprocal favors between criminal organizations and public officials. "Reliant upon the *guanxi* system and local political and public officials, criminal organisations rarely operate on a nationwide scale and are confined to regions, cities, towns, and townships" (Yoon, 2019). North Korean refugees who have been trafficked into prostitution predominately remain in the northeastern part of China, and *guanxi* has contributed significantly to this form of sex trafficking.

What is Being Done to Help?

The Korea Future Initiative has estimated that "$105,000,000 United States Dollars [are earned] annually from the sale of female North Korean bodies" (Yoon, 2019). A sum of this magnitude demonstrates how widespread the problem is. People who should be assisting victims, such as the police, have been accused of forcing these women into the sex trade. Their relatives, opportunistic citizens, and employers have also sold these women. While it appears that people take advantage of these victims far too frequently, some are willing to come to their rescue.

Nonprofits such as Crossing Borders and Liberty in North Korea have been assisting North Korean refugees. However, one significant issue is that they either need to work in secrecy or abide by Chinese laws because they are foreign organizations. In January 2017, the Chinese government enacted the Foreign NGO Law. This law "does not define NGOs, but stipulates that foreign NGOs are non-profit, non-governmental social organizations such as foundations, social organizations or think tanks" (The Foreign NGO Law and its Implementation Legal Path for Foreign NGOs in China, 2021). The United Nations has called for the law to be repealed, stating it "can be wielded as tools to intimidate, and even suppress, dissenting views and opinions in the country" (China: Newly adopted Foreign NGO Law should be repealed, UN experts urge) as it "ban[s] [these organizations] from undertaking activities deemed as 'endangering national unity, national security or ethnic unity or harming China's national interests and societal public interests" (China: Newly adopted Foreign NGO Law should be repealed, UN experts urge). The people who work for these nonprofits are risking their own lives while attempting to help the refugees since they are going against the Chinese government.

Even before the law was enacted, China was cracking down on these groups. An article published by CNN in 2014 claimed that "charity groups near [the] border with North Korea…. [have been] forced to leave the country" (Rajagopalan & Pearson, 2014) while those who remain live in fear. Many South Koreans who have tried to assist victims via these charities have been forced out of the country or have had their visas refused. Despite the Chinese government's obstacles, some people are still willing to assist North Koreans who are being trafficked.

Conclusion

While the elite ruling class in North Korea are allowed luxury vehicles, access to the world wide web, and "some basic privileges of modern life, such as indoor plumbing, …. meat [and] coffee" (Newman, 2013), the rest of the country struggles for basic necessities and are not allowed to speak out about their plight. Living under these conditions has compelled people to flee the country, although there is the risk of persecution if caught. Once inside China, however, they are not safe, as they are considered illegal and are deported back to North Korea if nabbed by authorities.

When people are in vulnerable situations, there are always opportunists willing to take advantage of the situation as it

benefits them. Chinese men, Chinese-Korean men, and even men from South Korea who are in China have exploited these women and girls for their own gain. The Chinese government has continually allowed sex trafficking to occur. When nonprofits seek to assist victims, the government then creates obstacles to make helping those in need more arduous. Sex trafficking, like all other forms of human trafficking, is an urgent issue that must be addressed. Given China's history of violating human rights and its internal governance structures, this is unlikely to happen anytime soon.

Bibliography

2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: China. (2021). United States Department of State. https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/china/

Barr, Heather. (2019). China's Bride Trafficking Problem *Human Rights Watch*. https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/31/chinas-bride-trafficking-problem#

Batha, Emma. (2019). North Korean women tell of slavery and gang rape in Chinese cybersex dens. *Reuters*. https:// www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-china-sex-slavery/north-korean-women-tell-of-slavery-and-gang-rape-in-chinese-cybersex-dens- idUSKCN1SQ105

Bride Trafficking in China. (2020). *Borgen Magazine*. https://www.borgenmagazine .com/bride- trafficking-in-china/

Chen, Shasha. (2020). China's gender imbalance may take decades to resolve. *Global Times*. https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1209713.shtml

Children recruited by armed forces. (2021). UNICEF. https://www.unicef.org/protec tion/children-recruited-by-armed-forces

China: Newly adopted Foreign NGO Law should be repealed, UN experts urge. (2016). United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=19921 &LangI D=E

Choe, Sang- Hun. (2019). After Fleeing North Korea, Women Get Trapped as Cybersex Slaves in China. NY Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/13/ world/asia/north-korea- cybersex-china.html

Cybersex Trafficking. (2016). *International Justice Mission*. https://www.ijm.org/ sites/default/files/IJM_2016_Casework_FactSheets_CybersexTrafficking.pdf

Davis, Kathleen. (2006). Brides, Bruises and the Border: The Trafficking of North Korean Women into China.*SAIS Review of International Affairs 26*(1), 131-141. d6.0004.

Edmond, Charlotte. (2020). Global migration, by the numbers: who migrates, where they go and why. *World Economic Forum*. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020 /01/iom-global- migration-report-international-migrants-2020/

Enos, Olivia & Yunjin Kim. (2019). Deceived and Sold: How China Treats North Korean Female Defectors. *Providence*. https://providencemag.com/2019/10/dece ived-sold- china-north-korean-female-defectors/

The Foreign NGO Law and its Implementation Legal Path for Foreign NGOs in China. (2021). *Dentons*. https://www.jdsupra.com/legalnews/the-foreign-ngo-law-and-its-7441715/

Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020. (2021). United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/2021/ GLOTiP_2020_15jan_web.pdf

Haerans, Margaret. (2012). *Human Trafficking*. Detroit, MI: Greenhaven Press.

Henderson, Margaret. (2019). Case Study: Stopping Human Trafficking. *ICMA.* https://icma.org/articles/pm-magazine/case-study-stopping-human-trafficking

HP Boe (2005). Human Trafficking as 21st Century Form of Slavery. Free Republic. http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1322431/posts

Human Trafficking. (n.d.). *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*. https:/ /www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/human-trafficking.html

Human Trafficking in China. (2014). *Human Trafficking* Search. https://human traffickingsearch.org/human-trafficking-in-china/

Human trafficking in developed countries more common than previously thought. (2018). *Crux*. https://cruxnow.com/global-church/2018/07/human-trafficking-in-developed-countries- more-common-than-previously-thought/

Keiper, Andrew & Perry Chiaramonte. (2019). Human trafficking in America among worst in world: Report. Fox News. https://www.foxnews.com/us/human-trafficking-in-america- among-worst-in-world-report

Newman, Rick. (2013). Here's How Lousy Life Is in North Korea. *U.S. News &* World Report. https://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/rick-newman/2013 /04/12/ heres-how-lousy-life-is- in-north-korea

On Release of the 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report. (2021). *U.S. Mission to the* OSCE. https://osce.usmission.gov/on-release-of-the-2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/

Rajagopalan, Megha & James Pearson. (2014). China cracking down on Christian groups along North Korea border: sources. *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com /article/us-northkorea- china-christians/china-cracking-down-on-christian-groups-along-north-korea-border- sources-idUSKBN0GB13I20140811

What Is Human Trafficking? (n.d.). *Department of Homeland Security.* https:// www.dhs.gov/blue-campaign/what-human-trafficking

Yoon, Hee-soon. (2019). Sex Slaves: The Prostitution, Cybersex & Forced Marriage of North Korean Women & Girls in China'. *London: Korea Future Initiative*. http://web.archive.org/web/20190614191603/https://www.koreafuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Korea_Future_Initiative-Sex_Slaves.pdf

Yu, Yeon Jung. (2017). The Moral Code of Chinese Sex Workers. *Sapiens*. https://www.sapiens.org/culture/china-sex-trade-moral-code/

Zaugg, Julie (2019). These North Korean defectors were sold into China as cybersex slaves. Then they escaped. *CNN*. https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/09/asia/north-korea-defectors-intl-hnk/index.html

---

About the author:

Kristin Hynes is a PhD candidate in International Relations at Florida International University who primarily focuses on East Asia. While she has a wide range of interests in that region, her research has mostly focused on South Korean soft power and tensions between Japan and its neighbors as a result of Japanese imperialism. Her

dissertation focuses on postcolonialism and explores parallels between South Korean-Japanese relations and Irish-British relations.