

BRIDE TRAFFICKING ALONG THE CHINA-PAKISTAN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR

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MARCH 2022

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over a period of several months in 2019, Pakistani and international media shone a spotlight on cases of bride trafficking that had been taking place around the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the \$62 billion flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative. The practice involved cases of fraudulent marriage between Pakistani women and girls — many of them from marginalized backgrounds and Christian families — and Chinese men who had travelled to Pakistan. The victims were lured with payments to the family and promises of a good life in China, but reported abuse, difficult living conditions, forced pregnancy, or forced prostitution once they reached China.

During this period of intense spotlight on the issue, Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency arrested and charged 52 Chinese traffickers. But by late 2019, more than half of the traffickers had been acquitted in a Pakistani court, the others were all given bail and flown out of Pakistan, investigators were pressured by Pakistani authorities to let the cases slide, and journalists were asked to curtail their reporting on the issue.

Such cases of Chinese bride trafficking are not confined to Pakistan: the practice has been documented in Laos, North Korea, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Cambodia. At the root of the issue is China's demographic gender gap, driven by its previous one-child policy, male preference, and the practices of selective abortion and in some cases even female infanticide that followed it, estimated to have resulted in some 34 million more men than women in China.

What made the Pakistani case different from the other contexts where such trafficking took place was the initial government and media attention to the issue, and how it was brushed under the rug soon after. Explaining it are two offsetting imperatives: first, the deeply disturbing nature of the crime for Pakistani society, given Pakistan's cultural emphasis on protecting women's "honor" — which explained the attention to the issue. The second imperative — which ultimately won out, and led to attention to the issue being stamped out — was the need to protect Pakistan's exceedingly close relationship, economic and otherwise, with China, given the lopsided power dynamic between the two countries. Regardless of that dynamic, Pakistan's government owes it to its citizens to be more assertive with China on human rights abuses that affect them.

BRIDE TRAFFICKING IN PAKISTAN REVEALED

The initial media exposé

On April 12, 2019, in a major exposé, Pakistan's ARY News Channel raided a compound in Lahore, Pakistan, cameras in tow, and found several Chinese men with six Pakistani women and girls – four adults and two teenagers – whom they claimed to have married.¹ One of the women had contacted the TV network. It appeared that the Chinese citizens had worked through marriage bureaus in Pakistan – businesses that arranged marriages for a fee – though they could not produce local marriage documents when asked. They appeared to target women and girls from poor and vulnerable households and marginalized communities, Christians in particular. The victims' families had been given 400,000 Pakistani rupees each (about \$2,820) and promised additional amounts monthly.²

Pakistani media had been speculating on marriages of Pakistani women and girls with Chinese men for some time; this media report brought them into full view. Nikkei Asia reported that these “marriages” had been taking place for a couple of years.³ There were claims that some women and girls who married Chinese men were forced into prostitution when they reached China, and even allegations of organ harvesting, something the Chinese government vehemently denied.⁴

The next day, the Chinese Embassy issued a statement, saying: “Both Chinese and Pakistani youths are victims of these illegal agents... China is cooperating with Pakistani law enforcement agencies to crack down on illegal matchmaking centers. We remind both Chinese and Pakistani citizens to remain vigilant and not to be cheated... We hope that the public do not believe in misleading information and work together to safeguard China-Pakistan friendship.”⁵

Human Rights Watch issued a statement noting that these cases were “disturbingly similar” to cases of bride trafficking in other Asian countries, including Myanmar (which it had documented) as well as Laos, Vietnam, North Korea, and Cambodia, adding that Pakistan should heed “alarm bells” over the practice.⁶

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It turned out that efforts to “safeguard the China-Pakistan friendship” would have an enormous impact on how Pakistan dealt with cases such as these.

A week of public arrests and new details

On May 6, 2019, Pakistani media reported that the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) had arrested eight Chinese citizens in locations across Lahore, including at the airport, on charges of bride trafficking.⁷ They also arrested four Pakistanis; it was reported that the suspected ringleader on the Pakistani side was the son of a police officer. The traffickers had paid each of the victims' families 50,000 Pakistani rupees for the “marriages”; the ceremonies had taken place in Pakistan, after which the women and girls were taken to China and allegedly forced into prostitution.

The next day, it was reported that 15 more Chinese citizens (one of them a woman) had been arrested by the FIA, along with one Pakistani man.⁸ Two Pakistani trafficking victims were recovered; three had been recovered earlier and reunited with their families.

Also on May 7, 2019, the Associated Press published the results of an investigation on cases of Pakistani women and girls being trafficked through marriage to China, based on interviews of trafficked women and girls and their families.⁹

It noted that “Pakistani and Chinese brokers work together in the trade.” These brokers trolled poor areas, especially Christian neighborhoods and churches, and coopted priests as well. (Marriage to a Muslim woman in Pakistan would also require the groom to convert officially to Islam, an additional cost.) Underaged girls were a target. Money was promised to the families in return for marriage – typically between \$3,500 and \$5,000, though the amount varied. This not only alleviated the great burden of a typical dowry for poor Pakistani families, it amounted to a very generous “bride price” (such a payment is not illegal per Pakistani law).

One Christian activist interviewed by the AP in May 2019 who had been tracking cases of bride trafficking noted that Gujranwala, a city in Punjab, was a “particular target” with, according to him, more than 100 Christian women and girls married to Chinese citizens in recent months. Overall, he estimated approximately 750 to 1,000 girls married this way in less than a year. Punjab’s human rights and minorities minister called the practice “human smuggling.”

It emerged that many of the men whose marriages were arranged in this manner were in Pakistan as Chinese workers around the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, or CPEC, the \$62 billion flagship project¹⁰ of China’s Belt and Road Initiative in Pakistan. Once the victims went to China, they realized they had been lied to, and were subjected to abuse, assault, poor living conditions, and in some cases, pushed into prostitution. Pakistani authorities and Chinese police cooperated in bringing home from China at least one of the victims whose cases the AP documented, as well as a case later documented by the New York Times.¹¹

That same week, on May 9, another trafficking cell was raided in a Lahore neighborhood, and 11 Chinese citizens and two Pakistanis were arrested.¹² All those arrested were charged with trafficking.¹³

Pushback and a halted investigation

Also in May 2019, the New York Times interviewed victims of bride trafficking who pointed to being forced into prostitution or physical labor once they reached China.¹⁴ Pakistani investigators also told the AP in June that a great deal of evidence pointed to victims being pushed into prostitution.¹⁵ In other cases it seemed the goal was to force the victim to become pregnant and to bear children.

The Chinese and Pakistani governments began to push back on the reporting and the investigations around this time. The Chinese ambassador went on local television to deny that any prostitution was occurring connected to these cases, and Pakistani officials began telling investigators to keep the cases quiet.¹⁶

At the same time, activists also began taking matters into their own hands, helping victims escape, or conducting sting operations in Pakistan to find cases.¹⁷

In December 2019, in an exclusive Associated Press report, journalist Kathy Gannon reported that by June that year, investigators from Pakistan’s Federal Investigation Agency had put together a list of 629 Pakistani brides who were victims of trafficking.¹⁸ In September, investigators sent a report to Prime Minister Imran Khan. But in October, 31 out of the 52 Chinese traffickers who had been charged were acquitted in a Faisalabad court. The other 21 were granted bail and flown out of the country.

Meanwhile, officials (on condition of anonymity, given their fear of reprisals) told the AP that the investigations had slowed down because of pressure from Pakistani authorities “fearful of hurting Pakistan’s lucrative ties to Beijing,” and that the media was asked to curb its reporting on the issue.¹⁹ At the same time the victims of the trafficking said they too were pressured not to discuss their stories with the media, and asked to remain anonymous.

Notably, one senior official interviewed by the Associated Press said that this did not mean that the practice had slowed down – in fact, the opposite: “No one is doing anything to help these girls. The whole racket is continuing, and it is growing. Why? Because they know they can get away with it. The authorities won’t follow through, everyone is being pressured to not investigate. Trafficking is increasing now.”²⁰ He added: “The lucrative trade continues.” It was telling that the official conducted the interview with the AP hundreds of kilometers away from his office to protect his anonymity.

CHINA, PAKISTAN, AND CPEC

Observers of the Chinese bride-trafficking issue in other contexts had worried that the flow of people from China to various regional countries with the Belt and Road Initiative would provide greater opportunities for this kind of trafficking. In Pakistan’s case, that came to pass; Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Vietnam, where a very similar pattern of the crime occurs, are all also part of Beijing’s Belt and Road initiative.²¹ Thousands of Chinese workers had arrived in Pakistan by 2018, and reporting indicates that in some cases the traffickers had exploited loopholes around the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, entering Pakistan with business visas for companies that didn’t exist.²²

The eventual pressure in Pakistan to stop the investigations and to brush these cases of trafficking under the carpet is not all that surprising. The Pakistani and Chinese states have sought to exercise tight control on the messaging and narrative about the exceedingly close relationship between the two countries.²³ This has particularly been the case around the terms and benefits of CPEC projects, for both Pakistan’s civilian government and its military. After the Pakistani chief of army staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa visited China in November 2018 to meet President Xi Jinping, the Pakistani military’s public relations wing issued

the following statement: “BRI with CPEC as its flagship is destined to succeed despite all odds and Pak Army shall ensure security of CPEC at all costs.”²⁴

This is not the only issue related to China on which Pakistan has looked away from human rights abuses of its own citizens: Pakistan has also been studiously, conspicuously quiet about China’s human rights abuses of its Uyghur Muslim minority in Xinjiang, including when it has involved spouses and children of Pakistani citizens.²⁵

The issue of bride trafficking, then, can be seen as another one of the dimensions of the China-Pakistan relationship on which the narrative (and even the investigations) was controlled “at all costs.” But this did not happen immediately, raising the question of why there was an initial flurry of attention on the topic, and how much of a role pressure from Beijing may have played in Islamabad’s decision to divert attention away from it.

THE ROOTS AND THE WIDER CONTEXT OF THE BRIDE-TRAFFICKING PROBLEM

At the root of the problem of Chinese bride trafficking is China’s demographic gender gap, driven by its one-child policy which lasted from 1980 to 2016, male preference, and the practices of selective abortion and in some cases even female infanticide that followed the one-child policy, all estimated to have resulted in some 34 million more men than women in China.²⁶ As these “extra” men have come of marriageable age, the unmet demand for brides has led some to turn to traffickers to procure wives. The victims are often girls or women from poor, vulnerable families in the border regions of neighboring countries, often from marginalized communities. China’s gender gap is part of a wider demographic crisis of an aging population and declining births that has worried its government, leading it to shift its policies to a two-child and now three-child policy.²⁷

In an interview with the New York Times, the mother of a Chinese “groom” in a case of bride trafficking from Pakistan confirmed directly that the gender gap was the motivation for the marriage. When she was asked why “so many local men had gone to Pakistan to find wives,” she said: “There are no girls here.”²⁸

In the cases of bride trafficking documented in other countries — including Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, North Korea, and Vietnam — local NGOs²⁹ along with international ones including Human Rights Watch³⁰ have helped document the cases (and provided help to the victims) — suggesting that there has been less pressure in those countries to shut down reporting about this practice. At the same time, there has not been focused, official attention to the topic in those countries precisely because the practice tends to target marginalized communities.³¹

PAKISTAN’S UNIQUE CIRCUMSTANCES

In the Pakistani case, there appears to have been a flurry of media and official attention on the issue — with reporting, arrests, investigations, and court cases discussed publicly — different from many of the other contexts in which this practice has occurred. Yet almost as quickly as the focus arose on the issue, the attention on it appears to have been stamped out. The explanation, in my analysis (and confirmed in my interviews with officials from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International who are familiar with these cases), lies in Pakistan’s cultural differences with the other contexts — in particular around notions of women’s honor — as well as in Pakistan’s unique relationship with China.

A woman’s “honor” is considered of paramount importance in Pakistan — and something her parents and family (and even society) are expected to protect. The notion of honor is both religious and cultural — and holds especially for Muslim women. That these marriages occurred

with the consent of the parents and the families of the victims — following the ubiquitous practice of “arranged marriage” in Pakistan — and then turned out to be cases of trafficking leading to abuse, sexualized violence, or selling the girls into prostitution was deeply disturbing for the families involved, and more broadly at a societal level, and seen as a failure to protect the honor of these girls.

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This was a significant problem for the government, as it illustrated Pakistan’s cultural and religious differences with its close partner China, an underlying potential fissure point in the relationship between the two countries that was understood but hadn’t until then surfaced as a problem — which explains the close media scrutiny and official investigations on the issue in mid-2019. Offsetting this was the fact that many of the victims belonged to the Christian community of Pakistan — less surrounded by society’s notions of honor, and less protected because they are marginalized.

But at the same time, this scrutiny was at odds with another imperative: that of protecting Pakistan’s relationship with China, and shielding Pakistani public opinion from any negative perceptions of China or of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.³² In the end, the latter imperative won out, arguably because of internal, self-imposed pressure in Pakistan to protect its relationship with China, but possibly also due to some direct pressure from the Chinese side. Pakistan is no stranger to suppressing its media: it enforces red

lines on reporting on a number of issues it sees as sensitive, including ethnic insurgencies.³³ It is significant that it would eventually enforce those red lines on a clear case of criminal behavior by foreign actors against Pakistani citizens on Pakistani soil.

The power dynamics in the relationship between the two countries are clear: Pakistan is the weaker partner that considers itself to have limited leverage with respect to China, which is investing tens of billions in Pakistan at a time when the latter's economic options have dwindled. It did not benefit Pakistan to shine a spotlight on the negative impacts of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor on its own citizens. That most of the victims belonged to the poor and marginalized Christian community of Pakistan sadly made it easier for Pakistan to divert attention away from the issue without an ensuing public outcry.

POLICY CHOICES

What is most notable in the matter of bride trafficking along the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is not that it was happening — transnational crime occurs, and we know Chinese bride trafficking occurs in several other contexts in Southeast Asia — but the attempt to brush it under the rug after shining a clear light on it, especially by Pakistan, a country whose citizens were the victims. Yet this fits in line with Pakistan's silence over the Uyghur issue even when it affects the families of its own citizens. It also highlights the broader impacts of Pakistan's close economic and strategic relationship with China — and the potential non-monetary costs of increasing economic dependence on China for other countries as well. Pakistan's handling of the matter also points to the instrumental role of media scrutiny in helping to identify and save victims — both by directing official attention to the issue as well as focusing the attention of activists and non-governmental organizations — and later, the potential negative consequences of suppressing media attention on it.

There has been no reporting on cases of bride trafficking from Pakistan to China after December 2019, at least as far as I am aware (a prominent reporter who worked on this story that year confirmed that they had not reported on this issue since then).³⁴ That coincided with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, and the closing of international borders that followed. At this point, there is no way to reliably know how many of these cases are still occurring given the complete absence of reporting on the issue. U.S. State Department analysts have pointed to the fact that the global pandemic has exacerbated vulnerabilities that traffickers tend to exploit.³⁵ If the closing down of international borders in March 2020 resulted in curtailed trafficking movement during the first months of the pandemic, one can presume that as border restrictions between China and Pakistan have eased somewhat, any mitigating effect of border closures likely also waned.

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A lack of transparency is counterproductive, and hinders the cause of ending (or at least reducing) this criminal activity; being able to discuss it openly, and to investigate and prosecute cases, is something on which the Pakistani government should take a harder line with China. As human rights advocate Omar Waraich told me, "Pakistan regularly makes consular representations on behalf of its citizens abroad, including with close allies, such as Saudi Arabia. But China is the one case where Pakistan seems to have largely abandoned that responsibility."³⁶ Given the overt anti-trafficking stance of both Pakistan

and China, and the fact that it is private citizens who have been involved in trafficking in both countries, acknowledging that transnational crime has taken place and taking overt action to counter it should theoretically not be a problem for China, as it is not liable for it. Yet that is not how China has operated in this case.

Both Pakistan and China have wider problems with human trafficking: Per the U.S. State Department's most recent Trafficking in Persons Report of 2021, China is on Tier 3 as a country whose government "does not fully meet the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000's minimum standards, and is not making significant efforts to do so."³⁷ On the issue of bride trafficking, the State Department report also notes that while Chinese rural border officials did help rescue forced marriage victims in some cases, the practice was ad hoc and officials farther inland were less likely to do so; officials in some cases also arrested trafficking victims for acts the traffickers forced them to commit, and in other cases returned them to their "husbands."³⁸ In addition, the State Department notes that while China did cooperate in some cases with other governments to apprehend traffickers, the practice was not universal, and

prosecution of traffickers remained ad hoc.³⁹ Human rights advocates argue that China is not doing anything to tackle the deeper roots of the problem either: "The bottom line is that the Chinese government is still failing to take on the real solutions to its human trafficking problem – ending gender discrimination and violations of reproductive rights," writes Heather Barr of Human Rights Watch.⁴⁰

Pakistan is on the Tier 2 Watch List of the State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report, a step below Tier 3, which is the worst designation. And while China is party to the United Nations' 2000 Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children,⁴¹ Pakistan is not. Pakistan should become a signatory to that protocol – which would, among other things, also give it cover to be more forceful on this issue with China. As Human Rights Watch has argued, governments of countries that are the victims of bride trafficking "should raise this issue vigorously and often, including with their local Chinese counterparts, demanding prompt action by the Chinese government to end this trade."⁴² Pakistan owes as much to its citizens that are victims of this inhuman practice.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Ted Reinert edited this policy brief, and Rachel Slattery provided layout. Brookings is grateful to the U.S. Department of State and the Institute for War and Peace Reporting for funding this research.

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