

Sold to China

Trafficking of women from throughout
Burma to be forced brides in China



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Summary

This report, based on interviews with 187 female trafficking survivors assisted by KWAT between 2019 and 2023, reveals that the demand for brides continues to be the main factor fuelling trafficking of women from Burma to China, and that women from throughout Burma are being trafficked for this purpose

Number of bride trafficking survivors assisted by KWAT in 2019 tripled from the previous year, before decreasing due to border closures and travel restrictions as a result of the Covid pandemic and escalated conflict after the 2021 military coup in Burma – during which time women began being trafficked to Chinese-run cyber scam centers in northeast Shan State.

Over half of all bride trafficking survivors came from states and regions of Burma not adjoining China, unlike in previous years, when most survivors came from Kachin or northern Shan State.

Most of the survivors were recruited in person, by relatives or “friends” linked to the extensive trafficking networks that have developed across Burma and China as a result of decades of bride trafficking. Many brokers were themselves originally trafficked as brides to China.

Most women were offered well-paying jobs at factories or farms in China to lure them across the border before being forced to be brides. Increased smuggling of workers from Burma to meet factory labour demands in China’s eastern industrial zones has been useful for traffickers, both as a pretext to entice women across the border, and enabling them to prey on those already in China.

Some women agreed from the outset to be wives of Chinese men, but usually ended up being cheated in terms of the promised payment or time-length required to be brides.

Only a third of the women crossed the border through official gates, the rest crossed using unofficial routes. Sometimes the sale transaction with husbands took place at the Chinese border, and sometimes women were smuggled by car much deeper inside China before being sold – at costs ranging from 10,000 yuan to as much as 500,000 yuan.

The majority of Chinese husbands were farmers, living alone with their parents. Almost all the forced brides were treated abusively by their Chinese husbands and parents-in-law. Most were kept locked up, forced to have sex, and beaten or otherwise tortured if they resisted. Several suffered life-threatening injuries.

The most common means of escape for the brides was to run to the Chinese police – sometimes after several years of captivity, and having given birth to one or more children. Some managed to use phones to arrange rescue by police. Others were rescued during police household checks, particularly during Covid.

Although running to the police usually resulted in being deported back to Burma, some women were returned by police back to their husbands before being able to escape again.

Some who turned to on-line friends or brokers to escape ended up being re-trafficked to another Chinese husband.

Before deporting the women back to the Burmese border, Chinese police kept the women in detention for periods of a few days to a year, in police stations, prisons, old people’s homes or juvenile detention centres. Shockingly, three were kept in mental asylums, including a 13-year-old girl detained in an asylum in Anhui for a year, where she was almost strangled to death by another patient.

The abusive treatment of forced brides by their Chinese husbands and in-laws provides disturbing evidence that patriarchal values remain deeply rooted in Chinese society. This is also apparent from the failure of local

community members to intervene to prevent the abusive treatment of the brides kept captive in their neighborhood.

The fact that Chinese husbands in all provinces managed to arrange for their undocumented brides to receive medical care at local health facilities and their children to be registered as Chinese citizens, also shows it is common practice for local Chinese authorities to turn a blind eye to the trafficking of foreign brides.

Given the ongoing demand for brides in China, and growing impoverishment of large sectors of Burma's population due to the spreading conflict and collapse of the economy since the 2021 military coup, more and more women are likely to be lured into the hands of unscrupulous traffickers, suffering untold abuse.

Clearly, to tackle the trafficking issue it is necessary to address the structural root causes of migration from Burma. This requires an end to military dictatorship and the establishment of federal democracy ensuring equitable, sustainable development.

However, in the meantime, we urge the Chinese government to take more serious measures to prevent and crack down on trafficking of foreign brides and improve police procedures assisting foreign trafficking survivors.

It is also urgently needed for the Chinese government to set up easily accessible, formal channels enabling citizens of Burma to enter China and work legally in all areas requiring foreign labour, so that they do not have to rely on smuggling networks that make them vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking.

The Chinese government should also carry out public awareness campaigns about the plight of foreign trafficked brides so that local communities and officials stop turning a blind eye to their enslavement.

Now that most areas of Burma along the China border have fallen under the control of ethnic resistance organizations (EROs), we also urge the Chinese government to authorize their police to liaise with these EROs when deporting trafficking survivors into areas under their control.

We also urge the EROs, particularly the United Wa State Army, to take action against human traffickers and close down any establishments using forced labor in their areas.

Introduction

Since 2005, when KWAT published our first report “Driven Away” on the trafficking of Kachin women to be forced brides in China, KWAT has been running an Anti-Trafficking Program on the China-Burma border, aimed at assisting trafficking survivors and raising community awareness to prevent trafficking.

In 2019, we saw an exponential increase in the number of trafficking survivors accessing our services. Although the numbers fell sharply between 2020 and 2023 due to COVID-19 and conflict-related border closures, they have been rising again in 2024, as people from all parts of Burma are flocking again to seek work in China.

Seeing the shifts in trafficking patterns from our caseloads, we felt it would be useful to compile and analyze this data in a report, to raise awareness among the public, and advocate for improved policies by relevant stakeholders to address the trafficking problem.

Data from interviews with 187 female trafficking survivors, assisted between 2019 and 2023, has been used to compile this report.

Trafficking patterns: 2019-2023



In 2019, KWAT assisted 109 survivors who had all escaped or been rescued from being trafficked to China. This was almost three times the number of survivors assisted in 2018.

In 2020, the number of survivors assisted dropped to 34, due to Covid lockdowns and Chinese closure of all border gates in March 2020. Most of the survivors were assisted in the early part of the year.

In 2021, the number dropped further to 19, due to ongoing border closure. Most of those assisted were survivors deported by Chinese police having been trafficked before the Covid lockdowns.

In 2022, only three survivors of trafficking to China were assisted, but KWAT began assisting women who had escaped from being trafficked to cyber-scamming centers run by Chinese criminals in northeast Shan State.

In 2023, even though China officially re-opened the border gates in January, the number of survivors who had been trafficked within Burma was still higher than the number of those trafficked to China.

Trafficking push factors in Burma

In our 2013 report “Pushed to the Brink” documenting how renewed war in Kachin State in 2011 was fuelling the trafficking of Kachin women to China, we described the main trafficking push factors as follows:

“Oppressive and destructive state policies resulted in extreme poverty for the majority of the population. Large-scale natural resource extraction projects, including mines, planned mega-dams, and massive commercial farms initiated by the military and government cronies forced local people from their lands and destroyed their livelihoods. Revenues generated from these projects were mainly used to support military expenditures, while public services such as health and education were ignored. This egregious mismanagement of the national economy led to inflation and soaring unemployment rates. Landless, jobless, and facing spiraling costs, people migrated to China for work (...)

Burma Army offensives against the Kachin Independence Army since June 2011 and widespread human rights abuses have driven over 100,000 villagers from their homes, mainly in eastern Kachin State. The majority of these refugees have fled to crowded IDP camps along the China border, which receive virtually no international aid. Desperate to earn an income, but with little or no legal option to pursue migrant work in China, many cross the border illegally.”

This description remains apt until today, the only difference being that armed conflict has intensified and rapacious resource extraction has expanded, particularly the mining of gold and rare earth for the Chinese market, both under the National League for Democracy government from 2016 to 2021, and under the military regime since the February 2021 coup.

As Kachin families sink further into poverty, traditional patriarchal values ascribing women’s main role as family caregivers, continue to compel daughters and mothers to migrate in search of work to support their families – a burden they are increasingly bearing alone, due to the loss of men to the war and rampant drug abuse.

The main change has been the increased number of women from other parts of Burma who have been migrating to work in China in recent years. These women were all from poor urban or rural communities, unable to earn enough income to support their families from the low-paid labor work available. Many had been working at factories in Yangon, but were unable to survive on the low wages there, particularly if they or their family members had health emergencies.

Trafficking pull factors in China

China's former One Child Policy, implemented from 1980 to 2015, is the main cause of the continuing demand for brides from Burma. Deeply engrained patriarchal preference for sons led to widespread abortion of female fetuses during that time, and a resulting demographic imbalance of men over women. At the start of 2024, China's National Bureau of Statistics, reported there were 30.97 million more men than women in China¹. Even though the policy was changed to allow two children in 2016, and then three children in 2021, it will take decades for the gender imbalance to be addressed².

The shortage of brides has been most keenly felt in rural areas, due to outflows of women migrating to work in towns³. Men's own desire to marry has been compounded by pressure from parents desperate to ensure continuity of their family line.

The fact that women from Burma have been sold to be wives across China for over 20 years means there are now wide-reaching networks linking communities in the two countries that facilitate trafficking. The proliferation of smart phone usage in both countries in recent years has also made trafficking transactions much quicker and easier.

Another factor fueling trafficking is the fact that a labor demand has arisen in China's eastern industrial zones in recent years. Large numbers of workers from Burma have been smuggled to factories in eastern China, particularly Guangzhou. As this labor flow has not been legalized by the Chinese government, workers from Burma are ripe for exploitation. With existing trafficking networks now also organising large-scale movement of factory labour, young women among this workforce have become vulnerable to sale as brides.

Trafficking pull factors in northeast Shan State

For decades, Chinese underworld investors have been running casinos -- and associated hotel and entertainment facilities -- catering to Chinese gamblers in border areas of northeast Shan State controlled by ethnic resistance organizations and Burma Army-linked militias. After the Covid border lockdown in 2020, these establishments began focusing on providing online gambling services. This put them in a perfect position -- with infrastructure and extralegal expertise already in place -- to take advantage of the cyber scamming boom that erupted during the Covid lockdown period.

New scamming and entertainment complexes were built in the Kokang and Wa border areas to serve thousands of Chinese scammers, and new labor demands emerged: for scammers speaking foreign languages to target victims in foreign countries, and for women to provide sexual services for the Chinese scammers. Many young people from different parts of Burma were lured by offers of well-paying jobs in these areas and ended up being held captive as scammers or sex slaves.

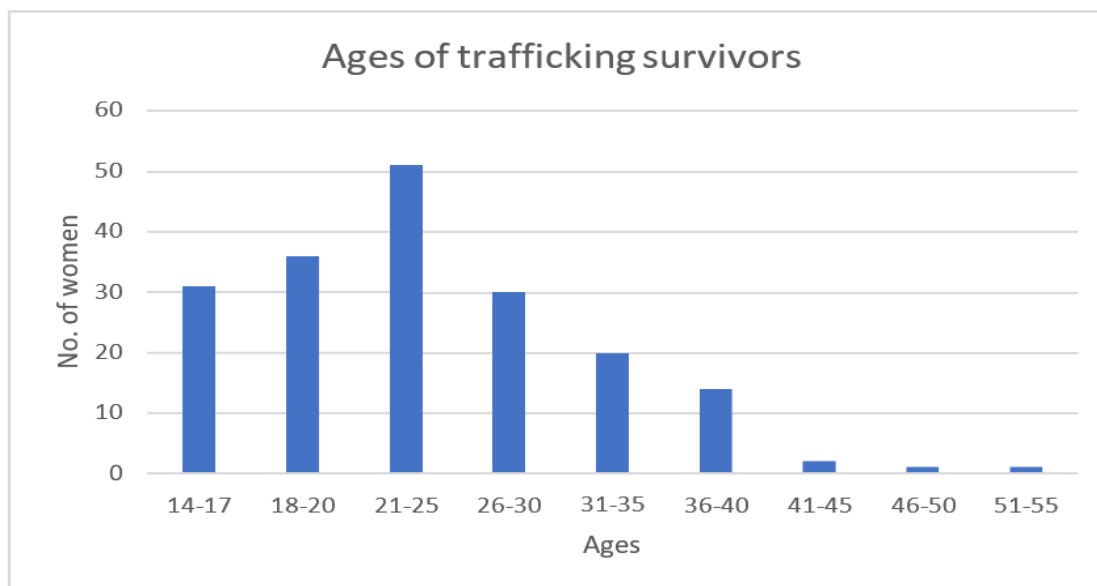
1 [https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202401/1305550.shtml#:~:text=The%20natural%20population%20growth%20rate,104.49%20\(per%20100%20females\).](https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202401/1305550.shtml#:~:text=The%20natural%20population%20growth%20rate,104.49%20(per%20100%20females).)

2 <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1209713.shtml>

3 <https://www.thinkchina.sg/society/when-millions-rural-chinese-men-are-desperate-wife>

Profile of trafficking survivors

Age



The graph shows that over two-thirds of the trafficking survivors were aged between 18 and 30. Half of the rest were under 18, and the other half were in their thirties.

It should be noted that the graph only shows ages at the time of interview rather than at the time of trafficking, which for those who escaped after spending several years in China would be correspondingly younger.

Girls under 18

Of the 31 trafficking survivors who were under 18, about two-thirds were from Kachin State and northern Shan State, and one-third were Bamar, almost all from Yangon.

Those from northern Burma were nearly all from poor families who had already left school to help support their families. While poverty was usually the reason for leaving school, the closure of schools during COVID-19 also led to some Kachin girls being trafficked.

Those from Yangon were mostly from broken families and already working in low-paid jobs when approached by brokers, which in two cases was their own boyfriends, who tricked them into traveling to China. In one case, the girl's mother – a money lender in Dala – arranged for her daughter to be sold as a wife in China.

In one case showing how trafficking to China has become inter-generational, a teenage girl from South Dagon was trafficked to China believing she would be rejoining her mother, who had long ago left her father and re-married a Chinese husband. The broker took 10,000 yuan from the mother but then trafficked the girl to a Chinese man in Henan province, where she suffered severe physical abuse for six months before being able to escape and return to Burma. Her mother offered to pay for her travel again, but the girl was too traumatized to return to China.

Marital status

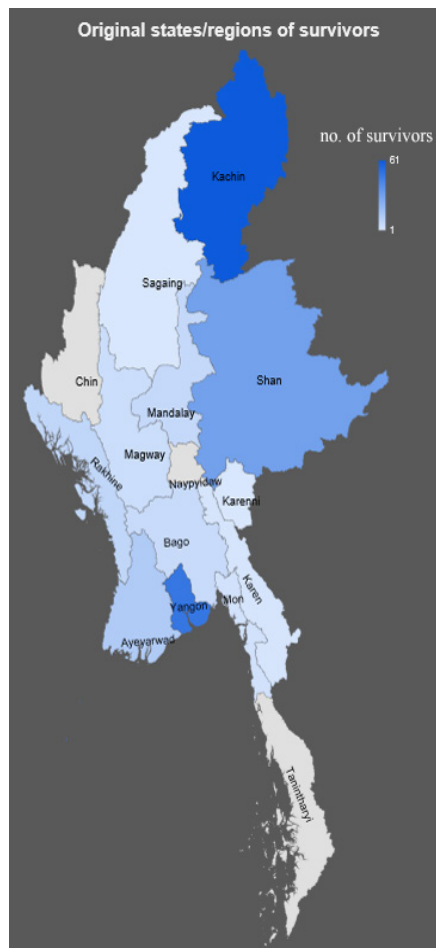
Over half of those trafficked had already been married, and of those married, two thirds already had children. Many of those married had faced problems with their husbands, usually related to drug or alcohol abuse, and some were separated. Some were widowed.

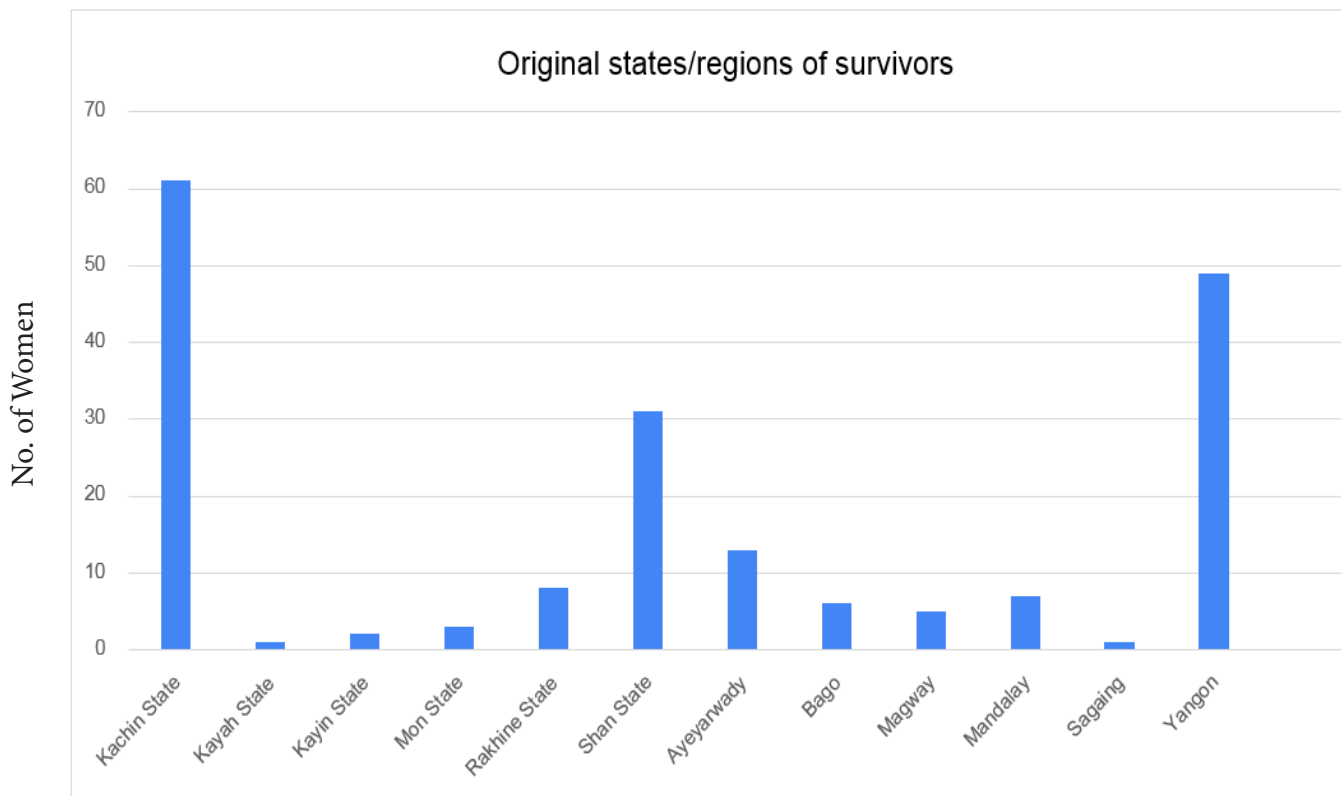
The women with children usually left them in the care of relatives while migrating to find work. However, a few women took their young children with them to China, and when trafficked as forced brides, brought their children along with them. For example, a Kachin woman with a young daughter was trafficked to marry a Chinese man in Shandong, and lived with him for twelve years, bearing him a son. When she was finally able to return to Burma, her daughter already had a Chinese boyfriend and did not want to return with her mother.

Some women were pregnant when trafficked, which was unacceptable for some potential Chinese husbands, but not others. A 24-year-old woman from Mandalay, separated from her husband, was four months pregnant when tricked to travel to China and sold to a Chinese man for 20,000 yuan. When the man found out she was pregnant, he sold her on to another Chinese man (a driver who smuggled trafficked women) who paid 35,000 yuan knowing she was pregnant. He took her home with him to eastern China, but was then arrested and imprisoned for 10 years for trafficking. Some brokers then tried to sell her to another Chinese man, who said he only wanted her child after she had given birth and not her, so she ended up running away to the police, after which she was returned to Burma.

A pregnant woman from Sagaing, married to a Burma Army soldier, and tricked to travel to China, was almost forced to have an abortion in Shweli by her traffickers before being sold, but luckily was able to escape in time.

Origin





The map and chart of the origin of survivors shows that women from almost every part of Burma are being trafficked, with over half coming from states or regions not bordering China. This is a significant change from 2018, when almost all survivors assisted by KWAT were ethnically Kachin, from Kachin State or northern Shan State.

While the need to earn money was the main factor causing all the women to migrate, from whichever region of Burma, conflict and displacement in northern regions of Burma greatly exacerbated this need and increased their vulnerability to trafficking.

About a quarter of the Kachin women trafficked were from IDP camps, many located beside the China border. For example, a 23-year-old Kachin woman, displaced to an IDP camp at the Chinese border by renewed conflict in 2011, crossed the border for a week to earn money harvesting sugar cane, but was tricked to travel deeper inside China by a job offer at a restaurant, and ended up being sold to marry a Chinese man. She lived with him for eight years, bearing him three children and suffering severe physical abuse, before being rescued.

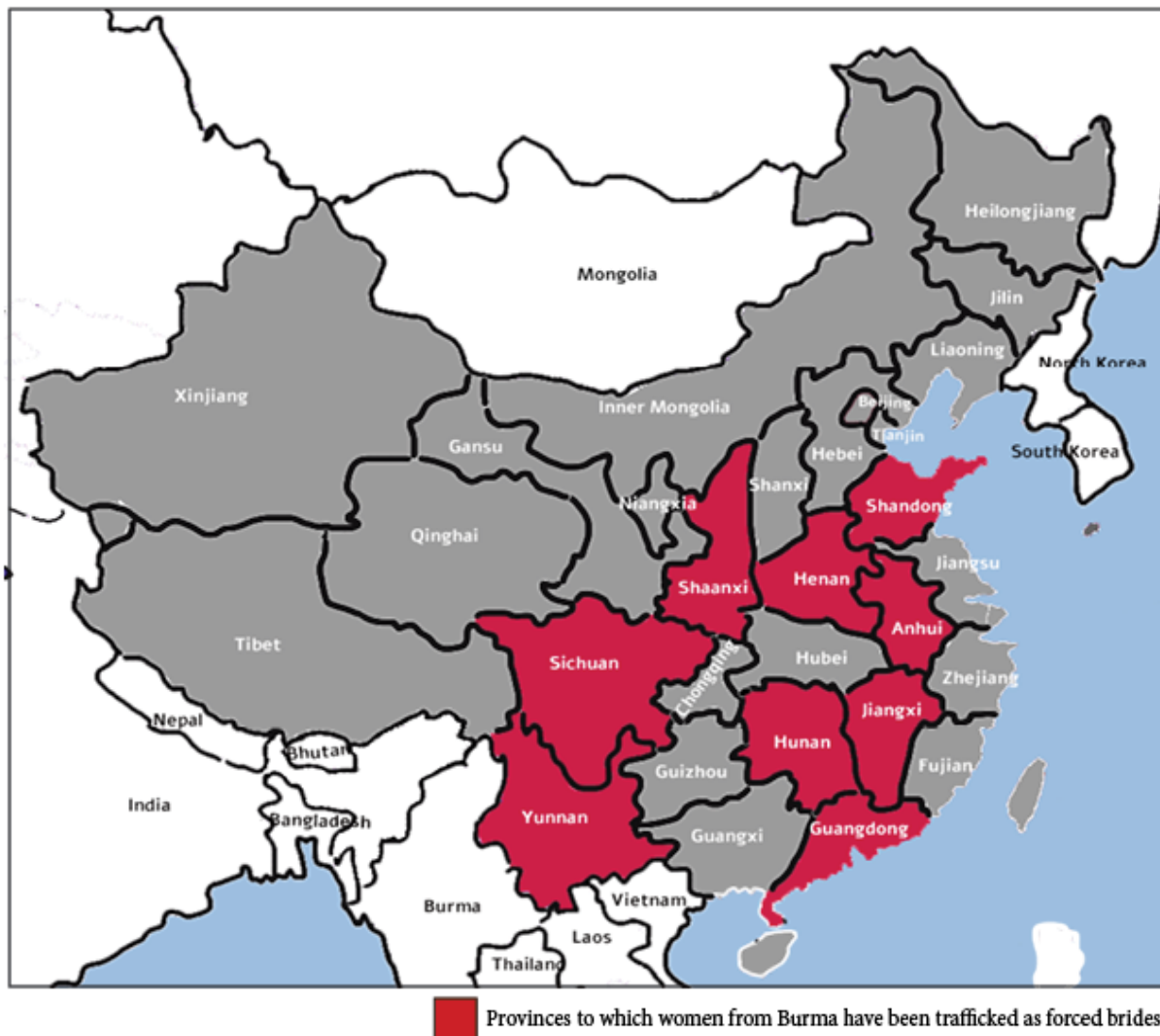
1. Trafficking to China

Ongoing demand for brides

Almost all the survivors who escaped from being trafficked to China had been or were in the process of being taken to be wives of Chinese men.

Only two women (both 20 years old from Magwe) who were caught by Burmese police with their traffickers when about to cross the river into China near Muse, said they had agreed to be surrogate mothers. They said they had been offered 10 million kyat for bearing a surrogate child (400,000 kyat a month, and then 5.5 million kyat after giving birth). As they were arrested before crossing, it is not known whether they were really being trafficked for surrogacy, or for other purposes.

Trafficking destinations in China



The map shows the provinces in China where the trafficking survivors were known to have ended up as forced brides. However, as dozens of survivors did not know exactly where they ended up, there are likely to be other provinces to which women are being trafficked.

Profile of husbands of forced brides

By far the most common occupation of the Chinese husbands was farming, growing wheat, corn or chili; a few were rearing livestock. The next most common occupations were construction work and factory work. A few were cooks, waiters, drivers and salesmen, and some were running restaurants, butcher's shops, auto repair shops or small businesses, such as making packaged noodles or wigs.

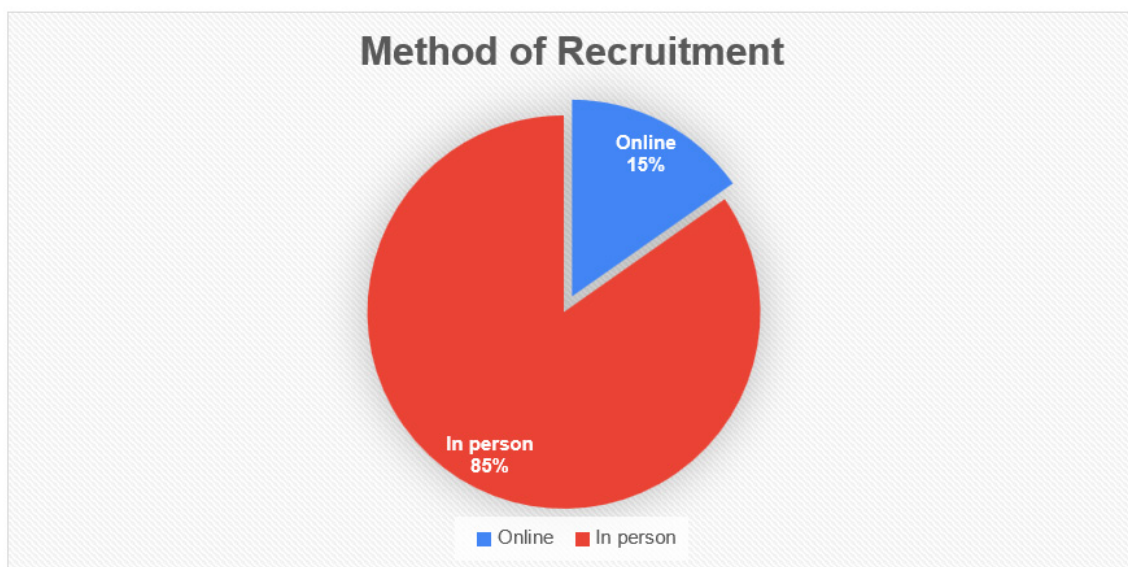
The men usually lived alone with their parents. Most were between 20 to 40 years old. Only in a few cases was the man older than 50.

In some cases, the man was already married, but had no offspring, and had taken another wife in order to bear children.

Several men were either physically or mentally disabled, and the bride purchase transaction was entirely handled by their parents or other relatives.

The trafficking process to China

Methods of recruitment



In person recruitment

- Lured by job offers

The vast majority of survivors were recruited in person inside Burma by being offered jobs in China. About half were recruited by “friends” or acquaintances, about a quarter by relatives and the other quarter by brokers who were strangers. The recruiters were almost all female.

If strangers, the brokers sought opportunities to approach potential targets. For example, a young Rakhine woman separated from her husband and struggling to support her two children by working in a restaurant in Kyaukphyu was offered a job in China by a female customer, and ended up being trafficked there as a bride.

The types of jobs in China offered were at factories, farms, restaurants, and beauty parlors, as well as domestic and construction work.

The monthly salaries promised for work at factories (mostly described as producing food or clothing) was usually between 300,000 and 500,000 kyat, or between 1,500 and 3,000 yuan.

The monthly salaries offered at farms (growing produce such as sugar cane, flowers, chillies, corn and oranges) was between 300,000 and 400,000 kyat a month.

For restaurant work, women were offered 200,000 to 300,000 kyat a month; for beauty parlour work, 1,500 yuan a month; and for domestic work, as housemaids or nannies, 400,000 to 600,000 kyat a month.

In a few cases, women were offered jobs at Burmese towns close to the Chinese border, from where they were trafficked into China. For example, an 18-year-old woman from Ayeyarwady was offered (by her landlord in Yangon) a job as a housemaid, earning 400,000 kyat a month, in Mong La, eastern Shan State, but after reaching there was trafficked across the border and forced to marry a 35-year-old Chinese corn farmer.

- *Persuaded to marry Chinese men*

While the majority of women trafficked to be wives were initially deceived by job offers from recruiters, about a quarter of the women were persuaded from the outset to marry Chinese men. The amounts promised for marrying Chinese men ranged from 1.5 million to 10 million kyat. They were usually told that they would only have to stay with the Chinese men for a few months, and then could leave.

Most of those who agreed to marry Chinese men were in their 20s or 30s and were already married, and needed money to support their families or pay off debts.

For example, a Rakhine woman from Sittwe, married to a drug user, badly needed money for hospital costs for her young son, so agreed to marry a Chinese man for payment of 2.5 million kyat. Another woman from Bago, whose husband was paralyzed and was struggling to support her four children, agreed to marry a Chinese man for 2 million kyat for a period of six months.

A few women were already working inside China when they were persuaded to marry Chinese men. For example, a 17-year-old Shan girl working as a nanny near Shweli for a Burmese woman married to a Chinese was persuaded by her employer to marry a 36-year-old Chinese man (a milk salesman) so she could earn more money. The broker received 40,000 yuan for the transaction, but she received nothing, and stayed for nine months with the husband, becoming pregnant, before being able to escape

On line recruitment

- *On-line job offers*

About 20 women were recruited on-line with job offers in China. These were mostly women working in poorly paid jobs in Yangon, Mandalay, or other towns, who were offered better-paying jobs in China.

Women recruited on-line included a garment factory worker from Hlaing Thar Yar (earning 108,000 kyat a month) and a biscuit factory worker from Mandalay (earning 120,000 MMK a month).

Most were recruited through Facebook, but a few Kachin women said they were recruited through the Chinese app WeChat.

The recruiters offered jobs in China, usually at factories, with much higher monthly salaries than the women were making in Burma, ranging from 900 to 2,000 yuan (if mentioned in Chinese currency), or from 400,000 to 700,000 kyat (if mentioned in Burmese currency).

Abduction

Although almost all trafficked survivors were initially recruited through persuasion, there were several horrifying cases of forcible abduction, involving young girls or women with disability.

In one case, the abduction was carried out by a Chinese worker in Namkham, northern Shan State. In 2010, a 12-year-old orphaned Ta'ang girl was working as a cook for Asia World company at a construction site when a 40-year-old Chinese electrician hit her on the head, gagged her, and smuggled her across the border back to his home several days' journey across China. He was already married, but his wife was unable to bear children, and he tortured the young girl to force her to sleep with him, slashing her with a knife and piercing her legs with nails. He was also violent with his first wife, and after killing her in a fit of rage, was imprisoned for murder. The girl then went to live with the man's elderly mother in Wuhan, who taught her to sing and dance to earn money. Finally, after nine years, she was able to escape back to Burma.

Also in 2010, a hearing-impaired Kachin woman was taken without her parents' knowledge from a village in Waimaw by a neighbor who was married in China. Her parents were told by the neighbour that their daughter had married a Chinese man, and lost all contact with her. Finally in 2019, someone posted their daughter's picture on Wechat, asking if anyone knew her. She was living in a tent near the Chin Shwe Haw market at the Chinese border, earning a living by collecting empty bottles. She was able to be reunited with her parents but had lost her mind and did not recognize them. She had been badly tortured by her Chinese husband, who she had borne three children.

In another case, a 13-year-old girl was seized off the street by three young men on the street in Yangon, who drugged and gang-raped her. She was then forced to work in a brothel for a week before being transported to Mong La, on the eastern Shan State border, where she was sold as a bride to a Chinese man, who took her back with him to Anhui province. After a few weeks, she was able to run away to the police, but they then kept her in a mental asylum for a year before deporting her to the Burmese border.

Travel

Transport to the Chinese border

The women recruited in person were usually escorted to the Chinese border, either by the recruiters themselves, or by another broker. Most of those recruited from central Burma travelled to Muse by bus.

Most women recruited on-line were asked to travel at their own cost to Muse, where they were met by a local broker, who arranged for them to cross the border. Only in a few cases, the recruiter transferred travel costs to Muse (of up to 150,000 kyat) in advance through the Wave app.

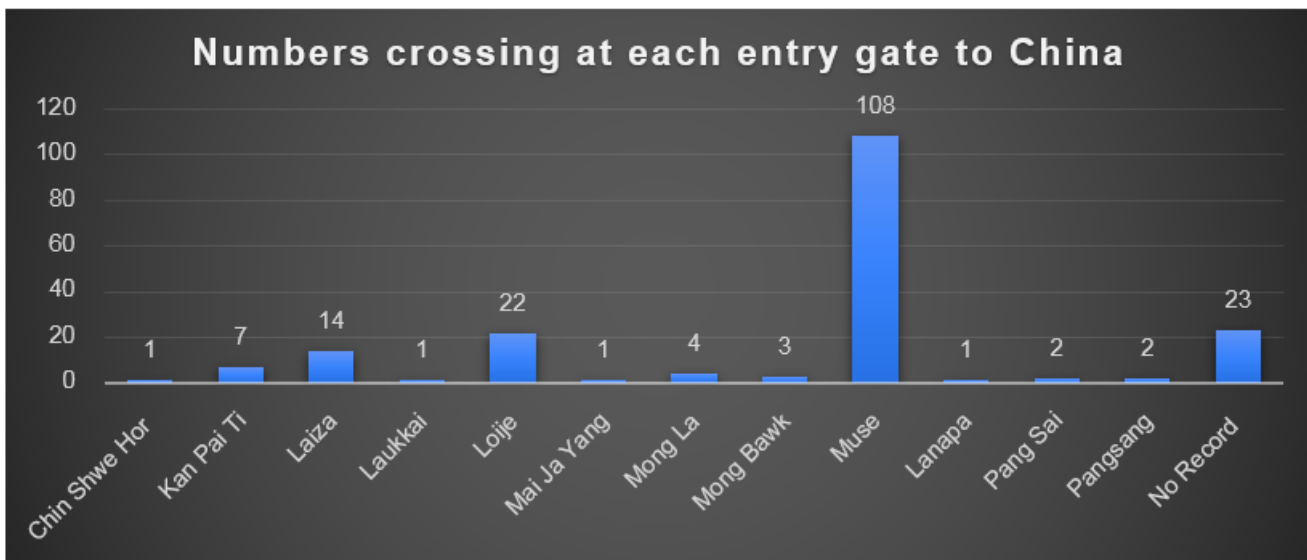
After the initial recruitment and transport to the Chinese border, where women were handed over to local brokers on the Burma side, the next steps of the journey depended on the transaction chain, and at which stage a potential buyer (i.e. Chinese husband) had been found.

Some women did not immediately cross over, but spent several days or weeks in a hotel or a broker's lodgings at the border town before crossing. The women sometimes stayed alone, and sometimes in groups, often locked up. For example, a 16-year-old girl stayed for a month locked up with other Burmese women in a Chinese broker's house in Chin Shwe Haw in northeast Shan State, before crossing the border.

Those who stayed longer on the Burmese side were usually straight away transported to the Chinese husband's house deeper inside China after crossing the border, showing that the transaction had been arranged during this time.

Border crossing points

Map of border entry gate locations



When women arrived on the Burmese side of the Chinese border, they were usually met by or handed over to a local broker, who arranged for them to cross over into China. By far the most common crossing point was at Muse, in northern Shan State. The second most common crossing point was at Loije, on the Kachin State border.

Although both Muse and Loije are official border crossing points, over two-thirds of those who entered China did so unofficially, meaning they did not pass through the official gate. In Muse, this meant passing through a hole in the border fence, and then sometimes taking a boat across the Shweli river.

Those who passed the border officially had to show their identity cards and apply for a Temporary Border Pass Card, either a green card, valid for seven days, or a red card, valid for one year (only available for residents of

Muse district). The red cards enabled holders to obtain work permits for local jobs, but only with recommendations from Chinese employers (Note: These work permits stopped being issued in September 2024).

The border pass cards only allowed the holders to travel within Dehong prefecture (later restricted in 2023 to only Shweli town), but the traffickers then used various means to smuggle the women deeper inside China.

Even though China has been erecting high-security fences along its border with Burma since early 2020, it remains possible for people from Burma to cross unofficially.

Travel inside China

Having crossed the border into China, women were usually accommodated first in a nearby Chinese town. For those crossing at Muse, this was Shweli (Ruili). They were often told they had to wait for a few days while the promised job was being arranged. Sometimes, after waiting for a few days, women were transported to another location in China, still believing they were going to work.

Many women realized soon after crossing the border that they were being trafficked as wives, either because they were directly persuaded or coerced by brokers to accept Chinese husbands, or because they were made to dress up and have their picture taken, and Chinese men were brought to inspect them. If the bride transaction was made at the border, they were then transported directly to the homes of their future husbands.

Whether the women were willing or not to become wives, the brokers (mostly Burmese nationals) usually kept them locked up near the border, confiscating their ID cards, border passes and phones. Some women said they were kept together with others also being trafficked.

Although most bride transactions were made at the border, some women were transported directly to locations deeper inside China -- including Guangdong, Shandong, Anhui, and Henan -- and the transactions were made there.

For example, an 18-year-old woman from Yangon tricked by her boyfriend to cross over at Muse to work at an orange farm in China, was taken by a Burmese woman broker to Guangdong by car. She stayed at the broker's Chinese husband's house for 20 days, during which time many Chinese men were brought to see her.

Another woman, a 23-year-old divorced mother from Pyay, was tricked into going all the way to Shandong, believing she would be given a job at a factory there, and traveled from the border at Jegao with about 20 other young women from Burma. Five of the most attractive women, including her, were separated from the group, and placed in a broker's house, where they were given expensive make-up and clothes, and told they would become wives of Chinese men.

Nearly all the transport within China was arranged by car. Only in a few cases, women were transported by motorcycle to nearby towns straight after crossing the border, or when traveling to some rural locations in Yunnan.

The car journeys to destinations deeper inside China took from several days to a week. One woman said that she changed cars seven times along the way during a three-day journey to Henan.

Sometimes the women were transported in cars alone, and sometimes in groups of other women from Burma. A 16-year-old girl from Yangon was transported from Shweli to Henan by car in a group of seven women. The journey took five days, and five of the other women were dropped off along the way. She said they were forbidden to talk to each other during the journey and were fed only instant noodles.

The car drivers were always Chinese, and often one or two Burmese-speaking female brokers accompanied the women.

Sometimes the prospective Chinese husband or one or more of his family members drove the woman themselves

from the border to the destination inside China. For example, a 16-year-old girl from Yangon, tricked by her boyfriend into travelling to Shweli for work, was sold to be a bride in Henan, and was collected personally by the parents and younger brother of her future husband, who was disabled. They took her by car back to Henan, a journey taking four days. Another woman was collected at the border by cousins of her future husband.

A woman taken by car to Guangdong said she was told to hide when passing through police checkpoints. Another woman who went by car to Shandong said that they took back roads, rather than highways, presumably to avoid checkpoints. She also said that they slept along the way at a building specially used for smuggled migrants from Burma.

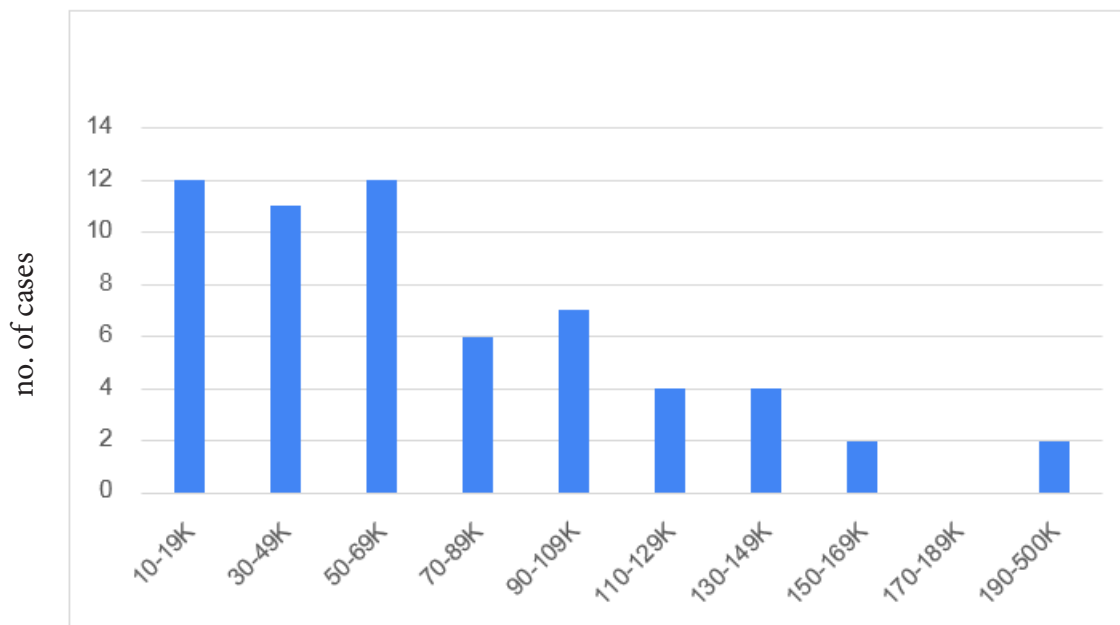
One woman being trafficked by car from Shweli to deeper inside China said their car was turned back along the way by Chinese police, but they simply returned to Shweli and then took another car.

Another woman traveled in a car for three days across China before she was suddenly told by the driver to get out of the car with her luggage, and was left on the road. This was because the driver had spotted a police checkpoint ahead. She sat crying in the road until a passerby alerted the police who took her to a police station.

A few women said they rode in a sleeper bus during part of the journey inside China; one said there were many people from Burma on the bus. Another said she was in a group of six Burmese women on the bus, and when they passed through police checkpoints, the six of them had to hide in a special compartment behind the toilet in the bus, which was cramped and poorly ventilated.

Bride transaction costs

Amounts paid by Chinese husbands



In about two thirds of the cases, the women who were trafficked as wives had no idea how much they were sold for. For the cases where the amount was known, most costs ranged from between 10,000 to 69,000 yuan (1,380-9,530 USD).

The highest amount was 500,000 yuan (about 69,000 USD), paid for a 14-year-old girl from Yangon by a chef in Henan.

Some women found out the amount when they were forced by the brokers to sign a document on arrival at the Chinese husband's house. Even though it was written in Chinese, they could read the amount of money on the document. Some saw the money being handed over in front of them.

In most cases, particularly if the women were tricked into marriage, they received nothing at all from the transaction. For those women who received payment, it was usually less than what was promised, and they were not allowed to leave after the agreed length of time.

For example, a young Kachin widow who agreed to marry a Chinese man for two months in exchange for 5 million kyat, found out after staying with the man for two months that the broker had only sent 2.8 million kyat to her family, and was told she would have to stay for at least a year.

A woman from Tangyan, married to a violent drug user, was promised 20,000 yuan by a broker for marrying a Chinese man to pay off her debts, but ended up only receiving 10,000 yuan, while the broker received 40,000 yuan. She stayed with her husband for six years before finally managing to run away.

In a few cases involving girls under 18, the brokers sent some money to the girl's families, likely to maintain the pretense that the girls were working and to prevent their families from alerting the police to follow up on them.

For example, a 16-year-old Shan girl from Tangyan living with her grandmother, was offered work as a maid by two young women, but then sold for 100,000 yuan to a Chinese man in Anhui. She later learned that the brokers had sent 1 million kyat to the grandmother, saying this was from the girl's wages as a maid.

In another case, a broker sent 4.1 million kyat to a 17-year-old girl's family after she had crossed the border into China, after which she was trafficked to be a wife in Henan.

In a few cases, if the women were paid in cash, the husbands took back the money after the transaction. For example, a woman from Yangon who had agreed to marry a Chinese man for one month for 6,000 yuan, initially received this amount during the handover by the broker (who she saw also receiving 6,000 yuan), but after driving her to a hotel and sleeping with her, the Chinese man took back the money.

Sometimes women were expected to pay back the money spent by their husbands on the trafficking transaction. A Kachin woman who agreed from the outset to marry a Chinese man for 10 million kyat, was handed over this money before leaving home (which she gave to her younger siblings, who she had been supporting since their parents died). However, after arriving in Sichuan she was told by her Chinese husband she had to work to pay him back for the 30 million kyat he had spent to marry her. She did road construction work for 200 yuan a day, and was forced to hand all her earnings over to her husband.

Treatment by Chinese husbands

“The Chinese husband was 38 years old and worked in a garment factory. He lived in a house with his mother and father. In the first month after I arrived at the house, I was able to eat well, and did not have to do any work. But I was not allowed to use the phone, and if I wanted to talk on the phone, I had to use my Chinese husband's phone. The broker Ma M-- sent me my father's Wechat contact, so I was able to talk to him through my Chinese husband's phone. After about 2 months, Ma M-- told me she had transferred 4 million kyat to my father, but when I asked him he said he had only received 2 million. Then my Chinese husband began drinking very often and physically torturing me. He cut my hands with a knife blade. He hit me on the head and elsewhere until my bones fractured.

I was fed only one serving of noodles a day. I had to work in their chili field. Even though I had to cook for the Chinese family, I wasn't allowed to share their food.

I contacted Ma M-- through my Chinese husband's Wechat, asking her help to move to another house, but she blocked me. My Chinese husband's parents also physically assaulted me. His mother hit me with a broom. My Chinese husband pierced me with a pair of pliers, and cut my knees with a knife. I was bleeding so badly, they had to take me to a clinic. At first, the clinic didn't want to stitch me up, but did so when the Chinese family paid them. Apart from this one time, I was never taken to hospital when I was sick. Whenever I was alone in the house with my Chinese husband's father, I had to lock myself in my room, because he tried to rape me.

After sleeping with my Chinese husband three times, I locked the door of my room because he was so violent. The violence was so unbearable that I almost took poison to kill myself, but stopped when I thought of how sad my parents and brother would be. After 7 months of torture, I jumped from the window of the third floor and walked for almost an hour to the road. My legs hurt and I was too tired to carry on walking. I gestured for help from an old farmer passing by, and he took me to the police station on his motorcycle. The Chinese police called an interpreter and questioned me. After this, I was sent to a Chinese prison and spent 20 days in jail. I heard that the police went to the Chinese man's house, and arrested and fined him for domestic violence. After that, the police took me by plane and then by car back to the border at Muse."

- *Testimony of 18-year-old survivor from Yangon, trafficked in 2019*

In almost all cases where the women and girls were trafficked as forced brides, they were kept inside, often locked up, after arrival at their husbands' homes, and were not allowed to use mobile phones. If they were taken outside, it was always together with a family member, who kept them under close watch.

Most of the forced brides were made to do household chores, such as cleaning and cooking. If they lived on farms, they were made to help with farm work. If the husbands ran home-based businesses, they had to help with this. Many women said they were not given enough food, or they suffered because they were unable to eat rice, Burma's staple food.

The most important duty for the brides was to sleep with their husbands. This usually took place soon after arrival, and if the brides resisted, they were beaten until they submitted. Some men were extremely sadistic and not only beat the women but cut them with knives or other implements, causing serious injury. Some women said that the husband's parents also beat them if they resisted having sex.

In one case, the Burmese broker, married to a Chinese man living only a few houses away, also came and slapped the trafficked woman when she refused to have sex with her husband.

Several women said that the Chinese husbands made them take "medicine", apparently to help them get pregnant.

Only in a few rare cases did the men not force themselves on their wives. For example, a young woman from Yangon was trafficked to Henan and sold for 200,000 yuan to a Chinese woman to be the wife of her son. The Chinese woman ran a pre-school at her house and told the Burmese woman she should clean the school in the day and sleep with her son at night. She refused and tried to run away several times, even breaking her leg when jumping from the fourth floor of the building. She stayed there eight months, refusing to sleep with the son, before the mother asked her one last time whether she insisted on rejecting her son, before sending her to the police station, and letting her be returned to Burma.

Apart from being forced to have sex and being beaten if they refused, many women suffered beatings from their husbands and in-laws for failure to perform household chores to their satisfaction. For example, an 18-year-old girl from Magwe trafficked to be the wife of a 35-year-old corn farmer, said she was slapped, kicked, and had her hair pulled by him, his parents, and his brother's family if she could not cook meals for their liking or was unable

to understand directions on how to do farm work.

Sometimes the injuries suffered by the women were life-threatening. One woman was nearly killed by her husband, a restaurant owner in Shantong, when he poured alcohol on himself, set himself alight, and then ran towards her. He died of his wounds, and she was so badly burned that she had to be hospitalized for a year.

Chinese community acceptance of bride trafficking

It is very clear from survivors' testimonies that not only the Chinese husbands and their families had no scruples about holding their bride's captive and abusing them, but this was also accepted by their surrounding community.

The abusive treatment of forced brides would have been noticeable to neighbors or other onlookers, such as in the case of a woman whose Chinese husband ran a restaurant, and who was frequently beaten in full view of customers. Yet no survivors mentioned that neighbors or onlookers intervened to help them, or reported this abuse to the authorities.

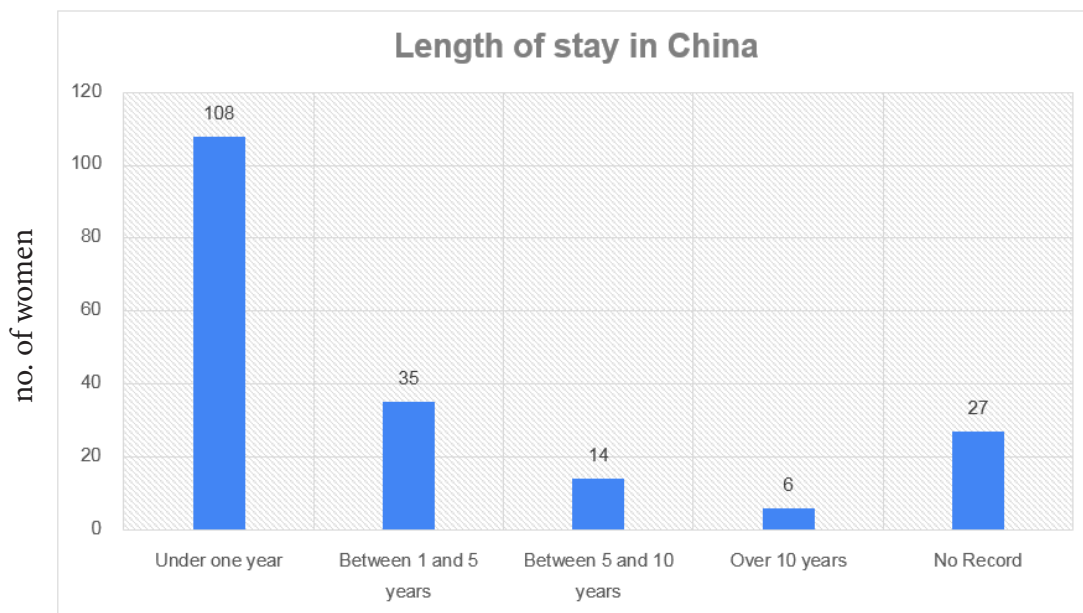
Another notable fact is that most forced brides were able to receive medical care when taken to local health facilities, for illness, injury, or delivery, despite their lack of household registration documents, which should have been obligatory whether accessing government or private health services.

While it is fortunate that the women were able to access health care, they always had to rely on their husbands to negotiate this unauthorized access. Also, "off the record" health treatment ensured that evidence of abuse would not be reported to the police. This is clear from the case of the woman taken to a clinic to be stitched up for knife wounds inflicted by her husband. She said that the clinic was very reluctant to treat her, knowing they were abetting the husband's abuse.

Furthermore, all the children fathered by the Chinese husbands appear to have been able to be registered as Chinese citizens, despite the mother having no household registration documents.

While access to health care and birth registration was no doubt facilitated through bribery, the fact this is happening in so many provinces show it is common practice for local Chinese authorities across the country to turn a blind eye to foreign bride trafficking.

Length of time spent in China



This chart of the length of time that trafficking survivors spent in China shows that about one-third were only able to escape after at least one year of marriage to Chinese husbands. Twenty-one women escaped after at least five years of marriage, including six women married for between ten and eighteen years.

Ways of Escape

Escape or rescue during transit in Burma

Some women were fortunate enough to escape before crossing the border into China, usually because they became suspicious of the brokers on arrival at the border and slipped away before crossing.

Several women were rescued in Muse by the Burmese Anti Trafficking Task Force (ATTF) police before crossing the border. Either acting on a tip-off or because the brokers were already under watch, the police arrested the brokers as they were preparing to take the women across the border, either out in the street or in their lodgings.

Escape or rescue during transit in China

Some women were able to escape or were rescued by police from their traffickers while in transit inside China.

Some ran away straight after crossing over to Shweli, as they felt scared when handed over to the new brokers. Some were rescued by police while being trafficked at locations deeper inside China.

One woman trafficked to Henan and kept in a locked room while the broker was negotiating to sell her to a Chinese husband, was able to use a phone and call the Chinese police hotline 110. The police told her to use Tiktok to send them her location, then came and rescued her, and arrested the trafficker.

Another woman was rescued by police from an apartment in a town near Kunming, where she had been locked up

for over a month while the broker was arranging to sell her. Luckily another woman trafficked by the same broker had run away to the police station, which led to the apartment being raided.

Escape or rescue from Chinese husband's home

Assisted by Chinese police

- *Running away to the Chinese police*

The most common method of escape from forced marriages was to run away from the Chinese husband's home to find the police. Some women were able to run away shortly after arriving at the home, but others only managed to run away after years of captivity. For example, one survivor said she only dared run away when she had learned to speak Chinese, after two and a half years.

As the women were either locked up or closely guarded at home, they would have to wait for a suitable opportunity such as when left alone in the house, or at night. Some escaped through windows, suffering injury if from upper floors.

After escaping from the home, the women usually walked -- often long distances -- to find a sympathetic passerby who could help them contact the police.

Some women escaped when they were finally allowed outside the home. For example, a woman who after about five weeks was allowed to go to shopping with her husband, was able to run into a nearby police station.

Several women were caught running away by their Chinese husbands or in-laws and then punished by beating or stricter confinement. In some cases, the husband was in collusion with the police, and the woman was returned to him after reaching the police station. One woman said her husband bribed the police for her to return home.

One woman who took a taxi from her home when running away was traced by the family's CCTV in front of the house, which recorded the taxi number plate. Her husband went to the police, who tracked down the taxi, and picked her up from the bus station where she intended to take a bus to the border. The police then returned her to the custody of her husband.

- *Phoning for help*

Some women were able to escape by using phones to arrange police rescue. This was usually by contacting their family or friends on social media, who then liaised with Burmese police or the Burmese Embassy in China to arrange for the Chinese police to rescue them.

For example, a woman from Magwe was able to use Facebook on her husband's phone to contact her family in Burma. They asked her to send pictures of her husband's ID card, and of the house and surrounding location, and then liaised with Burmese police to contact the police in China. The Chinese police were able to come and rescue her, but only on a second visit, as the husband first hid her at a relative's house when he discovered traces of her messages on his phone.

In another case, a woman from Yangon trafficked to Henan met a friend on social media, who put her in touch with a Burmese Embassy official in China. The embassy official asked her to send a copy of her Chinese husband's ID, and she was then rescued by Chinese police.

One woman managed to contact the Burmese Embassy in China directly through WeChat, and was rescued after three days. However, this was only after suffering one and a half years of abuse, when her husband finally gave her a sim card to use in her phone.

A few women were able to ring the Chinese police hotline 110 number directly. For example, a woman trafficked to marry a man in his 60s, used a phone to call 110. She only spoke Burmese, but was able to tell them the Chinese man's phone number and ID and within an hour, the police arrived at the house and rescued her.

- ***Police alerted by tip-offs***

In some cases, police came to rescue women after being tipped off that they had been trafficked. Those giving tip-offs included other trafficking survivors.

For example, a 16-year-old girl who had been trafficked together with her aunt, and sold to several men in China, was rescued after her aunt managed to escape to the Chinese police and inform them about her niece.

In another case, a 17-year-old girl was trafficked to Henan and ended up marrying a Chinese man involved in the trafficking business, who used his own apartment as a transit house for trafficked women from Burma. When a new arrival managed to ring the Chinese police, they came to raid the apartment, and she was also rescued by the other women.

- ***Police household check leads to rescue***

Some women were rescued when police carried out routine household checks and found they had no legal documents. This was particularly common during the Covid pandemic, when police carried out house-to-house health checks. One woman rescued in this way during a household Covid check had been married for 14 years to a crippled Chinese husband, with whom she had two children. She was sent by the police back to the border at Shweli.

- ***Police check outside home leads to rescue***

Several women were rescued by chance when outside their home and found by police to have no legal documents.

A 25-year-old Rakhine woman from Myebon, trafficked to marry a man in eastern China, was out walking in the street with another Burmese woman she had befriended -- also married to a Chinese man -- when they were overheard talking in Burmese by the police and asked to show their documents. She was then arrested and detained. When given a health check, she was found to be two months pregnant. She was then sent back to the Burmese border.

- ***Husbands or traffickers contact police***

In a few cases, the husbands or the traffickers themselves released the women to the Chinese police. For example, a woman from Yangon trafficked to be a forced bride, stayed with her Chinese husband for a year suffering physical abuse, before the man sent her back to the broker, who lived nearby, saying he didn't want her anymore. The broker then let her go to the police station, from where she was sent back to the border.

In another case, the husband rang the police reporting his pregnant wife as an illegal immigrant, after he found out the baby she was carrying was a girl. She was then sent back to the Burmese border.

Escape without police assistance

Some women escaped from abusive husbands without turning to the Chinese police. For those trafficked to locations in Yunnan, it was relatively easy for them to find their own way back to the Burmese border.

However, for those trafficked to other provinces, they usually escaped with the help of "friends" they had met on-line, or with the help of their original brokers. Unfortunately, this often led to them being re-trafficked (see later section).

Chinese husbands let wives leave

In some cases, the Chinese husbands themselves allowed their wives to return to Burma without contacting the police. Sometimes this was after only a short period of time, usually when the husbands took pity on them on learning they had been forcibly sold.

Sometimes this was after several years, when the wives had already delivered one or more children, and the husbands no longer wanted them. One husband let his wife leave after ten years, when she had delivered a child and when he had taken another younger wife to live with them. He drove her back to the Burmese border himself, and gave her 30,000 yuan.

Re-trafficked

In about a dozen cases, the women escaped from or left their Chinese husbands only to find themselves being trafficked again to another husband. Sometimes this was because they were returned to the original trafficker by the dissatisfied husband for some reason – such as being found to be unhealthy and unable to bear children. The traffickers then sold the women on to a new husband.

However, in most cases, the women were re-trafficked by other Burmese women married to Chinese men, either living nearby or who they met on-line. For example, a 17-year-old girl from Mon State, trafficked to marry a Chinese farmer in Henan, met on Wechat a Burmese woman married in China, who said she could find her a job in a factory. She then sneaked out of the house, and met the broker, who sold her to another Chinese man, who was very abusive. She stayed with him for two months, but cried so much that the man asked the broker to take her away. She was then sold to another Chinese man, who locked her up, but she was fortunately able to run away to the police after a month.

In a few cases, the Chinese husbands themselves sold the women on to other men when they no longer wanted them. For example, a 23-year-old woman from Yangon, who was trafficked to an abusive husband in Shandong, was re-sold by him for 10,000 yuan to another man in Shandong after she tried to run away. The second husband, who ran a restaurant, was even more violent, and ended up setting himself alight, killing himself and almost killing her. She was hospitalized for about a year, before being returned to Burma by the police.

Treatment by Chinese police

Once the women arrived at or were taken to police stations, they were questioned by the police, with an interpreter or using a translation app if they could not speak Chinese.

Where possible, the police then followed up with the husbands, who were called to the police station and questioned, if they had not already come to find their wives.

Some women who had suffered physical injury said the police charged the husbands with assault.

While most of the survivors who escaped to the police were then deported to the Burmese border, a number of women shared disturbing accounts of how the police returned them to their abusive husbands.

For example, a 17-year-old girl trafficked to marry a farmer in Henan ran away to the police, but was returned to her husband, who then locked her up for two weeks as punishment. She stayed with her husband for nine more months before being able to escape again, with the help of someone she met on-line.

In another case, a woman who had been trafficked to marry a man in Shandong, and after ten years was finally allowed by him to return to the Burmese border at Shweli, was detained there by the Chinese police, who contacted her husband to come and collect her. Only when he said he no longer wanted her, did they let her cross back to Burma.

Such cases indicate a disturbing police bias in favour of the husbands, suggesting there are likely many trafficked women still trapped in abusive marriages in China, who had tried escaping to the police but been forced to return to their husbands.

Police detention in China

Before being sent back to Burma, the women described being detained in police stations, prisons, old people’s nursing homes, and juvenile detention centres. Some who needing medical care stayed first in hospitals. A few said they were kept in hotels for up to several days when first detained. One said she stayed at a policewoman’s house for two nights before being sent back to the border.

Some women were lucky enough to be detained for only a few days, while others were detained for an entire year. It is not clear why the period of detention was so long for these cases. A 16- year-old Ta’ang girl trafficked as a wife in Yunnan, was rescued by police after two weeks, but then had to spend a year in a juvenile detention centre. Another woman trafficked as a wife in Guangzhou was rescued by police, but then spent a year in jail before being sent back to the Burmese border.



Very disturbingly, several survivors, including two young girls, said they were detained in mental asylums.

A 13-year-old girl from Yangon escaped to the police from a forced marriage in Anhui, but was then placed in a mental asylum for a year, where another patient tried to strangle her. She tried to run away from the asylum three times, before finally being sent back to the Burmese border by the police.

A 16-year-old girl from Yangon, trafficked to Henan to marry a crippled husband, managed to escape to the police after 10 months. After interrogation, the police kept her in prison for nearly two months, and then transferred her to a mental asylum for about five weeks, where they treated her with unidentified drugs, before deporting her to the Burmese border.

A 24-year-old Rakhine woman from Buthidaung, trafficked to be the wife of a Chinese man in Yunnan, ran away to the police after a few months. They gave her a medical examination and found she was two months pregnant, then kept her in a mental asylum for three months before sending her to the Burmese border at Shweli.

Deportation back to Burma

When deported, women were escorted by police officers (usually female) back to the Burmese border, almost always at Muse, but sometimes at Loiye and Kanpaiti. Most women were transported by train to Kunming, and then by car to the official border gate, where they were handed over to the Burmese ATTF police. A few were transported by plane to Yunnan, and then taken by car to the border. If they had to spend the night en route, they stayed at hotels.

Some said they were transported with other women deportees. Some mentioned they were handcuffed.

During the Covid pandemic, some women were flown by plane to Yangon, where they were received by the ATTF police.

Although most survivors were sent safely back to the border by the police, the experience of one survivor shows that police were not always reliable in ensuring that deportees reached their destination. This woman escaped to the police somewhere in eastern China, and was then put in a car supposedly heading for the border, but after a day's drive found herself dropped in the middle of nowhere. She had to find another local police station, where exactly the same thing happened. Only after ringing 110 and arriving at a third police station was she finally put on a plane back to Yunnan, and then driven to the border.

Police treatment of children born in China

Almost all the women who escaped to the police left behind children fathered by their Chinese husbands, presumably realizing that the fathers would demand custody. However, in one case, a 43-year-old Kachin woman trafficked to Yunnan, who had spent years with her abusive Chinese husband, ran to the police in Kunming with their three children. After interrogating her, the police let the woman and her three children travel back to Shweli by themselves.

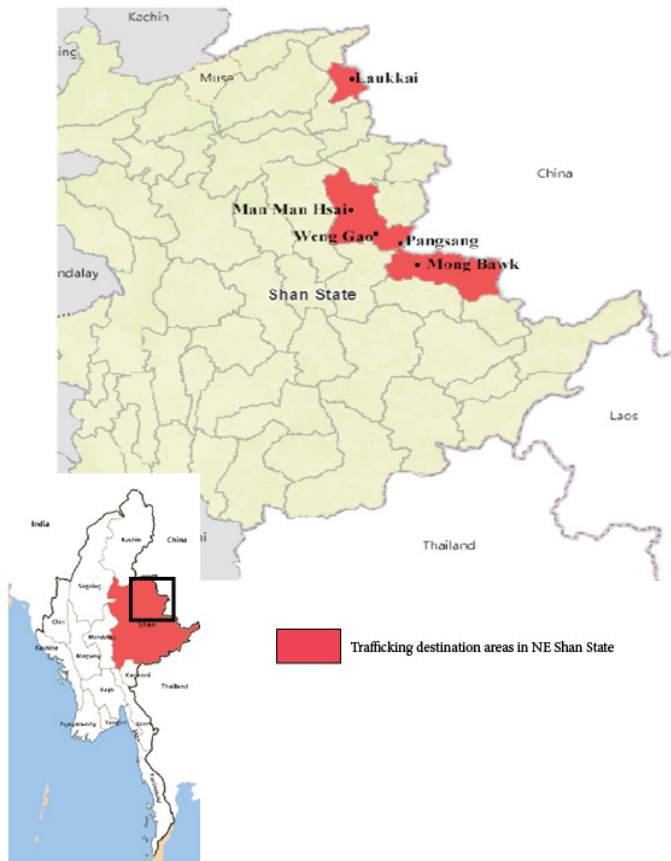
This survivor appears to have been lucky. Another woman trafficked to Lincang in Yunnan, ran away from her violent Chinese husband with her two children, one of whom was a daughter she had originally brought with her from Burma and the other a son fathered by the Chinese man. After seeking help from local police, she was able to travel to the border at Shweli, but there the police told her she was not allowed to take the son with her, as he was already registered in China. The police then called the Chinese husband's family to come and pick up the son, and she crossed back to Burma with only her daughter.

Treatment by Burmese anti-trafficking police

All trafficking survivors deported officially by Chinese police were handed over to the Burmese Anti-Trafficking Task Force (ATTF) police at border entry points. The Burmese police handled the immigration procedures and then took the survivors to their local offices for questioning, to identify traffickers and start legal proceedings against them where possible.

After police questioning, the survivors were handed over to staff of the Department of Rehabilitation (under the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement), who accommodated them at their shelters, and looked after them during legal proceedings against traffickers. Unfortunately, these shelters have limited capacity, and were often unable to house new survivors, meaning that the welfare officials regularly had to rely on other organizations for help in assisting survivors.

2. Trafficking to Chinese cyberscam hubs in northeast Shan State



In mid-2022, KWAT began assisting women trafficked to areas of northeastern Shan State under the control of the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and the Kokang Border Guard Force. By the end of 2023, KWAT had assisted ten women trafficked to these areas, most of whom had been forced into sexual servitude by Chinese criminal gangs running cyber scamming centers and related entertainment facilities; one, a university graduate, was herself forced to be a scammer.

Background of survivors

The survivors who had been trafficked to the Wa and Kokang areas were mostly in their twenties; three were nineteen years old, one was seventeen and one sixteen. All were unmarried, except one who was separated from her husband.

Of the ten survivors, eight were from Kachin State (six from IDP camps), one from Rakhine State, and one from Magwe Region.

Methods of recruitment

For the women from Burma, four were recruited through on-line advertisements, five were recruited in person by acquaintances or relatives, and one was drugged and then abducted.

Those recruited were offered service jobs, in hotels, game shops and hairdressers, for much higher monthly salaries than available in other parts of Burma. For example, a woman working at a garment factory in Yangon for 400,000 kyat a month, was offered up to 4,000 yuan a month to work at an online game shop in the Wa area. Another woman was offered 3 million kyat a month to work as a hotel receptionist in the Wa area.

Travel

The women were either accompanied directly by their recruiter to their destination, or travelled to towns in northern Shan State where they were met by local agents who accompanied them by car to the Wa or Kokang area. Those arriving in 2022 said they had to stay for one to two weeks in Covid quarantine.

Conditions of captivity

Sexual servitude

The women forced into sexual servitude were made to work in KTV bars and massage parlors, some on the premises of scam centers. In the Kokang area, this was in Laukkai. In the Wa region, these entertainment venues were located in Pangsang, Mong Bawk, and Weng Gao (all scamming hubs close to the Chinese border), as well as in Man Man Hsai, a village next to the Man Maw tin mines about 60 kms from the Chinese border.

The women were kept locked up and not allowed outside – except at one bar in Pangsang, where a woman was made to stand outside wearing scanty clothing to attract customers. She also said her pictures were posted in on-line ads.

Several women described being forced to take drugs while working. One said she was forced to sleep with over ten men a night. Another said she was forced to have sex without condoms and was often beaten by drunk customers. She also said her employers beat her if she took rest without permission.

On-line scamming

The woman forced to be an on-line scammer was trafficked in mid-2022 to Pangsang, the capital of the UWSA-administered area.

On arrival at her place of work, she was not allowed out of the building. Her phone was seized, and she was forbidden to contact her family. She was trained for ten days on how to befriend foreigners on-line, and trick them into investing money. When she said she did not want to scam people, she was told she had to pay 10,000 yuan. Unable to afford this, she was forced to sign a work contract for 6 months.

She was given a scamming target of 15 people per day. Her daily working time was fourteen hours, and if her target was not reached, she was forced to work four more hours overtime. If she still didn't reach her target or disobeyed any orders, she was punished by being handcuffed and beaten, made to squat and stand repeatedly, and locked up without food. Finally, after pleading with the agent who had trafficked her (a Burmese woman) she and her co-workers, altogether 16 people (men and women), were transferred to another location in Pangsang. In the new building, they were locked up on the 7th floor for a week. During that time, various Chinese people came to look them over, and they were then transferred to another scamming center and forced to sign a document in Chinese. When they refused to sign, saying they wanted to return home, they were beaten with metal rods so badly that some had to be hospitalized. She suffered head injuries.

Among the group were three Muslim men, who were separated and beaten again. Their captors said to the group: "If you don't sign a new contract, we will kill these three men. If any of you really wants to leave, you will have to pay us 500,000 yuan." All of them had no choice but to sign the contract and start scamming for their new employers, under similar work conditions.

Ways of escape

The most common method of escape was to run away from captivity. Two managed to slip away during a wedding ceremony. One jumped from a 2nd floor window and broke her foot, but luckily met a sympathetic car driver, who helped her escape.

Two Kachin women managed to escape by contacting their families on-line, who sought the help of Kachin living in the UWSA-controlled area to liaise with the local authorities to free the women.

The woman trafficked to the Wa mining area was freed when a fellow captive contacted her family in Karen State, who alerted the regime's Anti Trafficking Task Force (ATTF) in Hpa-An. The ATTF in Lashio then came and rescued them.

Complicity of UWSA authorities

Our interviews reveal that the trafficking and exploitation of women for cyber-scamming and sex was taking place with the full knowledge of the UWSA authorities. This can be seen clearly from the experiences of two women released with the help of local Kachin contacts.

In the case of the scamming survivor, her family had contacted Kachin living in Pangsang, who arranged for the Wa police to find her and take her to the police station. However, instead of rescuing her, the police forced her to

sign a new contract with her employer and returned her to the scam centre. A month later, after ongoing efforts by her family's contacts, she was called again to the police station. This time, her Chinese employer personally came and threatened her, telling her she owed him a large amount of money. Seeing a UWSA officer passing by the police station, she ran crying to him, and hugged his legs, begging him for help. Due to his intervention, the police told the woman that if she paid 900 yuan, she could stay in the police jail. She stayed in jail for one month, before her parents came and paid 2,000 yuan to the police for her release.

In the other case, a woman forced to sell sex in a Chinese-owned KTV bar in Mong Bawk was freed after local Kachin liaised with the UWSA authorities. However, this was only on condition that her family paid 6,500 yuan in compensation to her Chinese boss.

Conclusion and recommendations

Since the crackdowns on on-line scamming in the Kokang and Wa areas in late 2023, KWAT's caseload has not included any survivors of trafficking to scam centers in these areas.

However, during 2024, KWAT has seen a resurgence in the number of survivors who have escaped from being trafficked as brides in China. Most of those recently trafficked had crossed the border from the Wa and Mong La regions of eastern Shan State, where there has been no recent conflict.

Given the ongoing demand for brides in China, and growing impoverishment of large sectors of the population in Burma, due to the spreading conflict and collapse of the economy since the 2021 military coup, it is certain that more and more women will fall into the hands of the extensive bride trafficking networks described in this report.

We hope that this report can raise public awareness about the trafficking problem and help women protect themselves from being trafficked. However, the case of a survivor trafficked twice from Burma to be a forced bride in China – both times tricked with the promise of a job as a construction worker -- shows the overwhelming pressure driving women into the arms of traffickers, in spite of first-hand experience of the risks.

Clearly, the trafficking issue will never be solved without addressing the structural root causes of large-scale migration from Burma – which requires an end to military dictatorship and establishment of a federal democracy ensuring equitable, sustainable development throughout the country.

In the meantime, it is urgently needed for authorities on both sides of the border to take measures to prevent and crack down on human trafficking, and improve police procedures assisting those who have been trafficked.

We therefore make the following recommendations:

To the Government of the People's Republic of China:

1. To set up easily accessible, formal channels enabling citizens of Burma to enter and work legally in all areas of China needing foreign labour, without having to rely on smuggling networks that make them vulnerable to exploitation and traffickin
2. To raise public awareness of the plight of foreign trafficked brides – through public campaigns or production of TV dramas or feature films -- so that community members and local officials stop turning a blind eye to the enslavement of foreign brides.
3. To minimize the length of police detention of foreign trafficked persons before deportation, and to stop unjustly detaining trafficking survivors in mental asylums.
4. To authorize Chinese police to liaise with police/security officers of Ethnic Resistance Organizations at border gates when deporting trafficking survivors into areas of Burma under their control.
5. To allow local community volunteers in border areas to freely assist trafficking survivors without fear of arrest.

To Ethnic Resistance Organizations controlling areas of Burma along the Chinese border:

1. To take action against human traffickers and close down any establishments using forced labour.
2. To deport to the Chinese authorities any Chinese nationals involved in human trafficking and forced labour in their areas.

3. To set up and provide sufficient funding for procedures to receive and assist trafficking survivors deported by Chinese police into their areas.
4. To liaise with and facilitate the work of community-based organizations assisting trafficking survivors in their areas.



Kachin Women's Association Thailand

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