

# North Korean Women and Girls Trafficked into China's Sex Trade

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## Abstract

*Up to 200,000 North Koreans have fled their country to live in hiding across mainland China. The vast majority are female and have a precarious life as undocumented refugees without basic legal protection or means to travel to third-countries. The Government of China seeks to arrest and deport them. The Government of North Korea incarcerates, tortures, interrogates, and even executes repatriated citizens. Forced into the shadows of Chinese society, female North Korean refugees become exposed to human trafficking and a sex trade is built upon their exploitation. This article is based on long-term engagement with North Korean women and girls in China and survivors living in exile and documents just some the pathways of North Korean women and girls into prostitution and forced marriage in China.*

## I. Introduction

If the Korean War (1950-1953) is the world's *Forgotten War*, North Korea is our *forgotten human rights crisis*. Sandwiched between World War Two (1939-1945) and the Vietnam War (1955-1975), the conflict in Korea quickly faded from a war-weary international public consciousness. The same can be said of the human rights crisis that has plagued North Korea for the past seven decades. In spite of thousands of testimonies, committed activism, and a 2014 United Nations Commission of Inquiry which established that the human rights violations in North Korea are without 'parallel in the contemporary world',<sup>1</sup> global awareness remains limited.

Faced with global inaction and myriad human rights violations in their homeland – including extermination, murder, enslavement, torture, imprisonment, rape, forced abortions and other sexual violence, persecution on political, religious, racial and gender grounds, the forcible transfer of populations, the enforced disappearance of persons, and the inhumane act of knowingly causing

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<sup>1</sup> See UN Human Rights Council, 'North Korea: UN Commission documents wide-ranging and ongoing crimes against humanity, urges referral to ICC', 17 February 2014.

prolonged starvation – up to 200,000 North Koreans have fled to their country to live in hiding across mainland China.<sup>2</sup>

The vast majority of North Koreans in China are female and have a precarious life as undocumented refugees who lack basic legal protections and are denied the means to travel to third-countries. Trapped between the Government of China who seek their arrest and repatriation and the Government of North Korea who torture, interrogate, incarcerate, and even execute repatriated citizens, North Korean refugees are uniquely vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.<sup>3</sup> Against this backdrop, an estimated 60% of female North Korean refugees in China are trafficked into sex trade.<sup>4</sup> Of that number, almost 50% are forced into prostitution, over 30% sold into forced marriage, and 15% pressed into cybersex.<sup>5</sup>

In its truest sense, conflict-related sexual violence is fundamental to the trafficking of North Korean women and girls in China. North and South Korea have remained at war since 1953, with varying degrees of militarism on both sides of the border. In North Korea, an extreme form of hereditary-authoritarianism emerged from this militarism which has physically and psychologically dominated its people to such an extent that many have been forced to yield, perish, or escape via the only route out of the country: China.

First detected in the mid-1980s, the sex trafficking of North Korean women in China remained small-scale, opportunistic, and localised until two events a decade later connected *supply* with *demand* and transformed the crime into what is today a multi-million-dollar illegal industry.<sup>6</sup> Firstly, the *supply* of potential

<sup>2</sup> Estimates on the number of North Koreans in China vary between 50,000-200,000 and include North Korean nationals and their children, many of whom are born in China but do not receive Chinese citizenship. See UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the detailed findings of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (A/HRC/25/63)*, 7 February 2014, 111.

<sup>3</sup> In breach of its obligations under the United Nations Refugee Convention and aspects of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, China does not allow the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees unimpeded access to aid, screen, or determine the status of North Koreans on its territory.

<sup>4</sup> Sex trade refers to the trafficking of victims into any act for the purpose of sexual exploitation. This figure covers the period of 2015-2018 and reflects the opinions of rescuers who have been based in China. Unless otherwise stated or cited, all figures in this article are based on interviews with survivors and victims and discussions with rescuers.

<sup>5</sup> North Korean victims are not alone in China's sex trade. See *The Guardian*, 'Weddings from hell: the Cambodian brides trafficked to China', 1 February 2016; J. Vu, 'Thousands of Vietnamese women and children sold as "sex slaves"', *Asia News*, 3 November 2010; 'Chinese Marriage Proposals Become Prostitution Nightmares for Some Lao Girls', *Radio Free Asia*, 13 February 2017; 'Myanmar Woman, Trafficked to China to Marry, Hopes to Save Others From Same Fate', *Voice of America*, 23 August 2017.

<sup>6</sup> In the mid-1980s, some female North Korean traders crossed into China to purchase goods for North Korea's nascent black markets and were coerced into forced marriages and prostitution, sometimes in illicit sex shops that sold pay-per-view pornographic videotapes.

sex slaves in China swelled as tens of thousands of North Koreans flowed across the border between 1994-1999 to escape the famine in their country of origin.<sup>7</sup> Largely overlooked by the international community, at least 7000-10,000 North Korean men, women, and children are estimated to have become victims of human trafficking in China by the turn of the century.<sup>8</sup> Men and boys were forced to labour on construction sites and farms under threats of violence and repatriation, while women and girls were sold into domestic labour, manual labour, and an evolving sex trade.

Secondly, as the *supply* of North Koreans in China increased, so did *demand*. In rural townships and villages, out-migrations of marriageable Chinese women had created a buyer's market for foreign brides. And in bigger towns and cities, higher wages led to a greater demand for prostitution among Chinese male migrants.<sup>9</sup> Victims from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia fulfilled demand in China's southern provinces.<sup>10</sup> In north-eastern provinces, men turned to female North Korean refugees.

Connecting *supply* with *demand* have been a tapestry of ethnic Korean and ethnic Chinese brokers, human traffickers, and criminal organisations. Overseeing the prostitution of North Korean victims for as little as ¥30 Chinese Yuan (\$4 United States Dollars) and their sale as *wives* for just ¥1000 Chinese Yuan (\$146 United States Dollars), it can be conservatively estimated that the collective sexual exploitation of female North Korean refugees in China generates annual profits of at least \$105,000,000 United States Dollars (USD).

This article documents just two of multiple pathways into China's sex trade. Bought, sold, and exploited until their bodies are depleted, numerous testimonies spoke of North Korean victims who had perished in China from sexually transmitted diseases and sexual and physical abuse. This author has been fortunate to speak to lucky victims who managed to escape and sadly to others who remain.

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7 North Korea's famine is estimated to have killed between 450,000-2,000,000 people. See UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the detailed findings of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, 39.

8 Estimate provided by a rescuer of North Koreans.

9 See G. Tianming, A. Ivolga & V. Erokhin, 'Sustainable Rural Development in Northern China: Caught in a Vice between Poverty, Urban Attractions, and Migration', *Sustainability* 10.5 (2018): 1-20; Y. Huang et al., 'HIV/AIDS Risk Among Brothel-Based Female Sex Workers in China: Assessing the Terms, Content, and Knowledge of Sex Work', *Sexually Transmitted Diseases* 31 (2004): 695-700; X. Jin et al., "'Bare Branches' and the Marriage Market in Rural China: Preliminary Evidence from a Village-Level Survey', *Chinese Sociological Review* 46.1 (2013): 83-104.

10 Q. Jiang & J. Sánchez-Barricarte, 'Trafficking in Women in China', *Asian Women* 27.3 (2011): 83-111; Y. Liu et al., 'Interprovincial Migration, Regional Development and State Policy in China, 1985-2010', *Applied Spatial Analysis and Policy* 7.1 (2014): 47-70.

## 2. Methodology

Research and interviews conducted over a period of two years connected the experiences of over 45 survivors and victims of sexual violence into clear patterns of sex trafficking and exploitation. In the process of telling their stories, constancies and new details of China's sex trade were exposed to reveal a complex and interconnected illicit industry that accrues vast profits from trafficked women and girls. Unless otherwise stated, all figures in this paper stem from the aforesaid interviews.

The courageousness of survivors, victims, the families and friends of victims, and rescuers and their organisations cannot be overstated. Engaging with victims in China and survivors in South Korea was a fraught process riddled with ethical, security, and political difficulties.<sup>11</sup> Unconventional methods of outreach and research were required.

Throughout this article, and abiding by the wishes of many survivors, the terms *prostitute* and *prostitution*, rather than *sex worker* and *sex work*, are consciously used. Such terminology moves beyond descriptive functions to contest the normalisation of male-dominated standards that govern the commodification of the female body.<sup>12</sup> In this context, understandings of prostitution and forced marriage as *transactional sex*, *survival sex*, or *sex as work* are rejected.<sup>13</sup> *Victim* is used to describe a person forced into sexual slavery and *survivor* to describe a person who has escaped sexual slavery.<sup>14</sup> In accordance with the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Minors, and aligned to the territories in which most documented crimes are committed, this article defines girls as under 18 years of age.<sup>15</sup>

When describing North Koreans in China, this article avoids use of the term *defector*. The term carries a negative connotation of a person who has abandoned or deserted their country and does not accurately describe the experiences of

<sup>11</sup> See: The People's Republic of China, *Exit and Entry Administration Law of the People's Republic of China* (2013); The People's Republic of China, *Mutual Cooperation Protocol for the Work of Maintaining National Security and Social Order in the Border Areas* (1986); UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the detailed findings of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*.

<sup>12</sup> This author adopts the view that a distinction between forced and voluntary prostitution cannot exist. The prostitution of North Korean women and girls is a coercive and gendered practice grounded in patriarchal social structures and is reliant on physical force and other harmful contexts, such as poverty, absent legal aid, and hunger – all of which specifically disadvantage women and girls.

<sup>13</sup> Survival and transactional sex are said to involve the exchange of sex for services, such as food or shelter. See: B. Ozler, 'What Do People Mean When They Talk About "Transactional Sex"?', *World Bank Blog*, 23 February 2012.

<sup>14</sup> In this article, the term 'sexual slavery' refers to all practices that place women and girls in actual or imminent danger of sexual violence.

<sup>15</sup> This is used in place of Article 295 of the North Korean Criminal Law, which defines a child as being under the age of 15.

North Koreans who have been forced into exile by their government's imposition of poverty, hardship, and human rights violations. The terms *exile* and *escapee* are used where appropriate.

Human trafficking and exploitation are defined in accordance with the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organised Crime:<sup>16</sup>

'[T]he recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.'

To define sexual violence, this article uses the World Health Organisation's (WHO) description:<sup>17</sup>

Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the survivor, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.

Where appropriate, interviews conformed to the WHO Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Interviewing Trafficked Women and WHO best practices in researching violence against women.<sup>18</sup> Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities and safety of all victims, families of victims, and survivors in China and elsewhere.

### 3. Pathways into China's Sex Trade

All North Koreans must cross the border with China to escape.<sup>19</sup> Traversing the Yalu or Tumen rivers, most swim or cross on-foot at narrow gullies in summer and edge across the frozen rivers in winter, avoiding thin-ice that has proved fatal for many. Scrambling into mountains and scrubland to survive, North Koreans in China do not enjoy protection under the 1951

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<sup>16</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime and The Protocols Thereto* (Vienna: 2004).

<sup>17</sup> World Health Organization (WHO), *Violence Against Women – Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Against Women* (Geneva, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> C. Zimmerman & C. Watts, *WHO Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Interviewing Trafficked Women* (Geneva, 2003); M. Ellsberg & L. Heise, *Researching Violence Against Women: A Practical Guide for Researchers and Activists* (Washington DC: 2005).

<sup>19</sup> The Korean Demilitarised Zone at the 38th Parallel divides North and South Korea and prevents all but a handful of escapes across this border. North Korea also shares a small border with Russia, but few escapes occur.

Refugee Convention, to which China is a party, owing to Beijing's policy of non-enforcement.<sup>20</sup> Driven by hunger, desperation, and fear, they seek to evade authorities and tentatively make their way toward settlements in China's 2,000,000-strong ethnic Korean communities. Some join relatives or look for employment in factories, farms, or restaurants. Others find occasional work as maids in hotels or the homes of ethnic Korean or South Korean families. Homeless girls, known as *kotjebi*, scavenge for food and money, while others venture further afield into China. Evading the gaze of Chinese authorities, all exist and subsist in the shadows of society – which is where the sex trade awaits.

### 3.1. Coercion, Abduction, and Sale in China

Eighty-four percent of North Korean women and girls trafficked into China's sex trade are victims of coercion, abduction, or sale.<sup>21</sup>

Travelling as individuals or in small groups, North Korean refugees are often conspicuous by their clothing, which can be peculiar to current Chinese fashions, their physical appearance, which can exhibit visible malnourishment, and their inability to speak or understand Mandarin. Sought and preyed upon by human traffickers, strategies of coercion include offers of food, clothing, support, or the chance of onward journeys to South Korea. One victim explained how she was approached by multiple and competing traffickers in a period of just four days after crossing into China. Driven by desperation and fear of arrest, and unable to differentiate between friend and foe, many unwittingly accept the dishonest offers of traffickers.

In cases where coercion fails, human traffickers can resort to abduction. A practice that was once confined to border-towns and rural areas, 18% of interviewees had experienced either abductions or attempted abductions in China. In the majority of cases, contact between the abductor and victims had typically occurred before a kidnapping, which suggests the practice may be used as a last resort if coercion fails. Crude means of abduction are common and many testimonies involved captors using force or the means of surprise. Recent testimonies situated abductions and attempted abductions in cities, towns, places of employment, and public transport.

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<sup>20</sup> North Koreans in China are refugees owing to their inability to return to North Korea without being persecuted and their inability to claim the protection or citizenship of the Government of South Korea while in China. Details of escapes are not included for reasons of safety.

<sup>21</sup> Almost 50% become victims of the sex trade within twelve months of their entry into China and 25% in under one month.

Beside coercion and abduction, one quarter of North Korean victims in China's sex trade have been sold by Chinese nationals, police officers in China's Ministry of Public Security, and sub-brokers.<sup>22</sup>

Sales by Chinese nationals – namely relatives of escapees, employers, opportunistic citizens, and persons masquerading as missionaries or rescuers – have been commonplace since the mid-1990s and have long, and erroneously<sup>23</sup> been attributed to the economically disadvantaged communities of northeast China where victims are groomed and targeted.<sup>24</sup> Known to be prevalent in the border regions of Liaoning and Heilongjiang provinces, the sale of a single young North Korean woman for ¥7500–¥11,600 Chinese Yuan (\$1095–\$1694 USD) is considerable when compared to a minimum monthly wage of just ¥1000 Chinese Yuan (\$147 USD).<sup>25</sup>

The motive for direct sales brokered by lowly-paid police officers in China's Ministry of Public Security appears to be monetary. Throughout summer, police officers in Jilin, Liaoning, and Heilongjiang provinces come into monthly, if not weekly, contact with escaping North Koreans through, for instance, routine checks of family *hukou* registration in townships or raids of brothels in urban centres.<sup>26</sup> Once arrested, Chinese legislation provides that North Koreans should be questioned, identified, and repatriated. Yet in documented cases, notably in sub-bureaus near Shenyang and Yanji, police officers have instead sold arrested female North Koreans to human traffickers.<sup>27</sup>

The sale of North Korean escapees *en route* to freedom in third-countries by sub-brokers is a lesser, but perhaps more insidious practice that has emerged

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<sup>22</sup> The designation 'sub-brokers' refers to brokers, sometimes called secondary brokers, who operate under the employment of a primary private broker. Private brokers and sub-brokers are paid to lead North Korean refugees to safety in foreign countries.

<sup>23</sup> According to one rescuer who experienced direct sales of North Koreans, some Chinese citizens who sell refugees may have recently become unemployed or require a large sum of money for the schooling of their children or for hospital bills. However, no body of evidence on the reasons behind these sales exists.

<sup>24</sup> Growth of just 2.1% in Liaoning Province, 6.3% in Heilongjiang Province, and 6.5% in Jilin Province are slower than the national rate of 6.9%, leading to mass layoffs from industries and declining incomes. See 'Liaoning Worst Performer as China's Northeast Lags Behind Country's Economic Growth', *South China Morning Post*, 21 June 2018.

<sup>25</sup> M. Melnicoe, 'China: Wage Increases Level Off with Economy', *Bureau of National Affairs*, 5 May 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Towns (urban) and townships (rural) are designated within China's administrative divisions. See The People's Republic of China (State Council), 'Administrative Division', [http://english.gov.cn/archive/china\\_abc/2014/08/27/content\\_281474983873401.htm](http://english.gov.cn/archive/china_abc/2014/08/27/content_281474983873401.htm), accessed 26 August 2014.

<sup>27</sup> There is no evidence to suggest systemic links between Chinese police officers and human traffickers, but links between low-paid local police officers and criminal organisations in China are well-established. See the Economist, 'A Policeman's Lot in a Police State: Not Happy', 13 October 2016; P. Wang, 'The rise of the Red Mafia in China: A Case Study of Organised Crime and Corruption in Chongqing', *Trends in Organized Crime* 16.1 (2013): 49-73; X. Chuanjiao, 'Top cops in NE China city protected gangsters', *China Daily*, 17 July 2017.

in recent years. Escape from China is a dangerous undertaking for every North Korean.<sup>28</sup> Each year an estimated 6000 North Korean refugees are arrested and repatriated to fates that include interrogation, torture, starvation, incarceration, sexual violence, physical assault, and even execution.<sup>29</sup> To stand a chance of evading authorities and reaching the relative safety of southeast Asia, North Koreans turn to private brokers who, with the aid of networks of sub-brokers across east and southeast Asia, are experienced in guiding escapees to freedom.<sup>30</sup>

Once a thriving business, the brokering of escapes has been hindered by a host of factors over the past seven years, namely the increased surveillance of citizens in North Korea, arrests of brokers and North Korean refugees by Chinese police, and North Korean agents active in Chinese territory. As these risks have increased, so too have the costs. Many sub-brokers now require advance-payments and higher fees to offset their greater risks. Unable to afford the costs of escape, the number of North Koreans who have reached safety in South Korea has decreased from 2706 in 2011 to just 1127 in 2017.<sup>31</sup> To recoup lost and declining earnings, an unknown, but likely small number of unscrupulous sub-brokers have resorted to the exploitation and extortion of escapees' exiled families and the direct sale of escapees into the sex trade. Although many details cannot be shared, testimonies of sales by sub-brokers have been documented in three provinces and one directly-administered municipality.

***Ms. Kwon from Chongjin City, North Korea***

I cleaned and cooked food to earn money [in Longjing, China]. An ethnic Korean man allowed me to live in his apartment. I was not his wife. He was divorced. His wife had run away to South Korea to marry [another man], so I cooked for him instead of paying him rent (...) When he lost his job in a factory he tried to convince me to marry his friend. He told me that I would be safer. I refused many times (...) He became very angry and sold me.

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<sup>28</sup> Only 32,000 North Koreans have safely reached South Korea, with fewer arriving in 2017 than in any year since 2001. Between January and June 2018, just 488 North Koreans entered South Korea, 87% of whom were female. See: Ministry of Unification, 'Number of North Korean Defectors Entering South Korea', [www.unikorea.go.kr/eng\\_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/](http://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/), accessed on 24 August 2018.

<sup>29</sup> S. Scholte, 'United States Congressional-Executive Commission on China Hearing', <http://www.cecc.gov/sites/chinacommission.house.gov/files/documents/hearings/2012/CECC%20Hearing%20Testimony%20-%20Suzanne%20Scholte%20-%203,5,12.pdf>, accessed on 22 November 2018.

<sup>30</sup> A journey may cost between \$5000-\$14,000 USD per-person. Private brokers undertake this dangerous work for profit, but this is not necessarily a mercenary endeavour. Exiled North Korean brokers living in South Korea rarely possess college, university, or higher education and face social discrimination and unemployment. Utilising their knowledge and experiences of escaping North Korea and China, brokering is an important means of survival.

<sup>31</sup> Ministry of Unification, 'Number of North Korean Defectors Entering South Korea'.



***Ms. Paek from Chagang Province, North Korea***

When the [Chinese] police asked for my documentation, I cried and told them I was North Korean. I begged them to allow me to travel to Thailand [where North Koreans can claim asylum]. They arrested me and took me to the [security bureau]. I was there for ten hours and no one asked me any questions. They put me in their car and drove me to the countryside (...) I was sold to a marriage broker.

***Ms. Hwang from Musan, North Korea***

I was 14 years old [and] my mother's cousin [in China] arranged for me to work in a garment factory in Yanbian [China] (...) I crossed the river at night [with a broker] and was driven to a house (...) I realised that everything had been a lie when I arrived (...) A 36-year-old man bought me for ¥24,000 Chinese Yuan (\$3500 USD) (...) I escaped before his mother wanted me to have a child.

***Ms. Ha from Hoeryong City, North Korea***

Our mother [who had already escaped to South Korea] arranged for my sister and I to escape (...) We were driven to Changchun [China], then a new broker drove us to Shenyang [China]. He stopped outside an apartment and told us we would resume our journey in the night. I may sound ignorant, but I had no idea that I was being sold (...) We were forced to become prostitutes in a building behind a factory.

***Ms. Seo from Yonsa County, North Korea***

I met a woman whose sister was sold [by sub-brokers] (...) Her family [in South Korea] had sold many possessions, such as a car and televisions, to raise money to pay the brokers, but [the brokers] kept demanding more [money]. When the family said they had no more money, the brokers threatened to sell the sister to a brothel in Chengdu (...) The family never heard from the brokers again.

### 3.2. Human Trafficking from North Korea

Driven by the demand for young North Korean women and girls, a growing number of Chinese brokers have established trafficking networks that stretch into North Korean territory.<sup>32</sup> Created to identify and target high-value young women and girls at source, specialist brokers are now able to sell victims directly from North Korea in a matter of days or weeks.

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<sup>32</sup> Demand is driven by a voracious appetite for prostitution in China, a high-turnover of prostitutes owing to arrest, death, and even abduction by rival criminal organisations, and the low-price of North Korean women and girls.

Instead of crossing borders, Chinese-based brokers employ trusted sub-brokers or relatives in North Korea to fulfil orders from Chinese pimps, madams, and other buyers. Travelling to markets, remote villages, and transport hubs in the northern provinces of North Korea, sub-brokers search for girls and women under the ages of 25-27 who appear destitute and ‘suitable’ for the sex trade in China. Approached with false offers of employment, either in a neighbouring province or in China, victims are trafficked to the border by service cars and trains before being taken into China on foot. Passed to new brokers, victims are escorted directly to safe-houses, brothels, or to further buyers.<sup>33</sup> Physical and sexual violence is commonplace during these journeys, in particular drug rape, penetrative rape, and groping.

Victims who are not sold immediately are confined to safe houses where they can be locked in rooms and subjected to rape and gang-rape – a process referred to by one survivor as ‘*training*’. Supplementary violence designed to induce compliance is delivered in the forms of starvation, physical beatings, and verbal threats of repatriation. Testimonies have placed the direct trafficking of victims, many of whom are sold to secondary brokers, pimps, and madams, to specific satellite-towns in Jilin and Heilongjiang provinces. Few women are thought to be sold as *wives* through this form of trafficking.

***Ms. Song from [hometown redacted], North Korea***

There is a house where women are taken before they are sold. When I arrived, there were many [North Korean] women, but also girls ... One girl had her vagina and anus ripped apart. A woman told me there was nothing left: no skin, just a large hole. I was so shocked when I watched the girl crawl around the room and try to stand and lean on the wall. I could see where she had leaked fluids and there was blood on the floor. She was crying.

***Ms. Lee from [hometown redacted], North Korea***

I came [to China] three years ago to work in a clothing factory. My father is ill and I needed money to help my family pay for his medical care [in North Korea] ... After five months the factory official sold me into marriage ... I have a son now, so I cannot escape and leave him. I do not know what will happen to him if I escape.

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<sup>33</sup> Testimonies indicated that sub-brokers can coerce women with the use of photographs of modern workplaces and comparatively luxurious apartments where North Korean workers are said to live – all of which are used to deceive victims. According to one survivor now living in South Korea, the photographs may simply have been found online: “*I have thought about this [issue] and the factory I was shown was probably not even in China... I was ignorant and just assumed the man had been to the factory.*” For an explanation of human trafficking inside North Korea, see J. Burt, *Us Too: Sexual Violence Against North Korean Women and Girls* (Korea Future Initiative: London, 2018).

*Ms. Chang from Musan, North Korea*

A broker offered me work in China at a restaurant. My husband told me to work for one-year and then send for him and our daughter with the money ... The broker lied. I stayed in a house in a village for five days, then I was sold [as a prostitute] to a bathhouse.

*Ms. Ko from [hometown redacted], North Korea*

We were told [the men] would take us to [a] factory (...) [The men] stopped [the van] and asked us for money. We had no money so they asked whether we had family in South Korea. No one said anything and [the men] became very angry. There was an argument and [the men] started to drag us out of the van. I was trying to stop the first man when the second man punched me in the back of my head twice. He took me into the forest and raped me (...) I was motionless and I closed my eyes and cried.

*Ms. Kwon from Kimchaek City*

There is a detention centre in Tumen [China] (...) Many [North Koreans] who are arrested end up there (...) I will not forget two (...) sisters aged 12 and 14. The oldest had blood stains on her trousers. I could see other women looking at that. I was told [the sisters] were both raped by a man in China who had pretended to help them. [The Chinese police] had not even given [the elder sister] new clothes.

#### 4. Prostitution

The trafficking of North Korean women and girls into mainland China's sex trade is, demonstrably, neither unstructured nor opportunistic in nature. It is a highly lucrative illicit industry that is defined by transnational networks and layers of organisation that that involve brokers, human traffickers, public officials, and the clients who pay to buy, rape, and sexually assault women and girls. At its very core, it is an industry with just one purpose: the trade in female bodies for profit.

Criminal organisations have a central role in the prostitution of women and girls. Re-emerging in China after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, criminal organisations grew by capitalising on the country's economic reforms, especially the decentralisation of decision-making to cities, towns, and villages. Exploiting local environments and populations with the support of corrupt local public officials – known as the 'Red Mafia' – criminal organisations gradually became

involved in a range of localised illicit activities, from drug smuggling and protection racketeering to human trafficking and prostitution.<sup>34</sup>

Today, over 30,000,000 members of criminal organisations operate in mainland China. From small groups of less than twenty to large organisations of over 200, they are most heavily concentrated in southern provinces and regions where ethnic minorities are subject to social and economic discrimination.<sup>35</sup> Reliant upon the *guanxi* system and highly local networks of political and public officials, criminal organisations are largely confined to small areas in cities, towns, and townships. In the case of ethnic Korean criminal organisations, these geographic and political boundaries have pushed and incentivised the exploitation of resources at-hand: namely, female North Korean refugees.<sup>36</sup>

Despite being criminalised under Chinese law, prostitution remains a significant and visible component of daily life.<sup>37</sup> Over 10,000,000 prostitutes are believed to operate in China, while brothels – some of which explicitly advertise young North Korean prostitutes on street walls and posters – are clearly visible in cities, urban towns, and rural townships across the northeast provinces. Visited by more than 10% of Chinese men aged 20-24 and 17% of Chinese men aged 18-61,<sup>38</sup> prostitution is estimated to contribute 6% of China's gross-domestic-product.<sup>39</sup>

Termed '*xiaojie*', North Korean victims are forced to work in brothels that masquerade as *entertainment* or *service* venues, namely bathhouses, saunas, karaoke bars, cafes, massage parlours, beauty parlours, barbershops, hair salons, small hotels, and restaurants.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Guanxi* refers to the interpersonal networks that have come to involve reciprocal favours between criminal organisations and public officials in China. See: S. Lo, *The Politics of Controlling Organized Crime in Greater China* (Oxford: Routledge: 2016); P. Wang, *The Chinese Mafia: Organized Crime, Corruption, and Extra-Legal Protection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2017); R. Han, 'Discussion on Relationship between Guanxi and Corruption in China', *British Journal of Economics, Management & Trade* 14.3 (2011):1-8.

<sup>35</sup> See: Lo, *The Politics of Controlling Organized Crime in Greater China*; 'Organised Crime in China', *Stratfor Worldview*, 19 August 2008.

<sup>36</sup> On the governance of minorities in China, see: G. Tuttle, 'China's Race Problem', *Foreign Affairs* (2015):39-46; C. Larson, 'China's Minority Problem – And Ours', *Foreign Policy*, 30 September 2009; 'Organised Crime in China', *Stratfor Worldview*.

<sup>37</sup> See: J. Kaufman, 'HIV, Sex Work, and Civil Society in China', *The Journal of Infectious Diseases* 204.5 (2011): S1218-S1222; US Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report* (Washington DC, 2017), 134.

<sup>38</sup> S. Liao, J. Schensul & I. Wolfers, 'Sex-Related Health Risks and Implications for Interventions with Hospitality Women in Hainan, China', *AIDS Education and Prevention* 15.2 (2003): 109-121; P. Suiming, 'The Realistic Response to China's Prostitution Problem', *Sixth Tone*, 30 November 2017.

<sup>39</sup> L. Zhang, 'How China's Market Economy has Fuelled a Prostitution Boom', *South China Morning Post*, 12 January 2018.

<sup>40</sup> '*Xiaojie*' is a Mandarin Chinese expression signifying a prostitute. The term is also used in ethnic Korean communities

Victims enslaved in *entertainment* venues such as karaoke bars are typically aged between 15-25 and are confined inside or close to a venue. Remaining in the service of a pimp or madam, rather than a venue's owner, victims may engage 2-4 men every night and be subjected to penetrative vaginal rape, groping, forced masturbation, and gang-rape. In *service* venues, such as barbershops, victims are typically aged between 17-39 and are confined on or off-site. Victims may engage 1-9 men every day and suffer penetrative vaginal rape, oral rape, and forced masturbation.<sup>41</sup>

Brothels identified as exploiting North Korean women and girls were mainly located in satellite towns and townships surrounding larger cities in northeast China. Between 25-75 minute travel from a city or a larger urban area, they existed in districts with large floating populations of male migrants and in rural townships populated by male agricultural labourers and farmers. Though the population of any one town or township in northeast China may vary between 5000 and in excess of 60,000 citizens, it should be seen as indicative that a total of sixteen brothels enslaving North Korean prostitutes were identified in just one town close to a sub-provincial city in Jilin province.

Where organised prostitution of North Koreans exists, it is principally dominated by pimps or madams, who may be associated with criminal organisations and are responsible for the recruitment of prostitutes, their 'marketing', and the collection of fees paid by clients.<sup>42</sup> Provision of food, shelter, cigarettes, and occasionally drugs are intended to keep victims in a state of dependency. Enforcers and corrupt police officers attempt to ensure that prostitutes do not escape, while in Shanghai, survivors explained how North Korean prostitutes are branded with tattoos, such as lions and butterflies, to signify ownership and dissuade abductions from rivals.

Though the prostitution of North Korean women and girls in China is predominantly controlled by ethnic Korean pimps, madams, and criminal organisations, it is a diversifying and evolving illicit industry.<sup>43</sup> For example, one ethnic Korean criminal organisation operating in Shenyang has 'rented' North Korean victims to an ethnic Chinese prostitution-ring in Panjin. A survivor detailed how she taken from a brothel in Shenyang and passed to men in Panjin who

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<sup>41</sup> Earnings are typically retained by a pimp, madam, or venue manager. Few survivors were provided regular payment, although some were able to use smartphones, both for business and personal use.

<sup>42</sup> In some hotels and restaurants, prostitution can be controlled by the venue's manager.

<sup>43</sup> Valued for its ability to generate large profits in a market driven by strong male demand, prostitution in China has been subject to lax policing, despite sporadic crackdowns. For example: Z. Caixiong, 'Guangdong Plans Special Force to Tackle Online Prostitution', *China Daily*, 4 December 2015; BBC, 'China Executes Female Gangland Prostitution Ringleader', 7 December 2011; Walk Free Foundation, The Global Slavery Index, 'China', <https://www.globalslaveryindex.org/2018/findings/country-studies/china/>, accessed on 29 August 2018; Suiming, 'The Realistic Response to China's Prostitution Problem'.

drove her to accommodation used by migrant workers and forced her to have sex with multiple workers every day for one week. At the end of the week, she was exchanged for another North Korean victim on the outskirts of the city before being returned to Shenyang.

***Ms. Woon from [hometown redacted], North Korea***

There are four [North Korean] women working here (...) I have been in China for nine months. It is my second time. The first time I could not find work and returned [to North Korea] (...) I am fortunate because I just cook and I am good at that. The other women do lots of jobs and are also made to have sex with men who come to the restaurant (...) It is terrible for them.

***Ms. Choi from Hyesan, North Korea***

Our madam came into the room and told us when a client had arrived. We were sometimes told to reapply our makeup or to look happier (...) The prettiest woman would have to welcome the [client] to the bathhouse and, in turn, we would introduce ourselves by our fake names and state our prices (...) The [clients] could tell we were North Korean by our accents and some would even ask me about my life in North Korea.

***Ms. Pyon from Chongjin, North Korea***

I was sold [to a brothel] with six other North Korean women at a hotel. We were not given much food and were treated badly (...) After eight months, half of us were sold again. The broker did bad things to me. When I arrived [at the new brothel] I had bruises on my body. [The broker] was beaten then stabbed in the legs by some members of the gang.

***Ms. Shin from Anju City, North Korea***

[North Korean] women who [are prostituted] in Shenyang, Yanji, Zhuhai, and Dalian [have sex] with more South Koreans than ethnic Korean or ethnic Chinese men (...) Although the South Korean men can already be married and have children, they lie to North Korean women that they are single. A South Korean man even promised a friend that he would take care of her as a wife in South Korea. She believed him and found him when she escaped to South Korea, but he was already married with three children. There are a few North Korean women I know that experienced this.

#### 4.1. Forced Marriage

Forced marriage, namely the sale of women into cohabitation with men, is illegal but commonplace in rural China. Most prevalent in low-socioeconomic regions with skewed sex-ratios and high female out-migration, *wives* can be bought for as little as ¥1000-¥50,000 Chinese Yuan (\$146-\$7330 USD). Considerably less expensive than a conventional marriage, which may

cost up to twenty-times an annual household income,<sup>44</sup> the act of buying a North Korean *wife* is tolerated and often defended by local populations in China's so-called 'bachelor villages' who perceive the crime as a legitimate function to maintain the viability of a village or township. One survivor described the role of forced marriages to that of 'power-generators': '*Without North Korean women, the village [I was sold to] would have died many years before I was there*'.

Held in safe houses in the countryside and mountains of Jilin, Liaoning, and Heilongjiang provinces, North Korean victims are sold to prospective *husbands* by marriage brokers.<sup>45</sup> Often well known in their local and neighbouring villages and townships, and linked, either financially or by family, to local public officials, they are commonly ethnic Korean men aged between 24-55. Some marriage brokers will operate alone, but many work alongside family members, in particular their wives, who assume different roles.

Once the price of a *wife* has been agreed between a marriage broker and prospective *husband*, a victim is collected or delivered to her *husband's* household. Fearful of escape, a *husband's* family will confine a newly purchased *wife* to their home for weeks or months and rarely grant her access to mobile phones and computers or allow her to move without an escort. From the outset, North Korean *wives* are expected to undertake multiple unpaid duties: domestic labour in the mornings and evenings, agricultural and other forms of manual labour during the days, and sexual intercourse with their *husband* and, on occasion, his male relatives, at night.<sup>46</sup> Less than 10% of survivors recalled their *husbands* using any form of contraception, meaning that over half of survivors became pregnant within two years of being sold.<sup>47</sup>

The introduction of a North Korean *wife* to a township or village is almost always known to the local community and, despite its illegality, rarely reported to authorities. In situations where North Korean *wives* are arrested, bribes can be paid to secure their release. In a village in Heilongjiang province, one *husband* who lacked the money for a bribe that would release his *wife* from arrest consented to her prostitution to public officials, after which she was released.

Although some survivors recalled their Chinese *husbands* as benign, North Korean *wives* are trafficking victims who are sold, raped, exploited, and en-

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44 X. Jin et al., "'Bare Branches" and the Marriage Market in Rural China: Preliminary Evidence from a Village-Level Survey', *Chinese Sociological Review* 46.1 (2013):83-104.

45 While marriage brokers once travelled from town-to-town to advertise victims, they increasingly advertise online and through social media with photographs and details of victims.

46 Manual and agricultural labour is often imposed so that *wives* 'earn back' the fees spent on their purchase.

47 Unlike some cases of trafficked Vietnamese brides in China, where 'dates' and sham marriages can occur, none of the North Korean survivors interviewed for this article had experienced a wedding ceremony or legal marriage. See: T. Hancock, 'Rural Chinese Men Are Buying Vietnamese Brides For \$3,200', *Agence France Press*, 18 August 2014.

slaved.<sup>48</sup> Their Chinese *husbands* are enablers of human trafficking, perpetrators of sexual violence, and supporters of an illicit industry that profits from female bodies. Studies indicate that forced marriages in China inspire the perpetration of further sexual crimes, such as rape and enslavement, and encourage environments where female security is continually diminished.<sup>49, 50</sup>

***Ms. Park from Musan, North Korea***

One of my nieces went to China when she was aged 24. She was sold into a forced marriage and found herself in the early stages of pregnancy only after she had escaped to South Korea (...) After giving birth, she sent the baby to an orphanage but took the baby back. She was traumatised from the experience and still suffers.

***Ms. Ahn from Sinuiju, North Korea***

When [my friend] first escaped to China, she [was married into] a family of three men: a father and his two sons. She was forced to have sex with the men alternately. And she could not run away. I cannot even imagine what it was like.

***Ms. Kang from Hamhung, North Korea***

My aunt escaped [North Korea] in 2004 (...) She was sold to a disabled Chinese man so she escaped to Harbin and found work in a factory. The owner told her he would help her, but he sold her to a man in the countryside (...) Her second Chinese husband is so poor. We are saving money to bring her [to South Korea].

***Ms. Byeon from [hometown redacted], North Korea***

I do not know how much he paid [for me] (...) I plant crops and harvest them, usually on my own (...) He drinks alcohol every day and sometimes he will leave for 2-3 days (...) Everyone here watches me so I cannot escape.

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<sup>48</sup> A common perception that North Korean *wives* sold to ethnic Korean, rather than Chinese, *husbands* will experience better lives based on their ability to communicate was rejected by interviewees. No correlations between a shared-language and lesser experiences of sexual and physical violence were found.

<sup>49</sup> J. Banister, 'Shortage of Girls in China Today', *Journal of Population Research* 21.1 (2004): 19-45.

<sup>50</sup> Spilling across borders, the sale of North Korean women as *wives* is not confined to China. South Korean men, notably those in the country's southern provinces, have long purchased foreign brides, including North Korean women from brokers in China. Understood to be increasingly common, victims are trafficked and smuggled from China to South Korea on commercial flights and ferries. Once in South Korea, victims are known to endure further exploitation, sexual violence, and other human rights violations at the hands of South Korean *husbands*. On the prevalence of legal and illegally brokered marriages in South Korea, see The Economist, 'Farmed Out: South Korea's Foreign Brides', 24 May 2014; J. Scobey-Thal, 'Decoder: Asia's Bride Market', *Foreign Policy*, 26 March 2015.



***Ms. Cho from Sinpo, North Korea***

When I escaped in the late 1990s, most women were sold into forced marriage. Today, women are sold into prostitution. My friend's mother escaped from Heilongjiang Province and when she reached Yanji she saw North Korean girls forced into prostitution. Girls who cross these days are put in accommodation in Yanji, are fed, and then forced to have sex with men every night.

***Ms. Paek from Hamhung, North Korea***

I met a [North Korean] woman who had been sold twice to the same man [in South Korea]. The first passport she was given was not of a good quality (...) The broker made the man pay more money for a better passport. On the second journey she arrived in South Korea (...) Because she was unable to have children her husband told her he wasted a lot of money and beat her. She lived in three countries and had three bad lives.

## 5. Conclusion

This article shed a light on the systematic rape, gang-rape, sex trafficking, sexual slavery, prostitution, forced marriage, and forced pregnancy of North Korean women and girls in China. Pushed from their homeland by a regime that survives through tyranny and oppression, women and girls are passed through the hands of brokers, traffickers, and criminal organisations and sold into a brutal sex trade. Exploited by men until their bodies are depleted, many victims never escape the drug addictions, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, physical violence, and long-term consequences of sexual violence they are forced to endure.

At a time when significant global capital is invested in China and, more recently, political capital expended on the rulers of North Korea, rather than its people, it is a damning indictment that North Korean women and girls are left languishing in the sex trade. Condemnation is insufficient. Only tangible acts can dismantle China's sex trade, confront a North Korean regime that abhors women, and rescue sex slaves scattered across brothels, remote townships, and cybersex dens in mainland China. With knowledge of great wrongs comes responsibilities. The question remains of who will champion North Korean human rights?

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