Sex Trafficking Ring Found Selling Pakistani Women into Prostitution in China

Jonathan Abbamonte / May 23, 2019

Pakistani authorities have arrested 12 suspected members of a sex trafficking ring that was found to be selling Pakistani girls into prostitution in China. The incident is part of an alarming trend that has seen sex trafficking and bride trafficking into China increase in recent years.

Earlier this month, the Pakistani Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) announced that its anti-human trafficking unit had rounded up eight Chinese nationals and four Pakistanis suspected to be connected to the trafficking operative. According to authorities, the trafficking ring was involved in arranging fake marriages between Chinese men and Pakistani girls who, once they arrived in China, were forced into prostitution.

Suspects arrested included a Chinese woman, an alleged matchmaker, and a fake Pakistani priest who was detained at a marriage ceremony between a Chinese man and a Christian girl. According to authorities interviewed by Reuters, suspects have confessed to sending at least 36 Pakistani girls to China for prostitution.

Pakistani authorities gained key intelligence on the trafficking ring after police had conducted a raid on a wedding ceremony three weeks ago in the eastern city of Faisalabad.

Ring members allegedly issued counterfeit documents showing that the Chinese men had converted to Christianity or Islam. Islamic law in Pakistan prohibits a Muslim woman from marrying a non-Muslim man.

Chinese sex trafficking gangs operating in Pakistan primarily target impoverished Christian communities concentrated in the country’s northeastern Punjab province. Christians constitute only a small minority in Pakistan, about 1.6% of the population. The overwhelming majority of Pakistanis are Muslim.
In Pakistan, where marriages are usually arranged by the parents, traffickers often lure Christian parents into handing over their daughters for fake marriages with financial incentives and promises that their daughter will have a happy life in China. Parents are often told that prospective grooms are wealthy recent converts to Christianity, claims which often turn out to be untrue according to reports.

In April, the country’s sex trafficking problem gained national attention in Pakistan after a Pakistani television broadcaster, ARY News, gained entry into an illegal matchmaking center in Lahore. There, six Pakistani women, including two teen girls, were found with their alleged Chinese husbands. Victims interviewed by ARY News at the time said that their families had been paid nearly $3,000 and were promised monthly payments of about $280 and a Chinese visa for one of their male relatives. Traffickers also were unable to produce government-issued marriage certificates or documents showing proof of conversion to Islam when questioned.

Over the past few years, travel between China and Pakistan has increased due to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a $62 billion infrastructure investment project that serves as a key part of Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative.

In April, the Chinese embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan released a statement saying that China was “cooperating with Pakistani law enforcement agencies to crack down on illegal matchmaking centers,” according to VOA. The Chinese embassy has also denied reports that
some Pakistani women were trafficked into China for the purposes of selling their organs as “misleading and groundless.”

Two days after the Chinese embassy in Pakistan issued its statement, an article appeared in the Chinese state-run Global Times stating that the Chinese government prohibits marriage brokers from arranging marriages with persons in other countries. The Global Times article also noted that Chinese authorities had earlier this year shut down a pair of illegal transnational matchmaking businesses in China.

According to the Nikkei Asian Review, Chinese ambassadors in Pakistan have been known to celebrate the marriages of Chinese men to Pakistani women on social media.

Recent reports of sex trafficking and bride trafficking of Pakistani women into China echo decades of reports of widespread human trafficking of women into China from other countries including Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and North Korea.

Due to China’s one-child policy and decades of rampant sex-selective abortion, China today has a deep gender imbalance. In China today there are an estimated 30-40 million excess men, most of whom will be unable to find wives. According to one study, as many as one in five men in China will be unable to find a wife before they turn 50 years old.

In Chinese society, men are often expected to pay a dowry to the bride’s family. Due to traditional, culturally-rooted attitudes, women in China often have little interest in men unless they own property or make substantially more money than they do.

In recent years, many women have also migrated out of rural areas in search of better employment opportunities and more desirable marriage prospects, leaving men in rural areas with few options. Many low-income men are also finding it difficult to afford the skyrocketing cost of dowry. Marriage brokers often sell women trafficked from foreign countries at a fraction of the cost of dowry demanded by local Chinese families. These trends collectively have fueled a rampant sex trafficking industry in China.

No reliable statistics exist on the number of women who have been trafficked into China. Women who are able to escape back to their home countries often keep their experiences secret to avoid stigma and derision from their families and communities. The thousands of known cases of women smuggled into China are believed by human rights experts to be only the tip of the iceberg.

Victims are often sold to traffickers by friends, acquaintances, or even relatives. Traffickers often seek to entice cash-strapped families with large cash payments or false promises of
employment for their daughters. Victims themselves are often lured into trafficking schemes with false promises of employment only to find themselves detained by smugglers, shown off to prospective buyers, and sold as brides. Sometimes women are resold to multiple buyers if their first husbands tire of them.

Women who are sold as brides are often mistreated by the families they live with, often being forced into domestic servitude and sex slavery. Reports of trafficked women being beaten, abused, locked in the house, or routinely raped are not uncommon. According to a recent report from Human Rights Watch, women trafficked from Myanmar are often detained until they bear a child. Women who escape are often forced to leave any children they have behind.

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