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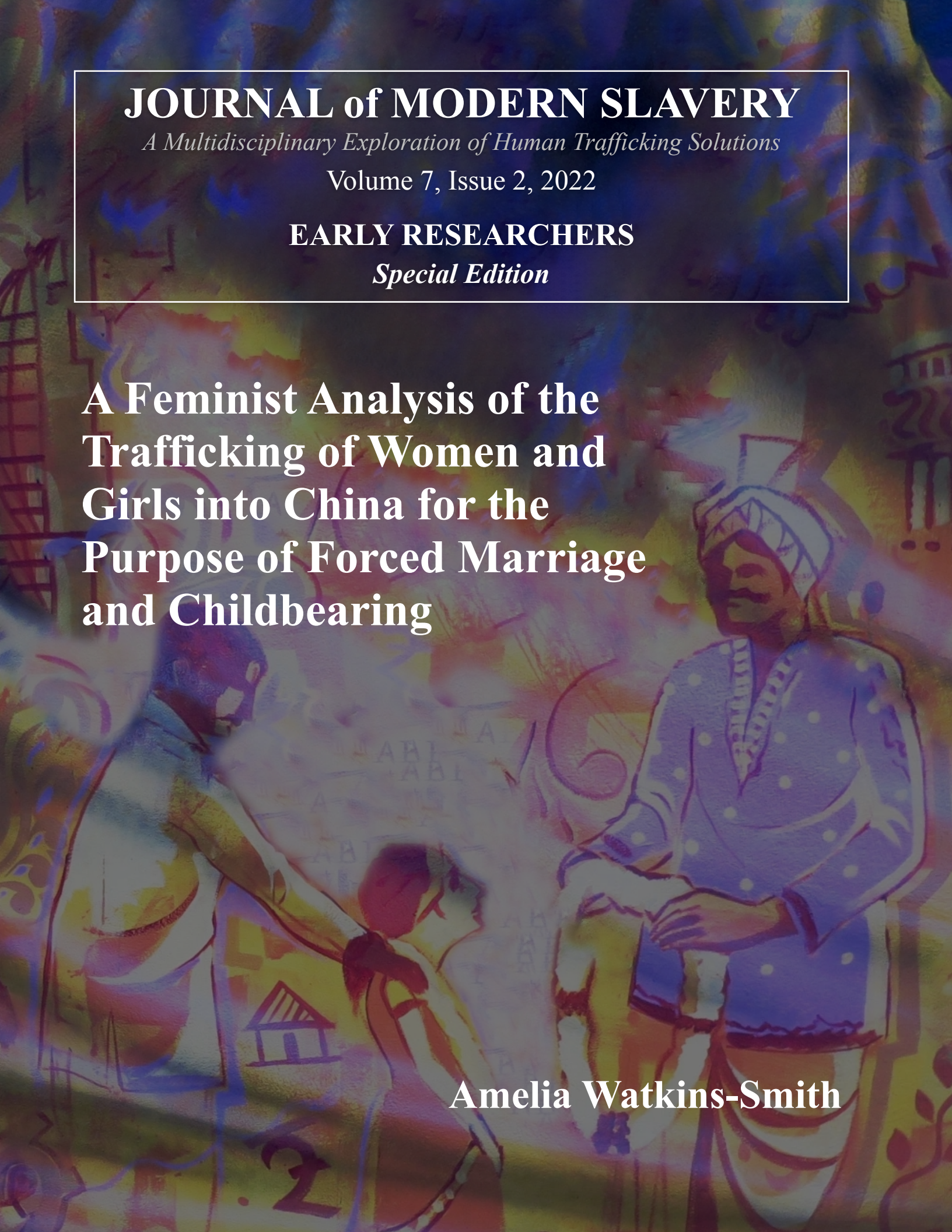
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A Feminist Analysis of the Trafficking of Women and Girls into China for the Purpose of Forced Marriage and Childbearing

Amelia Watkins-Smith



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Amelia Watkins-Smith

PhD student and Rights Lab research associate at the University of Nottingham.

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Abstract

The trafficking of women and girls into China for forced marriage and childbearing is a major social problem in our global society. This article serves to improve understanding of the problem by conducting a thematic analysis of 46 narratives of survivors from Cambodia, Myanmar, North Korea, and Vietnam. The theoretical lens of social constructivist feminism is utilised to illustrate how constructions of gender evolve throughout and within the process to form a multi-level system of gender which dictates power inequalities, thus both facilitating and justifying the trafficking of women and girls into China for forced marriage and childbearing.

Keywords: Gender, Forced Marriage, Bride-Trafficking, China.

Introduction

“My name is Jang Mi Kyung... I was living with my mother [in North Korea]... we were very poor. So I decided to cross the river [to China] to work... I followed a man who was going to get me a job. But soon as I crossed the river, I found I was trapped... I was married forcefully to a Chinese man... Later I found that the man had paid 15,000 [Chinese Yuan] for me. Now I have no choice but to live as his sexual play mate. I can't go out. This is like Hell to me... I like to have freedom of my own. Please help me.”¹

¹ Jang Mi Kyung, North Korea, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/2569> (accessed 10 February 2022).

The 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Art.16.2) states that ‘marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of intending spouses’.² Yet over seven decades later, forced marriage persists as a significant problem in our global society with the most recent estimate suggesting that 15.4 million people globally were living in a forced marriage on any given day in 2016.³ This includes women and girls like Jang Mi Kyung⁴ who are trafficked into China from neighbouring nations for the purpose of forced marriage and childbearing.

Within existing literature regarding Chinese bride-trafficking⁵ there is an agreed-upon assumption that it is ‘at its core, a profound expression of gender discrimination’.⁶ However, there is no clear evidence or understanding of *how* constructs of gender operate in this specific context. Hence, this research presents a unique contribution to the field by analysing the role of gender throughout the process of Chinese bride-trafficking, giving precedence to the survivor voice. The central research question is: *What is the role of gender in the trafficking of women and girls into China for the purpose of forced marriage and childbearing?*

This research utilises the Antislavery Usable Past VOICES Archive;⁷ the world’s largest archive of modern slavery survivor narratives which holds 46 narratives of survivors of Chinese bride-trafficking from Myanmar,⁸ North Korea, Cambodia, and Vietnam. These narratives are analysed using thematic analysis and the theoretical framework of social constructivist feminism.

The data paints a nuanced picture of how the dynamics of gender operate throughout this social problem across three core models of socially constructed gendered relations: *men exploiting women*, *women exploiting women*, and *systems exploiting women*. It is argued that these models operate independently and interdependently to form a multi-level system of gender

² “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” *United Nations*, 1948, https://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/UDHR_Translations/eng.pdf (accessed 10 February 2022).

³ “Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage,” *International Labour Organisation and Walk Free Foundation*, 2017, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_575479.pdf (accessed 10 February 2022): 43.

⁴ This article follows VOICES database guidance to ‘acknowledge the survivor’s name [and] provenance’ when citing narratives. See Hannah-Rose Murray, “Voices: Ideas for using survivor testimony in antislavery work,” *Rights Lab, University of Nottingham*, October 2019, <https://www.antislaverycommissioner.co.uk/media/1336/voices-ideas-for-using-survivor-testimony-in-antislavery-work.pdf> (accessed 10 February 2022): 6.

⁵ The term ‘Chinese bride-trafficking’ is herein utilised as an abbreviation for ‘the trafficking of women and girls into China for the purpose of forced marriage’ per Heather Barr, “China’s Bride Trafficking Problem,” *Human Rights Watch*, October 31, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/31/chinas-bride-trafficking-problem> (accessed 10 February 2022).

⁶ Heidi Stöckl *et al.*, “Trafficking of Vietnamese women and girls for marriage in China,” *Global Health and Research Policy* 2, no.28 (2017): 8.

⁷ “Voices Database,” *Rights Lab, University of Nottingham*, 2021, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/> (accessed 10 February 2022).

⁸ Formerly Burma. The name Myanmar is problematic because it was introduced by military dictators, but is used by citizens and the UN, so is also used in this article. See Nehginpao Kipgen, *Myanmar: A Political History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016).

that functions over time (across the chronological stages of bride-trafficking), and between levels of society (individual and structural). This multi-level system of gender operates to dictate power inequalities, thus facilitating and justifying the practice.

Literature Review

Existing literature broadly addresses two key elements of Chinese bride-trafficking. Namely, the Chinese demand for forced marriage, and the supply of vulnerable women in neighbouring nations. These are taken in turn.

Demand

In China, there is an intense cultural pressure for all men to marry and continue the family line.⁹ However, China also has a distorted sex ratio of 120 men to 100 women, and a dearth of approximately 32 million women¹⁰ within a total population of over 1 billion.¹¹ This is commonly attributed to the One Child Policy of 1978 whereby a preference for male children prompted gender-selective abortions.¹² Consequently, there is an oversupply of men in the marriage market, and not all are able to marry, threatening both their masculinity and ability to fulfil cultural expectations.¹³ This has caused ‘a huge demand for wives through illegal means’ (i.e., bride-trafficking).¹⁴

Demand for bride-trafficking is supported by the distortion of the traditional practice of matchmaking. Per Confucian thought, Chinese marriages are not a romantic endeavour, but a practical family arrangement whereby parents carry primary responsibility for the marriage of

⁹ Stöckl *et al.*, “Trafficking of Vietnamese women and girls for marriage in China.”

¹⁰ Under the age of 20 in 2005.

¹¹ Zhou Chi *et al.*, “Changing Gender Preference in China Today: Implications for the Sex Ratio,” *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 20, (2013): 51; Wei Xing Zhu, Li Lu, and Therese Hesketh, “China’s excess males, sex selective abortion, and one child policy: analysis of data from 2005 national intercensus survey,” *British Medical Journal (International ed.)* 338, no.7700 (April 2009).

¹² Quanbao Jiang and Jesús J. Sánchez-Barricarte, “Bride price in China: the obstacle to ‘Bare Branches’ seeking marriage,” *The History of the Family* 17, no.1 (February 2012): 3; Geping Qiu, Sheldon X. Zhang, and Weidi Liu, “Trafficking of Myanmar women for forced marriage in China,” *Crime, Law and Social Change* 72, no.1 (February 2019): 38.

¹³ Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte, “Bride price in China,” 3; Erin M. Kamler, “Women of the Kachin Conflict: Trafficking and Militarized Femininity on the Burma-China Border,” *Journal of Human Trafficking* 1, no.3 (August 2015): 219.

¹⁴ Gracie Ming Zhao, “Trafficking of women for marriage in China: Policy and practice,” *Criminal Justice* 3, (February 2003): 86.

their children.¹⁵ Therefore, matchmaking is utilised by some parents to find a spouse for their child.¹⁶ This is not the case for all marriages in China, and the 1950 Marriage Law abolished ‘all feudal forms of marriage’, including arranged marriage.¹⁷ However, some parents have responded to their son’s inability to marry by employing a matchmaker to *purchase* a wife for him,¹⁸ thus blurring the lines between traditional matchmaking and bride-trafficking.¹⁹

The bride price is also utilised to facilitate bride-trafficking. The bride price is traditionally paid to compensate the loss of a daughter who will now benefit her husband’s family.²⁰ Yet within bride-trafficking, it is used to justify the trafficker’s payment.²¹ This is termed ‘the sale of women for marriage’ since the bride’s consent is deemed unnecessary.²² The bride price is often cheaper for a women from overseas,²³ meaning that for many men, the simplest and cheapest way to marry is to purchase a wife.²⁴

In many cases, demand for bride-trafficking is also socially accepted. Bride-trafficking is illegal in China, punishable with up to three years in prison.²⁵ Yet the ‘collective social normalization’ process sees the crime destigmatised and legitimised within some Chinese communities.²⁶ To some, the purchase of a wife is ‘not considered a disgrace... but rather an

¹⁵ Therese Hesketh and Zhu Wei Xing, “Abnormal sex ratios in human populations: causes and consequences,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences – PNAS* 103, no.36 (July 2006); Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte, “Bride price in China,” 8; Gordon Kerr, *A Short History of China: From Ancient Dynasties to Economic Powerhouse* (Somerset: Pocket Essentials, 2013), 26.

¹⁶ Qiu, Zhang, and Liu, “Trafficking of Myanmar women for forced marriage in China,” 37.

¹⁷ Zhao, “Trafficking of women for marriage in China,” 92.

¹⁸ Qiu, Zhang, and Liu, “Trafficking of Myanmar women for forced marriage in China,” 38.

¹⁹ Laura K. Hackney, “Re-evaluating Palermo: The case of Burmese women as Chinese brides,” *Anti-Trafficking Review* 4, no.1 (2015): 3.

²⁰ Stevan Harrell and Sara A. Dickey, “Dowry systems in complex societies,” *Ethnology* 24, no.2 (April 1985); Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte, “Bride price in China,” 2; Zhao, “Trafficking of women for marriage in China,” 87.

²¹ Alivn Hoi-Chun Hung, “Tortured between Two Hells: A qualitative Analysis of the Collective Social Normalization of the Trafficking of Brides from Myanmar to China,” *Journal of Human Trafficking*, (June 2021): 3.

²² June J. H. Lee “Human trafficking in East Asia: current trends, data collection, and knowledge gaps,” *International Migration* 43, no.1-2 (2005); Stöckl *et al.*, “Trafficking of Vietnamese women and girls for marriage in China,” 1; Zhao, “Trafficking of women for marriage in China.”

²³ Hung, “Tortured between Two Hells,” 3.

²⁴ Zhao, “Trafficking of women for marriage in China,” 90.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 92.

²⁶ Hung, “Tortured between Two Hells,” 4.

inherent right'.²⁷ Patriarchal attitudes that justify the subordinate position of women are central to this moral tolerance.²⁸

Demand is also exacerbated in rural areas.²⁹ Gender equality policies have mainly been implemented through urban reforms,³⁰ causing rural women to migrate to cities to seek financial and social independence.³¹ Yet the patrilocal marriage system deems rural men immobile.³² As a result, the rural gender distortion is increased, and literature agrees that bride-trafficking is a rural problem, whereby entire villages are termed 'Vietnamese Bride Villages' due to their high prevalence of forced marriage.³³

Evidently, the intersection of multiple factors causes the Chinese demand for bride-trafficking.³⁴ Amongst these factors, gender inequality³⁵ and the gender imbalance³⁶ are important. This is evident through threatened masculinity of men unable to marry, the gendered practice of the bride price, patriarchal attitudes that contribute to collective social normalization,³⁷ and the role of urban gender equality policies.

Supply

China's neighbouring nations are home to a supply of vulnerable women and girls to meet the demand for bride-trafficking. This vulnerability stems from a broad range of socio-

²⁷ Zhao, "Trafficking of women for marriage in China," 90.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 89.

²⁹ Qiu, Zhang, and Liu, "Trafficking of Myanmar women for forced marriage in China," 38.

³⁰ Yuhui Li, "Women's Movement and Change of Women's Status in China," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 1, no.1 (2000): 34.

³¹ *Ibid.* 38-9.

³² Delia Davin, "Marriage Migration in China: The Enlargement of Marriage Markets in the Era of Market Reforms," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 12, no.2-3 (2005): 174.

³³ Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte, "Bride price in China," Qiu, Zhang, and Liu, "Trafficking of Myanmar women for forced marriage in China," 36.

³⁴ Annie Bunting, Benjamin N. Lawrance, and Richard L. Roberts, *Marriage by force?: Contestation over consent and coercion in Africa* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2016); Qiu, Zhang, and Liu, "Trafficking of Myanmar women for forced marriage in China," 36; Zhao, "Trafficking of women for marriage in China," 90.

³⁵ Hackney, "Re-evaluating Palermo," 1.

³⁶ Hung, "Tortured between Two Hells," 3; Weidi Liu, Geeping Qiu and Sheldon X Zhang, "Easy Prey: Illicit Enterprising Activities and the Trafficking of Vietnamese Women in China," *Asian Journal of Criminology* 16, no.4 (July 2020); Qiu, Zhang and Liu, "Trafficking of Myanmar women for forced marriage in China."

³⁷ Hung, "Tortured between Two Hells," 4.

economic factors including extensive famine and economic devastation in North Korea;³⁸ a lack of employment opportunities and rising debt in Cambodia;³⁹ widespread unemployment and poverty in Vietnam;⁴⁰ and long-term racism, violence, and armed conflict in Myanmar.⁴¹ This vulnerability is exacerbated by weak borders with corruption of law enforcement officials on both sides.⁴² Increased cross-border transportation also aids traffickers' efforts to illegally enter China.⁴³

The supply of women and girls also depends upon constructions of gender. This is evident in three main ways. Firstly, women are 'less visible than men since they are primarily located in the private sphere' and are consequently more vulnerable to exploitation.⁴⁴ Secondly, women are under pressure to migrate to China, further increasing their vulnerability to bride-trafficking. Some women are pressured to migrate for work due to 'militarized femininity' in Myanmar and increasing demands on women as both housekeepers and breadwinners.⁴⁵ Other women are pressured to migrate for marriage due to Vietnamese cultural expectations for all women to marry,⁴⁶ and female reliance on spousal income and to financially support ageing parents in North Korea.⁴⁷ Traffickers utilise this pressure to lure victims under the guise of employment, or with deceptions regarding consensual marriage.⁴⁸ Thirdly, constructions of gender also justify bride-trafficking through the stigmatization and exclusion of victims when they return home. This is realised through customary legal practices which negate the voices of

³⁸ Kathleen Davis "Brides, Bruises and the Border: The Trafficking of North Korean Women into China," *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 26, no.1 (Winter-Spring 2006).

³⁹ Matt Blomberg and Kong Meta, "Wedlocked: tangled webs trap Cambodian 'brides' in China," *Thomson Reuters Foundation*, March 11, 2019, <https://news.trust.org/item/20190311004959-hf9x6/> (accessed 10 February 2022).

⁴⁰ Stöckl *et al.*, "Trafficking of Vietnamese women and girls for marriage in China," 2.

⁴¹ Qiu, Zhang, and Liu, "Trafficking of Myanmar women for forced marriage in China," 37.

⁴² Hackney, "Re-evaluating Palermo," 9; Laetitia Lhomme, Siren Zhong, and Billie Du, "Demi Bride Trafficking: A Unique Trend of Human Trafficking from South-East Asia to China," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 22, no.3 (April 2021): 34; Yiwei Xia *et al.*, "Mapping Trafficking of Women in China: Evidence from Court Sentences," *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no.122 (2020).

⁴³ Ralf Emmers, "The Threat of Transnational Crime in South-East Asia: Drug Trafficking, Human Smuggling and Trafficking and Sea Piracy," *UNISC Discussion Paper*, May 2003, <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/767/76711296006.pdf> (accessed 10 February 2022); Lhomme, Zhong, and Du, "Demi Bride Trafficking," 28.

⁴⁴ Specifically in North Korea, see Kyunghye Kook "I Want to Be Trafficked so I Can Migrate!': Cross-Border Movement of North Koreans into China through Brokerage and Smuggling Networks," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 676, no.1 (March 2018): 120, 121.

⁴⁵ Kamler, "Women of the Kachin Conflict."

⁴⁶ Stöckl *et al.*, "Trafficking of Vietnamese women and girls for marriage in China," 2.

⁴⁷ Davis, "Brides, Bruises and the Border," 132.

⁴⁸ Qiu, Zhang, and Liu, "Trafficking of Myanmar women for forced marriage in China," 48.

women,⁴⁹ harsh conditions on return (including detention-interrogation facilities and forced infanticide),⁵⁰ and social rejection from home communities.⁵¹

The extent to which women do, or do not, have agency to enter bride-trafficking is a key debate within this literature.⁵² Agency in human rights violations operates on a continuum.⁵³ In this case, at one extreme of the continuum women report no agency, and are lured and deceived into bride-trafficking, and are unable to leave their forced marriage.⁵⁴ In the middle, women exercise partial agency. Some migrate to China of their own accord and are then trafficked into a forced marriage.⁵⁵ Others are openly recruited as brides but are ‘lied to about the details of the men they were set up to marry’.⁵⁶ At the other end of the continuum, some women present full agency in entering these marriages, and ‘choose to be sold to Chinese men’ as a survival strategy.⁵⁷ Although it is then questioned whether this fits the definition of forced marriage. For example, other women simply marry Chinese men through choice; a legitimate ‘love marriage’.⁵⁸

It is evident that the intersection of multiple socio-economic factors, weak borders, and constructions of gender generate a supply of vulnerable women and girls in China’s neighbouring nations to fulfill the demand for bride-trafficking.

⁴⁹ Kamler, “Women of the Kachin Conflict,” 224.

⁵⁰ Davis, “Brides, Bruises and the Border,” 134, 135.

⁵¹ Runa Lazzarino, “Between Shame and Lack of Responsibility: The Articulation of Emotions among Female Returnees of Human Trafficking in Northern Vietnam,” *Antropologia* 1 (November 2014).

⁵² Jennifer K. Lobasz, “Beyond Border Security: Feminist Approaches to Human Trafficking,” *Security Studies* 13, no.2 (May 2009).

⁵³ Austin Choi-Fitzpatrick and Amelia Watkins-Smith, “Agency Continuum? A Non- Binary Approach to Agency Among Human Rights Violators and Victims,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 43, no.4 (November 2021).

⁵⁴ Kamler, “Women of the Kachin Conflict,” 218; W Courtland Robinson and Casey Branchini, “Estimating trafficking of Myanmar women for forced marriage and childbearing in China,” *Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and KWAT*, December 2018, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ETFM_Full%20Report_07Dec2018_Final.pdf (accessed 10 February 2022): viii, 63.

⁵⁵ Hackney, “Re-evaluating Palermo,” 8; Robinson and Branchini, “Estimating trafficking of Myanmar women for forced marriage and childbearing in China,” 62.

⁵⁶ Qiu, Zhang, and Liu, “Trafficking of Myanmar women for forced marriage in China,” 48.

⁵⁷ Hackney, “Re-evaluating Palermo,” 3, 10 (emphasis added); Hung, “Tortured between Two Hells,” 8; Stöckl *et al.*, “Trafficking of Vietnamese women and girls for marriage in China.”

⁵⁸ Robinson and Branchini, “Estimating trafficking of Myanmar women for forced marriage and childbearing in China,” 53, 43.

Summary

Existing literature acknowledges the role of gender in Chinese bride-trafficking. Regarding Chinese demand, gender operates in threatened masculinity of men unable to marry, the bride price, patriarchal attitudes influencing collective social normalization,⁵⁹ and urban gender equality policies. Regarding supply in bordering nations, gender operates in increased female vulnerability to exploitation, pressures on women to migrate for work or marriage, and the stigmatisation of women when returning home. Indeed, ‘there can be little doubt that bride-trafficking is... a profound expression of gender discrimination’.⁶⁰

Yet whilst constructions of gender are frequently cited as important elements of this social problem, they are not yet fully understood. Analyses of gender currently sit independent from each other, and there is no overall understanding of the way that gender operates in Chinese bride-trafficking as a whole. These understandings are also mainly interested in the causes of bride-trafficking and do not fully consider the role of gender in the maintenance of, and after, the forced marriage. Moreover, the consultation of survivor voices in current literature is limited as many studies focus on governance and policy, and the analysis of court documents.⁶¹ Therefore, this article addresses a gap in knowledge by specifically considering the role of gender *throughout* the process of Chinese bride-trafficking, giving precedence to the survivor voice.

Theory and Methods

Research Paradigm

This research adopts a constructionist ontological approach, and an interpretivist epistemological approach. Therefore, analysis is conducted ‘through an examination of the interpretation’ of relevant social actors (i.e., survivors) per the underlying philosophy of qualitative research that meaning is socially constructed by individuals.⁶² Marriage is not understood as ‘fact’, but as a social construct. Bride-trafficking is understood as the result of multiple social structures and relationships, not a fixed reality.

Reflexivity is engaged with throughout the research process. Dominant personal assumptions and prejudices include a Western-centric perspective as the research concerns a different cultural and political context to that of the author, and a predilection towards victims/

⁵⁹ Hung, “Tortured between Two Hells,” 4.

⁶⁰ Stöckl *et al.*, “Trafficking of Vietnamese women and girls for marriage in China,” 8.

⁶¹ Davis, “Brides, Bruises and the Border;” Qiu, Zhang, and Liu, “Trafficking of Myanmar women for forced marriage in China.”

⁶² Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 5th Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 327; Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th Edition (Newark: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 3.

survivors as the author has previously worked with survivors of Chinese bride-trafficking in Myanmar.⁶³ These assumptions and prejudices are repeatedly confronted, specifically in the data analysis process. This article moves away from Western-centric views by utilising a survivor-informed approach, giving precedence to the voices of survivors.

Theory

This research utilises the theoretical framework of social constructivist feminist theory. Feminism is broadly defined as social and political movements that aim to enhance rights for women.⁶⁴ This large field has contested boundaries but primarily consists of the political movement advocating for gender equality, and the academic understanding of the world through the lens of gender.⁶⁵ This research focuses on the latter. Gender is defined as ‘the socially constructed dichotomy of masculine-feminine... shaped only in part by biologically constructed male-female dimensions’.⁶⁶ Hence, social constructivism is also inherent to feminism. There are multiple readings of social constructivism, but it is here defined as the theory of knowledge whereby perceptions of reality are corporately produced and reproduced by popular assumptions in society.⁶⁷ Social constructivist feminist theory is well-suited to this research question since it facilitates a thorough interrogation of the social constructions of gender that adversely affect women in Chinese bride-trafficking.

Data

Data collection is conducted via the Antislavery Usable Past VOICES Archive;⁶⁸ the world’s largest archive of modern slavery survivor narratives. The publicly available archive holds over 900 survivor testimonies, including 46 narratives of survivors of Chinese bride-trafficking. This includes women and girls trafficked from Myanmar (26), North Korea (12), Cambodia (7), and Vietnam (1).

⁶³ Bryman, *Social Research Methods*.

⁶⁴ Deborah Frances-White, *The Guilty Feminist* (London: Virago Press, 2020), 5.

⁶⁵ Laura Sjöberg and J. Ann Tickner, *Feminism and International Relations: Conversations about the Past, Present and Future* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 5.

⁶⁶ V. Spike Peterson, *Gendered States: Feminist (Re)Visions of International Relations Theory* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 1992), 8.

⁶⁷ Annika Björkdahl, “Norms in International Relations: Some Conceptual and Methodological Reflections,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 15, no.1 (June 2010): 10; Vivien Burr, *An introduction to social constructionism* (London: Routledge, 1995); Matthew J. Hoffmann, “Norms and social constructivism in international relations,” *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of International Studies*, December 22, 2017, <https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-60?print=pdf> (accessed 10 February 2022): 2.

⁶⁸ Rights Lab, “Voices Database.”

This dataset is limited. The narratives are pre-existing, so are not specifically iterative to this research question. They are taken from a range of sources including non-governmental organisation websites, research reports, and radio interviews. There is also numerical distortion between the countries.

Yet this data is considered valuable for two main reasons. Firstly, it enables a survivor-informed answer to the research question. Survivor narratives are understood as specialist knowledge presented by experts and thus have potential to significantly enhance academic understanding.⁶⁹ Secondly, and more pragmatically, ‘primary data collection on topics of this sensitive nature is difficult in China and... it is only prudent’ to utilise available secondary data before conducting fieldwork.⁷⁰ Therefore, this research utilises secondary data before further primary research is conducted in the field.

Ethics

Since this data set is publicly available, ethical considerations regarding the data collection process have already been addressed.⁷¹ This research follows all guidance of the database regarding the use and analysis of the narratives.

Analysis

Thematic analysis is well-suited to this research because it facilitates a flexible approach to the data whereby the voices of participants can be prioritised. Moreover, thematic analysis conducted within a constructivist framework – as this research is – does not focus on individuals but ‘seeks to theorise the sociocultural contexts and structural conditions that enable the individual accounts’.⁷² This aligns well with the research question and paradigm. Braun and Clarke’s six-phase guide to conducting thematic analysis is followed.⁷³ Coding is conducted using NVivo. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, an inductive approach is employed to generate themes, with a specific awareness of reflexivity, as above.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Murray, “Voices,” 8.

⁷⁰ Qiu, Zhang, and Liu, “Trafficking of Myanmar women for forced marriage in China,” 40.

⁷¹ Rights Lab, “Voices Database”.

⁷² Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Using thematic analysis in psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no.2 (2006): 85.

⁷³ *Ibid.* 87.

⁷⁴ Nektaria Pouli *et al.*, “The experience of living with knee osteoarthritis: exploring illness and treatment beliefs through thematic analysis,” *Disability & Rehabilitation* 36, no.7 (June 2013).

Findings and Analysis

Data shows three core themes of socially constructed gender relations operating within Chinese bride-trafficking: *men exploiting women*, *women exploiting women*, and *structures exploiting women*. Findings and analysis are presented within each core theme in turn. These are then drawn together to illustrate how the multi-level system of gender operates within and between them.

The chronological stages of Chinese bride-trafficking are identified as *migration*, *marriage*, and *motherhood*, and are utilised throughout. These stages are not exhaustive and do not represent all women. Some women are exploited in other sectors during the trafficking process,⁷⁵ and not all women experience forced childbearing and motherhood within the forced marriage.⁷⁶ However, the stages are representative of the data analysed in this study.

Men Exploiting Women

The male exploitation of women occurs across the three chronological stages of Chinese bride-trafficking.

Within the migration process, male brokers⁷⁷ subject female victims to gender-based violence.

*“The broker slapped me. This continued for a few days... Then the broker raped me. The broker got mad – to calm himself down at night he raped me. It was a violent rape. When I did not take off my clothes he beat me.”*⁷⁸

*“He took a rope – he showed it to me... “If you try to run away from here, look at this – I will tie you up,” he said.”*⁷⁹

Within the forced marriage, male “husbands” subject female victims to gender-based violence.

*“At night I had to have sex with the Chinese man. I couldn’t stand it. I kept crying... but then they beat me severely.”*⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Stöckl *et al.*, “Trafficking of Vietnamese women and girls for marriage in China.”

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 4; Robinson and Branchini, “Estimating trafficking of Myanmar women for forced marriage and childbearing in China.”

⁷⁷ ‘Broker’ refers to a perpetrator or ‘trafficker’.

⁷⁸ Htoi Nu Ja, Myanmar, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/2293> (accessed 10 February 2022).

⁷⁹ Ja Tawng, Myanmar, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/2282> (accessed 10 February 2022).

⁸⁰ Ja Tsin Mai, Myanmar, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/2294> (accessed 10 February 2022).

“The Chinese man raped me. Then he locked me in the room for the whole day... He came in and had sex with me every night. But one night it could not be okay anymore—it hurt too much... I refused to take off my clothes. The Chinese man kicked me, and I hit the corner of the wall. That’s how I got this scar.”⁸¹

Female victims are also subjected to rape within the forced marriage with the explicit purpose of forced childbearing.

“The Chinese man told me I would need to have a baby. I said I don’t want to have a baby. He pushed back and asked me to have a baby.”⁸²

Here the masculine-feminine dichotomy is active in constructing power inequalities between the powerful male perpetrator and the powerless female victim.⁸³ This is evident through the male control of female bodies and sexuality via gender-based violence and rape across the three chronological stages. This is also evident in the dehumanisation of women, as victims are treated in animalistic ways being beaten, held captive, fed in their bedroom (or “cage”), and forced to work. This is epitomised as Sook Joo recounts *“I was not a human in that house”*.⁸⁴ In both instances, the patriarchal expectation of men as powerful is realised through the abuse of female victims, and bride-trafficking is consequently facilitated by this performance of gendered expectations of dominant masculinities and submissive femininities.

The distinction between gender and sex is acknowledged here. Gender is defined as ‘the socially constructed dichotomy of masculine-feminine’, whereas sex refers to the *biological* distinction between men and women.⁸⁵ Thus, it may be argued that forced childbearing is not a question of gender, but of sex, since it is based on female biology and reproductive organs (sex), not socially constructed notions of femininity (gender). However, to draw a dichotomy between sex and gender is overly simplistic. Instead, this research understands sex and gender as co-constructed concepts.⁸⁶ The act of childbearing is a distinctly female pursuit and is thus dictated by sex. Whereas *forced* childbearing involves actions of gender-based violence and rape which are facilitated by gender hierarchies that deem men powerful over women. This forced childbearing also stems from gendered expectations for all men to continue the family line

⁸¹ Htoi Nu Ja, Myanmar, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/2293> (accessed 10 February 2022).

⁸² Ja Seng Htoi, Myanmar, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/2295> (accessed 10 February 2022).

⁸³ Peterson, *Gendered States*.

⁸⁴ Sook Joo, North Korea, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/1863> (accessed 10 February 2022).

⁸⁵ Peterson, *Gendered States*, 8.

⁸⁶ Anna Fausto-Sterling, “The problem with sex/gender and nature/nurture,” in *Debating Biology*, ed. Gillian A. Bendelow, Lynda Birke, and Simon J. Williams (London: Routledge, 2005).

through the birth of a child.⁸⁷ Thus, gender-based violence with the purpose of forced childbearing is also a result of patriarchal beliefs and expectations.

It is further argued that these social constructions of gender justify bride-trafficking through the hostility, shame, and stigma victims experience when (and if) they return home.

“[I] was sent back to North Korea and placed in a correctional facility.”⁸⁸

“My husband then divorced me and told me I could not have a relationship with my children anymore... among my relatives, every person condemns and looks down on me.”⁸⁹

In these accounts, the responsibility for male-inflicted abuse and harm is given to the female victim, who suffers the consequent social exclusion. Thus, the male exploitation of women is rationalised and legitimised through victim-blaming since the female victim is perceived to be at fault. This victim-blaming attitude and behaviour again correlates with patriarchal ideology that men are powerful and privileged over women.

In summary, the socially constructed masculine-feminine dichotomy, and consequent power inequalities, play a central role in the facilitation and justification of Chinese bride-trafficking through the male control of female victims before, during, and after the forced marriage.

Women Exploiting Women

However, to view exploitation within Chinese bride-trafficking as a purely male pursuit is overly simplistic since female perpetrators also exploit female victims across the chronological stages.

Female brokers assist in the recruitment trafficking of victims.

“She just said there are many jobs – in the shop... in a restaurant... [She] arranged everything from the camp to get to China.”⁹⁰

“When we arrived the Shan-Chinese woman locked the door from the outside and warned us not to run away. She said if we try to run she will cut off our hands and legs.”⁹¹

⁸⁷ Stöckl *et al.*, “Trafficking of Vietnamese women and girls for marriage in China.”

⁸⁸ Park Ji-hyun, North Korea, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/1714> (accessed 10 February 2022).

⁸⁹ Seng Ja Ngai, Myanmar, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/2284> (accessed 10 February 2022).

⁹⁰ Seng Ja Aung, Myanmar, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/2290> (accessed 10 February 2022).

⁹¹ Nang Nang Tsawm, Myanmar, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/2291> (accessed 10 February 2022).

The mothers of Chinese “husbands” also abuse victims.

“Then the mother beat me... Every time I was beaten, I did not know what to do. I was bleeding from my nose and my mouth... No matter what, they beat me.”⁹²

“I discovered that I was in the house of a Chinese man... I had to do lots of housework. I had to wash their clothes, cook for them, give a bath to his parents.”⁹³

The “mother-in-law” also exercises violence and manipulation to achieve forced childbearing.

“I was locked in the room for one year. Before I had a baby, the family members – especially the mother-in-law – treated me badly. Her face was furious. Sometimes they didn’t feed me because I didn’t get pregnant as soon as possible.”⁹⁴

“When I had sex with him, his parents would lock the door from the outside.”⁹⁵

Constructions of gender are interesting here since there is no male-female dichotomy. Instead, femininities are plural, and gender hierarchies operate on a continuum.⁹⁶ For example, the marriage is instigated by the “mother-in-law” exercising power over the victim as she purchases a wife for her son.⁹⁷ This power is maintained since the couple live in the “husband’s” family home. Therefore, the “mother-in-law” is more powerful than the victim for reasons that are not gendered, and a hierarchy of femininities is formed within the family whereby the victim is exploited by her more powerful “mother-in-law”. This is evident in physical violence, the restriction of food, and obligatory housework and caring responsibilities.

Social constructions of gender play an active role within these hierarchies of femininity. Female brokers rely on demand for bride-trafficking which stems from patriarchal norms including the preference for male children, the bride price, and patriarchal attitudes that

⁹² Ja Tsin Mai, Myanmar, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/2294> (accessed 10 February 2022).

⁹³ Ja Htoi Tsawm, Myanmar, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/2287> (accessed 10 February 2022).

⁹⁴ Seng Ja Ban, Myanmar, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/2289> (accessed 10 February 2022).

⁹⁵ Pan Pan Tsawm, Myanmar, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/2288> (accessed 10 February 2022).

⁹⁶ J. Ann Tickner and Laura Sjoberg, “Feminism,” in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, ed. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 228.

⁹⁷ Hesketh and Zhu, “Abnormal sex ratios in human populations;” Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte, “Bride price in China.”

contribute to collective social normalization.⁹⁸ Forced childbearing encouraged by the “mother-in-law” stems from patriarchal expectations for men to continue the family line and relies upon gender-based violence and rape. Thus, socially constructed gender roles and pressures are active in encouraging women to exploit women within the bride-trafficking process.

Hierarchies of femininity also facilitate long-term control over the victim.

“I ran away, leaving my daughter in that horrible place... it was freezing outside. I had no money... my daughter would either starve or freeze to death if she left with me.”⁹⁹

“After we give birth, no one cares about us anymore... I did not give birth naturally, I had to have an operation. When I did this, the Chinese family told the doctor to cut a part of my womb so that I could not have any more children.”¹⁰⁰

By conflating freedom from forced marriage with the abandonment of a child, the “mother-in-law” ensures women are less likely to flee. By inflicting female genital mutilation (FGM) on the victim, the “mother-in-law” ensures the victim is unable to have any more children. These are both reliant upon the female gender and sex of the victim, which are therefore active in the exploitation of victims both within and beyond the forced marriage. In summary, the role of gender is more complex than a dichotomy that simply subordinates women and honours men.¹⁰¹ Rather, socially constructed perceptions of gender operate on a continuum whereby hierarchies of femininity deem female brokers and “mothers-in-law” more powerful than victims. These hierarchies vary along the chronological stages as brokers operate in the short-term at migration and then leave, whereas “mothers-in-law” operate on a longer-term basis through the marriage and motherhood stages, maintaining exploitation in the long-term through childbirth and FGM. These hierarchies of femininity uphold patriarchal norms since they actively exploit – not empower – women.

Structures Exploiting Women

Lastly, gender operates within and between the individual and structural levels of society.¹⁰² Analysis so far has focused on the individual, but now turns to focus on how social

⁹⁸ Hesketh and Zhu, “Abnormal sex ratios in human populations;” Hung, “Tortured between Two Hells,” 4; Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte, “Bride price in China;” Qiu, Zhang and Liu, “Trafficking of Myanmar women for forced marriage in China;” Zhao, “Trafficking of women for marriage in China.”

⁹⁹ Sook Joo, North Korea, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/1863> (accessed 10 February 2022).

¹⁰⁰ Seng Ja Ban, Myanmar, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/2289> (accessed 10 February 2022).

¹⁰¹ Tickner and Sjoberg, “Feminism,” 226.

¹⁰² Barbara J. Risman, *Gender Vertigo* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Amy S Wharton, *The Sociology of Gender: An Introduction to Theory and Research*, 2nd Edition (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 9.

constructions of gender are embedded into structural practices that play a key role in Chinese bride-trafficking.

The pressure to provide for one's family through marriage to a Chinese man is reported to be a push factor encouraging female migration to China.

*"I wanted to ensure my family's wellbeing, I had to marry a Chinese man. My family would live on the money they got from selling me."*¹⁰³

*"My mother had no money and [I was told] I should help her by going to China and marrying a Chinese man."*¹⁰⁴

The bride price also facilitates the forced marriage.

*"People would come to take a look at me... They would come and haggle over my price... I was eventually sold for 5,000 yuan."*¹⁰⁵

*"The bride's price tag depends on her age and looks. The youngest and best-looking ones sell up to 20,000 yuan. A bride that's worth only 3,000 yuan is tough to sell."*¹⁰⁶

Data did not include significant evidence of the structural exploitation of women in the latter chronological stage of *motherhood*.

Within migration there is a structural pressure for women to provide for their family through marriage to a Chinese man. This subversion of the male breadwinner model in favour of female provision perhaps demonstrates the contradictory nature of social constructs of gender.

Yet in both cases the female role is submissive to that of the male. In the traditional model, the female is submissive to the male breadwinner. In this model, the female provides through submission to a "husband" in a forced marriage in China. Therefore, the patriarchal belief of men as powerful over women is consistently upheld. This does not deem women passive. As earlier established, the extent to which women have agency in this decision to migrate is a key debate within literature, and this variation is mirrored in the data. However, women who decide to enter bride-trafficking to provide do so within the broader patriarchal context of submission.

¹⁰³ Park Ji-hyun, North Korea, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/1714> (accessed 10 February 2022).

¹⁰⁴ Bopha B., Cambodia, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/1889> (accessed 10 February 2022).

¹⁰⁵ Park Ji-hyun, North Korea, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/1714> (accessed 10 February 2022).

¹⁰⁶ Chun Young-Hee, North Korea, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/1868> (accessed 10 February 2022).

The pressure for women to marry to provide is dependent on gendered assumptions. The structural commodification of women through the bride price is essential in ensuring the practice of is profitable for both traffickers and families of origin.

Moreover, the bride price also relies on socially constructed gendered expectations of marriage. Narratives show that expectations of femininity – namely, physical appearance, sexual history, and age – are utilised to determine the bride price. Yet the same expectations are not made of the men marrying these women.

“Most of the men who buy their brides tend to be physically or mentally ill, extremely lazy, or the poorest men in the village... we were being sold to unmarriageable men”.¹⁰⁷

The bride price is further utilised to justify the exploitation of women within forced marriage

*“Last time my husband hit me, he even said: ‘You, do you have any idea how much I paid for you?’”*¹⁰⁸

Thus, the bride price is a structural manifestation of social constructions of gender that facilitates and justifies the subordination of women before and during bride-trafficking.¹⁰⁹ In summary, social constructions of gender are embedded into structural practices that play a key and interdependent role in shaping power inequalities that perpetuate Chinese bride-trafficking.

A Multi-Level System of Gender

To draw the three core themes together, it is evident that data paints a complex and nuanced picture of the dynamics of gender within Chinese bride-trafficking.

At the individual level, socially constructed perceptions of gender, and consequent power inequalities, operate on a continuum. Perceptions of masculinity and femininity sit at either extreme, forming a power imbalance between male perpetrators and female victims which facilitates and justifies the practice of Chinese bride-trafficking across the three chronological stages and beyond. Hierarchies of femininity also operate between these extremes, deeming female perpetrators (brokers and “mothers-in-law”) more powerful than female victims. At the structural level, constructions of gender are embedded into the structural pressure for women to provide through marriage to a Chinese man, and the bride price. These structural practices intersect with each other to support bride-trafficking.

To further develop this notion of intersectionality, it is argued that the three core themes of *men exploiting women*, *women exploiting women*, and *systems exploiting women* also operate

¹⁰⁷ Sook Joo, North Korea, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/1863> (accessed 10 February 2022).

¹⁰⁸ Kang Sun-Mi, North Korea, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/1871> (accessed 10 February 2022).

¹⁰⁹ Stöckl *et al.*, “Trafficking of Vietnamese women and girls for marriage in China,” 1.

interdependently as they intersect to form a multi-level system of gender. This is illustrated across the three chronological stages in turn.

“I believed her and thought I was so lucky... The broker told me there would be no need to use [my ID card] in China, and if someone found it, they would know we were illegal. So that’s why she took the ID card... Me and my friend tried to stay together... But the Chinese men got mad and dragged us apart.”¹¹⁰

Within the migration process a female broker (*women exploiting women*) acts through deception and the confiscation of identity documents. She operates in collaboration with a male broker (*men exploiting women*) who physically controls the victim.

“A woman from my village called and said that my mother had no money and I should help her by going to China and marrying a Chinese man. She herself had married her two daughters off to Chinese men and they sent her [money].”¹¹¹

Additionally, a female broker (*women exploiting women*) utilises the bride price and consequent female pressure to migrate to support their family (*systems exploiting women*) to coerce the victim’s migration to China.

“Last time my husband hit me, he even said: ‘You, do you have any idea how much I paid for you?’”¹¹²

Within the forced marriage, gender-based violence (*men exploiting women*) intersects with the bride price (*systems exploiting women*) to justify control over the victim within forced marriage

“I don’t know why they beat me. One day they beat me a lot. Even the neighbour came to the house and tried to stop them. When the neighbour stopped the mother, then the son beat me again. When the neighbour stopped the son, then the mother beat me... I did not know what to do. I was bleeding from my nose and my mouth... No matter what, they beat me.”¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Seng Ja Ban, Myanmar, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/2289> (accessed 10 February 2022).

¹¹¹ Bopha B, Cambodia, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/1889> (accessed 10 February 2022).

¹¹² Kang Sun-Mi, North Korea, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/1871> (accessed 10 February 2022).

¹¹³ Ja Tsin Mai, Myanmar, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/2294> (accessed 10 February 2022).

Moreover, there he physical violence female victims suffer within forced marriage is inflicted by both the “husband” (*men exploiting women*) and “mother-in-law” (*women exploiting women*).

“In the beginning they locked me in a room... the Chinese [boy] and I slept together but we never had sex, because we did not know about it. After two months, his parents took us and checked in the hospital to see if I was pregnant or not. They saw—no pregnancy. Then the mom complained. She talked to her son—my husband—and gave him some sex films to watch. Then... we started having sex.”¹¹⁴

Lastly, within forced childbearing, the control of the “mother-in-law” (*women exploiting women*) is realised through the gender-based violence and rape inflicted by the “husband” (*men exploiting women*).

Therefore, the role of gender within Chinese bride-trafficking is most accurately understood as a multi-level system whereby multiple social constructions of gender operate both individually, and in collaboration with each other, to facilitate, justify, and perpetuate Chinese bride-trafficking. This multi-level system ultimately reflects broader patriarchal norms. This has been demonstrated across time (the three chronological stages of *migration, marriage, and motherhood*); across levels of society (individual and structural); and across different models of socially constructed gender relations (*men exploiting women, women exploiting women, and systems exploiting women*).

Limitations

This study holds several limitations which invite further research to explore the role of gender in Chinese bride-trafficking. Firstly, data is bias towards victims from Myanmar and North Korea and is therefore not necessarily representative of the four nations. The field would benefit from further research assessing the discrepancies and similarities in the role of gender between different source countries. Secondly, data focuses on *survivor* narratives, and consequently does not account for women who may still be trapped in forced marriage. Thus, although perhaps practically unfeasible, further empirical research with a focus on women still in forced marriage would be highly valuable. Thirdly, there is an assumption of heteronormativity throughout this research, and this article does not fully consider the role of masculinity within Chinese bride-trafficking. Further research considering non-heteronormative and male perspectives, specifically those of Chinese “husbands”, would be useful in further understanding how varied femininities and masculinities operate in the social problem. Lastly, social constructs of gender likely intersect with other factors including age, nationality, language barriers, and cultural differences. The data analysed here does not speak to these factors, and further research specifically interested in this would be beneficial.

¹¹⁴ Nang Nang Tsawm, Myanmar, <http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/2291> (accessed 10 February 2022).

Conclusion

Existing research concerning Chinese bride-trafficking acknowledges the role of gender in this social problem, contending that ‘bride-trafficking is, at its core, a profound expression of gender discrimination’.¹¹⁵ However, understanding of *how* gender operates is limited by unconnected studies, a focus on causes, and limited consideration of survivor voices. Therefore, this research presents a unique contribution to literature by specifically analysing the role of gender throughout the process of Chinese bride-trafficking. Analysis is drawn directly from narratives, giving precedence to survivor voice.

Findings and analysis paint a complex and nuanced picture of how these socially constructed perceptions of gender form a multi-level system that operates throughout Chinese bride-trafficking to play a core role by dictating gendered imbalances of power which both facilitate and justify the practice. The detailed understanding of how gender operates in Chinese bride-trafficking presented in this article provides a comprehensive, survivor-informed framework that can be utilised in further research.

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¹¹⁵ Stöckl *et al.*, “Trafficking of Vietnamese women and girls for marriage in China,” 8.

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