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CAMBODIA'S TRAFFICKED BRIDES

The escalating phenomenon
of forced marriage in China

VIREAK CHHUN | LUCIA BIRD | THI HOANG

MAY 2022



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Thousands of vulnerable Cambodian women and girls are trafficked each year for forced marriage to Chinese men. The phenomenon has escalated in recent years. © Jason South/Fairfax Media/Getty Images



Thousands of women and girls from Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Nepal, North Korea, Pakistan and Myanmar are transported to China to wed Chinese men.¹ While some travel in the knowledge that they are to be married, others are deceived. Similarly, although some end up happily married, many report suffering violence, sexual abuse and forced labour.²

The number of women and girls travelling from Cambodia to China for forced or arranged marriages has surged since 2016, and experienced a further spike since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in the first quarter of 2020. Many Cambodian women and girls who find themselves in arranged marriages with Chinese men, whether originally consensual or not, report finding themselves in remote, isolated areas and deeply abusive contexts. This report explores this escalating phenomenon.

As with all trafficking contexts, bride trafficking to China is driven by demand. While trafficking of women and girls from South East Asia for marriage in China dates back to the 1980s, it significantly increased since the early 2000s.³ This increase can be largely attributed to China's one-child policy – in force between 1979 and 2015. The policy led to sex-selective abortions by many families wanting to have a son instead of a daughter, creating a significant gender imbalance and a subsequent shortage of women to marry in China.⁴ According to the Seventh National Population Census in 2020, the number of male inhabitants living in China was 723 million, while female inhabitants were 688 million.⁵ This imbalance is being met by the importation of women and girls from the region for marriage to Chinese men, some in contexts constituting trafficking.

Cambodian women and girls are coerced and forced into arranged and forced marriages through various means: some are deceived and promised a job in China; others are told they need a marriage certificate in order to be eligible for well-paid work (which is not the case); some are tricked and sold by their family members, relatives and acquaintances for a lump sum or the promise of a good marriage and better life in China.

This report has been designed and implemented in partnership with Child Helpline Cambodia (CHC), a free service for youth and children in Cambodia which receives trafficking reports from callers. It explores the significant and escalating phenomenon of trafficking of Cambodian women and girls to China for marriage. It investigates the modus operandi of networks transporting Cambodian women and girls to China for

forced and arranged marriages, including the routes typically travelled, common and changing profiles of women and girls targeted, and the recruitment process.

Drawing on interviews with civil society, survivors of trafficking and their families in Cambodia, this report further explores the structures of networks, the

economics of the bride trafficking market, and the common dynamics surrounding the escape and return of Cambodian women and girls. The research also analyzes the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these trafficking dynamics, underscoring the concerning escalation the pandemic appears to be driving.

Voices of the survivors

This research was commissioned by the CHC, whose founder, Sok Phay Sean, was a 2020 fellow of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC)'s 2020 Resilience Fund Fellowship Programme, which focused on 'Disappearances Related to Organized Crime.'⁶

The Resilience Fund was originally designed as a result of engagements with local communities in Sinaloa, Mexico, and aims to build a sustainable network of resilient communities that can collaborate and sustain one another in responding to transnational organized crime. The project has grown in geographic scope to include partners in Africa, South America, South and South East Asia, and Europe.

The fellowship, an initiative of the fund, seeks to build a platform for cross-sectoral, global collaboration to counter the effects of organized crime. The fellows are supported in their work with communities, encouraged to pursue collaborative projects, and provided with mentorship, training opportunities and different international platforms for the dissemination of their work.

Sok Phay Sean spearheaded the establishment of the CHC, which now receives over a thousand calls a month from children and youth across Cambodia. A number of helpline callers reported situations that CHC staff identified to constitute contexts of trafficking. Sok Phay and the CHC team collaborated with GI-TOC researchers in commissioning, shaping, and coordinating the research in order to better understand some of the trafficking dynamics experienced by CHC callers.

This research was therefore shaped by the needs of CHC and their approach. The voices of the families and victims of trafficking who had called the helpline were placed at the centre of the research and are the focus of the analysis.

While the researchers analyzed all the caller data shared by CHC, which pointed to a range of distinct trafficking contexts, the research focused on bride trafficking to China, as this was highlighted as the fastest-growing trafficking phenomenon by government and civil society stakeholders engaged as part of this research, particularly following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. A number of stakeholders also noted that significant gaps in the understanding of this trafficking phenomenon remain.

Defining human trafficking and forced marriage

Human trafficking is defined under international law in the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children ('the Palermo Protocol'), supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized

Crime (UNTOC). The Palermo Protocol was adopted in 2000 and entered into force in 2003; human trafficking is understood to comprise three elements – the act, the means, and the purpose, as set out below:

Act	Means	Purpose
The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of person	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 [with exploitation including] 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.

It is widely recognized that the types of exploitation outlined in the Palermo Protocol definition are not exhaustive, and that a far wider range of exploitative typologies falls within the scope of the definition.

The consent of the victim is irrelevant where one of the 'means' is used, and always inapplicable where the victim is a child. Arranged marriages with minors therefore constitute cases of trafficking regardless of whether the girl was aware of the purpose of her transport, and of the circumstances of the marriage itself.

Where the bride is an adult, some arranged marriages will not constitute trafficking. However, where women and girls are deceived as to the purpose of their journey – informed that they are travelling for work for instance – their forced marriage falls within the definition of trafficking. This report, in line with previous literature on the subject, therefore conceives of a marriage that has occurred through deception or coercion as a form of trafficking in persons, regardless of whether there is evidence of subsequent sexual or labour exploitation. This is based on the understanding that forced marriage alone amounts to a case of exploitation.⁷

Where women and girls travel to China knowing they will be married to a Chinese man, but then face abuse and exploitation at the hands of the family, having expected an equitable and non-violent marriage, deception remains involved in the recruitment process, and the context constitutes trafficking under international law.

Some researchers have recognized the complexities in classifying the phenomenon of women and girls travelling to China to marry Chinese men by using the term 'demi-trafficking'.⁸ However, this obfuscates the fact that many such journeys clearly fall within the established legal definitions of trafficking. Cambodia's 2008 Law on Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation provides the main legal framework for trafficking in persons offences, although the Criminal Code includes some provisions that may be relevant to trafficking offences.⁹

The national criminal code in China – the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China (adopted on 1 July 1979, revised on 14 March 1997, last amended on 25 February 2011)¹⁰ – criminalizes some forms of sex trafficking, including the sale and purchase of women and girls (although this is not tied to a

purpose of exploitation). Under the law, a Chinese man who purchases a trafficked woman or girl for marriage, and forces them to have sexual intercourse, faces charges of rape and accommodating a trafficked person.¹¹ However, reportedly, where a woman initially entered into the marriage willingly, she will

typically not be identified as a victim of trafficking under Chinese law, regardless of abuse experienced at the hands of her husband, and any mismatch between the information given to gain consent and the reality she experiences.¹²



A Cambodian victim of forced marriage to a Chinese man, who managed to return home to Phnom Penh after her six-year ordeal. © Tang Chhin Sothy/AFP via Getty Images

Note on terminology: 'Traffickers' and 'brokers'

The terms 'broker' and 'trafficker' are often used interchangeably by stakeholders, including the media and civil society organizations (CSOs). This misuse risks blurring the lines between arranged marriages and trafficking.

The term 'broker' refers to an intermediary who does not intend to exploit the client, and where their relationship with the client is more of a transactional or personal nature. Examples include marriage brokers in arranged marriages, and labour brokers from recruitment agencies. In the case of forced marriages and forced labour, the actors involved are traffickers.

Traffickers may provide similar services, but also have the intent to traffic the person, using one of the means outlined in the Trafficking Protocol.

The distinction between brokers and traffickers can therefore often be blurry, especially when a broker's role morphs into that of a trafficker due to circumstances or situational factors, including greed, personal or financial motivation, etc., thus making it challenging for investigation and reporting. Within this report, the term 'broker' is used to include both trafficker and broker, while the term 'trafficker' is used exclusively in contexts where the intent to traffic is clear.

Scope of the research: Methodology and limitations

This research adopted the following research approaches:

- Review of grey literature in English, Khmer, Vietnamese and Chinese relating to human trafficking in Cambodia and of Cambodian nationals overseas, with a focus on forced or arranged marriages to Chinese men.
- Review of Cambodian press reporting of human trafficking of Cambodians, in Cambodia and overseas, between 2017 and 2021.
- Semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 Cambodian CSOs, academics and local researchers working on trafficking in Cambodia, two international CSOs, one Vietnamese CSO, and two government stakeholders in Cambodia. Interviews were conducted in person in Phnom Penh, and remotely, between March 2021 and January 2022.
- Semi-structured interviews with eight callers to CHC, including both survivors of trafficking and their families. CHC staff members with existing relationships with the survivors and their families initiated preliminary contact to check whether they wished to participate in the research. Only those that were willing to participate were then contacted by researchers under this study. Prior to commencing the interview, the interviewees were reminded that participation was entirely voluntary (and anonymized) and that they could terminate the interview at any point. These rights were repeated to the interviewees at regular intervals during the interview. Interviewing approaches were designed to minimize risks of re-traumatisation.
- A roundtable with five Cambodian journalists working with Cambodian media outlets, focused on press coverage of trafficking phenomena in Cambodia, was conducted remotely in March 2021.
- Analysis of CHC caller data between 2018 and 2021, and CHC cases of trafficking of Cambodian nationals overseas between 2015 and 2021, and analysis of CHC case reports in Khmer was undertaken.


The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant disruption to the research process, preventing planned fieldwork to Kampong Cham province, forcing some engagements online, and posing an obstacle to planned in-person interviews with additional CHC callers. Neither were many interviews able to be conducted with stakeholders in China or Vietnam, which would prove extremely valuable to gaining further insights into dynamics in destination and transit countries. The research focused on engaging with civil society and government stakeholders in Cambodia, together with survivors of trafficking who had returned to Cambodia, and the families of survivors either remaining in China or returned to Cambodia. This did not capture the perspectives of other stakeholders in the process, including the brokers themselves, or the husbands and families in China.

The research was also limited by resources and constitutes a snapshot of current dynamics. Further research, including engagement with brokers in the forced or arranged marriage market, and stakeholders in Vietnam and China, is required. Some stakeholders expressed concerns that the Belt and Road Initiative were shaping patterns of forced/arranged marriage to China (in parallel to shaping trafficking dynamics in the geographies close to the initiative) – this requires further research and investigation.



KEY INSIGHTS

Two girls begging in the streets of Phnom Penh. Poverty is one of the main drivers of trafficking for marriage in Cambodia. © Peter Charlesworth/LightRocket via Getty Images



The number of Cambodian women travelling to China for marriage, either forced or willing, has increased since 2016

There was consensus among government and civil society stakeholders in Cambodia that the number of Cambodian women and girls travelling to China for marriage had grown over the last five years. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the contributing factors was reported to be an observed shift by the traffickers and perpetrators (the victims' husbands) from trafficking Vietnamese women and girls towards Cambodian women and girls, due to increased awareness-raising and prevention efforts by the Vietnamese government (which was partly a result of increased media coverage and scrutiny from the international communities).¹³

The COVID-19 pandemic is reported to be driving a surge in forced and arranged marriages between Cambodia and China

Although data is lacking, government and CSOs working on counter-trafficking in Cambodia, and a CSO working in Vietnam with some Cambodian survivors of forced marriage in China, point to a sharp increase in the number of Cambodian women and girls travelling to China for marriage since the inception of the COVID-19 pandemic in the first quarter of 2020. Stakeholders identified the devastating socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 in Cambodia, and lack of alternative livelihood opportunities, as a key factor driving this increase. Another contributing factor includes the closure of the borders, limiting the legal pathways for Cambodian women to migrate and facilitating the illicit smuggling and trafficking services offered by brokers and traffickers.

Increasingly, young Cambodian girls are being targeted, and transported, by brokers for marriage in China

CSOs working with survivors of human trafficking in Cambodia reported that, since 2018, traffickers and brokers are increasingly targeting girls in their early teens for forced or arranged marriage in China. Furthermore, since the COVID-19 pandemic, CSOs in other countries in the South East Asian region, including Vietnam, have noted an increase in under-age marriages, as families' livelihoods are impacted, and they struggle to feed children. In these contexts, marriage can be perceived as a way of reducing the economic burden on the family.

Since 2016, routes used by women to travel from Cambodia to China for marriage have changed from direct air journeys to mixed-modal journeys that transit intermediate countries, predominantly Vietnam

There has been a notable increase in consular screening measures imposed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, and screening of visas granted to Cambodian women for travel to China by the Chinese Embassy in Cambodia since 2016. Since 2018, the government has imposed fees on foreign men flying back to their home countries with a Cambodian spouse,¹⁴ and this caused a shift in trafficking modes and journeys. Instead of flying directly from Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, to airports in China, women and girls now travel overland to neighbouring countries, predominantly Vietnam, before either continuing onto China overland, or flying from transit countries. Linked to this, growing numbers of women and girls embark on journeys without travel documentation, increasing their vulnerability upon arrival.

Civil society organizations working on counter-trafficking in Cambodia are struggling with resources to implement projects

A range of Cambodian CSOs noted that funding available for counter-trafficking work in Cambodia had substantially decreased since the mid-2000s, and particularly since the designation of Cambodia as a middle-income country in 2017, and changes in US foreign policy to Cambodia since 2018. This had already driven a number of organizations to cease operations, and many others felt their ongoing work was at risk. Although responses to trafficking in Cambodia have received significant attention and external financing over the years, much of the existing research base is outdated, reflecting diminishing resources for research on the issue. In addition, due to the COVID-19-induced negative economic impact, the government cut more than half of its anti-trafficking budget for the National Committee for Counter Trafficking (NCCT), down from 5.4 billion riels (US\$1.33 million) in 2020 to 2.2 billion riels (US\$543 080) in 2021,¹⁵ thus placing more of a burden on civil society actors to ramp up their prevention efforts, as well as in supporting victims and survivors of trafficking, despite their increased vulnerabilities during and after COVID-19.

Press coverage of human trafficking in Cambodia is limited, and focuses on overseas trafficking dynamics, including bride trafficking to China

Existing press coverage has concentrated on overseas trafficking dynamics, most prominently bride trafficking to China and labour trafficking to Thailand, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia. Trafficking as a whole was identified as a sensitive subject by Cambodian journalists, as it is perceived by government to tarnish the reputation of Cambodia overseas. Some civil society stakeholders stated that, although government focused on addressing trafficking of women and girls to China, the main concern was to rather make the practice 'less visible.'¹⁶

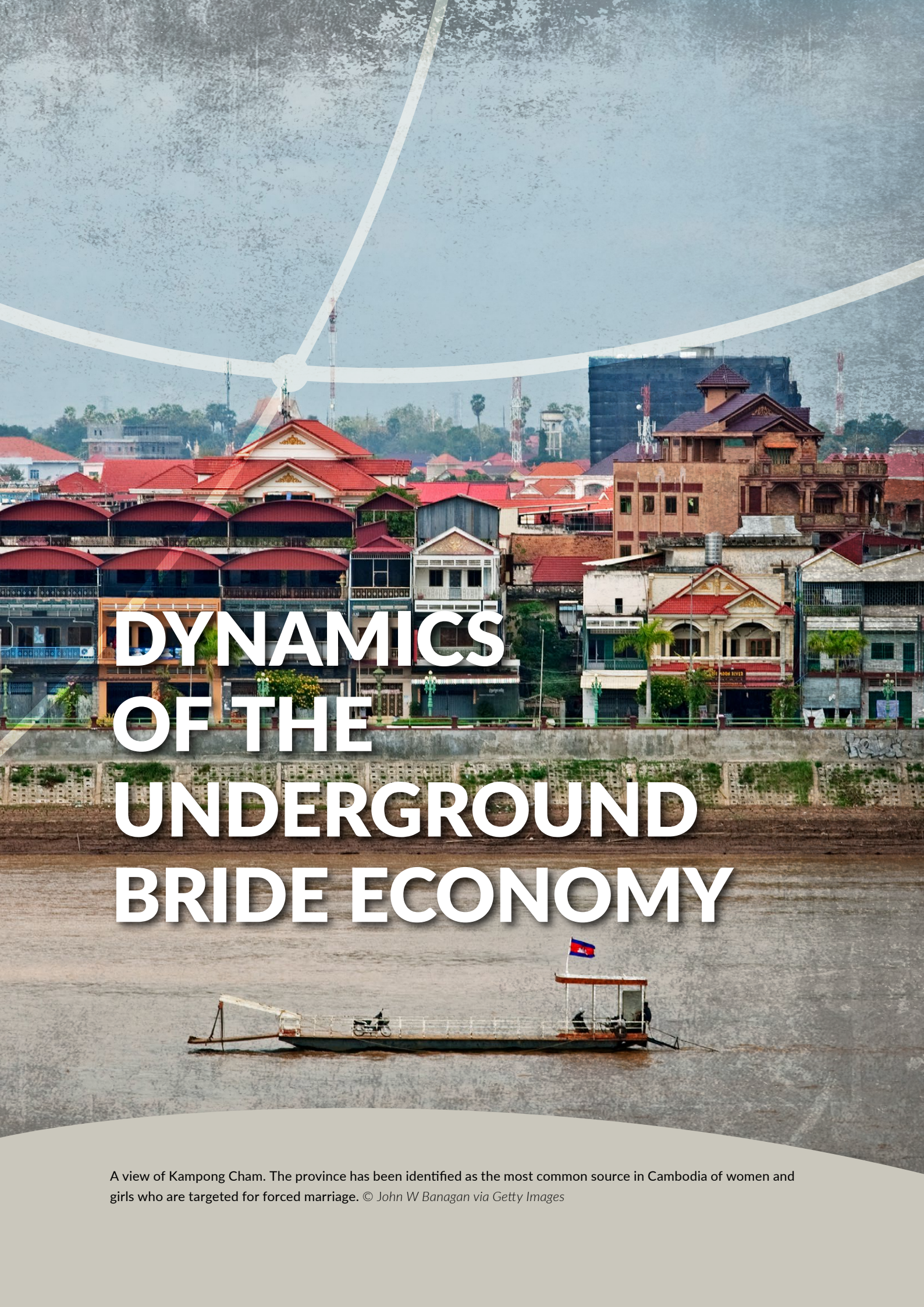
Domestic trafficking, particularly of minors for sexual exploitation, is especially taboo. This means that press coverage of sexual exploitation of minors in Cambodia is almost entirely absent. Some civil society stakeholders highlighted that, although the visibility of sex trafficking in urban centres had decreased, there were concerns that it had merely become more clandestine, with fewer organizations able to work on the phenomenon.

The 2019 sentencing of Rath Rott Mony (an English-Khmer translator) to two years in jail for 'incitement to discriminate' under Articles 494 and 496 of the Criminal Code has had a chilling effect on press coverage of trafficking, particularly the sex trafficking of minors. Mony was convicted in connection with his work as a fixer in 2017 for a documentary titled 'My Mother Sold Me' developed by the news network RT, which scrutinizes sex trafficking of girls in Cambodia, primarily for domestic clients. A number of human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, were critical of his conviction.¹⁷

This finding is in line with recent studies that have more broadly analyzed access to information in Cambodia, and concluded that many stakeholders were not able to fully access the information they wanted, citing biased media, self-censorship and growing pressure on media outlets by the government as key reasons.¹⁸

Emerging areas of concern: The COVID-19 pandemic is driving a surge in online child sexual abuse of victims in Cambodia

Although not the focus of this research, stakeholders repeatedly emphasized this acceleration as a key impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. To respond to this, the government introduced a new initiative titled 'Action Plan to Prevent and Respond to Online Child Sexual Exploitation 2021–2025', which was launched on 14 July 2021.¹⁹ Further research into this emerging phenomenon, as well as careful evaluation of the Action Plan and its implementation would greatly contribute to its counter-efforts.



DYNAMICS OF THE UNDERGROUND BRIDE ECONOMY

A view of Kampong Cham. The province has been identified as the most common source in Cambodia of women and girls who are targeted for forced marriage. © John W Banagan via Getty Images

Background

The phenomenon of bride trafficking to China, as with all trafficking phenomena, is driven by demand. While trafficking of women from South East Asia for marriage in China dates back to the 1980s, it experienced a significant increase since the early 2000s.²² This is likely attributable to the impacts of China's one-child policy (in force from 1979 to 2015), which led to a high number of sex-selective abortions by families wanting to have a son instead of a daughter, and consequently a growing gender imbalance in the country.²³

By the early 2000s, many men had started to struggle to find a wife. This is where criminal networks stepped in. Thousands of women and girls from Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Nepal, North Korea, Pakistan and Myanmar have been transported to China to wed Chinese men.²⁴ While some travelled in the knowledge that they were to be married, others were deceived. Many have reported suffering violence, sexual abuse and forced labour within their marriages in China.²⁵

The Cambodian government and civil society stakeholders interviewed for this

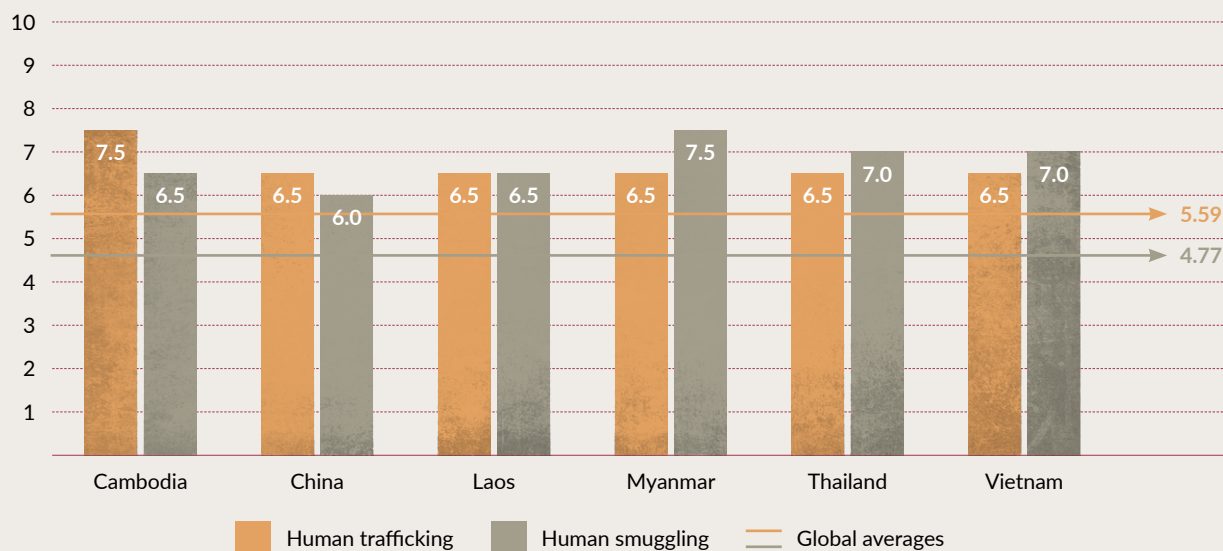


FIGURE 1 People markets in the Mekong.

NOTE: According to the Organized Crime Index 2021,²⁰ the average human trafficking score of the six Mekong countries (Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam) is 6.7, which is 0.6 higher than that of the South East Asia average, and higher than the global average by 1.1 point. Cambodia stood out with the highest human trafficking score of 7.5, and operates as a source, transit, and destination country. Women and girls form the majority of trafficking victims in Cambodia, largely for sexual exploitation. Trafficking of children, in contexts of child labour and forced begging, is also prominent, and little scrutinized.²¹

SOURCE: Organized Crime Index 2021, <https://ocindex.net/assets/downloads/global-ocindex-report.pdf>

research noted that trafficking of Cambodian women and girls for forced marriage in China has become particularly prominent since 2016, when it was reported by the Cambodian Government that 7 000 Cambodian women were living in forced marriages in China (although the total was likely to be higher).²⁶ Demand for overseas brides has continued to grow since then.

The gender imbalance in China has become increasingly acute – by 2020, men outnumbered women by 35 million according to the Seventh National Population Census.²⁷ This has driven a surge in the price of dowries in China: according to Chinese media, by 2021 US\$20 000 was at the lower threshold of payments made, with the average between US\$30 000 and US\$40 000.²⁸ In some rural areas, this points to a tenfold increase since 2010.²⁹

Sky-high dowries have meant that it is often cheaper for a groom's family to pay an 'agent' for an overseas bride (whether willing or otherwise), than to finance marriage with a Chinese woman. Although the fees payable to Chinese agents for an overseas bride have increased (from US\$10 000 to US\$20 000 in 2016, according to the UN, to up to US\$25 000 in 2020, according to the Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights), they reportedly remain lower than average dowries for Chinese wives, fuelling demand for overseas brides.³⁰ The increase in the payments due to 'agents' for overseas brides have also made the bride market an increasingly lucrative one for brokers and traffickers.³¹

Although China is not the only destination for Cambodian women and girls trafficked overseas for marriage, it is the most prevalent country of destination. According to statements by Cambodian government officials, out of 112 trafficked brides returned to

Cambodia in 2019, 111 returned from China.³² Most Cambodian women travelling to China for arranged marriages enter on a tourist visa, which enables only one month of stay. Marriages are typically arranged or forced within this one-month period. Where women and girls refuse to marry, traffickers commonly threaten to denounce the victim's illegal, or imminently illegal, immigration status to the police, and demand repayment of travel costs. Other women reported that traffickers leveraged significant violence and abuse to coerce marriage, or threatened to sell them into brothels if they didn't agree to marry. One Cambodian CSO working with victims of bride trafficking to China noted that often 'for the first and second time, the traffickers let the victims decide whether they like the men and wish to get married. The third time, if the victims do not like the men, the traffickers force the victim to marry, and use violence.'³³

Once married, women's movement is typically restricted, and they are commonly prohibited to leave the house unaccompanied. Further, women and girls are typically prohibited from owning mobile phones, or forbidden to use mobile phones to make contact with friends and relatives in Cambodia.

Some stakeholders noted that women can find themselves in repeated cycles of forced marriage, taken away from their first husbands and children, and married to a different man, often by traffickers involved in original arrangements. While one interviewee had married two distinct Chinese men, and borne children to both, the contexts of this remained unclear, and this research was unable to corroborate the contours of these reports. Further research is required into this area.

Points of origin, routes and profiles of victims

Cambodian women and girls who are smuggled or trafficked to China for marriage are typically of vulnerable socio-economic status, and from rural communities. While bride trafficking to China occurs from all of Cambodia's provinces, Kampong Cham is identified as the most common point of origin.³⁴

Historically, most women smuggled or trafficked to China for marriage were in their late teens or twenties. However, a number of CSOs noted the increasing prevalence of minors, including girls as young as 11.³⁵ Chab Dai Coalition ('Chab Dai'), an anti-trafficking CSO operating in Phnom Penh, reported that before 2019 there were 'only adult or older women,'

but that since 2020 they received 'many cases of victims aged 14 to 16.' Chab Dai noted that the age range of women targeted for marriage in China was widening overall, with a growing number of significantly older women also being targeted by brokers since 2018. Chab Dai attributed this to growing awareness regarding the risks of being recruited for marriage in China, forcing recruiters to expand the targeted age range to meet demand.

Bride trafficking targets a number of regions in China, but particularly poorer rural areas in the south. Press and interview reports cite Nanning province,³⁶ Henan Province,³⁷ Jiangxi Province of Nanchang City,³⁸



FIGURE 2 Commonly used bride trafficking routes from Cambodia to China.

Guangzhou,³⁹ Jinjiang province.⁴⁰ Many survivors are unsure of where they were taken to in China. Although maritime routes from Cambodia to Vietnam have been reported, these are rare.⁴¹

The preferred routes for women and girls travelling from Cambodia to China for marriage has oscillated over time – shifting between land and air routes in line with changing enforcement practices. Between 2010 and 2016, land routes via transit countries, most commonly Vietnam, were prevalent. However, growing enforcement at Vietnamese land borders, and decreasing prices for air travel, drove a growing proportion of Cambodian women to fly, typically from Phnom Penh in Cambodia to Shanghai or Guangzhou in China.⁴² During this period Chinese men also travelled to Cambodia to find a wife; however, this declined after 2016,⁴³ and particularly since the 2018 regulations requiring foreign men returning by air to their country of residence with a Cambodian woman to pay a fee.⁴⁴

From 2016 onwards, growing reports of women and girls being trafficking from Cambodia to China by air prompted the Chinese embassy in Cambodia to restrict travel visas issued to Cambodian women, and the Cambodian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation to enhance consular screening measures. This enhanced scrutiny made air journeys from Cambodia more difficult, displacing movement once again to overland routes.

In 2021, overland routes transiting Vietnam, and to a far lesser extent Laos and Myanmar, remained the most common route for Cambodian women and girls smuggled or trafficked out of Cambodia to China for

marriage.⁴⁵ Once in Vietnam, some brokers obtained Chinese travel visas for Cambodian women, who then entered China via air routes.⁴⁶

Other women and girls completed the entire journey overland. In these contexts, Cambodian civil society stakeholders reported that traffickers are increasingly choosing informal entry points over official border crossings. Reflecting this, since 2018, civil society stakeholders in Cambodia noticed that a growing proportion of Cambodian women and girls completed their journey to China without identity or travel documents, increasing their vulnerability upon arrival. In one typical journey, a Cambodian woman reportedly travelled overland from Siem Reap, Cambodia to Sha Yong San, China with no identity documents, reportedly walking through the jungle to cross the border between Vietnam and China.⁴⁷ The full journey took one month.

The construction of a tall fence equipped with video cameras, lights and movement detectors along China's southern border with Vietnam and Myanmar is likely to disrupt overland routes.⁴⁸ Construction, which began in 2017, reportedly accelerated since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, and is reportedly nearing completion along the border with Vietnam (completion of construction work on the Myanmar border is not expected until October 2022).⁴⁹ While the full impact of the fence remains unclear, it may drive a return to the use of official border crossings as informal crossing points become more difficult to traverse, or to the renewed use of air routes. Either trend would heighten the need for travel documents.

Recruitment methods and motives

Traffickers use a range of strategies to recruit Cambodian women and girls to travel to China. A common approach leveraged by recruiters is to promise women a job in China with a significant salary, typically of US\$500–US\$2 000 per month. Some families of women recruited in this way noted that the high salaries offered should have raised alarm bells. One mother of a trafficking survivor recruited at the age of 15 noted: 'She was hoping to work in a nice place with high salary, she wanted to earn money to support her family. She was so young, so US\$1 500 per month is too much. That's why she went to China with that woman.'⁵⁰

Perhaps due to growing awareness regarding the risks of accepting employment opportunities in China, some traffickers deceive women as to the destination.⁵¹ While recruitment often occurs in rural areas, traffickers also target women already working away from home in urban centres, most prominently Siem Reap and Phnom Penh. Factories in Phnom Penh are reportedly prime recruitment grounds, with traffickers waiting outside and offering female workers higher paid jobs abroad.⁵²

Civil society stakeholders reported that traffickers use social media platforms, including WeChat, to advertise fraudulent job opportunities to Cambodian

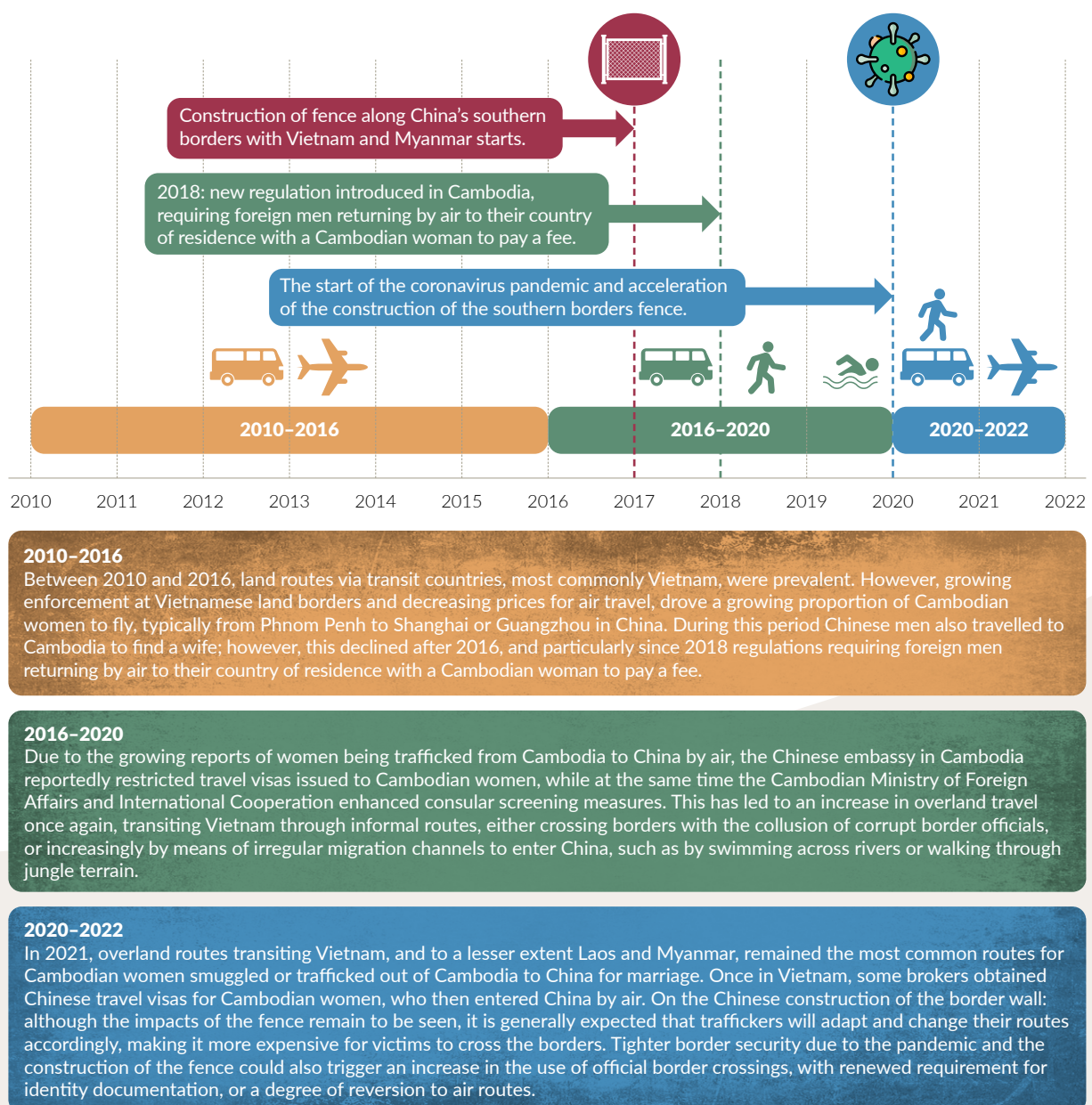


FIGURE 3 Shifting routes and modes of trafficking, 2010–2022.

women.⁵³ The traffickers reportedly transfer funds to cover travel costs to these women, who then travel to China independently, and are subsequently trafficked into forced marriage upon arrival. However, this was not experienced by CHC callers engaged with for this research.

Recruiters often pay the families of brides-to-be a 'dowry price', typically of US\$1 000–US\$3 000.⁵⁴ This is a significant increase since 2016, where payments were typically US\$100 to US\$1 000.⁵⁵ Payment was made either at the point of recruitment, or at the point of marriage. In some contexts, deceived families received payments via electronic transfer months after the disappearance of the

woman without knowing that it is the 'dowry price.'⁵⁶ One interviewee, whose daughter had been recruited for marriage in China while staying with her grandmother without her mother's knowledge, received US\$1 500 from the trafficker months after her daughter embarked on the journey to China to work. Therefore, she believed that this was her daughter's salary. Only later did she realize that her daughter had been trafficked into wedlock, and that the payment had been a dowry fee.⁵⁷ Women who resisted marriage upon arrival in China were often informed that they needed to repay this fee, together with all travel costs, to gain freedom.



FIGURE 4 Forced marriage recruitment strategies.

The hands in the marriage: Traffickers and brokers

There are typically a number of separate interconnected agents involved at each stage of the journey, including recruiters, transporters and marriage intermediaries.

Recruiters are typically Cambodian women,⁵⁸ often from the same communities or villages as the victims. Some recruiters are married to Chinese men, and flaunt their wealth, reporting luxurious lifestyles in China.⁵⁹ Other recruiters tell of having successfully arranged for the marriage of a friend, or relative, to a Chinese man.⁶⁰ While less common, there have also been cases of trafficking networks composed of Cambodian women married to Vietnamese men.⁶¹

Several studies looking into trafficker demographics in South East Asian countries, including Cambodia, have shown that many traffickers share similar disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds as their trafficked victims.⁶² This is not surprising given that, reportedly, many victims know their recruiters and traffickers.⁶³ Many Cambodian women, both recruiters and brokers, were reportedly not fully aware of the legal consequences and illegality of their actions.⁶⁴ These findings suggest that addressing the risk factors that make people vulnerable to human trafficking could also prevent them from becoming traffickers, especially when there are scarce sources of livelihood available to them.

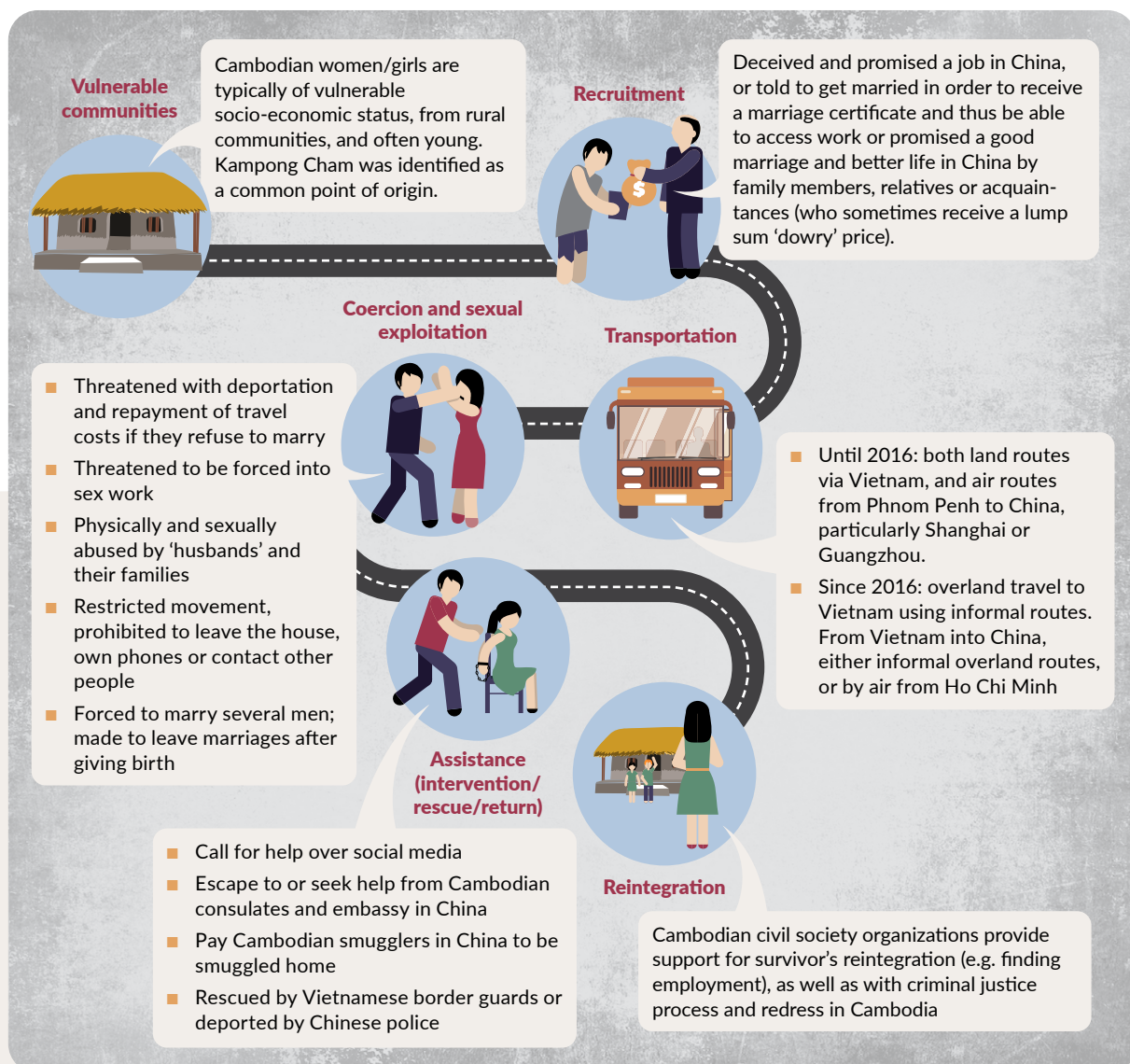


FIGURE 5 Phases in the trafficking cycle of Cambodian women and girls.

Recruiters will commonly provide financing for the journey to China, bearing the costs of procuring documents, accommodation, and travel.⁶⁵ In some cases, traffickers in China have presented the travel costs as a debt incurred by the victim, which requires repayment.⁶⁶ Where women are provided with travel documents, recruiters will typically stay close during this period, accompanying women from rural areas to Phnom Penh to obtain the necessary documentation.

Previously, where Cambodian women were typically flown from Cambodia to China, the recruiters' role would usually end when the women boarded the flight in Phnom Penh. Women typically flew alone, and were met by separate brokers upon arrival – the 'marriage intermediaries' – who often confiscated travel documents.⁶⁷

In 2021, as outlined above, overland journeys were more common. Some recruiters escorted women overland all the way to China before transferring them either to the 'marriage intermediaries' or to the groom.⁶⁸ However, in most cases the recruiters transferred women to other elements of the network – who play a transporting function – at the Vietnamese border,⁶⁹ or within one of the transit countries. Transporters are typically of the nationality of the

relevant transit country, most commonly Vietnam.

A separate set of actors – the 'marriage intermediaries' – typically met the women upon arrival in China. These were most commonly Chinese nationals, whose role included providing women with accommodation while the marriage was brokered, contacting prospective husbands, and negotiating the bride price.

While networks appear to be relatively small, reports indicated a significant degree of organization, with the ability to procure forged documentation, and nodes of the network interconnecting across origin, transit and destination countries. Testimonies pointed to some transporters moving groups of up to ten women and girls at a time, and transferring them between elements of the network at different points on the journey.⁷⁰

Traffickers and brokers exercise a significant degree of influence over women throughout the journey. Violence can occur at every stage of the journey, but is most commonly reported to surge at the point of the forced marriage, as one form of coercion to ensure the girl or woman marries the prospective husband.⁷¹

Those who escape: the returnee brides

Many testimonies of the experiences of Cambodian women who have been forced into marriage in China come from women who have been able to escape their marriages, and return to Cambodia. While the methods of escape vary, it is clear throughout testimonies that the often patchy support from authorities in China and Vietnam engenders significant reliance on support from CSOs in facilitating and financing returns.

Women have repeatedly leveraged social media, including Facebook and WeChat, as part of their attempts to escape their trafficking contexts, by posting statuses, photos, videos, messages and voice messages about their situation, and asking for help from the Cambodian government and other stakeholders.

One woman reported that her daughter used WeChat in August 2020 to gain support to leave China:

'She wrote in WeChat about her story, that she was deceived and trafficked by the broker in China, [and included] her background and address [in Cambodia], and that she was abused in China. Three days after she posted in WeChat, the [Cambodian] authorities came to investigate at my house whether [the post was] true or not. Then ... I went to Phnom Penh to file the complaint. The police and government engaged with the Cambodia Embassy and the Chinese government and police to help my daughter.'

The survivor returned to Cambodia and was working with a CSO in Phnom Penh at the time of writing. The investigation into her trafficking is ongoing.⁷²

Some CSOs have identified the potential of social media channels as an avenue for women and girls to report being caught in trafficking contexts – Blue Dragon in Vietnam, and Kachin Women's Association



Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The city is a key transit point for trafficking women from Cambodia to China.

© Rambaud /Alpaca /Andia/Universal Images Group via Getty Images.

in Thailand, have a number of programmes teaching women and girls how to use WeChat, and how to contact the police in China.

However, support from Chinese police is not always forthcoming. Chinese police have repeatedly been reported to return escapees to their husband's family and advise women to address their domestic grievances.⁷³ In other cases, Chinese police have reportedly detained Cambodian trafficking victims for periods of between three months to one year for overstaying their visas, or failing to provide legal identity and residence documents upon inspection. Following detention, victims are often deported to their last country of transit – most commonly Vietnam. This reported practice of group deporta-

tions can pose challenges to effective screening for victims of trafficking.⁷⁴

In Vietnam, the absence of a regulatory framework for the provision of support to foreign victims trafficked through Vietnam,⁷⁵ means no state support is available for Cambodian victims identified while transiting Vietnam. Instead, CSOs based in Vietnam, such as Blue Dragon, typically provide emergency support to these victims. This can include accommodation and food during the police investigation into the case, or while the Cambodian embassy arranges transport back to Cambodia, and both processes can take months.⁷⁶



© Child Helpline Cambodia

A Cambodian bride's journey to China

Chanthavy (not her real name), was 41 when she left Cambodia in 2015 to marry a Chinese man. Chanthavy was recruited by a relative: 'My aunt in law asked me why I stayed single for so long, and said that I should marry and have children just like other women do. So, she encouraged me to marry a Chinese husband.' Her relative boasted of having arranged other successful marriages: 'Her younger cousin went to China a year before me ... and [the younger cousin's] life and family are better than before.'

Chanthavy's relative introduced her to two other individuals, a man and a woman who 'facilitated and prepared everything for me to leave to China, including my passport and visa. They paid for everything. They never showed their faces to me and my family; we only talked on the phone.'⁷⁷ An unknown tuk-tuk driver picked Chanthavy up from her home and drove her to Phnom Penh international Airport, where she boarded a plane to China alone.

When Chanthavy landed in China, two Chinese men picked her up, and confiscated her passport. The brokers sent a photo of Chanthavy to a prospective groom, who asked to meet her. The brokers drove Chanthavy to an agreed meeting point, and presented her to the prospective Chinese husband, and his family.

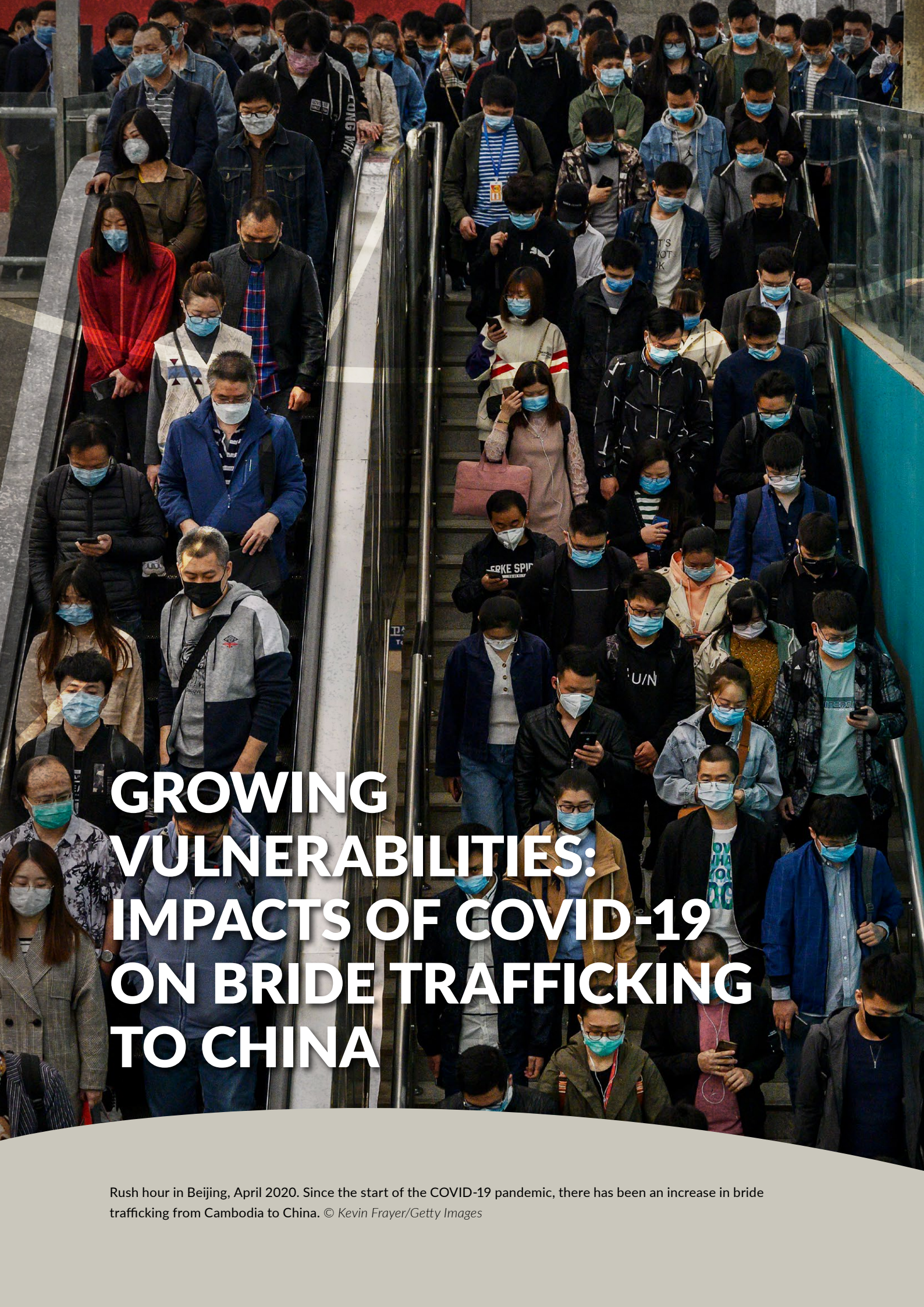
Although Chanthavy refused to marry the man, she was sold by the brokers to the groom's family for 130 000 Chinese Yuan (equivalent to about US\$21 000 in 2015) over lunch. After lunch,

Chanthavy was taken to the groom's family home. 'I did not like my husband, and did not want to marry. But I did not know what to do. I had no choice.' Although Chanthavy initially refused to have sex with her husband, his brother forced her to sleep in the same bed as her husband, and acquiesce to sex.

Chanthavy's passport was held by her husband's family, and she was not allowed outside the house. Nevertheless, she found out that there were many Cambodian women in the same village as her, many from Chamkar Lue district, Kampong Cham province.

While Chanthavy grew to like her husband, she experienced abuse at the hands of his mother, which drove her to flee. 'I called and asked my sister in Cambodia to report my case to an NGO, and the NGO (Chab Dai Coalition) gave the contact number of the Cambodia Embassy in Shanghai. [The Embassy] told me to do whatever I had to do to [reach the embassy's offices in Shanghai]. I escaped from the house when my mother-in-law was careless. I contacted a Cambodian woman who was married to a Chinese man and lived near my husband's house ... She stole her husband's Visa card to buy the bus ticket for me to go to Shanghai.'

The consulate facilitated Chanthavy's return to Cambodia, although Chab Dai was requested to pay for the return flight ticket. Chanthavy was working at a clothing factory at the time of the interview.



GROWING VULNERABILITIES: IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON BRIDE TRAFFICKING TO CHINA

Rush hour in Beijing, April 2020. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in bride trafficking from Cambodia to China. © Kevin Frayer/Getty Images

Cambodian government and civil society stakeholders alike have identified an increase in bride trafficking from Cambodia to China since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020.

In December 2020, H.E. Chou Bun Eng, Secretary of State of the Cambodian Ministry of Interior and Permanent Vice Chair of NCCT, reported that the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of the border had led to an increase in women being smuggled and trafficked out of Cambodia by brokers and traffickers for marriage abroad, most prominently in China.⁷⁸

 <p>1. Intensifying drivers and root causes of human trafficking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Vulnerability may increase among existing victims, vulnerable groups (including trafficking survivors) and those who were previously less vulnerable to human trafficking. 	 <p>2. Heightened and changed forms of exploitation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Increased abuse. ■ Shifts towards alternative exploitation types. ■ 'Adjusted' criminal modus operandi. ■ Supply of new criminal recruits. 	 <p>3. Multifaceted impact on children</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Rise in online child sexual exploitation. ■ Depriving many children of one or both parents and/or caregivers, thus increasing their vulnerability to trafficking. ■ Increased rates of child labour and child marriage. 	 <p>4. Shift towards informality in both formal and informal sectors of global supply chains</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ More opportunities for criminals to exploit in informal sectors due to increased supply of vulnerable groups. ■ COVID-19-induced economic crisis incentivizes businesses to exploit workers to remain viable.
 <p>5. Increased illegal and irregular migration flows</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ More people will be forced to move irregularly. ■ Irregular migrants are likely to experience increased human-trafficking risks. 	 <p>6. Disruption in victim assistance and support services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ NGOs have been dramatically limited in their anti-trafficking response, including cancelling victim rescue missions, shelters, in-person counselling and legal-assistance services. 	 <p>7. Reduced enforcement, policing, investigation and justice system capacities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Delays and/or reductions in law-enforcement operations and investigations of human-trafficking cases. ■ Disruptions in criminal justice systems; court cases being put on hold. ■ Decreased cyber-security and monitoring capacities of the private sector. 	 <p>8. Interrupted financial support and funding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Grants and donations are in steep decline, leading to reduced financial support for anti-trafficking efforts and organizations. ■ NGOs and research institutions are facing shortages of funding, delays or cancellations of ongoing research projects as donors and foundations switch priorities.

FIGURE 6 How COVID-19 has impacted human trafficking.

SOURCE: GITOC (2020) Aggravating circumstances: How coronavirus impacts human trafficking, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/human-trafficking-covid-impact/>

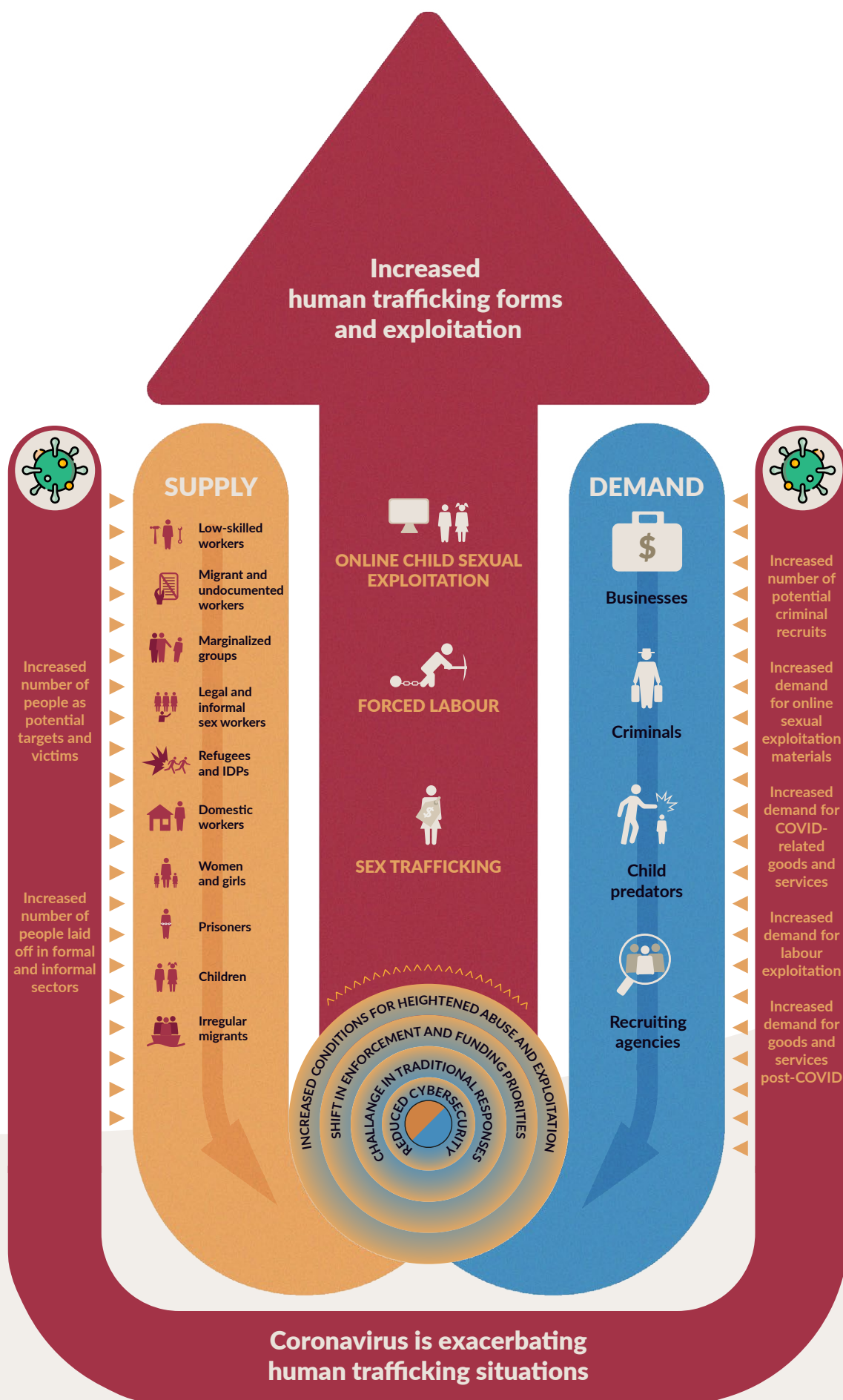


FIGURE 7 How COVID-19 has exacerbated supply and demand factors for human trafficking.

CSOs in Cambodia interviewed for this research corroborated this.⁷⁹ Chab Dai reported that in 2020 the number of cases of Cambodian women trafficked to China for marriage referred to them doubled (rising to a new case reported every three days).⁸⁰ Similarly, Hanoi-based Blue Dragon Children's Foundation, which supports women trafficked to China, reported a temporary two-fold increase in its caseload of Cambodian victims in 2020 (from nine in 2019 to 19 in 2020),⁸¹ although this subsided in 2021, where referrals returned to previous levels. (In contrast, referrals to Blue Dragon of Vietnamese victims trafficked to China for forced marriage have continued to increase since the start of the pandemic from 113 in 2019 to 122 in 2020, and to 139 in 2021.)⁸²

Blue Dragon attributed the growth in the number of Cambodian victims referred to them for support to several factors, including increased identification of Cambodian women trafficked to China in transit and destination. Growing scrutiny in transit was due to heightened controls by Chinese and Vietnamese border guards as part of COVID-19 counter-measures. In parallel, Blue Dragon reported an increase in enforcement of immigration laws by Chinese authorities, including through raids on residential properties, resulting in deportation of trafficking victims back to countries of origin or transit.⁸³


The clandestine nature of the trafficking business makes it difficult to assess to what extent the surge in referrals of Cambodian women seeking to escape marriages in China, or being trafficked into them, have been driven by spikes in the identification of victims, rather than increases in the overall numbers of women being trafficked. However – contextual factors support statements that the pandemic increased the phenomenon of trafficking of Cambodian women for marriage in China, and indicate that sustained growth is likely. Not only has demand in China for overseas brides remained high, but the vulnerabilities of Cambodian women to being trafficked have been heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had devastating impacts on womens' livelihoods in the country.

The pandemic has decimated sectors that have historically employed a high proportion of women, such as hospitality and tourism. One study scrutinizing the impacts of COVID-19 on women working in the tourism sector in Cambodia, with research coordinated in urban centres between February and November 2020, found that the income of over 90% of respondents had decreased because of the pandemic, while 10% had become unemployed. This meant that many respondents were either struggling to repay loans taken out before the pandemic, or had been forced to take out further loans, exacerbating vulnerabilities and risks of debt bondage. The study found that some young women turned to work as street-based sex workers to generate income.⁸⁴ Ongoing restrictions mean that the tourism and hospitality industries are predicted to have slow recoveries, extending the period of economic stress.

A close-up photograph of an elderly woman's hand, showing wrinkled skin and a diamond-encrusted ring on her ring finger. The hand is resting on a dark blue fabric. In the background, a purple patterned fabric is visible. Overlaid on the image are several thin, orange, curved lines that intersect to form a star-like pattern.

RESPONDING TO FORCED MARRIAGES BETWEEN CAMBODIA AND CHINA

Given the gender imbalance in China and lack of employment opportunities for women in Cambodia, demand and supply factors will continue to drive the forced marriage market between the two countries. © Lauren Crothers/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images



The areas outlined below do not attempt to present comprehensive recommendations for strengthening the response to bride trafficking to China, and instead constitute the points most strongly highlighted by stakeholders engaged with for this study.

Further, given that the research focused on dynamics in Cambodia, and did not engage with stakeholders in China, the recommendations are limited to those for Cambodian stakeholders, while recognizing that the forced marriage phenomenon requires cooperation between origin, transit and destination states.

Establish and allocate resources to strengthen procedures at diplomatic missions to assist Cambodian victims in China

Cambodian consulate structures in China play a pivotal role in the rescue and repatriation of trafficking victims in China. Reports highlight ongoing efforts by individuals at consulates to support victims.

However, some Cambodian CSOs have highlighted that engagement with Cambodian consulates in destination countries such as China on trafficking cases is difficult, noting that a lack of resources is one key factor shaping the engagement. One organization stated that ‘sometimes, we reported the case, which was identified as an emergency and serious case, for example a Chinese husband was violating and abusing his Cambodian wife ... but no action. It was silent, no response, no intervention.’⁸⁵ Similar reports were cited by the 2021 US Trafficking in Persons Report.⁸⁶ In a number of cases CSOs were asked to pay for the flight costs for repatriation of the victim.

Cambodian CSOs working to counter human trafficking said that civil society in China is highly restricted, particularly since the 2017 legislative amendments regarding the operation of foreign CSOs in China.⁸⁷ In addition, Chinese counter-trafficking CSOs typically focus on Chinese victims. The fact that foreign CSOs operating in China have to be under consistent monitoring, together with the lack of Chinese civil society support, complicates local rescue programming of overseas human trafficking victims in China.⁸⁸ This places further onus on Cambodian government institutions in China to provide support.

Enhance capacity building provided to Cambodian officials at diplomatic missions to assist Cambodian victims in China

It is crucial to strengthen the capacity of Cambodian officials in China to increase their understanding of forced marriage, empowering them to identify indicators of trafficking and forced marriage, and ensuring that they are informed of the actions to be taken where such cases are identified.



Poverty increases women and girls' vulnerability to trafficking for marriage. © Pixabay Images

Establish clear legal migration pathways for marriage between China and Cambodia, and monitor services providers

Given the ongoing gender imbalance in China, and enduring lack of employment opportunities for women in Cambodia, demand and supply will continue to drive a burgeoning marriage market between the two countries. Seeking to prevent this dynamic entirely is unfeasible, and ignores the fact that some marriages are beneficial to both parties. Consequently, China and Cambodia should establish structured pathways for legal marriages, regularize practises, and monitor closely for human rights abuses.

Marriage brokerage services are currently unlawful in Cambodia, however regulating these service-providers, rather than prohibiting the service altogether, would enable greater visibility over these activities. Were such services to be legalized, a national registry of bridal agencies and brokers engaged in arranged marriage could be established, alongside a regulatory body or office to monitor operations and ensure adequate protection for women. Further, provisions could be added to the Cambodian Trafficking Act making the commission of trafficking offences by an individual operating in their professional capacity as a service provider an aggravating factor, attracting higher penalties.

Heighten awareness-raising initiatives in vulnerable areas

While some Cambodian women may choose to migrate to China for marriage, anecdotal evidence suggests that many women embark on journeys to China without accurate information as to the risks of the process. Awareness-raising initiatives or activities should be targeted in provinces where the practice is prevalent, including Kampong Cham province. These should focus on ensuring that women are aware of the following:

- Women typically enter China on a 30-day tourist visa, which is difficult to extend.
- High salaries for unskilled jobs in China (such as harvesting, domestic work, work in factories) could indicate a risk of false promises.
- Keeping a copy of one's own passport, or at the very least memorising the passport number, is crucial in case any legal, consular or law enforcement services are required.
- Marriage to a Chinese man does not automatically open up employment opportunities, it only offers a potential pathway to employment after five years of marriage. Many husbands do not permit their wives to work, limiting opportunities for sending home remittances.
- Chinese husbands are more likely to be of lower socio-economic status, and from rural areas, than wealthy and from urban areas.⁸⁹
- There have been many survivors of trafficking who have since returned to Cambodia and have shared their experiences of abuse at the hands of their new families.

Strengthen the criminal justice process for human trafficking cases in Cambodia

Finance participation of survivors in court proceedings

In Cambodia, victims of trafficking often accept payments to settle with traffickers outside the court system, frustrated by judicial delays, scared by threats from traffickers, and unable to bear the significant costs of lodging charges, time off work, and travelling to court hearings. Instead, the cost of witness and victim travel to court should be financed by the state to encourage victim participation in judicial proceedings. In addition, since many victims are from impoverished communities, travelling and attending court proceedings often means that they would thus lose some time off work and forgo their little daily income. The state should also consider giving the witnesses and victims a daily allowance or subsistence support. In addition, judicial structures should ensure victims are able to file complaints and give testimony confidentially and safely, without having to meet their trafficker.

Limited resources heighten police officers' vulnerability to corruption, with a number of victims of trafficking noting hesitancy in reporting crimes for fear of being asked for bribes. Such vulnerabilities require addressing in order to facilitate victim participation in judicial proceedings.

Enhance consistency of sentencing, including between domestic and foreign perpetrators

According to Chab Dai, individuals convicted of trafficking are typically sentenced to between five to ten years in prison, and fined 5 to 10 million riels (US\$1 250–2 500). However, sentencing is not consistent, as some offenders are granted extremely light sentences, leading to many victims being reluctant to file a complaint. Furthermore, as is the case across many jurisdictions, only low-ranking traffickers are arrested. Some stakeholders reported that domestic perpetrators often received more lenient sentencing despite being the main group of traffickers,⁹⁰ a concerning trend.

Establish and implement clear procedures for payment of restitution to victim

Even where convictions are successful, structures for the payment of restitution to the victim, which is key to diminish vulnerabilities to re-trafficking going forward, are unclear, ineffective with the compensation considered too low or insignificant. To address this, legal amendments are required to enable clear restitution upon conviction of the trafficker, and training to relevant judicial officials is required on standard operating procedures for calculating and granting restitution.

Shorten the judicial process

Many victims and their families are frustrated by the lengthy delays to the judicial process, and withdraw their claims before the process is completed.

Changes in the judicial treatment of human trafficking cases may already be underway. Chab Dai reported a recent acceleration of court processes for trafficking cases, noting that prior to 2020 a case could take years to move through the courts, while since then processes have been shortened to a few months. Were this accelerated scheduling to continue, this would present a significant step in enhancing human trafficking victims' access to justice in Cambodia.

Strengthen press coverage of human trafficking dynamics in Cambodia, including by Cambodian media outlets

The repressive press environment (reflected in Cambodia's low and dropping ranking on the World Press Freedom Index),⁹¹ and in some cases the lack of understanding of trafficking phenomena by journalists, hampers effective coverage of human trafficking dynamics in Cambodia, creating a culture of silence which is not conducive to awareness raising, prevention and detection.

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