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Of Human Bonds: Between Sex Work and Trafficking

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China: Sex Work and Human Trafficking (Part 3)

31 August 2013

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Tiantian Zheng explores the intersection between sex work and human trafficking in post-socialist China. This is the last of a three part series. Read part one [here](#). ^[14]

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping urged a crackdown (严打, *yanda* – literally, strike severely) on the trafficking of women. Since then, the Chinese government has launched crackdown campaigns to carry out the task. Beginning in 1989, a new wave of crackdown campaigns — called anti-vice campaigns — targeted sex work, pornography, gambling, drugs, and superstition.

This campaign-style approach to enforce policies continues to the present day. The purpose of these periodical nationwide anti-vice campaigns is to ensure “security and state control.” The campaigns are aimed at “cultural purification” and “spiritual civilization.” The “erotic company” of entertainment hostesses, pornographic TV shows, erotic performances, and sex work within the entertainment industry are condemned as “cultural trash” that “destabilizes state rule and the socialist system.”

These campaigns last for spurts of three months at a time, to be repeated three times a year, strategically centering on important holidays (e.g. National Day and Army Day) and events (e.g. the APEC conference). Crackdowns target a potpourri of social ills, ranging from unlicensed video game arcades (said to corrupt the minds of youth), to undocumented rural migrants (said to disrupt urban management).

The combination of sex work and pornography is a mainstay in the list of crackdown targets. It covers pornographic media (magazines, laser discs) and performances (striptease). The behavior that receives the most organizational resources and manpower, however, is the “erotic services” conducted in karaoke bars and other commercial establishments (saunas and hair salons). Public Security Bureau employs a complex system of raids to attack karaoke bars. The techniques are self-described as “guerrilla warfare” (打游击, *da youji*), in reference to the historical heroic efforts of the Communist revolutionaries against the Japanese invaders and nationalists.

Adverse Effects

Despite the intense campaigns against sex work and human trafficking, the ban on sex work, the reeducation, detention and deportation of those who sell sex, and the criminalization of third parties not only have failed to slow down the growth of the sex industry, but also have in many ways accelerated it.

During the periodic crackdown campaigns, the state and police force focus on locating criminals and enforcing severe punishment. Convictions during campaigns are usually harsher than normal. The difference can be the death penalty for targeted crimes during campaigns as opposed to prison sentences at other times. Familiar with this pattern, most targeted “offenders” take actions to avoid the campaigns. They would take cover in remote and discreet areas when the crackdown campaigns begin, and resume their activities after the campaigns end. As a result, there is little effect on the targeted suppression of the trafficking in women.

Movement control, in many ways, is the true intent behind the combating of the trafficking of women. Most hostesses working in the entertainment industry are rural migrants, and thus have to pay monthly fees for their temporary resident card in order to remain legal in the city. As the central target of the crackdown campaign, the police not only arrest, detain, and fine them severely, but also send them to reeducation centers upon discovery of expired temporary resident cards as proof of their illegal status as rural migrants. Targeting these women not only reflects the state’s abolitionist attitude toward sex work, but also reveals the state’s strict movement control between rural and urban to maintain social order in the city.

Border Control

Similarly, all North Korean women, upon discovery by Chinese authorities, are identified as trafficked victims and deported back to North Korea. Whether or not they voluntarily migrate into China is considered irrelevant. Whether or not they have settled down with a family is also disregarded. For instance, in Jilin Province, some North Korean women are married to Chinese men but their children are denied access to formal education and legal rights. Neither the women nor their children are protected by the government. Deportation of the women back to North Korea often results in their imprisonment, torture, or death for having left the country. In this case, naming North Korean women as trafficked victims and “rescuing” them by deporting them back to their country is less an anti-trafficking campaign than a concern for increased border control.

Deportation of women has also subjected them to stigmatized situations and offered them no protection. While North Korean women will face severe

punishment for their escape after deportation, rural migrant women would suffer physical abuse and mistreatment in the detention center. There was a well-known case that a college graduate who was arrested in Guangzhou in 2003 on the charge of not having a temporary resident card, was subsequently beaten to death at the detention center [15]. The current policy has not only failed to protect victims, but also enhanced their vulnerability to physical abuse in detention centers.

Impact of Anti-Trafficking Campaigns

The Chinese state equates trafficking with sex work and perceives migrants for sex work as trafficked victims. Therefore, in combating trafficking, the anti-trafficking campaigns have failed to address forced labor and forced marriages, and exclusively focused on sex work as “the sexual exploitation of women.” As mentioned in the previous section, little assistance has reached those who have been enslaved into forced labor and those who have been kidnapped, abducted, or deceived into coerced marriages.

Anti-trafficking campaigns are fraught with corruption. Although the laws target third party involvement in sex work, the reality is that the law enforcement officials appropriate the laws to solicit bribes from owners of entertainment places, kidnappers, and abductors. The result is that the owners and operators of the entertainment establishments are usually informed of the impending campaigns by the bribed officials and left untouched. It is the most vulnerable and marginalized population of the rural migrant sex workers that are arrested, detained, and severely fined. Thus although the law in theory is to eradicate sex work, the practice of utilizing the industry as an informal income source perpetuates and contributes to the sex industry.

Indeed, such widespread corruption among law enforcement and government officials has fueled the sex trade. In order to open and manage an entertainment business, owners have to utilize bribes to secure special connections with officials as their protection in times of crackdown campaigns. These owners are able to receive notifications of imminent police raids from their connections in the police station or local government. This precious information makes them well prepared for the “unannounced,” sudden raids by hiding the women and concealing other evidence of sex work. Some police officers and government officials are also directly involved in running such entertainment establishments and gleaming profits.

Local implementation of the state’s anti-trafficking campaigns has failed to fulfill the stated objective of eliminating sex work and trafficking of women. It has only aggravated women’s working conditions and intensified their vulnerability. Because these officials have the arbitrary power to arrest and fine the hostesses, hostesses are extremely apprehensive when they are chosen by an official. In such instances, they must obey the officials’ demands including sexual services. Some officials maintain a group of “spy hostesses” (小姐奸细, *xiaojie jianxi*) who report on bar conditions as well as acting as these officials’ personal harem. In exchange for their services, hostesses gain immunity from police sanctions.

Anti-trafficking police raids have made the women legally and socially vulnerable. To protect themselves from random abuses by local gangsters and customers, apart from seeking protection from some government officials as part of their harem, almost all the hostesses were also connected with one or two street gangsters to gain protection. When a gangster came into the bar, the hostess who was connected with him or to a thug in his group, did not need to escape. They were connected with a bar owner, a bouncer, or a skilled street fighter. They frequently joked, “We hostesses are relatives of the underworld.”

The anti-trafficking campaigns have not only subjected the women to the whims of corrupt local police and government officials, but also engendered a dangerous working environment. If clients were to disclose their sexual services to the police, they would be subject to extreme humiliation, arrest, handsome fines, and incarceration. Because of this potentially horrifying outcome, hostesses do not disclose their real identity, and this ruse makes it easier for men to be violent toward them and even to murder them. Other research [16] also contends that the campaigns may weaken the ability of sex workers to negotiate condom use with clients and aggravate their exposure to HIV risk.

Long Road Ahead

The current laws and campaigns, unfortunately, have failed to cover forced labor and forced marriages. Rather, they have devoted all the energy to police raids of the entertainment establishments and punishment of sex workers. Such police raids and punishment have robbed women of legitimate mobility and employment as survival strategies, and subjected them to possible sexual assault by the police, deportation to hometowns, and forced relocation into more dangerous work areas or detention centers. They have further marginalized and alienated voluntary sex workers and fail to provide women with necessary job training, social services, and other support. They have exacerbated the dangers, violence, exploitations, and abuses sex workers encounter, including discrimination, continued police harassment, corrupt local government officials, and arbitrary physical violence by local gangsters without any legal redress. They have achieved nothing but pushing sex work underground and making it more dangerous.

Anti-trafficking campaigns have been about movement control and financial profit for some law enforcement officials. Campaigns should be revamped to protect the rights of voluntary sex workers and victims of forced labor, forced marriages, and forced sex work through the following steps.

For the victims of forced labor, forced marriages, and forced sex work, the state should assist the victims in legal proceedings and legal redress for their suffering. The perpetrators should be prosecuted for their crimes. The victims should be protected from threats or reprisals by perpetrators, and provided a list of protection services including social welfare, education, job training, shelter, medical, mental, and legal services so that they can be successfully reintegrated into families, communities and society. Research has shown that victims are often subject to physical diseases, and psychological distress and trauma.

The state should replace the top-down crackdown strategy with grassroots organizations and women’s groups. As illustrated, crackdown campaigns have fueled corruption and exacerbated voluntary sex workers’ working environment. The exclusive focus on police raids not only thwarts group organization and health education, but also strips away voluntary sex workers’ livelihood strategies.

By treating all sex workers as victims, police raids, crackdowns, and punishment remove voluntary workers who are potential workers to assist true victims. In excluding the communities that purport to assist, anti-trafficking campaigns fail to create alliances to access the expertise of these communities and forge successful interventions to tackle the trafficking and exploitation of workers.

I propose a human-rights framework, instead of a trafficking framework, to improve the working conditions and livelihood for migrant sex workers, which will forge a partnership between migrant sex work communities, law enforcement, and community-based organizations to help prevent forced labor and identify trafficked persons.

**[This article was originally published as "Prostitution and Human Trafficking in China," in The Routledge Handbook of Chinese Criminology [17] and is republished with permission from the author and publisher.]*

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