

Trafficking of Women and Forced Marriage in Rural China through the Lens of the SDGs: A Case Study of the "Xiao Huamei" Incident

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Abstract: Trafficking in women and forced marriage are serious problems in current society, especially more severe in rural areas of China. The underlying causes involve multiple factors such as gender inequality, economic disparity, patriarchy, and insufficient law enforcement. Based on the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, focusing on gender equality (SDG 5), reducing inequality (SDG 10), and peace and justice (SDG 16), this paper takes the case of the trafficked woman XIAO HUAMEI in Xuzhou City, Jiangsu Province as an example to explore the causes of trafficking in women and forced marriage in China. The research adopts a combined approach of case study and literature review. Through research, it conducts an in-depth analysis of the XIAO HUAMEI case and thereby analyzes the issue of trafficking in women in rural areas of China. The research indicates that promoting gender equality, narrowing the economic gap between urban and rural areas, economically and educationally empowering women, and strengthening the judicial system are effective ways to reduce trafficking in women.

Keywords: Trafficking in Women, Forced Marriage, Sustainable Development Goals, XIAO HUAMEI Case.

1. Introduction

Trafficking in women is a serious violation of human rights. According to the United Nations' data survey, about 4 out of every 10 identified trafficking victims globally in 2021 were adult women and 2 were girls (UNODC, 2021) [16]. Gender inequality, poverty, and lack of social protection constitute the main causes of trafficking in women and children [17]. Among them, trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation is one of the most common forms of exploitation, and the current society generally faces challenges such as impunity for traffickers and the lack of effective measures to deal with human trafficking (UN, 2015) [15]. According to statistics, the number of trafficked women in China is approximately 9,000 each year [22]. Most of the trafficked women come from poverty-stricken mountainous areas or remote regions such as the poverty-stricken mountainous areas of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou [22]. Many men are unable to marry normally due to geographical and economic conditions, generating the demand to purchase "brides", among which Jiangsu Province has become one of the main buyer markets (Jiang & J. Sánchez-Barricarte, 2011) [5]. In 2022, the case of XIAO HUAMEI being trafficked and forced to give birth to 8 children in Xuzhou, Jiangsu Province, caused a nationwide sensation. However, trafficking in women and forced marriage are not merely economic reasons but a multi-factor intertwined social issue, reflecting deep-seated reasons such as gender inequality, uneven distribution of resources between urban and rural areas, an imperfect legal system, and backward traditional culture (Sarker, P. C., & Panday, P. K. 2006) [11]. This paper takes the XIAO HUAMEI case as the core example, combines the United Nations' gender sustainable development goals to analyze the multi-dimensional causes of forced marriage and trafficking in women in rural China, and proposes suggestions for promoting gender sustainable development.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, incidents of trafficking in women and forced marriage in rural areas of China have occurred frequently and received much attention. Cases represented by the XIAO HUAMEI case have highlighted the complexity of the issue of trafficking in women and forced marriage. This literature review aims to explore the manifestations, driving factors, and current situation and challenges of the law regarding trafficking in women and forced marriage through literature integration.

2.1. Forced Marriage and Gender Inequality

In China, forced marriage in rural areas is one of the extreme manifestations of gender inequality, reflecting the long-standing gender discrimination, patriarchy, and unbalanced regional economic development in rural areas. McCabe (2022), Eglén (2022), and Watkins-Smith, A. (2022) pointed out in their research that patriarchy is deeply rooted in remote areas, where women are objectified by men and their families as accessories to the family, and women's marriages are merely regarded as meeting the physiological needs of men and the economic interests of the family [9, 19]. The culture of gender inequality and patriarchy is passed down through generations in rural or remote areas, and trafficking in women for forced marriage is maintained and consolidated in this region. At the same time, the current gender imbalance in society further exacerbates the situation of trafficking in women for forced marriage. Xiong (2021) and Zhao's (2003) research shows that due to the long-term gender imbalance in China, there is a "squeezing effect" in the marriage market in rural areas, where the number of men of marriageable age is far greater than that of women of marriageable age [20, 21]. Scarcity of women of marriageable age, promoting the construction and development of the industrial chain of trafficking in women for forced marriage. In addition to the participation of the buyer market in the

industrial chain of trafficking in women, there is also the participation and willingness of the seller. Due to the unbalanced economic development in various regions and the interaction of economic and cultural factors, women are in a disadvantaged position in marriage. The literature by Zheng, T. (2018), Jiang, Q. (2015) pointed out that the custom of preferring sons over daughters in China and the collection of high bride prices make women's marriages an economic transaction [22, 6]. In some poor and remote areas or rural areas, women's families choose the illegal channel of trafficking their daughters to obtain financial rewards to reduce the economic burden of the family for the bride price. At the same time, women in poverty-stricken areas are suppressed by gender discrimination and economic and educational conditions and are unable to solve economic and social survival problems through means other than marriage, further restricting women's independence and the issue of trafficking in women for forced marriage (Shaneela Sadaruddin Khowaja et al., 2012) [12].

2.2. Driving Factors of Women Trafficking

The driving factors of women trafficking are complex and diverse but mainly concentrated in the three major fields of economy, culture, and society. Unbalanced regional development leading to unequal economic development is one of the important factors contributing to women trafficking (Secretary-General, U. N., 2022) [17]. At the economic level, studies by Shaneela Sadaruddin Khowaja et al. (2012) and Jiang, Q., Zhang, Y., & Sánchez-Barricarte, J. J. (2015) pointed out that the unbalanced economic development between urban and rural areas and poverty in remote areas and rural areas are the main factors that make women become victims of human trafficking [7, 5]. The demand for purchasing women for marriage in rural areas and the high economic income from trafficking in women make the industrial chain of trafficking in women for forced marriage rampant (Khowaja et al., 2012; Jiang, Zhang, & Sánchez-Barricarte, 2015) [7, 5]. This market beneficial to both buyers and sellers has promoted the expansion and continuous development of the industrial chain of trafficking in women for forced marriage. At the cultural level, patriarchy and gender discrimination are another important factor in trafficking in women. The literature by Watkins-Smith, A. (2022) and Zhao (2003) analyzed in detail the constraints and norms of traditional Chinese culture on women's marriages, pointing out that women are seriously objectified by men and their families in rural areas and are regarded as resources and property, and explored the association between forced marriages of women and modern "slavery" [19, 21]. At the social level, trafficking in women for forced marriage is mainly reflected in the structural problems of gender imbalance in society. Xiong (2021) and Zheng, T. (2018) emphasized that the gender imbalance existing in Chinese society is particularly obvious in rural areas [20, 22]. On the one hand, it results from the ideology of preferring sons over daughters leading to the decrease in the number of girls, and on the other hand, it stems from the long-entrenched gender inequality. Therefore, men in rural areas face a serious situation of marriage and love squeeze [20, 22]. In addition, with the development of the Internet, population mobility, and regional economic imbalances, the industrial chain of transnational trafficking in women has been further promoted. In some areas with a severe gender imbalance, men and their families contact intermediaries of trafficking in women

through online platforms to purchase women transnationally. Studies have found that this phenomenon is becoming increasingly common (Lyu, 2022; Jiang & J. Sánchez-Barricarte, 2011) [8, 5].

2.3. Law and Law Enforcement

The deficiency in law and law enforcement is one of the important factors for the development of the industrial chain of trafficking in women. Although China has formulated a series of policies on trafficking in women and forced marriage at the legal level, such as Article 240 of the Criminal Law of China, scholars have pointed out that there are still deficiencies in the current law enforcement in punishing buyers, regional law enforcement collaboration, and victim protection. In terms of punishing buyers, Wang (2023) and Zhao (2003) pointed out that the lenient punishment for buyers at the legal level is one of the key reasons for trafficking in women [18, 21]. The existing Chinese law mainly punishes traffickers, while the handling of buyers is ambiguous. Zhao (2003) pointed out that law enforcement agencies in some areas even default or tolerate the phenomenon of buying and selling marriages, which greatly reduces the deterrent effect of the law [21]. Wang (2023) emphasized that this legal gap of ambiguous criminal accountability for the buyer market enables the industrial chain of trafficking in women to persist and expand [18]. In terms of regional law enforcement collaboration, several literatures pointed out that in economically underdeveloped areas, law enforcement personnel and law enforcement resources are limited, and the legal awareness and professional ability of law enforcement personnel are insufficient, especially in handling cross-regional cases (Wang, 2023; Zhao, 2003) [18, 21]. However, trafficking in women often involves economically underdeveloped areas in multiple provinces and regions, further reducing the punishment for trafficking in women, and the information sharing and cooperation mechanisms among law enforcement personnel in different provinces are not perfect, making it difficult to trace the source of many trafficking in women cases. In addition, Zheng, T. (2018) also pointed out that in international cases of trafficking in women, due to the imperfect international collaboration mechanism and the lack of a unified legal framework and agreement, it is difficult to track and punish transnational criminal gangs, exacerbating the complexity of international cases of trafficking in women [22]. At the victim protection level, McCabe & Eglen (2022) and Zhao (2003) pointed out the deficiencies in the existing law in protecting victims. After many trafficked women in society are rescued, they still face multiple injuries such as social stigmatization and psychological trauma [9, 21]. In international cases of trafficking in women, Watkins-Smith (2022) emphasized that victims are often legally judged as "illegal immigrants" or stigmatized by society due to involvement in sex trafficking, making victims afraid to seek legal aid [18]. Zheng (2018) and Xiong (2021) emphasized that the current legal framework should establish a long-term victim support system, incorporate long-term assistance and social integration of victims into the consideration of legal policies, and provide comprehensive protection for victims [22, 20].

2.4. The Relationship between Gender Equality and Social Development

The research on gender equality and human trafficking has

become an important topic in academia and policy formulation in recent years. EKWULO emphasized the structural connection between gender inequality and gender violence in the literature, especially providing operational suggestions on reducing the trafficking of women and proposing strategies for achieving gender equality by improving the economic and social environment [3]. Agwor, D. O., Nyekwere, E. H., and Okogbule, I. C. (2022) started from laws and policies, analyzed the achievements and deficiencies of existing international laws in protecting women and children, and the research showed that despite extensive international cooperation and treaties, the actual implementation of gender and children's rights still faces challenges [1]. Shimazaki (2022), from the perspective of gender sustainable development, focused on the application of SDG in human trafficking and emphasized the need for the international community to further integrate resources for international cooperation [13]. These studies all took SDG as the framework to explore the relationship between gender equality in social development and human rights protection, but there are differences in perspectives and methodologies.

Although existing studies have analyzed the phenomenon of trafficking in women and forced marriage in rural China from multiple perspectives such as economy, society, culture, and sustainable development, there are still some deficiencies. There are few literature studies looking at a specific case from the perspective of sustainable development of the United Nations, and there are relatively few studies in China looking at women trafficking and forced marriage from the perspective of gender sustainable development.

3. Case Analysis

This study selects the XIAO HUAMEI case as a typical case of trafficking in women for forced marriage in rural areas of China. The case study aims to reveal the universal causes of trafficking in women in rural areas of China through a detailed analysis of this incident. In January 2022, a video of a woman chained by the neck, wearing thin clothes and living in a dilapidated and shabby room spread widely on social media. According to the investigation, this woman was named "XIAO HUAMEI" and came from a remote mountainous area of a minority in Zhao tong City, Yunnan Province, China. XIAO HUAMEI was initially taken advantage of by traffickers due to her difficult family situation and low education level and was taken away from her hometown. After trafficking XIAO HUAMEI several times, the traffickers finally sold XIAO HUAMEI to a farmer named Dong Zhimin in Feng County, Xuzhou City, Jiangsu Province at an extremely low price and married her. After the marriage, XIAO HUAMEI not only suffered from long-term monitoring and restrictions on her personal freedom but was also forced to have 8 children with Dong Zhimin. From 1990 to 2020 when XIAO HUAMEI was trafficked to Dong Zhimin's home, XIAO HUAMEI's mental disorder continued to worsen. After the case was exposed, XIAO HUAMEI was identified as having a second-level mental disability by a professional institution (People's Daily, 2022) [10].

3.1. Common Causes Analysis of the XIAO HUAMEI Case

The unbalanced economic development in various regions is one of the important reasons for the XIAO HUAMEI case. Especially in the context of the unbalanced economic

development between urban and rural areas, poverty has become an important driving force for trafficking in women for forced marriage. Jiang, Zhang, and Sánchez-Barricarte (2015) pointed out that the economic development gap between urban and rural areas led to an imbalance in the supply and demand of marriage in poverty-stricken areas [6]. Although Jiangsu Province is one of the most economically developed provinces in China, Feng County where Dong Zhimin, who purchased XIAO HUAMEI, is located in a rural area of Xuzhou City, Jiangsu Province, and the local economic development has a large gap compared to the entire Jiangsu Province. And Dong Zhimin, as a marriageable man in Jiangsu, has a large gap compared to other urban marriageable men and does not have an advantage in the marriage market. Therefore, he finally chose to purchase XIAO HUAMEI for 3,000 RMB to marry her. However, economic poverty is not only the basic reason for women trafficking but also amplifies the influence of society and culture.

Gender imbalance and patriarchy are the key social factors leading to the XIAO HUAMEI case. Xiong (2021) and Zhao (2003) pointed out that the traditional ideology of preferring sons over daughters has led to a long-term gender imbalance in China, resulting in more serious marriage squeeze for rural men [20, 21]. Moreover, in the traditional patriarchal culture in China pointed out by Watkins-Smith (2022), the marital value of women is simplified as reproductive value and is a tool to satisfy family interests [19]. In the XIAO HUAMEI case, XIAO HUAMEI was forced to have 8 children with Dong Zhimin. XIAO HUAMEI's personal value as a woman was regarded by Dong Zhimin and his family as a reproductive resource to satisfy the family interest of carrying on the family line. At the same time, in the village where XIAO HUAMEI was located, the villagers did not raise objections to Dong Zhimin's act of purchasing XIAO HUAMEI revealing the local default that women are accessories and the high tolerance for the phenomenon of buying and selling marriages. This implicit support further strengthened XIAO HUAMEI's predicament, forming a "soft connivance" of society towards illegal marriages. Under the intertwining of social and cultural factors, the issue of trafficking in women in rural areas is difficult to be fundamentally resolved through a single law and policy.

The deficiency in law and law enforcement has further exacerbated the universality of the XIAO HUAMEI case. Wang (2023) and Zhao (2003) pointed out in their research that although trafficking in women is clearly stipulated as an illegal act in China's Criminal Law, there are still serious deficiencies in the pursuit of the responsibility of the buyer and the punishment of traffickers [18, 21]. In the XIAO HUAMEI case, Dong Zhimin, as the buyer of trafficked women, abused XIAO HUAMEI, causing her to have schizophrenia that is irreversible, and illegally detained XIAO HUAMEI to restrict her personal freedom. In the final judgment, Dong Zhimin was only sentenced to 9 years in prison. And for the 5 criminals who trafficked XIAO HUAMEI, they were only sentenced to a maximum of 13 years and a minimum of 8 years in prison. The insufficient punishment of the buyer and the seller by the law and law enforcement agencies weakens the deterrent effect of the law on society and does not directly reduce the cost of crime, highlighting the need for reform in law and law enforcement at multiple levels.

4. United Nations Gender Sustainable Development Analysis

According to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, gender inequality is a manifestation of social justice, and education, employment, and political participation are the main pillars of women's empowerment (Secretary-General, U. N., 2022) [17]. The acquisition of these resources can effectively change the social status and rights of women (Kabeer, 2005) [7]. Achieving gender equality is conducive to reducing the vulnerability of women in rural or poverty-stricken areas. The XIAO HUAMEI case reflects how gender inequality and the vulnerability of the social economy and culture interact. XIAO HUAMEI has been passively trapped in a long-term predicament for a long time due to the lack of education and economic support. This phenomenon is common in most rural areas. Secondly, under the influence of traditional patriarchal concepts and the ideology of preferring sons over daughters in rural China, women have suffered unequal social treatment and severe gender discrimination, further leading to the vulnerability of rural women. Therefore, gender equality is not only related to the rights and interests of women themselves but also to the sustainable development of the entire society.

4.1. SDG 5: Gender Equality

Gender equality is the core to eliminating the trafficking of women and forced marriage. SDG5 clearly states that all forms of violence should be eliminated through legislation and policies to guarantee the basic rights of vulnerable women. According to United Nations data, 75% of the trafficked population globally are women, among which trafficking in women for the purpose of sexual exploitation is one of the most common forms of exploitation (UN, 2015) [15]. The XIAO HUAMEI case, as a typical example among them, reveals that those who bought and sold XIAO HUAMEI only regarded her as reproductive and sexual resources and the economic rewards that could be obtained from trafficking XIAO HUAMEI, indicating that gender violence and economic exploitation are the main driving forces for trafficking in women. SDG5 provides solutions and paths to this problem by emphasizing female education, prevention of gender violence, and enhancement of gender awareness. For example, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals report on gender equality pointed out that through gender education and community publicity, community education projects in South Asia have significantly raised public awareness of gender violence issues (UN, 2015) [15]. In response to the XIAO HUAMEI case, the same measures can be taken to empower rural women through education and conduct publicity in society, but at the same time, it still requires the support of society and relevant laws and policies to reduce the frequent occurrence of similar incidents.

4.2. SDG 10: Reducing Inequality

Reducing social and economic inequality is an important solution to trafficking in women and forced marriage. SDG 10 emphasizes reducing income inequality and social inequality, which is crucial for improving the social status of rural vulnerable groups, especially women. The ILO's "Global Report on Human Trafficking" pointed out that in rural areas with extreme scarcity of economic resources, poverty and lack of education significantly increase the risk

of individuals being trafficked due to the lack of awareness and ability to cope with risks (International Labour Organization et al., 2022) [4]. In China, the dual household registration system between urban and rural areas limits the social mobility and access to public resources of rural women, marginalizing rural women and putting them at a disadvantage in terms of education, medical care, and employment opportunities (Carnegie et al., 2020) [2]. In the XIAO HUAMEI case, due to years of economic poverty and lack of education, XIAO HUAMEI was unable to identify and respond to the risk of trafficking and was trafficked to Jiangsu Province. Under the influence of the urban-rural gap and related factors, XIAO HUAMEI fell into the marginalized group of society and was unable to escape. By emphasizing promoting economic equality and social inclusiveness as in SDG 10, the risk of similar trafficking in women can be effectively mitigated. For example, increasing infrastructure, employment opportunities, and educational opportunities in rural areas to improve the economic poverty in rural areas, empower women through education, raise public awareness, and reduce the vulnerability of rural women. In addition to reducing equality, establishing a strong legal framework is a necessary condition to ensure the achievement of these goals.

4.3. SDG 16: Peace and Justice

Effective law enforcement and legal protection are among the key guarantees for combating trafficking in women and forced marriage. The core of SDG 16 is to strengthen law enforcement and reduce criminal acts against vulnerable groups by establishing a transparent and efficient judicial system, and the improvement of the judicial system is directly related to human rights protection (UN, 2015) [14]. According to the UNODC report in 2021, the prosecution rate of human trafficking in areas with weak law enforcement is significantly lower than that in areas with a more complete judicial system [16]. In the XIAO HUAMEI case, although the police and relevant judicial institutions intervened in the investigation, due to limited local law enforcement resources and the professional ability of law enforcement personnel, many relevant evidence chains were incomplete, and local officials had insufficient legal knowledge of trafficking in women and forced marriage, and the judgment results for both parties involved in buying and selling XIAO HUAMEI were not satisfactory. SDG 16 emphasizes establishing a transparent and efficient judicial system, which can provide better legal protection for victims. In response to the XIAO HUAMEI case, strengthening the local law enforcement capacity and the professional ability of relevant judicial personnel, improving the reporting mechanism and supervision mechanism, strengthening the equal guilt of buying and selling women and increasing the severity of punishment can effectively reduce the occurrence of similar cases. Therefore, SDG 16 provides important support and deterrence in combating crimes and forms a good collaboration with SDG 5 and SDG 10 to jointly reduce the vulnerability of rural women, trafficking in women, and forced marriage.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the issues of trafficking in women and forced marriage from the perspective of gender sustainable development, compensating for the deficiency of analyzing specific cases of trafficking in women in China from the perspective of SDG in related research. Through the analysis

of the XIAO HUAMEI case, it explained the economic, social, and judicial policy causes behind trafficking in women and forced marriage, and attempted to propose solutions based on SDG 5, SDG 10, and SDG 16. In future research, we can further explore the changes and development of social and cultural customs in rural areas after policy and social participation governance or combine relevant cases to explore innovative measures of judicial institutions to achieve gender sustainable development and more effectively reduce the problems of trafficking in women and forced marriage.

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