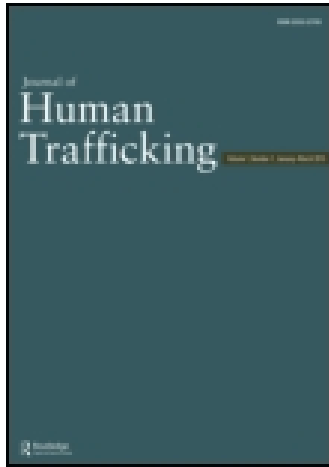


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Women of the Kachin Conflict: Trafficking and Militarized Femininity on the Burma-China Border

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This article presents findings from field research on the trafficking of women from Kachin State, Burma into China as “forced brides.” Analyzing interviews with trafficking survivors, female soldiers, women’s activists and KIO administrators, I describe the factors that influence trafficking, the mechanism by which it occurs, and argue that by looking at Kachin women’s experiences, we may understand the workings of the conflict more broadly.

Keywords: Burma, China, gender, Kachin conflict, trafficking

Kachin State is an ethnic region in northern Burma that has long been in conflict with the central Burmese government.¹ In 2011, a 17-year ceasefire was broken, resulting in the resumption of active warfare between the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO)—the political arm of the Kachin people—and the Burmese military, at the government’s behest. In spite of ongoing attempts at peace negotiations, the Kachin Women’s Association of Thailand has documented an alarming number of atrocities—including rape, arbitrary arrest, and torture—against civilians (Kachin Women’s Association of Thailand, 2013). The area has been documented to be an active conflict zone resulting in one of the worst humanitarian crises in the Mekong Sub-Region (Human Rights Watch, 2014). According to a report by the prior Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Burma, over 120,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) have fled to border areas of Burma and China to escape the fighting (Quintana, 2014), and these communities suffer from a lack of basic necessities and little to no foreign aid. These desperate conditions have left civilians—women, in particular—very vulnerable. As a result, trafficking in women—often to Yunnan Province as forced brides—is on the rise. This form of trafficking, however, has not been made

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¹ While the government officially changed the name of the country to the “Union of Myanmar” in 1989, throughout this article, I refer to it as “Burma,” the name still used by the country’s democracy movement and by all respondents who participated in this study.

a priority on the policy agendas of the Burmese or Chinese governments, and there is currently no official anti-trafficking policy operating within Kachin State.

While the issue of trafficking goes largely overlooked in scholarly and journalistic writing on the war in Kachin State, I argue that understanding trafficking will, in fact, allow us to better understand the conflict. Drawing on gender analysis and feminist international relations (IR) scholarship, I show how the conditions that contribute to trafficking illuminate a fuller picture of this conflict and allow us to begin conceptualizing solutions.

Background of the Kachin Conflict

Located in northeastern Burma, Kachin State is a remote, resource-rich, nonindustrialized region surrounded by the borderlands of India and China. The Kachin—or, as they characterized themselves prior to British colonialism, “Jinghpo” (Leach, 1954)—dwell in villages and cities, and their typical employment endeavors include agricultural production and jade mining (Global Witness, 2005).

Conflict between the Kachin people and the central Burmese government has been a constant since Burma’s independence from colonialism in 1948 (Sun, 2014). Active armed conflict, spurred by Kachin grievances over the lack of autonomy offered by the Central Burmese government and ongoing ethnic discrimination, escalated in 1961 and was fueled by the newly formed KIO and its armed wing, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA; Global Witness, 2005). One of a number of armed ethnic groups in Burma, the Kachin are known for their political organization and military prowess (Lintner, 1997) having, by the early 1990s, trained over 6,000 troops, plus militias (Global Witness, 2005). The conflict continued until 1994 when a ceasefire agreement was reached between Burma’s then governing body, the State Peace and Development Council (SLORC) and the KIO. The agreement ushered in 17 years of relative peace and, according to Woods (2012), served the interests of both political parties, as it created opportunities for capitalist expansion in the region (e.g., in the jade and timber trades). However, this, in turn, enhanced the power of Burma’s central government, authorizing the state to engage in land grabbing in the resource-rich Kachin region (Kevin McLeod, personal communication, October 13, 2014). Because such practices continued, the ceasefire was ultimately broken, and armed conflict continues at time of writing. The KIO are now “the country’s second largest remaining armed ceasefire group” (Woods, 2012, p. 749).

As a result of the conflict, conditions on the ground remain volatile for the Kachin people. Fighting has escalated in and around KIO-controlled areas, IDPs face worsening insecurity in and around the camps, and many have had to flee across the China border to escape the fighting (Quintana, 2014). According to the Democratic Voice of Burma, “Aid workers say additional displaced persons will further deteriorate the conditions” (Kachinland News, 2014, para. 3). These conditions have also given rise to an increase in sexual violence along the border.

The Role of Women in Violence

Sexual violence against women is used as a common tactic of warfare in armed conflict. The United Nations Populations Fund (UNFPA) has documented systematic and pervasive acts of rape and sexual violence committed against women during conflicts in Kosovo, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo and elsewhere, explaining that

such atrocities are generally committed by the thousands, if not the hundreds of thousands, and are facilitated by the circumstances surrounding internal displacement (Ward & Marsh, 2006). These authors argued, “[T]he nature of warfare is changing, in ways that increasingly endanger women and girls” (p. 3). Additionally, as Vlachova and Biason noted, “The World Health Organisation estimates that globally one woman in five will be the victim of rape or attempted rape in her lifetime” (2005, p. 1).

In line with this conclusion, research conducted by the Kachin Women’s Association of Thailand (2013), policy reports commissioned by the Netherlands Government (Horton, 2005), and the UN Secretary General’s recent call for Investigation into Sexual Violence in Burma (Burma Campaign UK, 2014) have suggested that gender plays a crucial role in the ongoing fighting between the Burmese army and the KIO. Far from being removed from this conflict, women are caught in the crossfire of the war. The Women’s League of Burma’s 2014 report discussing sexual abuses committed against ethnic minority women by the Burmese Army noted, “Most cases are linked to the military offensives in Kachin and Northern Shan States since 2011. The Kachin Women’s Association Thailand (KWAT) documented that 59 women have been victims of acts of sexual violence committed by Burmese soldiers. The Shan Women’s Action Network (SWAN) reports 30 cases of sexual violence involving 35 women and girls in the past three years. The incidence of rape correlates with the timing of conflict” (Data provided to Women’s League of Burma by KWAT and SWAN, 2014, p. 1). The report argued that these circumstances represent a structural pattern in which rape is used by the Burmese military as a tactic of warfare against ethnic minorities.

Trafficking of Kachin Women in China

Previous studies on the trafficking of women from Burma’s Kachin State into China as forced brides are few, but important. Elena Shih’s (2013) research on trafficked Kachin women and HIV/AIDS in Ruili, China, lends important insight into the weaknesses in China’s anti-trafficking policy. Shih conducted ethnographic research through a local community arts project, finding that social conflicts, drugs, and disease converge with cross-border marginalization and underscore the problem of trafficking. Importantly, Shih applied the frame of gender analysis to her study, avoiding painting too broad a brush over the perception that all women and children are “victims” while their male counterparts are perpetrators. By engaging this complex analysis, Shih’s study illustrated the social nuances that are at play in the lives of her respondents and shed light on community intersections that underscore the problem of trafficking, rather than examining only the carceral aspects of the problem. This approach has implications on the way in which feminist scholars conduct research on trafficking as it demonstrates the importance of putting social processes in conversation with anti-trafficking policy analysis.

Asma Masood’s work on the economics of trafficking in Kachin State (2013) supports this approach. Examining reports of community-based organizations working on combat trafficking, Masood noted that trafficking is a complex process involving networks of recruiters, many of whom are impoverished migrants themselves. Masood found that “push factors of conflict and poverty, and the pull factor of a lucrative black market have shaped the trafficking of the Kachin into a vicious cycle” (Masood, 2013, p. 2). In addition, studies by Lwin (2013) and Sam (2005) and the Kachin Women’s Association of Thailand (2013) documented specific instances of

trafficking from Kachin State into China, claiming that “the neglect of social services in favor of extending military forces, have plunged the country into poverty and unemployment. This has in turn increased the numbers of youths forced to move away from home in the search for work, which provides traffickers with easy targets” (Sam, 2005, p. 1). These studies shed light on the mechanism by which trafficking occurs and point to the importance of drawing on an understanding of social processes to inform policy. As such, they lay the groundwork for an analysis of the relationship between trafficking and the Kachin conflict.

Prior research on gender, sexuality, and the trafficking of women within China also underscores the importance of understanding this prevalent practice. Evans (1995) examined academic and journalistic literature to trace the discursive construction of female sexuality and its connection with the institution of marriage as a state-led project in China from the 1950s through the 1990s, arguing that the construction of gender difference (and the corresponding problematization of female sexuality as part of this difference) perpetuates male authority while reinforcing the state’s interest in reproducing citizenship. The implications of this power disparity were articulated by Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte (2011), who analyzed prior survey and fieldwork data to trace the practice of selling women from southwestern China as wives to farmers in the north back to the 1970s, and explained the reasons for its current escalation to include demand for brides from neighboring countries (pp. 85–86). Importantly, the authors attributed such demand to the “marriage squeeze” among men—a phenomenon resulting from the one-child policy and corresponding gender imbalance due to the devaluing of female children. The cultural devaluation of girls, in effect, has led to a heightened demand for them, as evidenced by the general rise in “bride price” observed since the late 1980s (Jiang & Sánchez-Barricarte, 2012). But because China has been reluctant to treat either violence against women or the trafficking of potential wives across its borders as human rights abuses and crimes (Zhao, 2004), there is a troubling “absence of systematic national data” on trafficking in China (Lu, Liu, & Crowther, 2009, p. 870). This absence of data or even authorities from whom aggrieved women or their would-be protectors could seek recourse makes it even more challenging for scholars to track the fates of Kachin “forced brides” who have been trafficked across the border.

These studies point to a need for evidence-based research on trafficking along the Burma-China border that could effectively lead to policy change. Trafficking has been identified as a concern for the governments of both China and Burma in the 2014 United States Trafficking In Persons (TIP) Report, which upgraded China from Tier 3 to Tier 2 Watch List status, while keeping Burma’s ranking at Tier 2 on the Watch List in 2013 and 2014.² These tier placements, far from demonstrating government compliance with the U. S. State Department’s criterion, suggest that trafficking should remain a front-and-center policy priority for both the Burmese and Chinese governments if they wish to avoid being sanctioned by the United States.³

² The U.S. State Department’s annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report ranks every country in the world according to its adherence to anti-trafficking policy as stated by the U.S. government’s Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking. Countries with a Tier 3 ranking are considered the “lowest” on the rung, demonstrating little or no efforts to implement anti-trafficking measures. Burma stands as a Tier 2 Watch-List country, indicating that, while the government has made some efforts to address trafficking, those efforts remain inadequate.

³ For more on the TIP Report and its role in international relations, see Brennan (2005), Chuang (2006), Desyllas (2007), Parreñas (2011), and Pickering et al. (2009).

CONCEPTUALIZING “MILITARIZED FEMININITY”

I suggest that examining Kachin women’s experiences of trafficking will help us better understand the broader workings of the Kachin conflict. To explicate this connection, I draw on the concept of “militarized femininity” — that is, societal expectations of women under the conditions of conflict—as a lens through which to view the issue. Scholars of feminist international relations have shown that women’s experiences can tell us about the conditions of conflict in ways that traditional masculinist conceptions of international relations obscure. Tickner (2001) explained that approaching global politics from relationships that occur in the embodied, experiential realms of marginalized populations and women may help us understand the experiences of insecurity that are produced by such conflicts, while Enloe’s work on gender and militarism (1989, 2000, 2007) illuminated the ways in which militarization and the public and private power norms that accompany it, produced conceptualizations of femininity and masculinity, and depended on these conceptualizations for its maintenance. In order to see the full picture of armed conflict, Enloe explained, women’s experiences must become “visible,” regardless of whether the roles they play in conflict mirror those of traditional masculine roles, such as taking up arms (2013).

Following this line of thought, Sylvester (2012) argued that in order to accurately understand the conditions of war we must first look to the experiences of women. Drawing on analysis of traditional IR texts and theories, Sylvester suggested that IR should “conceptualize war as a subset of social relations of experience, on the grounds that war cannot be fully apprehended unless it is studied up from people who experience it in myriad ways and not only down from abstract places of International Relations theory” (Sylvester, 2012, p. 483). She explained that the traditionally realist conceptualization of warfare, which situates states as rational actors and views war as occurring through “system-dominant frameworks” misses the fact that women are often the targets in contemporary wars. Not taking their experiences into account leaves us with a “skewed” understanding of the circumstances of armed conflict (p. 491).

In her study of gender construction in the formation of nonstate armed groups (NSAGs), Mazurana (2012) explained that power and resources are used to mobilize militarized gender identities in order to create insurgency movements. Examining case studies of women and girls’ participation in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, The Islamist al-Shabaab youth movement in Somalia, the Palestinian jihadist group Hamas, and the United Self-Defense Forces of Columbia (AUC), Mazurana concluded that gendered identities are constructed in order to create and maintain insurgency movements, with women and girls recruited in targeted ways that differ from those with power. While studies of armed conflict often take for granted the gender disparity that exists within communities, Mazurana’s study illustrated that gender analysis can inform our understanding of the ways such groups function and maintain power.

Additionally, McEvoy’s (2010) interviews with women in Loyalist paramilitaries organizations in Northern Ireland led her to suggest that incorporating women’s experiences into dialogues about security helps us better understand the male heads of state who appear, on the surface, to control the mechanics of war. Analyzing respondents’ reflections on peace agreements, McEvoy argued that “gendered security analysis” (see Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007) should be incorporated into studies of women and war in order for scholarship on the subject to move beyond the incomplete and oversimplified premise that all women in militarized contexts are victims.

Militarized femininity, then, offers an alternative way of approaching the study of armed conflict and one that requires widening the lens to include experiences of women, even if those experiences may, at first glance, appear seemingly unrelated to conflict. Adopting this approach, I turn to trafficking—an issue that, while highly studied, has not yet been interrogated in terms of its relationship to the war in Kachin State.

METHODOLOGY

In February 2014, I traveled to Mai Ja Yang, a city on the border of Burma's Kachin State and China's Yunnan province, to conduct three weeks of exploratory research. I was invited to undertake this project by a community-based organization (CBO) comprised of Kachin women's activists, who have made trafficking a priority on their organization's agenda. The invitation came as a result of my having written and produced an original musical, inspired by field research about the trafficking of women Thailand, for an audience comprised of Kachin and other ethnic minority migrants in Chiang Mai, Thailand, including members of the CBO.⁴ I was asked to help the organization to better understand the conditions women are facing around this growing problem and to offer preliminary recommendations for the development of an anti-trafficking policy that serves the needs of women in Kachin State. During the research period, I stayed in the home, or "compound," of a senior member of the organization, whose close ties to KIO administrators, community leaders, and others provided me with access to a variety of research participants.

Participants

Qualitative interviews were conducted with 25 participants, including 6 trafficking survivors, 3 female soldiers, 8 women's rights activists, 4 internally displaced persons (IDPs), and 4 KIO lawmakers and administrators. Interviews were semi-structured and consisted of questions appropriate to each group. Questions were formulated based on prior studies examining trafficking from the social locations of various actors in a given community (see, in particular, Parreñas, 2011; Pickering et al., 2009). Participants were selected by an administrator working for the community-based organization, and each traveled to the field site to participate in the study. For the purposes of anonymity, all participants' names and identities have been changed.

⁴ Parallel to my endeavors as a scholar, I also work professionally as a playwright, musician, and composer, and my forthcoming dissertation at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism combines international feminist research with the writing, composing, and production of an original musical, *Land of Smiles*, about the trafficking of women in Thailand. Inspired by field research including over 50 interviews with anti-trafficking nongovernmental organization (NGO) employees, female migrant laborers from Burma, government officials, women's activists and others, the musical presents one of the dominant stories about human trafficking and shows that the voices of the people, most often women, can illuminate the problems and highlight the difficulties in finding solutions. This artistic project is designed to facilitate communication between stakeholders in the anti-trafficking movement and to prime a dialogue to explore the policies, practices, and outcomes of actions in this environment. The musical was performed in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in December, 2013, for an audience of stakeholders including the community-based organization with whom I later traveled to Kachin State.

Procedures

Each interview lasted between 45 minutes to 2.5 hours and was audio recorded with the respondents' permission. I also took notes by hand and kept a daily diary of my experiences and observations in the field site. Throughout the research process, I used analytic memos to identify emerging themes and to further "steer" the direction of the interviews. The data were stored on my laptop computer, as well as uploaded into a dropbox in order to prevent loss. An information sheet describing the project goals and university Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines was provided to each respondent in the Kachin language. Interviews were then transcribed by a university research assistant and analyzed by me. I compensated the former forced brides, or survivors, in the form of a small donation, as many of these women traveled several hours by car or motorbike from their villages to reach the compound, costing them both money and time. I relied closely on two translators—fluent in English, Burmese, and Kachin—who were selected by the CBO and also served as research assistants, helping guide the direction of the interviews. While I used the interview scripts as guidelines, I allowed respondents to "steer" the direction of the interviews, focusing on topics that they felt were most relevant to their experiences.

Analysis

Once transcribed, the interview data were parsed into categories based on the participant populations for further analysis. Participants were coded according to ethnicity, gender, and role in the community. Interview excerpts and analytic memos were color coded according to emergent themes; that is, discussion of legal processes, gender discrimination, diplomatic collaboration, experiences in captivity, stigmatization, intergovernmental policy efforts, and activists' narratives. I revisited my field journal to assess my responses to the themes that emerged and to reflect on my own location and potential bias in the research process. I then compared and contrasted participants' responses to emerging themes, noting the nature of inconsistencies and agreement among participants. Taking these complexities into account, I then summarized the emergent themes broadly, noting, where possible, variations among participants. As discussed in the limitations section, this analysis is meant to paint a broad picture of the general themes that emerged from the study and to serve as a springboard for further research.

Researcher Subjectivity

Several noteworthy constraints may have impacted my bias in the field site. Foremost among these was my consistently close proximity to the community-based organization that helped facilitate the project and my reliance on their selection of participant respondents. This reliance may have slanted my perspective in favor of the political perspectives of that organization's members. I attempted to mitigate such potential bias by keeping a journal of my own observations in the field site as a way of separating the participants' responses from my own impressions, as well as to "track" my own location in the research context (see Ackerly & True, 2010). I was also aware that in conducting this project in partnership with the community-based organization, my role would be that of an "activist-scholar." Therefore, in this article, I do not

claim to present an “objective” or “positivist” view of the research but rather a view in which the positionality of the women with whom I partnered, as well as my own positionality, informs the process of interrogation.

Additionally, as I discuss in the limitations section, my mobility in the field site was extremely limited. While in Mai Ja Yang, I was asked to remain on the “compound,” which also served as an informal headquarters for the community-based organization that facilitated the research. This restriction may have impacted my bias, as it prevented me from accessing additional participants via snowball sampling within the local community. This restriction, however, proved to be both a detriment and an asset. By being situated in the compound, I was fortunate to have consistent access to a broad range of participants. Listening to the perspectives of a variety of participants also allowed me some ability to triangulate the data; I attempted to check data points with various members of the population subgroups in order to better understand what was being reported. This, in turn, provided me with a rich, albeit preliminary, perspective on the research. This process also allowed me to continue reformulating my questions as the study progressed and to interpret new meanings from previous interviews.

RESULTS

Below, I will discuss the emerging themes in detail from the perspectives of three participant groups: “survivors,” that is, women who experienced being trafficked into China as forced brides; “community members,” including members of women’s organizations and female soldiers working for the KIA; and “authority figures,” including lawmakers and KIO administrators. Each participant had varying experiences with and understandings of the issue of trafficking and approached the subject from their own social location and perspective. The themes that emerged in their responses illustrate the importance of understanding the realities of trafficking and shed light on its inherent relationship to the armed conflict.

Survivors

The first group of participants I interviewed was former forced brides or trafficking “survivors.” I asked questions about their home and family life, the effect the breaking of the ceasefire had on their communities, and their migration processes into China. Many of these interviews were very in depth, as it took a considerable amount of time to build trust with the participants. As many stories involved issues of rape and sexuality, they were difficult subjects for participants to discuss. I noted that despite this challenge, the survivors arrived at the field site *wanting* to tell their stories. Themes that emerged from these interviews included navigating crippling conditions on the ground, the influence of these conditions on the process of trafficking, the mechanism by which Kachin women are trafficked into China, the problems they face while in captivity, social stigmatization upon their return to Kachin State, and their inability to rely on the police or judicial processes to bring traffickers and perpetrators to justice.

Crippling conditions on the ground

Several survivors noted that the challenging conditions on the ground exacerbate the need for migration, thereby facilitating trafficking. These women reported having had to flee from situations of grave violence, including witnessing their villages burned, livestock crippled, women raped, men and children tortured, and children conscripted into the Burmese army. Many reported having had to flee to jungle areas and subsisting there for months or years before finding refuge in one of the many KIO-controlled and funded IDP camps.

One Kachin female survivor (KFS1) described her life in Pa Katawng IDP camp, explaining, “During the first year of fighting, in our village people have gone to different places. From our village, eleven families became IDPs. Fighting came to the village and we had to leave.” KFS1 recalled living in the camp for “over one year.” During that time, she said, “I mostly stayed in the camp, and went into the forest and to other places.”

When I asked KFS1 what conditions were like there, she remarked, “The camp had many IDPs. We lived in wood houses—very small and tight. We lived in the camp but sometimes we wanted to work.”

This survivor went on to report that conditions in the camp included poor infrastructure, a lack of access to basic resources, and a pervasive sense of hopelessness and numbness among those taking refuge there. Some explained that the desire for productive work influenced many IDPs to migrate to China of their own volition, but that their undocumented status often made them vulnerable to labor exploitation and trafficking. Furthermore, she reported that little to no international aid is supporting the camps, due to members of the Burmese army surrounding key entry points and blocking aid workers.

The circumstances of having to flee villages and to face life in an IDP camp described by many survivors echo numerous women’s experiences of violence and displacement in conflict zones around the world. In describing the experiences of refugee women throughout the past decade, for example, Ward and Marsh explained:

Without money or other resources, displaced women and girls may be compelled to submit to sex in return for safe passage, food, shelter or other resources. Some may head towards urban settings, possibly in search of the relative security of a densely populated area or in the hope of obtaining employment. Whatever the motivation, both internally displaced and refugee women and girls in urban settings are at risk of ongoing exploitation by local residents, especially because they are less likely than encamped populations to be targeted for assistance and protection by governments or by humanitarian agencies. (Ward & Marsh, 2006, p. 8)

Echoing the concerns of the Kachin survivors I spoke with, Ward and Marsh noted that camp settings for IDPs are often as predictably dangerous for women, who remain vulnerable. Because of these compounding insecurities, many women leave the camps in search of productive income-generating activities.

Migrating into China

The need to find work described by survivors revealed the mechanism by which trafficking into China occurs. Each survivor I spoke with described a similar experience: Initially, she is recruited by a middleman in Kachin State—often a friend of the family or someone the woman

knows. This person then leads the woman to believe that a job awaits her in China and offers to facilitate her transport. Once she crosses the border, however, the migrant is told that the job has changed and she must now travel further with another middleman, usually an unfamiliar Chinese person. At this point, the migrant's communication network is cut off. Often she lacks either the language skills necessary to communicate, and/or her phone is taken away or her SIM card removed. From here, the migrant soon ends up in the home of a Chinese family—a single man and his parents—and is told that she has been sold as a bride.

Facing captivity

Survivors explained that Chinese men do not act alone in the purchase of Kachin “brides.” Rather, entire families are complicit in the exchange with parents of the men often facilitating the purchase, capture, harboring, and coercion of Kachin women into slave-like domestic conditions.

One Kachin female survivor (KFS2) experienced being transported by a Chinese trafficker to the home of a family in what she believed to be a village located near Beijing.

“I thought I was going to go work as a maid,” she said, “but when I arrived at the house the man took me for his younger brother. The Chinese trafficker said they already paid for the transportation, and took me to that place and he told me that in his home, in his village, there were other people from Myanmar.”

I asked KFS2 if she had known that the man who took her did not intend to have her work as a maid. She responded, “I was so afraid. I didn't want to marry the man. Their house is high with many floors, and that is why they always locked me inside. I had no way to go out. I was afraid and cried every day.”

I then asked KFS2 whether she knew she was going to marry this man. “I knew nothing about that before,” she said, “I went there only for work. They said they would give 2000 Yuan for each month. I was with Chinese man about nine months.”

The Chinese man, KFS2 explained, worked as a “ticket person” in the train station. He had a low salary, she noted, adding that she believed the reason he could not find a wife in China was due to the fact that there are “not a lot of women in China, there is mostly men.”

I then asked KFS2 to describe the man she would be forced to marry. “That man has a big, round face, and he is an impatient man,” she said. “When he got angry he grabbed my clothes and beat and tortured and hit me. That is why I decided to run.”

KFS2 began planning her escape from the home in which she was being held. “After six months,” she said, “I saw that the door was sometimes not locked when he is home. I go outside sometimes and just look around to assess the situation. Then I met another Kachin forced bride nearby the house on the bus. One day, I grabbed my phone and ran to that friend's house. Then the Chinese man found out. The family came and took me back to the house and kept me in the house again. And they said, ‘If you try and run again we will just tie you up.’”

“That night I got in a fight with the Chinese man. I could speak more Chinese by then. I said, ‘I am not your legal wife. You bought me. I would like to go. I come here for work. I come here not because I love.’”

KFS2 described having threatened to take police action against the man and his family if they did not let her go. The Chinese man, however, responded by telling her, “You have no proof. We already paid the money and bought you. We can kill you and no one will ever know.”

I asked KFS2 how she managed to endure the situation and finally negotiate an escape.

“Day by day, I saved a little money from each time when I went to buy food,” she explained. “Then, when I had saved 8000 Yuan, after that I run. In the early morning my husband went to work and my mother-in-law went to buy food. I ran from that house. I ran with another forced bride from Kachin State. We two decided to get a bus and go to the Chinese station. We decided to run together. The other woman wanted to run but she didn’t have the money so I said, ‘I have the money. We will go together.’”

KFS2’s story illuminates that the demand in China for brides—particularly among working class men—is fueling the trafficking of Kachin women. The prevalence of this circumstance is likely due to the “marriage squeeze” that has resulted from China’s one-child policy and the selective abortion of female fetuses that has accompanied it. As Amartya Sen noted, such “natality selection” creates conditions of gender imbalance in communities where it is practiced (Perry, 2014). Indeed, as discussed by Shih (2013), KWAT (2013), and Masood (2013), demand from China represents a critical “pull factor” in the trafficking of women. Furthermore, as Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte (2011, 2012) have argued, the “marriage squeeze” among men of both low economic status and marriageable age is fueling the demand for brides who can be obtained at a competitive price. While the nature of such sales goes beyond the scope of this preliminary research, such demand appears to have directly led to the circumstances of the survivors’ ordeals. All of the survivors interviewed in this study indicated that the men who they were forced to marry came from middle-income families and sought to fulfill their familial duty by producing an heir.

Evans’ (1995) discussion of the construction of gender lends further insight into this predicament: The masculinity of the Chinese sons is at stake; their inability to find a suitable wife due to the imbalanced gender ratio in China leaves them unable to fulfill their obligations as men, as sons, and as procreating members of the Chinese state.

This survivor’s dramatic recollection illustrates how demand from China is playing out in the lives of Kachin women. The fact that another forced bride lived in a nearby house speaks to the prevalence of the practice in China. In the context of the Kachin conflict, this survivor’s story illuminates that the conflicts women endure as a result of their need to migrate are much farther reaching than the Burma-China borderlands. Indeed, we may view this survivor’s story as a “ripple effect” of the Kachin conflict, in points as far away as Beijing.

Stigmatization upon return

Another factor that informs the process of trafficking while also illuminating the workings of the conflict is survivors’ stigmatization upon returning to Kachin State. Following their ordeals in China, those women who manage to escape do so at great risk to their safety and with little help from Chinese authorities. Once they return to their home villages, they often face stigma from the community for having a “bad story.”

One Kachin female survivor (KFS3) described experiencing such stigma: “When I came back from China in 2009, I stayed with my family for a year and got married in 2011,” she said. “Actually my husband wanted to marry me when I come back from China as soon as possible, but my relative and his mother said, ‘It’s not the right time.’ That’s why we waited until 2011 and then decided to get married and stay together in the forest.” I asked KFS3 why her mother-in-law had felt it was not the right time for them to marry. “She said, ‘You have

been married to Chinese man. You have been sold into China. My son cannot marry that kind of woman. My mother-in-law talked to her other friends, like gossip—that I was sold to China by my people, and that I look like the kind of person that cannot have a baby,” she explained.

KFS3 revealed that following her ordeal in China, it was not her Kachin fiancé, but his mother—a woman—who enforced her stigmatization upon her return. This implies that not only are women stigmatized by male community members but also from the community at large. Here, we see the pull of cultural norms at work: the deeply conservative, Christian ethics embedded in Kachin society (see Tegenfeldt, 1974) become a destructive force in the lives of Kachin former forced brides. In the context of the conflict, such deeply rooted cultural norms are being unchallenged and slow to transform.

The stigmatization of Kachin survivors raises questions about the role and meaning of the migration process under the conditions of the conflict. What cannot be ignored, but nevertheless goes unseen in this circumstance, is the fact that Kachin women are migrating to China explicitly *because of* the conflict. All of the former brides I interviewed explained that their migration was fueled by a desire to find work and to send remittances home to their families and communities. Whether a demonstration of support, solidarity, willingness to contribute, or desperation, the women who migrate are doing so in response to the ongoing civil conflict and subsequent lack of opportunity this conflict has created. Therefore, their ordeals in China cannot be seen as being “divorced” from the conflict.

Stigmatizing women who return with a “bad story” obfuscates the contribution they are making to the war effort. These migrants’ heroic attempts to support their families and communities during wartime are eclipsed by the stigma associated with their ordeal. Additionally, such stigmatization may serve to recover the masculinity of those embedded in the armed conflict—namely the male husbands of trafficked women who are recruited to the frontlines as soldiers for the KIA. The failure of KIA soldiers—who spend their days on the frontlines and suffer difficult ordeals of their own—to “protect their women” no doubt contributes to the stigmatization of “brides” who return to these men after surviving ordeals in China.

The prevailing issue of stigmatization, again points to how the workings of gender, and specifically gender relationships in the context of trafficking, illuminate the social underpinnings of the Kachin conflict.

Community Members

I classify the second group of participants as community members, including women’s activists and KIA soldiers, each of whom revealed important and often contrasting perspectives on trafficking. In questioning these participants, I sought to understand their impressions of trafficking as a social problem, of the women who survive being trafficked, of gender norms in Kachin culture, and of whether trafficking was being prioritized by the KIO administration. Themes emerging from this group included issues linked to gender discrimination and its connection to trafficking, problematic customary legal practices, and the lack of women’s participation in political decision-making processes.

Identifying gender discrimination

Several of the women's activists I interviewed identified gender discrimination to be a major problem in Kachin society, and one they felt fueled trafficking. Some explained that discrimination had worsened since the advent of active warfare in 2011. As fighting increased, they explained, men left their villages and communities to serve in the armed forces of the KIA and on war strategy committees. Women, in turn, were expected to adhere to traditional gender roles as housekeepers and caretakers of children while somehow also serving as the primary breadwinners for their families. This has caused many women to migrate to China seeking employment while leaving their children in the care of other family members—a situation that leaves them vulnerable to trafficking.

One Kachin female activist (KFA1) explained that trafficking has recently increased in the KIO-controlled areas of Kachin State due to an increase in women's irregular migration: "In this region there are many trafficked to China. Mainly is the job or money problem or the family problem," she said. "It happens to the girls or women who do not have parents— orphan girls whose father or mother has died, single parents. It might be because of the civil war. We face many problems, and so it is increasing and getting worse and many people are looking for the job," she explained.

Another activist, KFA2, noted the problem of gender discrimination within the KIO administration: "There should be a policy that women should have equal opportunities as men in all of the jobs and positions in the KIO," explained KFA2. "KIO should protect those who are trafficked into the China and should protect them firmly and warmly."

When I asked KFA2 which types of jobs she felt were unequal in the KIO, she replied, "For example, a major in the army. Some women are qualified to be a major but the organization does not give the position to the women." She then explained that when both a man and woman apply for the same job, the job is typically given to the man, as the KIO administrators believe women to be less qualified.

KFA2 then articulated that gender discrimination within the administration has caused the KIO to dismiss the problem of trafficking. While women's organizations are working to prevent trafficking through small-scale awareness-raising programs in rural villages, she explained, their efforts have been slow due to the lack of resources and personnel. Additionally, KIO administrators—all of whom are men—have been in dialogue with women's groups but, as of this writing, have not developed an effective policy for dealing with what they see as being a "women's issue."

While the problem of gender discrimination was identified by many of the activists I interviewed, interestingly, not all women in Kachin society appeared to see such discrimination—and its relationship to trafficking—as a problem. In contrast, three female KIO soldiers (KFSol1, KFSol2, KFSol3) reported experiencing little to no gender discrimination within the context of their work environments, or in Kachin society more broadly. "We are all brothers and sisters," they explained. "There is no gender imbalance."

I then asked the soldiers whether trafficking was a priority for the KIO and KIA. They responded by affirming that trafficking is a priority for the KIO, and that the KIO "protects us from being trafficked." When I asked what the KIO's anti-trafficking policy entailed, however, the soldiers responded by saying, "We don't know. But we think they're doing a good job."

In stark contrast to the women's activists, these soldiers demonstrated little awareness of the issue of trafficking and no concrete knowledge of policies in place to combat it. In addition, they made no connection between the problem of trafficking and the prevalence of gender discrimination in Kachin society. This disparity in awareness points to a gap in the impressions of women across various levels of Kachin society. While some women believed trafficking to be a serious problem and saw its relationship to gender discrimination, others had little to no awareness of this problem. Despite this lack of awareness, however, the soldiers' comment that the KIO protects women from being trafficked is notable, as it raises questions about women's motivation for joining the KIO.

These discrepancies reveal the extent to which community members' experiences and understandings of trafficking differ, depending on their social roles. It also illuminates the lengths to which women involved in the armed services can go to "overlook" aspects of society that may undermine the solidarity of the KIA. Indeed, identifying gender discrimination as a problem in Kachin society could evoke the perception that these female soldiers were "against" their male counterparts—an attitude that could impact them unfavorably. Often, nonstate armed groups (NSAGs) cannot afford to alienate local communities in their efforts to engage support among their civilian populations (Mazurana, 2012, p. 154). One way to avoid conflict is to actively support the prevalence of traditional gender roles by members of the resistance and to promote these roles within social fabric of civilian communities. By maintaining the view that "we are all brothers and sisters," women are less likely to become radicalized to the point of rebellion against their male counterparts and thus appear dangerous to the community. In Kachin State, traditional gender roles are reinforced even as women's rights are touted as goals of the group.

These responses to the issue of gender discrimination show that women's experiences can shed light on processes at play within the context of the Kachin conflict. The activists who identified gender discrimination as a prevalent social problem provide clues as to how and why trafficking has worsened. The tension, however, between the responses of these activists and the KIA soldiers illustrates that there is resistance to accepting and articulating the problem of gender discrimination within the KIO. This likely is informed by a desire to maintain a sense of social stability and status quo in a highly unstable political context.

Legal practices to combat trafficking

Legal practices associated with combating trafficking emerged as a central theme among female community members. Several Kachin women activists articulated that, in Kachin society, trafficking cases (as well as other issues that are seen by cultural leaders as being "women's issues") are handled under practices of customary law, rather than by a formal judiciary. One participant explained that prior to 2013, no formal judiciary existed within Kachin State. Communities have, instead, used "cultural" practices to resolve disputes. Such practices rely on cultural norms and values to achieve the resolution of social conflict. While such practices can be useful ways of resolving conflicts in deeply traditional societies, they do not incorporate formal mechanisms or standardized policies to resolve conflicts and, thus, are unpredictable and often do not result in justice for all parties.

Additionally, such laws often put women at a disadvantage, as they incorporate norms reliant upon gender discrimination. A basic tenet of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) suggests that states "incorporate the principle of

equality of men and women in their legal system, abolish all discriminatory laws and adopt appropriate ones prohibiting discrimination against women” (UN Women, 1979, para. 4). While critics of CEDAW argue that it remains too focused on the public sphere and does not accurately reflect the workings of women’s private lives (see, e.g., Agarwal, 2008; Lijnzaad, 1994), others note that, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, women’s engagement in domestic litigation, prompted by CEDAW, is helping to resolve the “universalism vs. cultural relativism” debate associated with customary legal practices and allowing women to use domestic legal systems to challenge the traditions that they identify as being in violation of their rights (Forster & Vedna, 2005).

Many of the women activists I spoke with expressed the desire for formalized legal systems to take the place of cultural legal frameworks. One women’s rights activist, KFA3, spoke about a recent rape case that occurred in Mai Ja Yang, criticizing the community’s response and the lack of formalized legal system that took into consideration the rights of the woman involved. In the absence of professional lawyers, KFA3 explained, “respected” community members were called to represent the victim and defendant. A respected KIO administrator acted as a “temporary judge,” and resolution was achieved through deliberative debate. Damages were awarded to the victim in the amount of one buffalo and financial support from the perpetrator through the term of her pregnancy, which had occurred as a result of the rape. Once she gave birth, however, the child was to be awarded to the perpetrator, as according to Kachin custom, children are considered to be the property of the father.

Such deeply embedded gender discrimination exemplifies the extent to which women are often left at a disadvantage under customary law. While the custom of patrilineal descent, and children being the property of the father is an accepted norm in Kachin society (Leach, 1954), in the case of rape, CEDAW Article 16 clearly states that states must take measures to end such discriminatory practices, as abiding by such customs is detrimental to the best interest of women, children, and the family (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2013). Article 16 explains, “Inequality in the family underlies all other aspects of discrimination against women and is often justified in the name of ideology, tradition and culture” (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2013). While reservations to Article 16 have been expressed primarily by states that have adopted the practice of Sharia law (Freeman, 2009), Burma, having ratified CEDAW, holds no such reservations (UN Women, 2006). As CEDAW Shadow Reports have documented, however, Burma’s laws have not been adequately revised to address such discrimination, and CEDAW’s legal principals have not been adequately incorporated. According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “In terms of family law, there is a plethora of customary law still utilized by Burman and non-Burman ethnic groups concerning marriage, adoption, property ownership, and inheritance rights. Many of these laws emphasize women’s roles as child-bearers and homemakers while giving men greater economic and decision-making power in domestic affairs” (2008, p. 7).

While an ongoing debate between universalism and cultural relativism surrounds the issue of customary law, Renteln (1990) argued that theory of relativism has been misunderstood and does not preclude the existence of cross-cultural universals. Renteln posited a theory of ethical relativism, arguing that certain values appear cross-culturally and form the premise for the very existence of international law. Supporting this idea, it was the female Kachin activist herself who explained that in having to give up her child to her rapist, the Kachin defendant’s right to motherhood had been compromised. Furthermore, in order to see her child, she would

presumably have to face her perpetrator—the man who raped her, and endure potential revictimization, trauma, community stigma, and insecurity. KFA3 explained that such a verdict, while acceptable under Kachin “customary” law, nevertheless disempowered the woman involved in the case. This critique supports both CEDAW and Renteln’s claims that in the case of family law, universal ethical norms should take precedence over customary legal practices.

As other participants revealed, “temporary courts” themselves are structured in gendered ways. One activist (KFA4) explained that in such court systems, men from the KIO administration act as court leaders and women are rarely allowed to participate in the decision-making process. KFA4 explained that recently, women from her organization had lobbied the KIO to allow them to participate in trafficking and other cases involving “women’s issues”: “We told them. . . we started to mobilize them: ‘Please invite us when you make decision, when you set up court that concern with women. Like trafficking, rape, domestic violence. Invite women.’ And also we mobilize them: ‘Don’t investigate women victims with male police.’ After that they let women participate [in the temporary courts],” she said.

KFA4 went on to explain that the court system has traditionally restricted women’s participation in the roles leaders, judges, and community “representatives.” Only recently, and with considerable struggle, have female activists been able to influence changes in this structure, having asked KIO leaders to allow them greater participation. Despite some recent success, however, KFA3 expressed that the lack of women’s participation remains a problem.

I suggest that the prevalence of customary legal practices, which often fail to serve the best interests of women in the community, serves a larger purpose within the context of the Kachin conflict. Customary legal practices allow the Kachin to maintain gendered identities in ways that support the interests of men. By not addressing gender disparity during a time of conflict, members of Kachin society overlook the needs of women in their own community and instead focus on war and peace-building efforts (i.e., between the KIO and the central Burmese government). As numerous scholars have noted, in many nonstate armed groups, the process of militarization itself is gendered (Enloe, 2000; Mazurana, 2012). Group structures call for women to be “managed” in order to assure men’s gendered identities/positions within them, a process that, in turn, secures the image of men as protectors of the family and culture. In the Kachin context, customary legal responses to trafficking—both the restitution of damages to victims as well as the structure of the court system itself—similarly reinforce gendered norms and hierarchies. Such gendered approaches to justice leave women at a disadvantage as their voices go unheard and their needs go unmet.

Narrating the experiences of trafficking survivors

The female activists I interviewed often discussed problems within Kachin society in tandem with their own struggle to help victims of human trafficking. In interviews with activists, I noticed that some seemed to vacillate between the broader discussion of gender discrimination in Kachin State and the experiences of survivors. The activists seemed to want me to be aware of the challenges on both sides of the border: from those in their own culture, as well as the hardships faced by the survivors they were working to assist. As a result, narratives of forced brides, told second-hand, emerged as a recurring theme in almost every conversation I had with an activist.

Interestingly, many of these stories echoed the discussions about gender discrimination within Kachin society itself. One activist (KFA5) spoke about survivors who have babies for Chinese men, only to be trafficked again. She explained:

Some people face problem [*sic*], that they come from the Kachin State and their friend said they will be able to find work near the China and Myanmar border. [Upon arriving in China,] [t]hey cannot find a job and they move more far and far. Some people get married to Chinese men, and they got a baby and they still get—sorted to other place again.

When I asked her to clarify, KFA5 explained that after having a baby for a Chinese man, “The man sells the wife again to other people.”

“What happens to the baby?” I asked.

“The baby, they keep it,” responded KFA5. “The man keeps the baby and sells the women [*sic*] to the other people.”

What is notable about this activists’ story is the frustration with which she relayed the survivors’ experiences. This frustration echoes the feeling of desperation I sensed in KFA3’s discussion of the rape case and the difficulty achieving equality for women within a male-dominated legal system. The similar emotional tenor of these conversations—the desire to communicate the gravity of gender discrimination against Kachin women, both within Kachin society as well as outside its borders—illustrates a deep solidarity and commitment among the activists to achieving equality—not *after* the resolution of the armed conflict but immediately in the present. Activists did not highlight, for example, their work in peace-building meetings, ceasefire talks, or efforts at diplomatic dialogue with the Burmese government. Nor did they focus on women’s direct participation in the war effort. Instead, what was of grave importance to them was the issue of equality for women within Kachin State and the visibility of sexual violence that many women are forced to endure outside its borders.

The deep commitments expressed by these activists show us that the Kachin conflict does not merely comprise war tactics and peace treaties; rather, as noted by Enloe (2013), Sylvester (2012), and others, it is the experiences of women on the “periphery” of the war that must be understood and acknowledged in order that resolution to the conflict is achieved in the best interest of all.

Weaknesses in government collaboration

Finally, an issue that emerged in several conversations with community members involved the lack of government collaboration around the issue of trafficking. This was mainly highlighted by women’s activists who worked to assist trafficking survivors and to facilitate their repatriation and reintegration into society.⁵ When I asked one participant, KFA6, about her organization’s efforts to combat trafficking, she noted the challenge of establishing cross-border collaboration with the Chinese authorities, due to the KIO’s status as an “informal” government:

⁵ It is notable that this population of women’s activists is extremely small. While several women’s groups operate throughout Kachin State, only one group has officially incorporated an anti-trafficking policy into its organization’s efforts. The anti-trafficking unit is comprised of eight women, who provide rescue, rehabilitation, and counseling services to returned survivors throughout KIO-controlled territory, including Mai Ja Yang and Laiza, a city to the north where the KIO headquarters are based.

Sometimes it is not easy for the KIO to talk to China's government, because we have not signed any agreement about women issue [*sic*] — about this anti-trafficking issue. It's more easy [*sic*] for the Burmese government to talk to Chinese government. For us, if the KIO talk to the Chinese government, we need to spend a lot of time on the issue, because we have not signed an agreement around trafficking.

When I asked why no formal agreement yet existed between the KIO and the Chinese government, KFA6 explained, "KIO is not an official government yet." This lack of official status, she suggested, impedes the KIO's progress in developing a strong cross-border policy to combat trafficking. Subsequently, she noted, the cross-border facilitation of freeing trafficking victims is often slow. "For the Kachin government to help trafficking victims, we have to go step by step," she said. "It takes more time to talk directly to the higher the Chinese government."

Additionally, noted KFA6, the process of cross-border collaboration is informal. In contrast, she explained, "For the Burmese government they might get to talk to the Chinese government directly," due to Burma's formal government status.

Indeed, the Kachin's ongoing conflict with the central Burmese government has been characterized by the KIO's desire to achieve political autonomy from the Burma heartland. This activist reiterated that goal by contextualizing it within the issue of trafficking. Here, we see another example of how trafficking plays out in the context of the broader conflict: Women suffer from stalled collaboration between the KIO and Chinese governments, as well as the inability to receive protection from the Burmese government—the only "official" government authorized to help them combat trafficking.

KIO Administrators and Lawmakers

The third group of participants I spoke with constituted KIO administrators and lawmakers—cultural leaders who hold the authority to make trafficking a political and social priority in Kachin society. In speaking with these participants, I sought to understand whether they believed trafficking to be a problem that warranted attention from the KIO, and, if so, how they were going about putting it on the KIO's agenda.

Several participants saw trafficking as a broad issue necessitating the cooperation of government and police bodies in China, Kachin State, and Burma, as they noted that the practice of trafficking often takes place across the Burma-China border. While the Palermo Protocol recognizes that trafficking can also occur within sovereign state borders (United Nations, 2000), in instances when trafficking as a transnational process is demonstrated, communication between governments is essential to the development and implementation of anti-trafficking policy. Cooperation between the KIO and the Chinese government, therefore, is needed to resolve cases and to bolster prevention on both sides of the border. But, as the participants explained, such cooperation remains erratic. Several KIO administrators reported having had little to no communication with anti-trafficking practitioners or authority figures in China. Rather, most cases that have been resolved successfully have been done so through coordination with the Foreign Ministry in Yunnan.

Additionally, the lack of cooperation between the KIO and the central Burmese government poses challenges to combating trafficking. One interview with a Kachin male court leader (KMCL1) in the KIO's nascent judiciary exemplifies the perceived difficulty of obtaining such collaboration. KMCL1 explained that in order to develop a good policy, the KIO would

need memos of understanding—agreements with Burma and China around the issue of trafficking. When I asked him how difficult or easy he believed this would be to achieve, KMCL1 responded, “I think that there would be no possibility. It would be very difficult because for both countries because in Burma there is a lot of corruption in society.”

KMCL1 went on to explain that the lack of communication between the KIO and the central Burmese government around trafficking remains a challenge. Exacerbating this issue is the ongoing conflict between the KIO and central Burmese government, which stalls the ability to find common ground around an issue that both governments should, in fact, be working to address.

In contrast, the court leader expressed optimism around the relationship between the KIO and the Chinese government around trafficking.

“We work together and we communicate,” he noted. “Just a few months ago, there was a case—four women from Burma were trafficked into China. The China government sent them back to Burma. Two Kachin women and one Karen woman and one Burmese woman.”

While relations with the central Burmese government remain problematic, KMCL1’s description of these improvements revealed a sense of optimism about diplomatic collaboration along the Burma-China border.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that several factors driven by the conflict influence the processes by which Kachin women are trafficked into China as forced brides. Crippling conditions on the ground and the prevalence of gender discrimination within Kachin society fuels the problem of trafficking. Additionally, demand from China due to a “marriage squeeze” is fueling the sale of Kachin brides, while stigmatization of Kachin women remains an obstacle to their reintegration into Kachin society and potentially makes them more vulnerable to trafficking in the future. While policies to combat trafficking are a stated priority on the agendas of the KIO and many community-based groups, an overwhelming focus on the military conflict has stalled the development of an official anti-trafficking policy, and many women’s activists complain that the KIO has not successfully integrated its stated commitment to anti-trafficking into real practices that support women. Legal practitioners suggest that they are seeking to make trafficking a focus in the nascent KIO judiciary; however, the adherence to customary or “cultural” law hinders progress toward developing policies that adequately respond to women’s needs. Finally, diplomatic collaboration between the Chinese, central Burmese, and KIO governments around trafficking has seen progress but overall has been slow.

I suggest that these factors, which are obfuscated in much writing on the Kachin conflict, in fact illuminate the workings of the conflict in important ways. By drawing on women’s experiences, we see how the armed conflict is being supported by gendered social processes that remain unaddressed. While the KIO focuses on war tactics and cease-fire talks, women continue to suffer, both in their migration processes into China and within Kachin society itself. Trafficking, then, is one of a number of gendered social problems that serves to maintain the workings of the conflict. “Teasing out” the structural ways that trafficking supports the conflict is therefore a crucial first step toward finding productive solutions.

Finding Solutions: The Need for Regional Diplomatic Collaboration

The difficulty that Kachin forced brides have had in relying on the Chinese or Kachin legal systems to bring their perpetrators (both Kachin traffickers and Chinese families who held them against their will) to justice suggests that neither the Chinese government nor the KIO have put adequate investment into combating trafficking. In China, prosecutions remain low, and formal policies are not in place to penalize families who buy women as brides. In Kachin State, customary legal practices are used to locate and penalize traffickers, and cooperation between these two governing bodies remains rare. Police cooperation between the KIO and Chinese police forces remain weak, particularly given that the KIA's focus on armed conflict often overshadows what it views as a "women's issue."

Lack of cooperation between the KIO and the central Burmese government also poses an obstacle. As previously discussed, trafficking has been identified as a concern for Burma in the 2014 U.S. TIP Report (U.S. Department of State, 2014). Since it is not recognized as its own sovereign nation, however, Kachin State is not subject to independent TIP report analysis and, thus, must remain under the jurisdiction of Burma's anti-trafficking policies. While the 2014 TIP report made a general note of the problem of sex trafficking in Kachin State, it did not elaborate on the nature of the problem and made no mention of Kachin women being sold as forced brides (see U.S. Department of State, 2014). As this research indicates, trafficking in the Kachin region is not only unacknowledged by the central Burmese government but it is, in fact, exacerbated by the ongoing conflict between the government and the KIO. The U.S. Department of State should take this reality into account as they work to encourage Burma's central government to more fully address the issue of trafficking.

Given the concerns expressed by members of the KIO judiciary and KIO administration, the issue of trafficking sheds light on the pitfalls and potentials of diplomatic collaboration in the region. Trafficking should be a necessary item on the agendas of the Chinese and Burmese governments, if these governments wish to increase their standing in the eyes of the U.S. government. As such, it could become a "wedge issue" used to foster collaboration between each of these actors and the KIO. As Sun has suggested, the Kachin stand at the center of a delicate geopolitical zone in which they must balance various allegiances. The Kachin conflict implicates not only China-Burma relations (involving border security and Chinese investment in the Burma heartland) but also the interests of the United States in the face of China's rising regional power and, hence, Sun's referral to the "internationalization" of the Kachin conflict (Sun, 2014, p. 1).

I suggest that collaboration around the issue of trafficking could open doors for dialogue between these governments and foster greater diplomatic collaboration in the region at large. Again, we are shown how circumstances often considered "women's" or "gender" issues in fact have much larger implications. By understanding the experiences of women, we gain broader insight into the workings of the conflict in Kachin State.

Trafficking and Kachin Nationalism

The preliminary research suggests that trafficking is part of a complex process of the maintenance and production of gender norms within Kachin society. These gender norms give rise to the conditions that fuel trafficking and are perpetuated and maintained as a result of trafficking.

Additionally, these gender norms reinforce the roles of men and women within the operations of the conflict. A circular logic is at play, in which gender becomes a site for both constructing identity under the conflict and serving as a byproduct of that construction.

Trafficking, which is influenced by the prevalence of these gender norms, is therefore also indirectly constitutive of Kachin nationalism. As I have explained, the problem of trafficking occurs as a result of the exploitation of women's irregular labor migration, which is deemed a necessary aspect of women's roles under the conditions of armed conflict. By overlooking the results of this migration and exploitation, however, members of Kachin society render the problem of trafficking "invisible." In the absence of a policy to combat it, the trafficking circumstance, in effect, serves to perpetuate the status quo under the war effort: It both reinforces women's roles as breadwinners (i.e., taking on the responsibility of supporting families and communities through their migration and labor, while their husbands are on the frontlines or in IDP camps) and reinforces stigma against former forced brides who return from China with a "bad story."

As many of the women's activists I interviewed explained, women's experiences of trafficking are being overlooked because of seemingly more important issues such as the war effort, ceasefire talks, and the peace process—issues that continue to dominate discussions about the Kachin conflict in the media.⁶ The lack of attention paid to women's experiences of trafficking reinforces their invisibility. Yet, it is precisely through these women's experiences that we may actually understand the way the Kachin conflict is playing out on the ground. By participating in the migration process, Kachin women support the war effort, putting their lives at risk. As such, these women are the face of the Kachin conflict. Rendering their experiences "invisible," however, enables a false picture of nationalistic unity to be maintained.

I hypothesize that this imagined nationalistic unity, which obscures the reality of trafficking, comes with an additional promise—a hope that better circumstances may be realized after the anticipated ceasefire agreement between the KIO and the central Burmese government takes place. Indeed, one of the reasons many women and girls join nonstate armed groups is because of the patriarchal systems that are in place in their societies. Girls believe that by joining the resistance, they will abolish not only the civil or national conflict but also gender inequalities within their own societies (Mazurana, 2012, p. 149). This belief was reflected in the responses of the female soldiers I interviewed, who spoke of their unwavering trust in the KIO. It was also expressed, albeit less explicitly, by Kachin women's activists who believed that if they managed to put enough pressure on the KIO, things would be different after the ceasefire—that gender equality could become a reality in times of peace.

Such complex responses show us that gender is an important—if not essential—site of analysis for understanding the social dynamics of the Kachin conflict. Moreover, it is important to note that women are being left out of "official" discussions about the peace process—as in times of peace, gender inequality, trafficking, and other "women's issues" will find a way to remedy themselves. Yet, gender inequality takes continual scrutiny, pressure, and commitment on the part of dedicated activists to be remedied, for in doing so, they must dismantle the masculinist norms upon which armed conflicts—and entire social structures—have been built.

⁶ See, for example, recent articles in *The Irrawaddy Magazine* (Nyein, 2014) and Radio Free Asia (2014). At time of writing, the tenuous ceasefire talks between the KIO and the Burmese army are taking focus in the media, while women's experiences of life under the conflict goes largely unreported.

LIMITATIONS

Challenges to Research in a Conflict Zone

Several limitations affected the outcome of this study. Due to the ongoing fighting, Kachin State has been partitioned with certain parts of the region controlled by the KIO and other parts controlled by the Burmese military. Thus, access to the whole of the region has proven difficult for locals and virtually impossible for foreigners, and travel to each area must be conducted by separate means. In preparing to conduct the research, I quickly realized that accessing the field site would be a challenge, and that I would have to rely closely on the community-based organization to facilitate my travel, accommodations, and protection while in the field site.

Additionally, while in the field site, my physical mobility was extremely limited, as Westerners are seldom allowed entry into the town of Mai Ja Yang. Indeed, my time in the field site was characterized by “secrecy”; I was required to seek permission to leave the compound and asked to hide my identity when in public. Members of the community-based organization explained that the border between the KIO-controlled territory and Yunnan province is porous, and, due to the insecurity of the Kachin, is controlled by Chinese authorities. These authorities “oversee” the goings-on in and around the town of Mai Ja Yang and are not welcoming of Western foreigners. It was explained to me that such a relationship affords the KIO and, in turn, Kachin citizens, access to “unofficial” border-crossing sites and processes, ultimately increasing their safety in the face of the ever-encroaching Burmese Army. Maintaining good relations with Chinese officials just across the border was, therefore, a top priority in the eyes of the community-based organization. Thus, I was asked to comply with their protocols.

Geopolitical constraints also limited this study. Due to the active armed conflict that closely surrounded the field site, I felt the need to prioritize my physical safety at all times. When, after three weeks, I was informed by the leader of the organization that fighting between the Burmese Army and the KIO might soon be approaching the town of Mai Ja Yang, I chose to abruptly end the study and requested that the organization facilitate my transport out of Kachin State. Thus, the interviews presented here are limited to 25 participants, and the data are extremely preliminary.

Finally, the participant demographics and limited sample size impacts the conclusions drawn from this study. While the goal of the research was to listen to the voices of women in the context of armed conflict, these voices nevertheless paint a narrow picture of the nature of gender relations under such conditions. Having only female participants in the soldier and activist categories limits the research from making broader conclusions about the nature of interactions between men and women, or from making claims about the role of masculinity in the conflict. Broadening this sample to include male participants would allow for a fuller picture of the way in which gender dynamics play out.

Thus, this study is intended to pave the way for further research. Future projects might seek to compare gender relations in Kachin society in pre- and postconflict contexts, to interrogate legal processes designed to combat trafficking in Yunnan, China, and their outcomes, to examine strategies employed by the central Burmese government to combat trafficking, and where and how where these strategies fall short in the Kachin context, and to assess the nuances in

relationships between the KIO and community-based organizations working to combat trafficking.

CONCLUSION

The research presented here is highly preliminary, due to methodological limitations involving access, mobility, and safety in the field site. In this article, I presented key findings that underscore the reasons and processes by which trafficking is occurring in Kachin State and opened a discussion of issues that warrant further attention.

The findings reveal that gendered constructions of women's roles are serving the Kachin conflict in ways that benefit the ongoing war effort, while often leaving women's needs and interests behind. Women must put their own safety and security second to the war effort and, in so doing, risk experiences of labor exploitation and other abuses. Those who survive the ordeal of trafficking do so at the cost of their reputations—a price they pay not only in conflicted relationships with husbands but also with other women in Kachin society. Customary legal practices that respond to trafficking and other gender-related crimes do little to benefit women in Kachin society. Furthermore, while demand from China is fueling the sale of Kachin brides, few formal policies are in place to combat trafficking—a reality that has important implications on diplomatic relations in the region.

Ann Tickner explained, "Listening to and respecting women's voices worldwide and recovering the activities of those on the margins—people not usually considered significant actors in world politics—is an important contribution to the discipline" (2001, p. 21). As I have attempted to show, "militarized femininity"—that is, the societal expectations of women under the conditions of armed conflict—provides an alternative entry point through which we may understand the conflict in Kachin State. By turning to the experiences of women, we may see a more complete picture of this conflict, what constitutes it, and how it is manifesting in the lives of ordinary citizens. Such a conceptualization has important implications on our understanding of global politics and on the future development of anti-trafficking policy along the Burma-China border.

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