



Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights (NKHR)

10F, gonghwadang bldg, 131 Tongil-ro, seodaemun-gu, Seoul 120-012, Korea

Tel: +82-2-723-1672, 2671 Fax: +82-2-723-1671

<http://www.nkhumanrights.or.kr> e-mail: citizens.nkhr@gmail.com

Seoul, December 22, 2022

Submission on rights of women and girls in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

The Citizens' Alliance's years-long investigations into the role of the North Korean regime's top structures in export linked to large-scale human rights abuses has revealed that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) sustains its economic system through a coercive quota system, which requires civilians to submit quotas of goods for the export of minerals, agricultural and livestock products, metal, construction materials, etc. This pyramid of extortion is enforced through each Ministry and Party organ and is imposed on every citizen throughout society. The internal investment in infrastructure, especially for the military also relies on submission of quotas of good for export. These quotas are also fulfilled by mobilizing free forced labor of civilians, which includes vulnerable members such as women and children who are often made to participate in arduous activities required by schools or under Women's League auspices.

The quotas of goods, in particular the top commodities for export which are often the target of the most restrictive international sanctions are also fulfilled using free forced labor in detentions. The NKHR's findings indicate that the production in detentions is based on intergenerational discrimination of the *songbun* system, which determines which citizens will reinforce the slave labor force in the infamous prison system and is largely affecting women deported from China.

The impact on vulnerable groups

In many ways, the North Korean government delegates the roles of women to the "caregivers of the family" and this system is reinforced in school, through ideological indoctrination at the Women's Union meetings and paradoxically through the market economy which reinforces the perception that even without education and skills, women can undertake private activities to take care of the families, alleviating the burden of the government. Because vast majority of women turn to private market activities for survival of their families, the government sees it as an opportunity to impose required "levies" through quotas of goods.

There are no voluntary organizations to which women could turn to address their problems. Membership is compulsory in all types of the organizations as a form of control of citizens. In particular, women who are housewives must attend the Women's Union sessions. Through various rounds of research from 2012-2020 our interviewees insisted that the Union exists as an institution of state indoctrination and a readily accessible source of free harsh labor, money, and resources without benefiting or being accountable to its members.

Women have reported increasing quotas of goods with the development of the black markets in North Korea, including berries, beans, oil, pebble for making roads, or being forced to pay an equivalent in

money if they could not obtain the goods. Inability of submitting goods also results in additional harsh labor as a punishment – work on construction sites such as buildings, railroads, making bricks, which women view as oppressive as it takes away the time and resources from women’s hardly earned income.¹ One of the local Women’s Union leaders described the process of submission of quotas as a foreign currency earning as following:

“The Women’s Union is very complicated and there are a lot of tasks. There’s also a lot of foreign currency earning. Silkworms. Women harvest silkworm cocoons. There are gadong silkworms and mulberry silkworms. With gadong silkworms you go up the mountain to break of gadong tree branches and grow your silkworms on them. Also bracken.

They don’t give you money. They say that “foreign currency earning is patriotism”. Kidney beans, for example, if they tell you 10 kilograms per person, you submit 10 kg. They sell it to China for foreign currency earning. Things like matsutake mushrooms, too. There’s a lot. You can’t prepare everything yourself, so you buy them on the private markets and submit those. I don’t exempt myself just because I’m the Committee Chair. If I don’t do it but tell other people to do it, they won’t listen to me, so I have to be a good example.

[Q: How do you know this is foreign currency earning? Who told you it was foreign currency earning?] They’re orders from the Party. The Central Women’s Union gives the orders. About foreign currency earning.

[Q: So every week? Every month?]

For silkworms, there’s a silkworm season between May and August. They tell you to submit silkworm cocoons of however many kilos per person. At Thursday’s lecture we’ll gather the people together and tell them that for this round’s foreign currency earning we need how many kilos of silkworm cocoons, how many kilos of bracken, how many kilos of kidney beans...Five kilos of bracken per person, ten kilos of silkworms per person, etc.

[Q: If several dozens of people submit 5 kilos each, that’s a lot. Where does it all go?]

It’s a lot. You take it to the Prefecture Women’s Union. The District Women’s Union takes it to the Prefecture Women’s Union. The Prefecture Women’s Union takes it to the Province Women’s Union and the Province takes it to Central [Pyongyang].

[Q: Do they exchange these goods for rations?]

They only give you the ration tickets, not the actual rations. If you only collected these ration tickets one family would be entitled to several tons. They promise we’ll get rations someday. Some families will still keep them, thinking they’ll eventually get rations. I suppose now they’ll have given up on that thought even if they’ve kept the tickets.

[Q: How many women did you have to manage?]

My Committee alone had 50 members.

[Q: Five kilos for 50 members is 250 kilos. How did you transport those goods?]

There’s a Women’s League Committee Member in the District Women’s Union, an Ideology Committee Member and a Planning Committee Member. Three or four of them will come at once and once you get several tens of kilos they’ll take it away in cars and three-wheeler trucks.

We mention every Life Review Session, like “this person has submitted” and “this person hasn’t submitted yet”. Then the person who hasn’t submitted is embarrassed and is forced to pay. The authorities get everything.”

¹ For more information on Women’s Union please see the report “They only claim that things have changed...Discrimination against Women in the Democratic People’s republic of Korea”, Citizens’ Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, Seoul, 2018

The quota system and the persecution of women

The system of quotas expands to all sorts of production in prisons including political prison camps and *kyohwaso* prisons that host large numbers of women forcibly deported back to North Korea. The hunting system for prisoners and slave labor is enforced by the Ministry of State Security (MSS) which, together with the Ministry of People's Safety (MPS) and Korea People's Army (KPA), sits under the current Leader in the State Affairs Commission - the top organ of the State. The law enforcement ministries have large number of companies attached to them that deal with the production obtained through slavery labor in detentions.

The MSS is a primary investigative authority dealing with persons deported from China, the majority of them women, who have crossed the border with the aim to find work or seek asylum in third countries, or as victims of trafficking. The MSS is providing constant supply of labor force.

One MSS Officer reported that the evaluation is made based on the discriminatory *songbun* classification, on biased information and evidence unverified by an independent court:

“We [MSS] make up crimes that didn't happen. We exaggerate as much as possible. They've committed a small crime, but we exaggerate. The sentence will change depending on the phrasing of the report.”²

In its pre-trial secret investigation, it is MSS that decides which women will remain under custody of MSS and possibly be sent to political prison camps operated by MSS and which prisoners will be released to the custody of MPS to face trial and sentence in MPS operated detentions, such as *kyohwaso* prisons. Similarly to political prison camps, the *kyohwaso* prisons are major sites of production (mining, lumbering, farming, production of goods). Women reported that some *kyohwaso* prisons have been operating large wards for women deported from China were women produced textiles or cosmetic products labelled “Made in China”. Women also reported increase of the punishment for border crossing, especially after 2012 to be on average a five year sentence in *kyohwaso* prisons for illegal border crossing or for illegal trade. This should be viewed and further analyzed through the lenses of the quota system of production in detentions which forms a vicious cycle of hunting for free forced labor that women are the primary victim of.

The consequences of quota system economy on the lack of development and link to sanctions

There is no discussion of how this pyramid scheme of extortion and slavery – which the North Korean government depends on for exports and foreign currency earnings and thus its economic survival – suppresses any possibility of development or reforms in North Korea. In fact, it is another worrying sign that during the January 2021 Korea Worker's Party Congress, the statements of the Leader admitting economic failures and necessity for reforms were equated with statements calling to bolster

² See “Blood coal export from North Korea. Pyramid scheme of earnings maintaining the structures of power.”, Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, Seoul, 2020, pp.36~38.

the defense capabilities of the DPRK. Given the state of the North Korean economy and challenges of COVID-19, these two statements are mutually exclusive: the government requires resources for defense weaponry, rather than for reforms that would benefit all citizens. Such statements in the context of the NKHR's investigations, and the continued focus on military expenditure may again bring dire consequences for the population of the DPRK, where the regime only increases pressure on citizens to deliver through quotas of goods and labor, risking another famine.

The North Korean regime has for decades been extorting much from its citizens, with dire consequences. The Commission of Inquiry for DPRK (COI) in its 2014 report found the evidence of systematic, widespread and grave violations of the right to food through decisions of State officials related to production and distribution of food, and has also highlighted the fact that the state has failed its citizens by improper allocation of resources, instead prioritizing the development of the weapons systems and the nuclear program even during mass starvation that took the lives of hundreds of thousands of North Korean citizens. However, the COI did not analyze how DPRK's oppressive quota system may have contributed to starvation, deprivation, and persecution of citizens. Similarly little analysis exist on the chain of command in the pyramid system of extortion of quotas of various goods that has been ensuring continued flow of resources and sponsoring rapid military investments since 1980s and how the free slave labor in the vast network of detentions has been serving this purpose, providing top commodities for export and primary revenue for the state.

Indeed, many testimonies of women and children that have been reported since the 1990s have only been analyzed separately and not connected to the kleptocratic state which, even during the time of the great famine (Arduous March), required the continued submission of quotas of agricultural goods, metals and clothing for the Military. In the decades post-famine, the women-driven grassroots economy, which could contribute to private entrepreneurship and development of the country, suffers the most, as the regime has been increasingly tapping into the meagre earnings of women through Korea's Democratic Women Union (Women's Union) and Neighborhood Watch Units which impose ever-increasing amounts of goods for export as well as require goods and forced labor for the increasing expenditures on the military and infrastructure projects that benefit the elites.

As such, the link between lifting of sanctions and allowing for free trade seems to lead to an increased quota of goods demanded from the society for export (shouldered mostly by women) as well as expansion of slavery practices in detentions. For example in the course of our investigations we found an increase in coal production since 2018 on satellite photos and expansion of boundaries of the political prison camps producing coal, and the zones adjacent to the camps hosting released prisoners and their families, even as international sanctions on coal were becoming more restrictive after 2016. This time coincided with the talks between two Koreas and the U.S. and North Korea and was possibly due to DPRK's expectation of lifting sanctions and possibility of engaging in free export which leads to greater demand for forced labor and increased production of goods for export.