



Jubilee Campaign Submission to the United Nations Working Group on discrimination against women and girls

The Insecurity of North Korean Women in the Context of Poverty and Inequality in North Korea as Citizens and in South Korea and China as Defectors

I. The Situation of North Korean Women in North Korea

A. Inequality

The Socialist Women's Union of Korea, despite its initial purpose of educating women on their rights and freedoms, is – according to North Korean defector survey respondents – simply a tool “for political indoctrination” through which the government can force women to engage in unpaid forced labor for the country and donate material goods to the state for redistribution.¹ 22 out of 25 female respondents who were formerly members of the Women's Union reported that send large sums of money or goods (food, pebbles for road construction) to the Union; some women reported being conscripted by the Union to engage in strenuous labor such as construction, brick building and brick laying.

During the Arduous March, during which economic crisis ushered in an extended period of widespread famine in the 1990s, the economic role of North Korean women transformed tremendously. While men were – and still are – required to attend their state-mandated jobs each day, the work was irregular and offered insufficient pay. Increasingly, “the burden of economic activity fell on women”, many of whom – upon encouragement by the state – began to take up additional economic activities, such as working in informal and illicit markets, in order to earn money to sustain their families. Initially, it was very difficult for young married women to enter the economic sector; because only women above the age of 40 were permitted to work in markets, younger women were forced to pay high bribes to secure their permission to work, and when the government imposed a fine for women caught riding bikes, female workers who used bikes to transport goods for sale were often compelled to engage in sexual favors in exchange for travel permission from local authorities.² To this day, women who work in the informal market system remain legally and physically unprotected against rights violations committed against them; many have reported being subjected to verbal, physical, and sexual harassment, violence, and intimidation by Party officials.

¹ Daye Gang, Joanna Hosaniak, Sohee Kim, Ji-yoon Lee, Eui Hwan Cho, Sook Yi Oh, [“They only claim that things have changed...”: Discrimination against Women in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea](#), NKHR Briefing Report No. 8, Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, July 2018.

² *Supra* note 1.

The system by which North Korean women are the primary breadwinners for their families while their husbands engage in largely unprofitable state-mandated jobs has persisted to this day. However, this increased financial power has not manifested greater social power or equality for women. 27 out of 37 (73%) female respondents of a 2018 survey revealed that they mainly use their income to financially support their husbands and sons' education and advancement in the Party³; "one reason why they prefer to support their husband over investing in themselves and their education to succeed in their own career is that there is a limit for women in moving up the hierarchy in political positions or to succeed in society".⁴

Despite the fact that North Korean women are nearly entirely financially responsible for the livelihood of their families, the effect that their husbands' social standing has on their wives' work, in combination with the patriarchal nature of North Korean society, cause women to remain subjugated in the home. The frequency of intimate partner violence (IPV) towards women is significantly higher among North Korean refugee populations (57.1%) than South Koreans (9.9%).⁵ Women's difficulty in balancing their work both in the informal market economy and the domestic work they are expected to perform in the home, in combination with high levels of resentment among husbands who are unable to hold financial power, exacerbates domestic violence between North Korean spouses.

B. Poverty

In a 2013 survey conducted by Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights upon 60 women defectors, 40 respondents (67%) reported that they had earned only enough money for food and could not afford medicine, clothing, and other daily necessities.⁶ A 2018 survey conducted by the same organization upon 37 North Korean women who had defected between 2013 and 2017 revealed that nearly 60% of respondents could not afford a primary care physician and instead treated themselves with medication they could only afford via the black market; this is despite that the government is supposed to provide its citizens with free health care. Many women also avoided obtaining necessary surgeries and preferred to give birth in the home, as they could not financial or materially meet the requirements of paying the doctors, and bringing wood and water to the hospitals.⁷

Poverty remains one of the primary reasons for defection from the DPRK. A 2018 study revealed that "even though the government policies generated better conditions in terms of mobility and capital for North Korean females, it never eliminated the individual's incentive to defect." Most female defectors are poor and from border regions, and even though they are able to participate in market economy, they are never fully able to lift themselves out of inter-generational and abject poverty and establish a sustainable life in DPRK. Meanwhile, some wealthier women leave as well, because no matter how much money they acquire in North Korea, there exists a glass ceiling to how far they can advance in society; furthermore, due to the illicit import of South Korean and global media depicting relatively luxurious and prosperous lives abroad, there is an increased awareness that no matter how 'rich' they become in North Korea, they can still achieve a better life by comparison outside of the DPRK.⁸ A more recent Korea Hana Foundation survey of 2,461 defectors living in South Korea revealed that the

³ *Supra* note 3.

⁴ Jeong-ah Cho, Ji Sun Yee, Hee Young Yi, [Daily Lives of North Korean Women and Gender Politics](#), Study Series 20-03, Korea Institute for National Unification, August 2020 (translated to English from original December 2019 report).

⁵ Boyoung Nam, MSW, Jae Yop Kim, PhD, & Wonjung Ryu, BA, [Intimate Partner Violence Against Women Among North Korean Refugees: A Comparison With South Koreans](#), Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 2020.

⁶ *Supra* note 1.

⁷ *Supra* note 3.

⁸ Kieun Sung & Sunwoong Cho, [Why Are North Korean Women More Likely to Defect than North Korean Men?](#), Asian Women, September 2018.

second and fourth most reported motivations for defection from DPRK were food shortage (21.6%) and the need to earn more money to live (10.7%).⁹

II. The Situation of North Korean Defector Women in South Korea

A. Poverty

Regrettably, even though North Korean defectors – primarily women – leave their home country in order to find a better life in a third country, a large portion experience major difficulty in socially adapting to life in South Korea. One noteworthy example of the poverty and hardship that defectors face in South Korea is the unfortunate case of 42-year-old Han Sung-ok and her 6-year-old son Kim Dong-jin who were found deceased in their apartment in July 2019 having likely succumbed to starvation. Sung-ok could not afford a cellphone, was unable to make friends, and never entered the workforce as she was unable to find a childcare center that would care for her son who suffered from epilepsy; she lived in a ≈ USD \$75/month apartment and relied on the government child support which was decreased from ≈ USD \$165/month to just ≈ USD \$82/month after Dong-jin turned six. In July 2019, Sung-ok's and Dong-jin's bodies were found by a meter-man who was visiting the apartment to collect overdue fees; forensic scientists noticed that the only food in the apartment was a small container of chili powder and determined they had likely died two months prior of starvation. Despite living just yards from a district government office and being eligible for disability support due to her son's condition, she never accessed these lines of help; "she either didn't know how to navigate the South Korean system and find the help that was available, or just felt so hopeless about her situation that she gave up trying."¹⁰

Korea Hana Foundation's 2021 Settlement Survey of North Korean Refugees in South Korea reveals that the employment rate of female defectors is 52.3% in comparison with the male defector employment rate of 70.7%. Furthermore, the average three-month wage of male defectors amounts to nearly 3.07 million Korean won (≈ USD \$2,150), whereas female defectors' average three-month wage is 1.96 million won (≈ USD \$1,370). The lower wage for North Korean defector women can largely be attributed to the more general issue of the large wage disparity between genders in South Korea (the highest pay gap of all OECD nations), as well as the fact that defector women are typically most suitable for the less profitable manual labor and service industries due to their lower education levels.¹¹

B. Human Rights Violations

In September 2020, two officers of the South Korean Armed Force Intelligence Command were convicted on sexual assault charges for repeatedly raping and sexually abusing a North Korean defector woman named Lee for over a year and a half; Lee was forced to undergo two abortions to terminate pregnancies caused by her abuse, and she reported being suicidal. Months earlier, in July 2020, South Korea's National Police Agency announced it would be investigating a case involving a local police officer who was accused of raping a defector woman at least 12 times over 2 years.¹²

Numerous survivors have reported being prostituted by traveling South Korean businessmen in third countries, such as in China. One defector woman explained that "[t]here are many South Koreans ... We put advertising cards under their doors ... The cards are in the Korean-language and advertise what we offer ... We are mostly taken to bars. South Korean companies want [prostitutes] for their

⁹ Korea Hana Foundation (North Korean Refugees Foundation), [2021 Settlement Survey of North Korean Refugees in South Korea](#), July 2022.

¹⁰ Choe Sang-Hun, ["She Fled Famine in North Korea. Then Died Poor in a Prosperous Land"](#), *The New York Times*, 21 September 2019.

¹¹ *Supra* note 17.

¹² Elizabeth Shim, ["South Korea to investigate case of defector raped by police"](#), *United Press International*, 29 July 2020.

businessmen ... Prostitution was my first experience of meeting a South Korean person.”¹³ Although this exploitation is occurring in a third country, because it is at the behest of South Korean male customers and companies, it is the responsibility of the South Korean government to take measures to eradicate it and prosecute perpetrators.

C. Social Stigma

North Korean defectors – and by extension, defector women – often have to deal with negative social stigma and perception towards them. Defectors, upon their entry into South Korea, are distinguishable by their distinctly North Korean dialect, clothing, and hairstyles; their identifiable natures have singled them out for distrust and prejudice. Such negative stigmas towards defectors could stem from the strained relationship between the two Koreas, stereotypes about North Koreans being communist sympathizers, and unreconcilable differences in lifestyles and culture.¹⁴

In a June 2020 survey of South Korean respondents, only 50% responded that they would be willing to hire a North Korean “settler”. The researchers emphasize that misperceptions of North Koreans being inclined to participate in organized crime and theft – both of which occur at relatively high frequencies in the DPRK – may contribute to the fact that only half of respondents would consider hiring a defector.¹⁵

III. The Situation of North Korean Defector Women in China

A. Inequality

The political arrangement between the countries of China and North Korea has put women escapees from North Korea to China in a precarious situation. China refuses to classify the defectors as “refugees,” and instead labels them as “economic migrants” allegedly due to North Korea’s historic food and financial troubles. In late July 2021, Radio Free Asia revealed that a group of 50 North Korean defectors – including a mother who was already sent back once before – was removed from Dandong and repatriated to the DPRK, and that there remain hundreds more defectors in the Shenyang area that are at risk of deportation.¹⁶ In August 2021, authorities in the North Korea-adjacent Chinese provinces of Liaoning and Jilin ambushed homes of North Korean defectors and arrested them. One detained individual was a North Korean defector woman who had been living in China for a decade with her husband and young child; Chinese authorities arrested her and charged her with human trafficking simply because she provided food, clothing, and shelter to recent North Korean defectors.¹⁷

In September 2021, a source who spoke to Daily NK regarding the medical discrimination against defector women revealed that “female defectors in China aren’t able to go to the hospital to receive proper medical treat even if their husband is Chinese . . . There are many Chinese who have received three shots of the COVID-19 vaccine, but defector woman are unable to receive the vaccine because of their status as illegal aliens.”¹⁸

B. Human Rights Violations

¹³ Yoon Hee-soon, *Sex Slaves: The Prostitution, Cybersex & Forced Marriage of North Korean Women & Girls in China*, Korea Future Initiative, 2019.

¹⁴ Jeea Yang, [Struggles of resettlement: North Koreans in South Korea](#), Psychology International, September 2018.

¹⁵ Madelynn Einhorn, Isabel Eliassen, [Ben Hanson, Carolyn Brueggemann, & Timothy S. Rich, Opinion – Would You Hire A North Korean? South Korean Public Opinion is Mixed](#), E-International Relations, 9 June 2020.

¹⁶ Jieun Kim, [“Concern About Fate of 50 North Korean Escapees Sent Home by China”](#), Radio Free Asia, 19 July 2021.

¹⁷ Jeong Yon Park, Leejin Jun, & Eugene Whong, [“Arrests of North Korean Wives of Chinese Men Spook Refugee Community”](#), Radio Free Asia, 20 August 2021.

¹⁸ Jeong Tae Joo, [“Many Female North Korean Defectors in China Unable to Receive COVID-19 Shots”](#), Daily NK, 23 Sept 2021.

Within the first year of leaving the DPRK, defector women are often sold more than once and forced to partake in at least one form of sexual slavery. Around 60% of female North Korean refugees in China are trafficked into the sex trade, 50% of whom are then forced into prostitution, 30% sold into fraudulent marriages, and 15% pushed into the mass cybersex industry.¹⁹ These defector women and girls are trapped between the Chinese government and the North Korean government who want to arrest and repatriate them, or imprison and torture them, respectively. In response to an OHCHR survey of 636 defector women who had reached a safe third country between 2018 and 2019, 7% reported being sold more than three times, 45% sold twice, and 41% sold once. Korean NGOs estimate that 70% to 80% of North Korean women who make it to China are trafficked, for between 6,000 and 30,000 yuan (\$890 to \$4,500), depending on their age and beauty.²⁰

¹⁹ *Supra* note 13.

²⁰ Isabel G. Skomro, "[North Korean Escapees Discuss Human Rights at HKS Event](#)", *The Harvard Crimson*, 21 Apr 2021.