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THE SITUATION OF NORTH KOREAN DEFECTORS  
IN THE DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF KOREA

**I. Introduction**

This report serves to inform the United Nations Economic and Social Council Commission on the Status of Women regarding the current conditions faced by North Korean women in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. While 2020 and 2021 saw the same pattern of human rights violations taking place against North Korean women as has been recorded in previous years (i.e., violence against women; trafficking and exploitation; discrimination), recent years have observed newer trends and violations amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. As is important to note, it is tremendously difficult to acquire up-to-date and reliable data regarding the situation of life in North Korea due to the regime’s emphasis on secrecy and denial; the condition has only been made more unfavorable for accurate reporting as pandemic measures have nearly entirely restricted movement and, by extension, flow of information in the region.

This submission draws its information from various non-governmental organization reports, government statements, news articles, United Nations reports, and other sources to provide evidence to further demonstrate that the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is failing to improve the situation of gender equality and women’s rights, despite that the nation is party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women since 2001<sup>2</sup>. As the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is due to submit its State party report to CEDAW in November 2021, we call upon the Commission on the Status of Women to take notice of the situation of human rights and women’s rights for North Korean women.

**II. General Human Rights Concerns**

The situation of human rights in the DPRK is nothing short of alarming. In July 2021, the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group on North Korea released a report documenting the endless list of human rights violations that have taken place between 2014 and 2020 in the DPRK: arbitrary and prolonged imprisonment; physical torture; slavery and conscripted labor; summary and public

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<sup>1</sup> Jubilee Campaign holds special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council.

<sup>2</sup> UN General Assembly, *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*, 18 December 1979, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1249.

executions; deliberate starvation and malnutrition; rape and sexual violence; and more.<sup>3</sup> COVID-19 and the ensuing pandemic prevention measures and lockdowns have only introduced newer concerns and exacerbated older ones.

In August 2020, it was revealed that the DPRK had established “buffer zones” along its shared border with China in which individuals engaging in unauthorized travel or exchanges could face “unconditional firing” or “firing without warning”; such a measure was taken to reportedly prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic via transnational movement.<sup>4</sup> It is unconfirmed whether the firing measures are based on ‘shoot-to-kill’ orders, due to inconsistencies in translation. However, since the implementation of the buffer zones, there have already been incidences of both North Korean civilians and non-citizens being shot at and killed while in the designated borderlands. In late September 2020, a North Korean blueberry smuggler was killed in the mountainous region of Taehongdan on his way back from trading in China; the individual’s bag was found to hold some Chinese money, clothing, and shoes believed to be stolen while abroad. The border official that shot and killed the smuggler was reportedly rewarded with a vacation.<sup>5</sup> Also in late September, North Korean authorities shot and killed a South Korean fishery official in a patrol boat at sea before setting fire to the body, allegedly to eliminate any possible traces of COVID-19; Kim Jong Un, in an unprecedented move, has since apologized for the killing, which he called “unexpected” and “unfortunate”.<sup>6</sup> The implementation of shoot-to-kill orders constitutes arbitrary deprivation of life, as is impermissible under international humanitarian law. It also restricts the freedom of movement of North Korean citizens, including women, who attempt to escape the brutal regime or who participate in transnational business operations.

Human Rights Watch in its 2021 World Report expressed that the North Korean government has used the COVID-19 as a justification to expand its restrictions and repression of its own people. In light of the aforementioned threat of pandemic expansion across borders, the government sealed frontiers and promoted “self-reliance”. This ideal of ‘self-reliance’, however, remains threatened by the UN economic sanctions leveled on the nation for its continued expansion of weaponry; these sanctions have prevented further agricultural development, which is the major source of food and livelihood and is necessary to sustain the population.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the DPRK regime has routinely rejected all offers for humanitarian aid which could be used to repair the thousands of acres of arable farmland and crops destroyed by recent monsoon floods, or to distribute medical supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE) to hospitals for pandemic prevention and mitigation.<sup>8</sup> In the same breath that the North Korean government has mischaracterized international aid offers as “sinister political scheme[s]”<sup>9</sup>, it has used politics to justify rejecting

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<sup>3</sup> All-Party Parliamentary Group for North Korea, *Inquiry into Human Rights Violations in North Korea 2014-2020/1*, July 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Weiser, “North Korea’s mistranslated ‘shoot-to-kill’ border protection order”, *East Asia Forum*, 27 February 2021. ; Sewon Kim, “North Korea Orders Troops and Police to Shoot Citizens Who Approach the Chinese Border”, *Radio Free Asia*, 26 August 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Ha Yoon Ah, “North Korean smuggler shot dead while crossing border”, *Daily NK*, 21 September 2020.

<sup>6</sup> BBC News, “North Korea ‘killed and burned South Korean official’”, 24 September 2020. ; Justin McCurry, “North Korea apologises for ‘unfortunate’ killing of South Korean official”, *The Guardian*, 25 September 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch, *North Korea: Events of 2020*.

<sup>8</sup> Choe Sang-Hun, “North Korea, Fighting to Hold Back Virus and Floods, Says No Thanks to Outside Aid”, *The New York Times*, 14 August 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Josh Smith, “N.Korea dismisses U.S. humanitarian aid as ‘sinister scheme’”, *Reuters*, 12 July 2021.

genuine assistance which would visibly benefit its civilians and infrastructure; such vitriolic aid denial is a ‘sinister political scheme’ in itself which will deny the North Korean people of the help they so desperately need.

The devastation caused by the DPRK regime’s unwillingness to accept help for its people has already been well documented. Both the Seoul-headquarters Korea Development Institute and the UN Food and Agricultural Organization have reported the shortfall of an estimated one million tons of food<sup>10</sup>; 5.2 million tons is the minimum required to feed the nation’s people. The nation is running out of polio and tuberculosis vaccines it usually acquires from China. UNICEF and Red Cross aid workers, as well as diplomats, have been recalled from the DPRK in light of the precarious situation.<sup>11</sup> Rates of street begging and homelessness have soared.<sup>12</sup> In July 2021, two North Korean prisoners died within weeks of each other, one of which collapsed of starvation while pulling weeds; a source explained that on rainy days, prisoners will lie in their cells in a pile of skin and bones, barely breathing.<sup>13</sup> On numerous instances throughout 2021, Kim Jong Un himself admitted the failure of the nation’s farming sector, compared the current food insecurity to the famine of the 1990s called the “Arduous March”, and stated that the pandemic has caused a “great crisis” with “grave consequences” for the nation.<sup>14</sup>

### III. Issues Concerning North Korean Women

The situation of human rights in the DPRK is felt indiscriminately by men, women, the elderly, and children alike. However, despite multiple domestic legal provisions designed in whole or in part to protect women’s rights specifically (i.e., the 1946 Law on Sex Equality guaranteeing gender equality; the 2020 Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Women; the 2012 Criminal Law which includes articles criminalizing sexual violence; the 2009 Family Law ensuring the woman’s right to marriage and divorce; and The 2010 Law on Socialist Labour Rights guaranteeing maternity leave for new mothers; and the 2014 Criminal Procedure Act which allows women to redress acts of discrimination with payment for loss and/or damages).<sup>15</sup> In reality, however, violations of women’s rights slide through the legal cracks and go un-remedied, and a more comprehensive program must be developed to address and eradicate the issues discussed in the following sections.

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<sup>10</sup> Emer O’Reilly, “Reports Of Starvation In North Korea As Food Insecurity Mounts”, *The Organization for World Peace*, 16 July 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Hyung-Jin Kim, “UN says no international staff left in North Korea”, *Associated Press*, 20 March 2021. ; Kyung Ha Rhee & Erin Ji, “Red Cross Pulls Foreign Staff Out of North Korea as Quarantine Measures Intensify”, *Radio Free Asia*, 4 December 2020. ; BBC News, “North Korea: Russian diplomats leave by hand-pushed trolley”, 26 February 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Smith, “Reports of people ‘starving’ as N Korea struggles to feed itself”, *Al Jazeera*, 1 July 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Jieun Kim, “Death of Two North Korean Prisoners Highlights Starvation Diets”, *Radio Free Asia*, 21 July 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Jeong, “Kim Jong Un Says North Korea Faces Food Crisis Due to Flooding”, *Wall Street Journal*, 16 June 2021. ; Scott Neuman, “North Korea’s Kim Alludes To 1990s Famine, Warns Of ‘Difficulties Ahead Of Us’”, *NPR*, 9 April 2021. ; Choe Sang-Hun, “North Korea reports a ‘great crisis’ in its virus response”, *New York Times*, 29 June 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Sea Young Kim & Leif-Eric Easley, “The Neglected North Korean Crisis: Women’s Rights”, *Ethics & International Affairs*, 2021. ; Jina Yang, “Women’s Rights in the DPRK: Discrepancies Between International and Domestic Legal Instruments in Promoting Women’s Rights and the Reality Reflected by North Korean Defectors”, *Cornell International Law Journal*, 2018.

### a. Sexual and Domestic Violence Against Women

Violence against women is extraordinarily common in the DPRK, especially domestic and sexual violence. Despite that the North Korean government in 2017 claimed that “domestic violence is not a social problem in the DPRK”<sup>16</sup>, reports reveal that the frequency of intimate partner violence (IPV) towards women is significantly higher among North Korean refugee populations (57.1%) than South Koreans (9.9%).<sup>17</sup> While the 2010 Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Women prohibits domestic violence, it is reported that women are often physically abused by male partners and relatives as a form of punishment, and that such incidents cause shame and humiliation among victims; at the same time, victims are not provided protection or legal recourse.<sup>18</sup> A March 2020 report by UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK, Tomás Ojea Quintana, reported that “accounts from escapees indicate that domestic violence is widespread. According to escapees, economic hardship, drug abuse and patriarchal attitudes contribute to domestic violence.”<sup>19</sup> In March 2021, it was reported that a North Korean married man under the influence of alcohol visited the home of his extramarital lover and stabbed her to death before setting her body on fire.<sup>20</sup>

Sexual violence is another major issue both within the DPRK and among North Korean defector populations outside of the country. The 2018 Human Rights Watch report “You Cry at Night but Don’t Know Why” offers statistics which shed light on the severity of the problem: nearly half (48.6%) of defector respondents (352 men, 773 women) reported that “rape and sexual harassment against women in North Korea was ‘common’”.<sup>21</sup> Female traders that work in informal marketplaces throughout the DPRK have reported being subjected to rape, sexual assault, harassment, and groping by police officers, party officials, soldiers, and more. North Korean female soldiers have also reported being subjected to violent and repeated rape and sexual violence by their male superiors.<sup>22</sup> The likelihood of achieving legal recourse or justice for such sex crimes is stymied by the fact that the perpetrators are often well-respected state actors, that the common perception among officials that sexual violence is “not a serious crime”, and increasing fear of repercussions upon the accuser and her family.

### b. Human Trafficking and Exploitation

The United Nations’ definition of ‘trafficking in persons’, pursuant to its Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, is “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of

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<sup>16</sup> Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, *Replies of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea*, 16 June 2017/ CEDAW/C/PRK/Q/2-4/Add.1.

<sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>18</sup> Human Rights Watch, “You Cry at Night but Don’t Know Why”, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Jacob Fromer, “New UN report highlights dire state of women’s human rights in North Korea”, *NK News*, 5 March 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Kim Yoo Jin, “Jilted lover in Hoeryong murders woman and sets her body on fire”, *Daily NK*, 29 March 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Human Rights Watch, “You Cry at Night but Don’t Know Why”, *supra note 16*.

<sup>22</sup> Voice of North Korea by Yeonmi Park [YouTube video], “Shocking Sexual Abuse of North Korean Female Soldiers”, 14 December 2020.

vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude [...]"<sup>23</sup>

In January 2021, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights published a report on *Promoting accountability in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*; the OHCHR interviewed primarily North Korean defector women who had escaped after being repatriated at least once by China. These respondents reported that "women are also more at risk than men of being trafficked into neighbouring States for the purposes of forced marriage and sexual or labour exploitation."<sup>24</sup> Such a statement directly contradicts the claim made by the North Korean government in 2016 that "human trafficking is inconceivable in the DPRK."<sup>25</sup> On the contrary, additional reports by myriad NGOs such as Korea Future Initiative in 2019 highlight the extent to which large populations of North Korean women and girls are trafficked outside of their home country and into nearby nations where they are then forced into border-town prostitution rings; sold into unwanted marriages for nonconsensual sexual and domestic labor; or placed in the cybersex industry where they are subjected to rape and sexual violence on camera for a paying audience.<sup>26</sup> It is noteworthy that some North Korean citizens themselves work as sub-brokers within the country, approach vulnerable women and girls and make false promises of jobs and food, and then traffic them across national borders into the hands of brokers in neighboring states for further exploitation. Though the crime is transnational, the DPRK must address the portion of such human trafficking occurs within its domestic jurisdiction.

The North Korean government pays lip service to the situation of trafficking in the DPRK, stating in 2016 that "some immoral persons who arranged for or forced women to commit prostitution, or committed rape were duly punished in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Criminal Law."<sup>27</sup> In another perhaps unintentionally telling admission to the existence of trafficking in the DPRK, the North Korean government stated that in the combined years 2008, 2011, and 2015, 14 individuals were convicted "obliging a woman who is his subordinate to have sexual intercourse."<sup>28</sup> While the North Korean government acknowledges that trafficking does occur within the nations, the number of convictions carried out undoubtedly fall short to the number of legitimate cases and perpetrators; moreover, despite the plethora of relevant cases, the DPRK has no formal legal provisions criminalizing human and sexual trafficking or stipulating a uniform punishment for such crimes.

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<sup>23</sup> UN General Assembly, Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, 15 November 2000.

<sup>24</sup> Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Promoting accountability in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, Human Rights Council, Forty-sixth session, 11 January 2021.

<sup>25</sup> UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW Elimination of All), *UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women: State Party Report, Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, 1 June 2016, CEDAW/C/PRK/2-4.

<sup>26</sup> Yoon, Hee-soon, "Sex Slaves: The Prostitution, Cybersex & Forced Marriage of North Korean Women & Girls in China", *Korea Future Initiative*, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, *supra note 1*.

<sup>28</sup> Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, *Replies of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, 16 June 2017/ CEDAW/C/PRK/Q/2-4/Add.1.

Furthermore, it is imperative to note that human trafficking in the DPRK is undertaken not solely by non-state actors both within and across the nation's borders, but also domestically by government agents. In May 2020, reports circulated that Kim Jong Un has reinstated a former tradition of his father and grandfather: a "pleasure squad" consisting of thousands of women and girls who entertain and provide sexual favors for the nation's leader and other government officials. The members of the squad – some as young as 13 years old – are taken out of school early, subjected to medical examinations to determine virginity, and forced into sex work for Kim Jong Un and his subordinates.<sup>29</sup>

In July 2021, the United States Department of State released its annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report, in which the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is listed as one of the only 17 nations on Tier 3; this placement is reserved for "countries whose governments do not fully meet the TVPA's [Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000] minimum standards and are not making significant efforts to do so."<sup>30</sup> More specifically, the TIP report observed that the North Korean government has mobilized large populations of adults and children – notably in prison camps – to participate in forced labor as a means of political punishment or enhanced production during pandemic times. The TIP report further highlighted a common occurrence in which female university students who are unable to pay associated education fees were made more vulnerable to sexual trafficking as a means to raise funds.<sup>31</sup>

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea should accept the recommendations made by the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review in 2019 to (1) "adopt legislation to criminalize trafficking, in accordance with international standards, and provide support for women survivors of trafficking" [recommended by Israel]; "consider adopting policies to combat trafficking in persons, especially women and children" [recommended by the Philippines]; and formally define trafficking [recommended by France and Iceland].<sup>32</sup>

### **c. Situation of Repatriated Defector Women**

One of the gravest crimes in the DPRK is crossing the national border without permission or attempting to defect, and men and women alike who commit such a crime and are arrested or repatriated face tremendous dangers in police custody. The act of crossing the border in itself is punishable by one to five years in prison; men and women who seek refuge in South Korea, stay for an extended period of time, or attempt to help others defect from the DPRK face the worst forms of punishment upon repatriation, including labor reform or even the death sentence. Repatriated defector women, however, do face some human rights violations unique to their gender while they are in detention. A 2020 report by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human

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<sup>29</sup> Bob Fredericks, "Kim Jong Un may be holed up with his 2,000-woman 'Pleasure Squad': report", *New York Post*, 1 May 2020. ; Voice of North Korea by Yeonmi Park [YouTube video], "North Korea's Pleasure Squad", 10 September 2020. ; Voice of North Korea by Yeonmi Park [YouTube video], "North Korea's Secret 'Pleasure Squad' Parties", 17 December 2020.

<sup>30</sup> United States Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report*, June 2021.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Human Rights Council, *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, 25 June 2019, A/HRC/42/10.

Rights revealed that sexual violence, including forced nudity, invasive body searches, penetrative rape, sexual assault, groping, and more are a common reality for these women.<sup>33</sup>

Women who have become pregnant during their time outside of the DPRK have reported being subjected to forced abortions and infanticide upon their repatriation. Though the Law on the Protection of the Rights of Women stipulates pregnant women be suspended from criminal liability from three months pre-birth to seven months post-birth, repatriated defector women do not receive such protections. Women who had spent time in China specifically – a large portion of which were sold into prostitution or coerced marriages – were forced to have immediate abortions to terminate babies “with Chinese blood.” While some of these operations were performed surgically, survivors have reported that authorities would sometimes resort to physically beating and kicking pregnant women, or forcing them to conduct overly strenuous labor, in order to induce a miscarriage.

In cases in which the pregnancy is too far along to perform a forced abortion, authorities will allow the birth to occur before confiscating the infants and disappearing to an unknown location where it is believed infanticide takes place. Some witnesses have reported believing that babies would be left outside in freezing temperatures wrapped face-down in plastic bags until they perish. Women who are forced to undergo abortions and even women who proceed to birth their infants have in some cases died as a result of insufficient medical care post-abortion and post-birth. Such cases of forced abortion and forced infanticide are in clear and heinous violation of the right of women to reproductive health, security of person, and of the child to freedom from arbitrary deprivation of life.<sup>34</sup>

One illustration of the extent to which North Korea’s practice of forced abortions on repatriated defector women is a valid fear is the case of pregnant North Korean defector women who have been spared repatriation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Though the DPRK’s border closures have prevented some citizens from escaping and seeking refuge elsewhere, some nations have refrained from sending defectors back to the DPRK due to the pandemic and the North Korean government’s strict border management. It was reported in March 2020 that 20 individuals, including a single pregnant woman, detained in a third country have been spared repatriation; deportation is usually the case under “normal” non-pandemic circumstances. The family of the pregnant woman reported being grateful for the unprecedented situation which protected the woman and child from certain death if they had been forcibly returned to the DPRK.<sup>35</sup> It is likely that there are other similar cases, as the North Korean government was still rejecting repatriations as recently as October 2020.<sup>36</sup>

In April 2021, it was reported that a repatriated defector woman at a detention center in Yanggang Province located in the Sino-North Korean border town of Hyesan passed away after being assaulted by a prison officer with the butt of his rifle; it is unclear whether the woman succumbed to her injuries or if her death was due in part also to malnutrition, as she was provided only 22

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<sup>33</sup> Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Human rights violations against women detained in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea: ‘I still feel the pain...’*, July 2020.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Jong So Yong, “N. Korea refuses repatriation of defectors imprisoned in Dandong”, *Daily NK*, 4 March 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Mun Dong Hui, “N. Korea still rejecting Chinese proposals to repatriate defectors”, *Daily NK*, 15 October 2020.

kernels of boiled corn per meal.<sup>37</sup> This woman's case is testament to the numerous reports among survivors of the routine physical abuse and starvation faced by repatriated defectors in pre-trial detention facilities across the DPRK.

#### **d. The Effects of COVID-19 on North Korean Women**

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only wreaked havoc on the entirety of North Korean society, but the effects have been indiscriminately felt by women, especially in the arenas of employment and family management. Since the Arduous March in the 1990s, North Korean women's roles have been transformed as they increasingly became the primary breadwinners of their homes; at the same time, however, they remain expected to be dutiful mothers and conduct domestic work.<sup>38</sup> With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the DPRK's pandemic mitigation efforts – notably, the closure of the Sino-North Korean border – women as family leaders have suffered from the eradication of imported materials necessary for survival, as well as the temporary stall in border-town market and smuggling activities which accounted for much of their income. Many women have succumbed to food rationing in order to keep themselves and their families alive.

Especially throughout 2020 and 2021, the Kim regime has increasingly placed simultaneous conflicting pressures on women to be both active workers and fully-present mothers and wives. In June 2020, North Korean authorities published propaganda urging women as old as over 60 years to participate in agricultural work to counteract the national shortage in food supplies and other raw materials.<sup>39</sup> A year later in July 2021, DPRK officials forcibly mobilized married women in the Sino-North Korean border region to make cement blocks and partake in other dangerous and strenuous physical labor necessary for the construction of a border wall to prevent defections and transnational smuggling.<sup>40</sup> Amidst the rising food insecurity and worsening outlook for life in the nation – due to both the pandemic and lack of survival necessities – many North Korean women have decided against having children and have taken more birth control measures; one woman lamented that “the country is encouraging us to give birth to many children without suggesting a way to solve our economic distress.”<sup>41</sup> In fact, the government has offered some incentives to encourage women to have three or more children.

But the women who have heeded the regime's suggestions and have tried to concurrently be both dedicated mothers and efficient workers have faced a plethora of difficulties. Many have had to find nannies to watch their children while they work, which the government has criticized for its misalignment with the nation's priority of self-sufficiency. Authorities encourage women to use state-run kindergartens and academies for childcare; however, they have done little to address women's concerns about these buildings' unhygienic and unsafe conditions. On the contrary, they

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<sup>37</sup> Lee Chae Un, “Woman in her 20s dies after beating from Yanggang Province detention center guard”, *Daily NK*, 30 April 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Dr. Sung Kyung Kim, “North Korean Women as New Economic Agents: Drivers and Consequences”, *Institute for Security & Development Policy*, 21 October 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Kang Mi Jin, “N. Korea's women are called on to support farming activities”, *Daily NK*, 11 June 2020. ; Lee Chae Un, “Elderly members of Socialist Women's Union mobilized to take part in farm work”, *Daily NK*, 29 June 2021.

<sup>40</sup> Jieun Kim, “North Korea Mobilized Women for Border Wall Construction Near China”, *Radio Free Asia*, 12 July 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Jeong Yon Park, “North Korean Women Say No to Motherhood Due to Economic Difficulties”, *Radio Free Asia*, 22 June 2021.



have even increased the pressure on working women to be better mothers; Kim Jong Un in one public address urged mothers to keep a close eye on their children to prevent them from being attracted to “alien ideology, culture and lifestyles”, namely South Korean television shows and music and Western fashion and vernacular.<sup>42</sup>

The North Korean regime stresses that women must fulfill their roles as leading economic agents and workers, and also as mothers and wives. At the same time however, the government seems to fear that women are becoming both too powerful in comparison to their male counterparts, and also more aware of global issues and women’s rights. Annual celebrations of International Women’s Day, 8 March, have raised to authorities’ attention that “with each passing year, the relative power of women in the home increases”. How can the DPRK have such mammoth expectations for women, only to be disappointed by some women’s struggle to fulfill all roles required of them, and insecure about other women’s achievement and increased agency in such roles?

#### IV. Conclusion

Women in the Democratic People’ Republic of Korea remain one of the most vulnerable populations in the world, and the condition of their lives is only growing more precarious with regards to the pandemic, the mounting pressure on them to provide for their families, and the dangers they face in society while trying to do so. While the regime has claimed to prioritize the status and rights of women, the information available to the Commission on the Status of Women and the details in this report prove otherwise. The DPRK is not actively striving to promote and ensure gender equality and is not working to protect the human rights of its citizens, including marginalized women. We urge the DPRK to make genuine, calculable efforts towards the empowerment and protection of women, and we renew our call on the Commission to acknowledge the worsening situation of human rights and women’s rights in the DPRK and include this consideration in its program of work.

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<sup>42</sup> Michael E. Miller, “[Kim Jong Un, fearing loss of control, has grooming and parenting advice for North Korean women](#)”, *The Washington Post*, 22 June 2021.