

# Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-Sixth session

14-25 March 2022

## *Statement submitted by Jubilee Campaign, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

---

Jubilee Campaign promotes the human rights and religious liberty of ethnic and religious minorities; advocates for the release of prisoners of conscience; and promotes the dignity and safety of women and children from sexual exploitation. Jubilee Campaign has held special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council at the United Nations since 2003.

This report seeks to inform the United Nations Economic and Social Council Commission on the Status of Women on the conditions faced by North Korean women in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the People's Republic of China, and the Republic of Korea.

### **THE DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA**

2020 and 2021 saw relatively the same pattern of human rights violations taking place against North Korean women as had been recorded in previous years, including violence against women, trafficking and exploitation, and discrimination, all of which have been exacerbated by the pandemic. There have also been a few newer trends and violations during the coronavirus pandemic. For example, in August 2020, it was revealed that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea had established "buffer zones" along its shared border with China where military and other state authorities can fire at individuals crossing the border irregularly, which is tantamount to extrajudicial killings; such measures were taken purportedly to prevent the spread of the coronavirus pandemic via transnational movement. These actions disproportionately impact women, who are, willing or not, significantly more involved in unauthorized travel and cross-border exchanges than men. The North Korean government has used the pretext of coronavirus to expand its ideal of 'self-reliance', by rejecting offers of aid, vaccines, and food, thus leaving hundreds of thousands of civilians struggling for survival; this has in turn resulted in the North Korean government placing additional pressure on women and has increased their exploitation for labor.

As in previous years, domestic and sexual violence has continued to ravage North Korean women despite domestic provisions (i.e., the 2012 Criminal Law, which prohibits sexual violence, and the 2010 Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Women, which prohibits domestic violence). 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.

Human trafficking and sexual exploitation of North Korean women also persisted in 2020 and 2021. In January 2021, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights published a report on Promoting accountability in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea; the OHCHR primarily interviewed 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." North Korean women who are repatriated to the Democratic People's Republic of

Korea face forced abortions, infanticide, and forced miscarriages if they became pregnant while abroad; these procedures are often performed without follow-up medical care.

The pandemic also resulted in increased violations and discrimination specifically against North Korean women. Throughout 2020 and 2021, the Kim regime pressured women to be both active workers and also fully present mothers; in July 2020, state-run propaganda urged women over 60 years old to participate in agricultural work to combat the famine, and in July 2021 officials of Democratic People's Republic of Korea mobilized married women to participate in the strenuous construction of a border wall.

### ***THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA***

North Korean defector women continue to face a myriad of human rights abuses in the People's Republic of China. Traffickers and "brokers" convince vulnerable North Korean women that they will find employment abroad; instead, they sell these women for low prices into exploitative sectors such as forced marriage, prostitution, and the cybersex industry. Girls and women as young as 15 years old that are sold into prostitution are required to serve multiple male 'customers' each night and are subjected to rape and face a higher risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections. Girls and women in the cybersex industry are forced to work hours on end performing sex acts on camera to a paying audience. The United States Department of State in its 2021 Annual Trafficking in Persons report condemned China for not taking measurable steps to eliminate human trafficking and sexual exploitation of North Korean women and girls.

North Korean defectors – including women – are under constant threat of being repatriated to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea despite China being party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the Convention against Torture, both of which prohibit refoulement. In December 2020, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights as well as numerous Special Rapporteurs sent a letter urging the Chinese government to refrain from repatriating a group of five defectors, among which there was a teenage girl and a pregnant woman.

The pandemic has presented numerous challenges to North Korean defectors residing in China, including women. In February 2020, hospital staff turned away a North Korean defector woman, married to a Chinese citizen, after she exhibited coronavirus symptoms but was ultimately unable to produce a Chinese identification card. Furthermore, in December 2020 it was reported that North Korean factory workers in the Jilin Province of China were experiencing high rates of tuberculosis as a result of malnutrition and coronavirus prevention measures which restricted their movement and relegated them to cramped shared living, working, and eating spaces. A large portion of North Korean workers in Chinese provinces are women.

### ***THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA***

The coronavirus pandemic and resulting travel restrictions and lockdowns have resulted in the lowest defection levels of North Korean refugees to the Republic of Korea (South Korea) within the past twenty years. Still, South Korea has a substantial population of North Korean defectors, primarily women, and their continuous struggles are therefore worth highlighting. One of the most noteworthy problems faced by these women is a deterioration in mental health during and following their defection; North Korean defector women express high rates of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorders, insomnia, and suicidal ideations and attempts.

North Korean defectors – and by extension, defector women – often have to deal with negative social stigma and perception towards them upon arriving in South Korea. They are often singled out for their clothing, dialect, and hairstyles, and they are subjected to harmful stereotypes such as that they are communist sympathizers or that they are poor and helpless. While some initiatives at socializing and integrating North Korean defectors into South Korean society have been successful, more efforts are needed to combat ongoing discrimination against North Korean defectors.

North Korean defectors often experience difficulties finding steady employment and suffer from economic hardships, usually due to their lack of higher education, technology skills, and linguistic adjustment to South Korean society. While 7.1% of North Korean defector men were paid less than 1.5 million won a month ( $\approx$  \$1300), 30.6% of defector women made such an income. 14.1% of North Korean defector women earned less than 1 million won ( $\approx$  \$866) per month. Even when they are able to find employment, North Korean defector women are paid the bare minimum and are often unable to lift themselves out of poverty.

Perhaps the greatest issue faced by North Korean defector women in South Korea during the pandemic is unemployment, specifically because service jobs at restaurants, cafes, pubs, and more, were effectively paused while businesses across the country shut down to prevent the spread of the virus. By December 2020, the unemployment rate for North Korean defector women increased from 7.7% (2019) to an astounding 11.4%.

North Korean women and girls are also subjected to human trafficking by South Korean individuals while abroad and even by South Korean state actors within the nation. Numerous defectors have reported that they encountered South Korean businessmen and companies seeking prostitution services of North Korean women while they were in China on business trips; some lamented that forced prostitution was the circumstance in which they first met a South Korean individual. With regards to sexual exploitation domestically, in September 2020 two officers of the South Korean Armed Forces' Intelligence Command were convicted for sexually assaulting two North Korean defector women they were tasked with protecting.

## **CONCLUSION**

North Korean women are one of the most marginalized populations in the world, evidenced by the fact that they face hardships and human rights violations in their home nation as well as in countries they escape to in hopes of a better life. They are effectively unable to avoid the cycle of vulnerability, inequality, and exploitation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the People's Republic of China, and the Republic of Korea. The situation for North Korean defector women has only worsened as a result of the pandemic in regard to increased domestic violence and exploitation of women for labor in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, worsening employment status in South Korea, and difficulties receiving medical care. Each of these factors has negatively impacted North Korean women's physical and mental health.