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THE SITUATION OF NORTH KOREAN WOMEN  
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 (DPRK). Obtaining current and reliable data from the DPRK is notoriously difficult due to inability or fear of reporting troublesome dynamics, restricted movement, and the regime's silence or denial when presented with human rights concerns.

Due to the country's information blockade, information contained in this report is primarily taken from various non-governmental organization reports, news articles, and United Nations reports. The data that is available sheds a light on the many ways the DPRK is failing to ensure rights and protections for the women who reside within its borders.

**II. Pertinent Legal Provisions & Standards**

*a. General Survey of Human Rights Violations*

Between 2014 and 2020, numerous human rights violations took place in the DPRK: arbitrary and prolonged imprisonment; physical torture; slavery and conscripted labor; summary and public executions; deliberate starvation and malnutrition; rape and sexual violence; and more.<sup>2</sup> The United Nations' Human Rights Council—in a resolution (A/HRC/49/L.4) on the Situation of human rights in the DPRK—condemned “in the strongest terms the long-standing and ongoing systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations in the State.”<sup>3</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup> All-Party Parliamentary Group for North Korea, Inquiry into Human Rights Violations in North Korea 2014-2020/1, July 2021.

<sup>3</sup> HRC, Human Rights Council adopts seven resolutions – extends mandates on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Myanmar and Iran, 01 April 2022.

*b. Provisions Claiming to Protect Women's Rights*

Several domestic laws in the DPRK claim to protect Women's Rights (i.e., the 1946 Law on Sex Equality guaranteeing gender equality; the 2009 Family Law ensuring the woman's right to marriage and divorce; the 2010 Law on Socialist Labour Rights guaranteeing maternity leave for new mothers; the 2010 Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Women prohibiting domestic violence; the 2012 Criminal Law that includes articles criminalizing sexual violence; the 2014 Criminal Procedure Act which allows women to redress acts of discrimination with payment for loss and/or damages; and the 2020 Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Women). Regrettably, however, violations occur under these and go un-remedied.<sup>4</sup>

Governments and multilateral institutions attempt to influence the DPRK government to meet its obligations under the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

**III. Issues Concerning North Korean Women**

Although the DPRK became a party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 2001, the practical treatment of women in the DPRK does not indicate a positive correlation between stated words and action. Investigations by the UN Committee on Information have proved that DPRK had not implemented the policies found in the 2010 Women's Rights Act. Part of that failure could be attributed to the Act's vague language, non-existent definition for gender equality, failure to criminalize sexual harassment, and/or absent guarantee of reliable access to healthcare.<sup>5</sup>

*a. Sexual and Domestic Violence Against Women*

Domestic and sexual violence is very common in the DPRK. 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>6</sup> One North Korean female soldier stated "[b]ased on my experience, I think almost 70% of female soldiers are victims of sexual assault or sexual harassment"<sup>7</sup> Rape in the military is commonplace and victims are often blackmailed to keep silent; one former female soldier explained that because most women join the army as it is one of the few means to join the Worker's Party of Korea and thus achieve a sustainable life, senior male military officials exploit this, prey on female soldiers, and threaten to restrict their chance of

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<sup>4</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.

<sup>5</sup> Ida Casmier, *The Reality of Women's Rights in North Korea*, *The Borgen Project*, 23 Oct 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Voice of North Korea by Yeonmi Park, *Shocking Sexual Abuse of North Korean Female Soldiers*, *YouTube*, 14 December 2020.

<sup>7</sup> The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, *The Shocking Life of a North Korean Female Soldier: The Reality of North Korea!*, *YouTube*, 29 Nov 2021.

joining the Party should they resist or report the abuse.<sup>8</sup> Women in the North Korean military who become pregnant go to extreme measures to hide it—from “taking anthelmintic medicine (antiparasitic drugs designed to remove parasitic worms from the body), or jumping off and rolling down the high mountain hills.”<sup>9</sup> In addition, “it’s common to find foetuses in army toilets.”<sup>10</sup>

North Korean women in the DPRK not only experience violence in the military, but also within the home. 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>11</sup> 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>12</sup> 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>13</sup>

Reprehensibly, there has been little to no improvement in the situation of domestic abuse within the past decade. A 2011 Citizens’ Alliance for North Korean Human Rights publication *The Battered Wheel of the Revolution* surveyed 25 North Korean respondents, all of whom reported witnessing domestic violence or experiencing it. Excerpts from their statements reveal that spousal violence and IPV is viewed as private “family affairs” and the victim’s fault for being “not ladylike” or making minor mistakes such as failing to maintain home cleanliness or even improperly setting a table. Daughters who grew up witnessing their fathers abusing their mothers eventually entered relationships in which their husbands abused them. Even when victims knew that the violence was both painful and morally wrong, they often stayed with their husbands for many reasons, including financial dependence, fear of being viewed as disgraceful, and that there are no reporting and prosecution services available; police have even been reported laughing at and berating women who attempt to report cases of domestic abuse.<sup>14</sup>

#### *b. Human Trafficking and Exploitation*

According to the United Nations’ Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children describes ‘trafficking in persons’ as “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 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

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<sup>8</sup> Julia Campbell, [The Horrors of Being a Woman in the North Korean Military](#), NK Hidden Gulag, 14 Jul 2022.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> Jacob Fromer, [New UN report highlights dire state of women’s human rights in North Korea](#), *NK News*, 5 March 2020.

<sup>12</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>13</sup> Human Rights Watch, [“You Cry at Night but Don’t Know Why”](#), *supra note 3*.

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>14</sup>

The US Department of State’s annual Trafficking in Persons report for 2022 ranked DPRK as one of only 22 nations on Tier 3. Countries in Tier 3 are those 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>15</sup> The 2022 TIP report also highlighted the DPRK’s withholding of pertinent information, stating:

*“The government did not report any law enforcement efforts. It is unclear whether DPRK laws criminalized sex trafficking or labor trafficking. Fair trials did not occur in the DPRK, and the government did not explain what provisions of law, if any, it used to prosecute trafficking crimes, if it did so. The government did not provide law enforcement data; there were no known investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of traffickers, including government employees complicit in forced labor or other trafficking crimes.”*<sup>16</sup>

Essentially, 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. In fact, reports say that Kim Jong Un and other leaders from the regime benefit from 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>17</sup>

Many NGOs—specifically the Korea Future Initiative—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>18</sup>

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

Crossing the national border of the DPRK without permission is one of the gravest crimes in the country; the act is punishable by one to five years in prison. Any man or woman who defects—thus abandoning loyalty to the DPRK—can expect the worst punishment upon repatriation: labor reform or even the death sentence.

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<sup>14</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>15</sup> United States Department of State, Trafficking in Persons Report, July 2022.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

<sup>17</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, North Korea’s Pleasure Squad, *YouTube*, 10 September 2020; Voice of North Korea by Yeonmi Park, North Korea’s Secret ‘Pleasure Squad’ Parties, 17 December 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Yoon, Hee-soon, Sex Slaves: The Prostitution, Cybersex & Forced Marriage of North Korean Women & Girls in China, *Korea Future Initiative*, 2019.

Repatriated defector women face some human rights violations unique to their gender while they are in detention. In 2017, at the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, North Korea's representatives indignantly refused to provide details on rape, sexual assault, and violence against women when asked about measures taken to address the UN Commission of Inquiry's 2014 findings of serious human rights violations committed against women who were forcibly returned from China. A 2020 report by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human 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>19</sup>

If a defector woman has become pregnant during her time outside of the DPRK, she can even expect being subjected to forced abortions and infanticide upon her repatriation. Though the Law on the Protection of the Rights of Women stipulates that pregnant women are 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 abort 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>20</sup>

#### *d. Dual Role of a Woman –Provider & Caretaker*

Despite that newly married North Korean women are required to retire from their state-mandated careers in order to become dutiful wives and mothers, these women often find themselves becoming the breadwinners by participating in the informal market, as is the case in roughly 80 to 90 percent of households.<sup>21</sup> Single women must use bribes, come up with medical excuses, or fake marriages if they want to leave their state-allocated “official” jobs and participate in the market.<sup>22</sup> The men, however, are tied to the country's moribund state-run institutions; if they refuse to work, they go to jail. Alternatively, a man could pay 20-30x of his monthly salary to avoid working.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</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>20</sup> *Id.*

<sup>21</sup> Chad O'Carroll, North Korea seeks 'close' foreign cooperation on women's rights, health, *NK News*, 08 July 2022; Louisa Lim, Out of Desperation, North Korean Women Become Breadwinners, *NPR*, 28 Dec 2012.

<sup>22</sup> Jeong-ah Cho, Ji-Sun Yee, and Hee-Young Yi, Daily Lives of North Korean Women and Gender Politics, Korea Institute for National Unification, Aug 2020; *see also* NK Hidden Gulag Blog, Women in the Workplace in North Korea, 28 June 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Louisa Lim, Out of Desperation, North Korean Women Become Breadwinners, *NPR*, 28 Dec 2012.

An interview with an average North Korean couple zeroes in on the disparity: a wife working at the market for one day can earn twice her husband's monthly salary.<sup>24</sup> One North Korean man expressed frustration at how women's increased economic agency has affected spousal relationships, stating, "Whatever your wife tells you to do, you do . . . We are slaves, slaves of the women. Women's voices have become louder. Men have become mute."<sup>25</sup> This resentment and alienation professionally and at home is often regarded as a motivating pressure that tragically fuels domestic violence.

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 famine and shortage of other raw materials.<sup>26</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>27</sup>

*e. Harsh Treatment Towards Religious Women*

Given the DPRK's view on religion generally, women of faith experience a magnification of customary gender-based violence in detention if they do have a religious identity.<sup>28</sup> "North Korea's constitution nominally extends the right to freedom of religion or belief to all citizens, yet this right is qualified as one to be "granted" by the state, rather than a freedom that is inherent to all persons."<sup>29</sup> The criminal code in North Korea "dictates that persons engaged in 'superstitious activities,' which encompasses religious and belief practices, and commonly refers to Shamanism, shall be punished by forced labour for up to three years."<sup>30</sup> In December 2021, Korea Future reported on 331 cases of violations of the human rights of North Korean women of faith having their human rights violated in North Korea. They include:

*"...arbitrary deprivation of liberty; torture or cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment; forced labour; the denial of fair trial rights; the denial of right to life; refolement; and sexual violence. These violations were based on acts protected under international law, such as religious practice, attending a place of worship, possessing religious items, and being in contact with religious persons."*<sup>31</sup>

Out of 151 Christian women surveyed in the DPRK, 140 were arbitrarily deprived of their liberty; 33 were subjected to torture & cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment; 11 were refoled; 5 were

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<sup>24</sup> *Id.*

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

<sup>26</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>27</sup> Jieun Kim, North Korea Mobilized Women for Border Wall Construction Near China, *Radio Free Asia*, 12 July 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Korea Future, Religious Women as Beacons of Resistance in North Korea, 22, Dec 2021.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* at 21.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.* at 5.

forced to perform labour; and one was subjected to sexual violence, including rape.<sup>32</sup> In a similar manner, a study of 180 Shamanic women showed 157 were arbitrarily deprived of liberty, 26 were subjected to torture & cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment; 53 were forced to perform labour, and one was subjected to sexual violence, including rape.<sup>33</sup>

If North Korean women return—voluntarily or forcefully—from China and are suspected to adhere to Christianity, they are subjected to surveillance by the Ministry of State Security.<sup>34</sup> The Ministry has a network of informants who provide intelligence about the suspected Christians. Moreover,

*“Women who are not married, are not employed at a state-assigned workplace, and are aged between 31 and 60 are required to become members of the Women’s Union, a state organization that controls the ideological alignment of non-part members, further embeds harmful gender norms, and delivers anti-religious education on a frequent basis.”<sup>35</sup>*

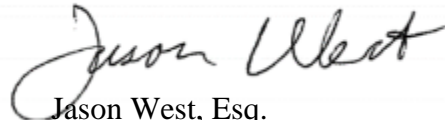
#### **IV. Conclusion**

The regime has claimed to prioritize the status and rights of women, but 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; it does not protect the human rights of its citizens, in particular 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.

Respectfully Submitted:



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<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at 14.

<sup>33</sup> *Id.*

<sup>34</sup> *Id.* at 22.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at 20.