#### UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN COMMUNICATIONS PROCEDURE

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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 government's silence and denial when confronted with testaments of human rights concerns.

Throughout the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, gathering information on present country conditions in the DPRK has been increasingly difficult as border closures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus have caused an exponential and observable decline in the number of defectors who have escaped the DPRK and are available to provide testimonies.<sup>2</sup> Due to this information blockade, information contained in this submission is primarily assembled from non-governmental organization documentation, news articles, and United Nations reports. The data that is readily available exposes systematic violations of the rights of women citizens.

## II. Legal Background

Experts, human rights organizations, and defectors alike have agreed that the DPRK's few and notably insubstantial legislations on women's rights and gender equality are "merely a façade".<sup>3</sup> The December 2010 Women's Rights Act Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Women fails to: define and outline forms of violence against women, recognize sexual violence and harassment of women, and establish any legal bodies to address violations of the rights of women.<sup>4</sup> The only other legislations which address the rights of women are the 2009 Family Law

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

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Martin Weiser, <u>North Korea's mistranslated 'shoot-to-kill' border protection order</u>, *East Asia Forum*, 27 Feb 2021. ; Sewon Kim, <u>North Korea Orders Troops and Police to Shoot Citizens Who Approach the Chinese Border</u>, *Radio Free Asia*, 26 Aug 2020.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Joanna Hosaniak, Andrew Wolman, Eunyoung Kim, Sohee Kim, Sehyek Oh, Lilian Lee, Young-ja Kim, Eui Hwan Cho, & Sook Yi Oh, <u>Status of Women's Rights in the Context of Socio-Economic Changes in the DPRK</u>, NKHR Briefing Report No. 7, *Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights*, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Left Review Online, <u>Gender Equality in the DPRK Seen by Law</u>, 19 Jul 2021.

which grants women the right to enter marriages upon their own will, and the 2010 Law on Socialist Labour Rights which guarantees mothers maternity leave. The Criminal Law of 2012 does identify rape as a violent offense punishable by an undetermined length of imprisonment but declines to clarify what constitutes the act of rape.<sup>5</sup> Female defectors have reported that the primary body which is tasked with educating women about their rights and freedoms, the Socialist Women's Union of Korea, is in actuality a tool "for political indoctrination"<sup>6</sup> and "social control and material coercion"<sup>7</sup> through which the government forces women to engage in unpaid strenuous labor and relinquish foodstuffs and large sums of money for redistribution. Specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic, to counteract the national famine and shortage of raw materials - exacerbated by the government's refusal of external assistance and food aid<sup>8</sup> - the Women's Union coercively mobilized elderly and married women to participate in agricultural labor and construction of a border wall to prevent defections and transnational smuggling.<sup>9</sup>

## III. Inequality, Discrimination, and Rights Violations in the Public Sector

The Arduous March, which was an economic crisis and ensuing famine in the 1990s, ushered in a major period of transformation of the economic role of North Korean women. As families became unable to sustain themselves financially and materially, and as men's mandatory labor in the official state mandated workforce became increasingly irregular and unprofitable, women took up the task of working in illicit marketplaces which is relatively lucrative but exposes them to abuse by government officials. While North Korean women acquired financial power through such work, according to the Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, "their economic empowerment is ironically another way to cement women's role as dutiful mothers, wives, and daughters, because it reinforces the role of women's being primarily responsible for the well-being of their families".<sup>10</sup> Two young North Korean defector men who escaped in 2020 and 2021 echoed these societal expectations, stressing that women must be gentle, docile, good at housework and childcare, "respect their husbands", and "take good care of men".<sup>11</sup> 27 out of 37 (73%) female respondents of a 2018 survey revealed that they mainly use their income to finance their husbands' and sons' education and advancement in the Party. This is because, despite a woman's fiscal accomplishments and stability, there is a glass ceiling which restricts them from "moving up the hierarchy in political positions or to succeed in society".<sup>12</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Jina Yang, <u>Women's Rights in the DPRK: Discrepancies Between International and Domestic Legal Instruments in</u> <u>Promoting Women's Rights and the Reality Reflected by North Korean Defectors</u>, *Cornell International Law Journal*, 2018.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Daye Gang, Joanna Hosaniak, Sohee Kim, Ji-yoon Lee, Eui Hwan Cho, & Sook Yi Oh, <u>"The only claim that things have changed..."</u>: 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.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> The Guardian & Reuters, <u>'Poisoned candy': North Korean state media shuns food aid despite hunger crisis</u>, 21 Feb 2023.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Kang Mi Jin, <u>N.Korea's women are called on to support farming activities</u>, *Daily NK*, 11 Jun 2020. ; Lee Chae Eun, <u>Elderly members of Socialist Women's Union mobilized to take part in farm work</u>, *Daily NK*, 29 Jun 2021. ; Jieun Kim, <u>North Korea Mobilizes Women for Border Wall Construction Near China</u>, *Radio Free Asia*, 12 Jul 2021.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Supra note 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Korea Institute for National Unification [South Korea], <u>White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea 2022</u>, Apr 2023.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Women's work in the informal market sector disqualifies them from receiving labor protection and social security benefits. Additionally, defector women reported being subjected to verbal, physical, and sexual harassment, violence, and intimidation by Party officials; however, they had no choice but to continue to work in order to support their family. Even if women want to report such incidents, there are no means of legal remedy to achieve justice against perpetrators. Other women, in order to avoid punishment for their work in illegal markets and continue generating the revenue necessary to support their families, have resorted to providing sexual favors to state authorities and male tradesmen. One former trader, Ms. Choi Dal Mi, explained to Human Rights Watch in 2018 that "having sex with men who have power over you or letting them touch all over your body is a necessity to survive. It never occurred to me that I could or would want to do anything about it. It was just how things are."<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, defector women have reported that male colleagues misunderstand this practice and express bitterness, claiming female traders are lucky to have the ability to sell their bodies in exchange for benefits in the workplace.

Notwithstanding the multiple dangers of working in the black market sector, women have no choice but to continue as their livelihood depends on it. Still, it is becoming increasingly difficult to do so. 64% of respondents of a 2018 survey reported an escalation in invasive regulation of markets, presence of police officers, bribe prices, frequency of inspections, and confiscation of goods and income.<sup>14</sup> The government persistently pressures women to be both good workers and good mothers; however, despite knowing that women's work is necessary for the survival of families and the nation, the Women's Union actively exerts control over women's economic activities in order to prevent their accumulation of 'surplus' wealth and material ownership in a socialist society. As such, for female traders, "the more you are able to accumulate, the more you will be exploited. [...] Rather than empowering women, their earning power made them a target."<sup>15</sup>

Another public arena in which gender inequality manifests in the horrific form of physical and sexual violence towards and exploitation of women is the military. Historically, men have been legally obligated to serve an average of ten years in the military. In late January 2015, it was reported that the North Korean government had mandated military service for women between the ages of 17 and 20 years who have graduated either middle school or high school; however they were not required to serve a full decade but only until the age of 23.<sup>16</sup> In March 2023, the mandatory military service term for women was extended to eight years.<sup>17</sup> As the military is largely male-dominated, female soldiers have been subjected to violent and repeated rape and sexual aggression by their male superiors.<sup>18</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

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Human Rights Watch, <u>"You Cry at Night but Don't Know Why": Sexual Violence against Women in North Korea</u>, 2018.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Supra note 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Christian Davies, <u>North Korean women pay a heavy price as Kim turns on 'black market breadwinners'</u>, *Financial Times*, 12 Jan 2022.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Choi Song Min, North Korea introduces 'mandatory military service for women', The Guardian, 31 Jan 2015.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Jieun Kim, <u>'Where else in the world is there this kind of slavery?'</u>, *Radio Free Asia*, 10 Mar 2023.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Voice of North Korea by Yeonmi Park, <u>Shocking Sexual Abuse of North Korean Female Soldiers</u>, *YouTube*, 14 Dec 2020. ; The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, <u>The Shocking Life of a North Korean Female Soldier: The Reality of North Korea!</u>, *YouTube*, 29 Nov 2021.

harassment". Rape in the military is commonplace and victims are often blackmailed into silence; one former female soldier explained that because most women join the army as it is one of the few means to enter the Workers' 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 joining the Party should they resist or report abuses. In January 2023, lecture materials distributed to military officers divulged an incident in 2022 in which a then-18-year-old female soldier was gang raped by male colleagues at a mixed-gender military base. Unlike most sexual violence and assault cases which are reprehensibly not deemed egregious enough to warrant censure, this incident was so horrific that it was inserted in teaching materials as an example of felonious and despicable violence which would be punished severely. Despite such warnings, however, "there are no systems to prevent them [human rights abuses] or punish offenders"<sup>19</sup>, and "the incident [of rape] becomes an issue only when the female victim dies, and surviving rape victims usually are not able to complain anywhere or hold their assailant accountable".<sup>20</sup>

Those female troops who become pregnant as a result of sexual assault during military service 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>21</sup> In addition, "it's common to find foetuses in army toilets." Other defector women report that during their time in the military they were forced to reuse pieces of gauze and cloth for menstruation, as they were not provided with sanitary pads.<sup>22</sup>

# **IV.** The Suffering of Women Within the Home

Despite the fact that North Korean women are nearly entirely financially responsible for the livelihood of their families, due to their dependence on their husbands' social standing – which affects their work – and the patriarchal nature of North Korean society, women remain subjugated in the home. 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, exacerbate domestic violence between North Korean spouses. A 2020 study of the husbands of North Korean defector women revealed that 56.1% of North Korean male respondents reported having perpetrated some form of physical violence against their partner within the past year. Furthermore, 21.4% of North Korean refugee husbands reported inflicting severe violence – including choking, beating, and/or use of a knife or gun – upon their partners.<sup>23</sup> While rates of domestic violence and intimate partner violence are statistically significant, negligible efforts are made to investigate cases and apprehend perpetrators. In the 2018 Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights survey, 92% of respondents reported that authorities do not treat domestic violence as egregious conduct deserving of punishment, and 86% indicated that police never

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Seulkee Jang, N. Korea's female soldiers still face sexual harassment, even rape, in the military, Daily NK, 28 Apr 2023.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Supra note 11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Julia Campbell, <u>The Horrors of Being a Woman in the North Korean Military</u>, NK Hidden Gulag, 14 Jul 2022.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Soram Cheon, <u>'When you join the military, gender is not a thing. We are all only soldiers.'</u>, *Radio Free Asia*, 9 Mar 2023.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Boyoung Nam, MSW, Jae Yop Kim, PhD, & Wonjung Ryu, BA, <u>Intimate Partner Violence Against Women</u> <u>Among North Korean Refugees: A Comparison With South Koreans</u>, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 2020.

respond to incidents.<sup>24</sup> Defector women who shared testimonies in 2022 shed further light on North Korean authorities' insignificant efforts, recalling that punishment for abusers is only sanctioned when aggravated assault with a weapon results in physical disability; even in such severe cases, perpetrators are typically detained for no longer than two months on average.<sup>25</sup> One woman remembered an incident in which she contacted police to file a report of "habitual" physical assault perpetrated by her husband; she was told that this violence was "not a crime but a form of discipline" and that there was no legal basis to arraign her husband. Without any intervention or assistance from authorities, the woman was forced to return to the home where she continued to live with her abuser. Another defector shared with researchers that in 2013, when she was an adolescent, "her intoxicated father grabbed her hair, slammed her head against a wall, and beat her body with a wooden stick until it broke", causing her to run away from home and live homeless on the streets where she was later sexually assaulted.<sup>26</sup>

The unending spate of violence within the home has increased divorce rates; women's increasing financial agency has enabled them to take action to dissolve their marriages in the interest of escaping abuse and mistreatment. This financial autonomy has come about, not through state intervention, but largely through women's engagement in the gray market economy - an under-the-radar network formed primarily by women where goods and services are exchanged outside of official channels. Despite the ability of some women to utilize their own financial autonomy to obtain a divorce, the divorce process in the DPRK remains laden with undue burdens and is often inaccessible to the average woman due to its stringent requirements and bureaucratic hurdles. One defector who operated a photography studio testified that numerous citizens would visit their business to take pictures and self-portraits to use as evidence of domestic violence which, supplemented by medical examination records, can be used to justify and finalize divorces.<sup>27</sup> However, in March 2023, the government launched "an education campaign" which demonized women seeking to obtain divorces and characterized such as "escap[ing] life's difficulties" and "giving up on their families".<sup>28</sup>

Sexual violence in the DPRK is usually considered as prevalent within the public sector, but numerous defector testimonies uncovered that some of the most horrific acts of sexual violence occur within the home. Similar to how reporting incidents that occurred within the public arena is difficult due to the threat of revocation of licenses to operate in illicit markets and demotions in the military, sexual violence committed by family members often goes unreported.<sup>29</sup>

"In one case, a victim who was sexually assaulted by her cousin had an abortion due to the pregnancy. Although the rest of her family became aware of the situation, they didn't even consider reporting it because they regarded it as a family matter. In another case, a woman who was sexually assaulted by her

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Supra note 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Supra note 11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Ministry of Unification Center for North Korean Human Rights Records [South Korea], <u>2023 Report on North Korean Human Rights</u>, Jul 2023.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Supra note 11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Myung Chul Lee, <u>North Korea launches anti-divorce campaign, targeting women</u>, *Radio Free Asia*, 30 Mar 2023.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Supra note 26.

biological father became pregnant and had three or four abortions, and although everyone around her knew about it, she did not report it because she felt shame".<sup>30</sup>

## V. Abject Poverty and Inadequate Health

Though reliable and updated statistics regarding life in the DPRK are difficult to obtain, research conducted by the Vienna University of Economics and Businesses in 2020 led to the estimation that approximately 60% of the nation's population falls below the poverty line. This research was conducted by examining various satellite images of the night in the DPRK and calculating the poverty levels in certain areas based on the amount of light – indicative of both production and consumption or lack thereof – that is emitted from artificial sources.<sup>31</sup>

In 2013, 40 out of 60 defector women survey respondents revealed that they had earned only enough money for food and could not afford other daily necessities including medicine and clothing.<sup>32</sup> It is reasonable to conjecture that pandemic-induced food insecurity, 'self-sufficiency' policies, and rising inflation have presented further obstacles to the purchase of already meager food supplies and basic provisions. Similarly, in 2018 60% of female survey 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 the fact that the government is supposed to provide its citizens with free healthcare. Many women also avoided obtaining necessary surgeries and preferred to give birth in the home, as they could not financially or materially meet the requirements of paying the doctors and bringing wood and water to the hospitals.<sup>33</sup>

It is widely accepted that North Korean citizens suffer from poor health irrespective of their gender, largely due to outdated health and medical services, widespread hunger, overwork, and most recently, COVID-19. It is important to note, however, that women and girls face some unique health problems based on their gender. A 2020 survey of defector women who had experienced menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and postnatal/postpartum care while in the DPRK revealed three commonalities among survey respondents: "distorted sexual concepts", "internalization of sexual repression", and their observance of "threat[s] to a woman's right to health." More specifically, many respondents reported (1) having never received formal sex education; (2) believing sex to be shameful; (3) believing menstruation to indicate sexual impurity; and (4) having false knowledge on the causes of pregnancy. Some other responses reflect misogynistic and discriminatory attitudes prevalent within North Korean society, including (1) lack of bodily autonomy; and (2) the perception that rape and premarital/extramarital pregnancies are attributed to women's fault and mistake. The dearth of novel health technology, knowledge, and services also directly lead to certain violations of women's right to health in the form of (1) illegal and unsafe abortions; (2) dangerous contraceptive methods; and (3) postpartum infection.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Phys.org, <u>60% of North Koreans live in absolute poverty - higher than ever thought</u>, 18 Mar 2020.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Supra note 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Supra note 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Jung Jin Han, PhD. & Seung Jin Oh, PhD., <u>North Korean women's reproductive health experience</u>, *Public Health Nursing*, 2021.

Certain women are particularly susceptible to inaccessible maternal health services. As women are becoming increasingly engaged in illegal marketplaces, they are not guaranteed paid maternity leave, which renders them unable to reserve time and acquire funds to pay for essential prenatal and postpartum doctors' appointments. Even though formal industries are obligated to provide maternity leave for pregnant workers, many defectors have reported that these laws are - unsurprisingly - violated and ignored regularly. One pregnant woman in South Hamgyong who worked as a lathe operator at a machine factory continued to work through her pregnancy and, at nine months gestation with a full-term baby, collapsed at work and suffered a stillbirth in hospital. Another woman, in North Hamgyong, began feeling ill at five weeks gestation but continued to work due to the one-month maternity leave which was only guaranteed the final month of the last trimester; she, too, suffered a medical emergency at work and later miscarried.<sup>35</sup>

In a rare positive development, the World Health Organization released a report covering the trends of maternal mortality across the globe between 2000 and 2020 which estimated that the maternal and pregnancy-associated mortality rate among North Korean women declined from 186 deaths per 100,000 births in 2000 to 107 deaths per 100,000 births in 2020 (a 43% decrease). It is believed that this progress has been realized with the assistance of global aid organizations providing nutritional resources and vaccinations to the DPRK within the past two decades.<sup>36</sup>

## VI. Human Rights Violations upon Repatriated Women

Crossing the national border of the DPRK without prior approval remains one of the most egregious crimes both in the eyes of the government and according to law. In fact, Article 233 of the 2009 Criminal Law of the DPRK dictates that illegal crossing of the nation's borders calls for, at minimum, less than two years of labor or, at maximum, no more than five years of "reform through labour" if the defector committed a "grave offence".<sup>37</sup> However, it should be noted that, more often than not, defection is considered to be a treasonous act; therefore, according to Article 67 of the very same Criminal Law, any individual who commits a "grave offence" with the perceived intention of betraying the nation can be punished with life imprisonment and confiscation of property at minimum and the death penalty at maximum. Indeed, in contrast with historic precedent in which repatriated defectors were typically detained in North Korean correctional facilities for terms proportionate to their length of residence in third countries, recent testimonies have indicated that the corresponding punishment has expanded "so that repatriated defectors are sentenced to prison terms that are twice as long as the period of their stay" in third countries.<sup>38</sup>

A 2020 report<sup>39</sup> by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and defector testimonies gathered via survey in 2021, both reveal that sexual violence, including forced nudity, invasive body cavity searches, penetrative rape, sexual assault, and groping are a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Supra note 26.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Ifang Bremer, <u>Fewer North Korean women dying due to complications of pregnancy: UN report</u>, *NK News*, 24 Feb 2023.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, <u>The Criminal Law of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (2009)</u>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Supra note 11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, <u>Human rights violations against women detained in the</u> <u>Democratic People's Republic of Korea: 'I still feel the pain...'</u>, Jul 2020.

common reality for North Korean women who have been repatriated. Additionally, "North Korean investigative agencies not only conduct uterus examinations but also force female detainees to repeatedly sit and stand or forcibly feed them to defecate for examination" in order to inspect whether they have smuggled money from third countries.<sup>40</sup>

Even more horrific is how DPRK customs officials treat defector women who have become pregnant while outside of the nation. Though the Law on the Protection of the Rights of Women stipulates that pregnant women are suspended from criminal liability from three months prenatal to seven months postpartum, such protections are not extended to repatriated pregnant defector women who are perceived to be traitors to the DPRK, and many are subjected to forced abortions and post-birth infanticide. 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. While some pregnancy termination 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.

In many cases, defectors under the age of 14 years who have been repatriated are not sent to detention centers like their adult counterparts; rather, they receive shorter interrogations, are placed in separate cells, undergo "Social Education Disposition", and are later released.<sup>41</sup> Such was the case of two defector girls who, at the ages of 14 and 13 respectively, were trafficked into a third country, accosted by authorities, and repatriated to the DPRK to undergo "Social Education Disposition". Another girl defector who was repatriated at the age of 15 years in 2017, however, revealed that child defectors over the age of 14 years are not afforded the protections enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to which the DPRK acceded in 1990. Article 37 of this treaty stipulates, among other provisions, that "(a) no child shall be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment" and "(b) no child shall be deprived of his or her liberty unlawfully or arbitrarily".<sup>42</sup> Numerous female defectors who were interned as children following repatriation recollected being incarcerated alongside adult inmates, being prohibited from communicating with other detainees, and being subjected to harsh punishments and acts of torture, including: "reformation through labor"; fixed stress positions; "painful body cavity searches"; physical assault to extract coerced confessions; and more.43

An August 2022 published study of North Korean defectors revealed that "traumatic experiences of forced repatriation" are positively associated with more severe mental health problems among North Korean refugee women who had been repatriated than those who had not been repatriated. Out of the 627 respondents (consisting of 496 women and 131 men), approximately 21% had been repatriated to the DPRK at least once. Further, more women defectors (23.3% of women;

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Supra note 11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Supra note 26.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> UN General Assembly, <u>Convention on the Rights of the Child</u>, *United Nations, Treaty Series*, vol. 1577, p. 3, 20 Nov 1989.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Supra note 26.

n=245) than male had been repatriated. This, however, can likely be explained by the fact that North Korean women are much more likely than men to defect and are therefore at a significantly higher risk of repatriation (as evidenced by the gender demographics of this study). But because female defectors are subjected to gender-based violations in the escape process, along with the repatriation process and subsequent punishment in the DPRK, researchers were not shocked to find that defector women who had been forcibly repatriated at least once exhibited significantly higher levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and clinical anxiety than their counterparts who were not repatriated.<sup>44</sup>

## VII. Conclusion

The North Korean government 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.

Testimonies of defectors interviewed in 2022 have revealed that there appears to be a gradual shift unfolding in the perception of women's value among younger generations in the DPRK.<sup>45</sup> Husbands are increasingly undertaking domestic chores on the grounds of shared responsibilities and mutual respect. It is important to note that this transformation in belief and behavior is not uniform, as there remain many North Korean men of both older and younger ages who still perpetuate traditional roles and reject progress in the realm of gender equality. Additionally, this shift in mindset did not occur as a result of any noticeable state intervention or policy changes. There is a strong possibility that these changes can be traced back to external influences - notably, media from outside the country that manages to seep into the DPRK despite its illegality and the severe penalties attached to its consumption.

The liberty and empowerment of women must not be contingent upon their contributions to the family or to society, but rather endowed according to the principles of inherent human dignity.

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>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Eunyoung Kim, Minwoo Yun, & Cordula von Denkowski, <u>Violence Against North Korean Refugee Women:</u> <u>Doubly Victimized By Repatriation and Premigration Traumatic Experiences</u>, *Violence Against Women*, 2022.
<sup>45</sup> Summ note 11

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Supra note 11.