

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

The North Korea Freedom Coalition	)	
Working Group on North Korean Women	)	UN CSW 68 (2024)
% Jubilee Campaign <sup>1</sup>	)	
9689-C Main St.	)	Filed []
Fairfax, VA 22031	)	

---

THE SITUATION OF NORTH KOREAN WOMEN  
IN THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA

**I. Introduction**

This report serves to inform the United Nations Economic and Social Council Commission on the Status of Women of the current conditions faced by North Korean defector women in the Republic of Korea (ROK). Between the years of 2003 and 2023, the ROK accepted 30,849 North Korean defectors. According to the South Korean Ministry of Unification, 99 North Korean defectors entered the ROK in 2023 so far, a 421% increase from the total of 67 defectors in 2022. The year of 2023 so far has seen more defectors than the past two years during which the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic ushered in border closures; however, this year's total falls significantly short of the pre-COVID numbers, notably the 1,047 resettled defectors recorded in 2019 immediately preceding the outbreak of the pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

The majority of North Korean defectors are women, as “it is much easier for them to flee, because they are not usually enrolled in formal employment at a factory or a state firm where any absence would be immediately reported.”<sup>3</sup> In line with this trend, males account for roughly 24% of North Korean refugees whereas females represent 76% of the group.<sup>4</sup> Given that a large proportion of North Korean defectors in the ROK are women, issues pertaining to their safety and security, assimilation into society, mental and physical health, and more should be a major point of consideration by the South Korean government. Most concerns regarding the treatment of women defectors stem from negative social stigma and the special vulnerabilities they face when integrating into South Korean society. We call on the Commission on the Status of Women to recognize the fragile situation of North Korean refugee women in the ROK and encourage the South Korean government to comply with international and domestic law protecting the fair treatment and protection of these defector women.

**II. Legal Background: North Korean Defectors**

---

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

<sup>2</sup> South Korea's Ministry on Unification, [Number of North Korean Defectors Entering South Korea](#).

<sup>3</sup> Isabel G. Skomro, [North Korean Escapees Discuss Human Rights at HKS Event](#), 21 Apr 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Korea Hana Foundation, [2021 Settlement Survey of North Korean Refugees in South Korea](#), 2021.

The legal protections afforded to North Korean defectors are codified in the 1997 Protection of Defecting North Korean Residents and Support of Their Settlement Act, which requires the government of the ROK to (1) "provide protected persons with special care on the basis of humanitarianism"; (2) consider the age, gender, and health conditions of defectors when providing care and assistance; (3) guarantee legitimate defectors national identification documentation and citizenship; and (4) provide defectors with vocational training, reduced-cost accommodations, and equitable access to health care and education.<sup>5</sup>

Regrettably, however, over the past few years, we have witnessed the South Korean government become less tolerant of defectors' activism against the DPRK and, as such, make concessions to appease the North Korean government. In July 2020, following complaints from Kim Jong-un's regime, the ROK Unification Ministry revoked the operation licenses of two defector organizations for sending anti-Pyongyang leaflets into the DPRK and announced it would be investigating another 25 defector organizations to determine if they had the necessary documentation for continued operation. If their licenses were to be revoked, they would be unable to raise funding or receive tax exemptions, and therefore they would face difficulties continuing their work on helping North Koreans escape and providing shelter and guidance during their defection journeys.<sup>6</sup>

The North Korean Refugee Protection Center has been criticized for engaging in human rights violations during interrogations of defectors. In 2013, a North Korean defector was improperly charged with espionage as a result of a false testimony that his defector sister was coerced into providing by South Korean authorities.<sup>7</sup> In October 2022, a Seoul court ruled against a North Korean defector woman and her husband who had previously sued the National Intelligence Service for alleged illegal detention and torture, including being interrogated for 165 days and 176 days respectively. The couple also reported that they had been forced to run laps around a field and were subjected to isolation and abusive language.<sup>8</sup> Ethan Hee-Seok Shin of the Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG) has implored the National Intelligence Service to treat defectors foremost as legitimate migrants rather than as potential spies.<sup>9</sup>

### III. Negative Social Stigma

The distrust of North Korean defectors is also reflected in the broader South Korean society which has historically harbored prejudice and pity towards the defector community which is largely discernible by their North Korean dialect, clothing, and hairstyles; their distinct characteristics make defectors more susceptible to outward intolerance. Multiple factors contribute to negative stigma against defectors, such as: the strained relationship between the two

---

<sup>5</sup> [Republic of Korea] Republic of Korea: Protection of Defecting North Korean Residents and Support of Their Resettlement Act, 1997, 14 Jul 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission [Hearing], Civil and Political Rights in the Republic of Korea: Implications for Human Rights on the Peninsula, 15 Apr 2021. ; Hyonhee Shin, Defectors say S.Korea investigations threaten N.Korean 'Underground Railroad', *Reuters*, 11 Aug 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Ahn Sung-mi, A look inside the revamped North Korean defector debriefing center, *The Korea Herald*, 24 Jun 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Ifang Bremer, Seoul court rules against North Korean defectors who accused spy agency of abuse, *NK News*, 12 Oct 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Koreas, stereotypes about North Koreans being communist sympathizers, and irreconcilable differences in lifestyles and culture.<sup>10</sup> One interviewed female defector in her 20s told NK News in 2023 that while she is excited for her future in the ROK, “My concern is South Koreans may see North Koreans differently. I hope they do not see us as strangers”.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, numerous biased misconceptions South Koreans have about North Korean defectors include that they are “aggressive, impolite, dependent on state welfare, or even a burden on society.”<sup>12</sup>

The Korea Institute of Public Administration published its 2022 Korea Social Integration Survey to shed light on South Korean society’s perception of minorities. Disappointingly, the survey of 8,000 South Korean citizens illustrated that negative perceptions of North Korean defectors have more than doubled since 2016. Six years ago, 12.1% of respondents reported harboring unfavorable feelings about defectors, a proportion which has increased to 25.1% of respondents of the 2022 survey.<sup>13</sup> Also in 2022 the Seoul National University's Institute for Peace and Unification revealed statistics that only approximately 20 to 25% of South Korean citizens recorded feelings of “friendlessness” towards defectors. In fact, the lowest percentage ever of “closeness” towards North Koreans recorded by South Koreans was documented as recently as 2020 (21%), a shocking decline from six years earlier in 2015 when the highest percentage ever was recorded (45.9%).<sup>14</sup>

In a June 2020 survey of South Korean citizens, only half responded that they would be willing to hire a North Korean "settler". The survey conductors stated that unfair generalizations of North Koreans being inclined to participate in organized crime and theft – both of which occur at relatively high frequencies in the DPRK but do not indicate felonious intentions among all North Korean nationals – may contribute to the fact that only half of respondents would consider hiring a defector.<sup>15</sup> A separate study in 2021 revealed that another major perceived cause of discrimination against North Korean defectors in the ROK is “lack of professional knowledge and skills” which, generally, are a prerequisite for engaging in the highly modernized and competitive South Korean workforce.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, because the majority of defectors and, by extension, defector women, are less educated and do not have specialized employment experience from their time in the DPRK, South Korean businesses are much less likely to employ them in comparison with defectors who have achieved secondary/tertiary education and developed technical skills.<sup>17</sup> Even defector women who hold degrees from prestigious North Korean universities are discriminated against in the hiring process; one woman, Hyangmi, was

---

<sup>10</sup> Jeea Yang, Struggles of resettlement: North Koreans in South Korea, *Psychology International*, Sept 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Shreyas Reddy, Life at Hanawon: A center for North Korean refugees adapts to pandemic changes, *NK News*, 11 Jul 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Boyoung Nam, PhD., JoonBeom Kim, MSW., Wonjung Ryu, PhD., Dam I Kim, MCWS., Jodi J. Frey, PhD., & Jordan DeVlyder, PhD., Perceived social stigma, selfconcealment, and suicide risk among North Korean refugee women exposed to traumatic events, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Ifang Bremer, Hostility toward North Korean defectors on rise in South Korea: Survey, *NK News*, 13 Apr 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Seoul National University Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS), Inter-Korean Integration Index 2021, 27 Dec 2021. ; Seoul National University Institute for Peace and Unification Studies, Unification Consciousness Survey 2021, 4 Jul 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Madelynn Einhorn, Isabel Eliassen, Ben Hanson, Carolyn Brueggemann, & Timothy S. Rich, Opinion – Would You Hire A North Korean? South Korean Public Opinion is Mixed, *E-International Relations*, 9 Jun 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Korea Hana Foundation, 2021 Settlement Survey of North Korean Refugees in South Korea, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Christina Green & Steven Denney, Improving North Korean Defector Integration in South Korea: Survey Findings and Recommendations, *38North*, 6 May 2022.

only able to acquire a job after using her Mandarin language skills to fabricate an identity as a Chinese citizen.<sup>18</sup>

Many North Korean defector women in particular have expressed that, due to the double negative bias they receive as both defectors from a communist country and as victims of sexual violence, they are more likely to hide their identities as defectors and instead pretend to be native South Koreans in order to evade ostracism and discrimination in both society and employment. According to some studies, myriad South Koreans hold the false stereotype that North Korean defector women – countless of whom have suffered sexual violence before, during, and after migration – are sex workers or “sexually unfaithful.”<sup>19</sup> Research concluded that “repeated exposure to prejudice and discrimination from the mainstream society could result in internalization of those prejudicial beliefs, and such internalized stigmatization could contribute to lowering North Korean refugee women’s self-confidence and overall attitude towards life. Such perceived and internalized social stigma could worsen overall mental health and even serve as a major barrier to help-seeking behaviors.”<sup>20</sup>

#### **IV. Poverty and Obstacles to Assimilation**

Even though North Korean citizens defect in order to find a better life in a third country, a large portion experience major difficulties in socially adapting to and establishing sustainable lives in the ROK. In July 2019, 42-year-old defector Han Sung-ok and her 6-year-old son Kim Dong-jin were found deceased in their apartment having likely succumbed to starvation. Sung-ok had initially entered the ROK in 2009 alone and worked to earn money to fund her husband’s and son’s defections from the DPRK. After eight years of living in the ROK and having a second son, the family moved to a third country as Sung-ok’s husband suffered from the decline in the shipbuilding industry. In 2018, after divorcing her husband, Sung-ok returned to the ROK with her youngest son, Dong-jin, though she realized it would be difficult to work as she couldn’t find a childcare facility that would accept her epileptic son. Sung-ok could not afford a cellphone, was unable to make friends, and never entered the workforce. She lived in an extremely cheap apartment and relied on government-provided child support that had been reduced after Dong-jin turned six. Upon the discovery of Sung-ok’s and Dong-jin’s remains, forensic scientists noticed that the only food in the apartment was a small container of chili powder and determined they had likely died two months prior of starvation; around that time, Sung-ok had withdrawn all remaining money from her bank account. Despite living just yards from a district government office and being eligible for disability support due to her son’s medical condition, she never accessed these lines of help. “She either didn’t know how to navigate the South Korean system and find the help that was available, or just felt so hopeless about her situation that she gave up trying.”<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Jennifer Hough, The contradictory effects of South Korean resettlement policy on North Koreans in South Korea, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Boyoung Nam, PhD., JoonBeom Kim, MSW., Wonjung Ryu, PhD., Dam I Kim, MCWS., Jodi J. Frey, PhD., & Jordan DeVlyder, PhD., Perceived social stigma, selfconcealment, and suicide risk among North Korean refugee women exposed to traumatic events, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Choe Sang-Hun, She Fled Famine in North Korea, Then Died Poor in a Prosperous Land, *The New York Times*, 21 Sept 2019.

More recently, in late October 2022, authorities from the Seoul Housing and Communities Corporation followed up on a defector woman who had failed to pay rent for a few months. They found the 49-year-old woman deceased in her apartment, decomposed to nearly just her skeletal remains, and an autopsy revealed that she had died an entire year earlier, likely from starvation. The defector woman, who arrived in the ROK in 2002, worked for fifteen years as a counselor for other North Korean defectors and had actually been praised as a North Korean defector resettlement success story. Even though Seoul officials periodically check up on defectors, the woman requested authorities to cease their protection and assistance services for her in 2019.<sup>22</sup>

Defectors, many of whom did not benefit from higher education and instead worked primarily in manual labor industries, are unable to participate in the competitive and highly specialized employment sector in the ROK. A 2018 study found that only 43% of defectors who attended vocational training classes at the Settlement Support Center for North Korean Refugees ('Hanawon') had actually found such instruction and assistance to be helpful in securing a job, and a substantial 30.6% of those who completed this employment training program were still inactive in the labor market.<sup>23</sup> In July 2023, Hanawon's Vocational Training Center - which offers classes such as sewing, cooking, and cosmetology to female defectors - indicated its intention to increase the variety of career training classes; however, skills alone are often insufficient in finding jobs, as many positions require certifications and educational achievements. Numerous experts have reiterated that 12 weeks is insufficient time for defectors - who have spent their entire lives isolated in the technological obsolescence of the DPRK - to adjust to the extremely fast-paced South Korean society.<sup>24</sup> Korea Hana Foundation's 2021 Settlement Survey of North Korean Refugees in the ROK reveals that the employment rate of female defectors is 52.3% in comparison with the male defector employment rate of 70.7%. Furthermore, the average three-month wage of male defectors amounts to nearly ₩3.07 million Korean won ( $\approx$  \$2,150), whereas female defectors' average three-month wage is ₩1.96 million ( $\approx$  \$1,370).<sup>25</sup>

## V. Mental and Physical Health

Medical studies and surveys of defectors have consistently illustrated that "exposure to cruel and inhumane treatment by authorities" during defection is significantly associated with higher levels of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder PTSD, anxiety disorders (60.1%), attention disorders, insomnia (38%), somatic symptoms, and lower social functioning among defector populations.<sup>26</sup> In consideration of recent findings that 30% of Hanawon residents suffered from PTSD and that 20% need further assistance following discharge, the facility in summer 2023

---

<sup>22</sup> Julian Ryall, Defector's death puts focus on anti-North bias in S. Korea, *Deutsche Welle*, 1 Nov 2022. ; Jessie Yeung & Yoonjung Seo, North Korean defector's decomposing remains found by Seoul police, *CNN*, 26 Oct 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Yun Kyung Kim, Jin Young Jun, In Han Song, & Philip Young P. Hong, Factors Associated with Employment Hope among North Korean Defectors in South Korea, *International Migration*, 10 Oct 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Supra note 12.

<sup>25</sup> Korea Hana Foundation, 2021 Settlement Survey of North Korean Refugees in South Korea, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Jin-Won Noh & So Hee Lee, Trauma History and Mental Health of North Korean Defectors, *Current Behavioral Neuroscience Reports*, 6 Oct 2020.

divulged its plans to expand mental health support to defectors beyond the rudimentary health checkups upon arrival and counseling services provided exclusively to adolescents.<sup>27</sup>

The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family of the Republic of Korea has reported that approximately 65.2% of female refugees suffered chronic diseases, 50% were at risk of developing depression, and over 25% suffered with PTSD.<sup>28</sup> An October 2020 survey of 140 North Korean defector women in the ROK found that 60% had either contemplated or attempted suicide within the past 12 months. Interestingly, depression, harmful alcohol use, and trauma exposure did not play as large of an expected role in suicidal ideation and attempts among North Korean defector women. Rather, “negative life events” – such as unemployment, interpersonal disputes, somatic illnesses, and acculturation difficulties – were more strongly associated with suicidal ideation and attempt.<sup>29</sup> Two defector women - who chose to remain anonymous for security purposes - in early 2023 expressed the mental suffering they face daily in the ROK. One woman lamented that “I am so lonely. I want to go back and die there - South Korea is as suffocating as the North”.<sup>30</sup>

With regards to the physical health of North Korean defectors, women are much more likely than their male counterparts to exhibit high rates of sexually transmitted infections (i.e., syphilis, HIV), unsurprisingly as a result of the sexual trauma to which many are subjected. Research finds that “difficulties in healthcare access are common problems for defectors or immigrants” – largely due to negative stigma in the host society towards voluntary and involuntary migrants – and “these difficulties are intensified in the sexual and reproductive health domains for female defectors”, many of whom are unaware of the necessity of obstetric and gynecological medical care, especially if they have been subjected to sexual violence.<sup>31</sup>

Fortunately, per the National Health Insurance System (NIHS), North Korean defectors are guaranteed medical aid and healthcare as beneficiaries (type 1) upon their entry into Hanawon. As type 1 beneficiaries, their medical and health expenses are paid for by “public funds” and taxes.<sup>32</sup> Research of the NIHS database found that 22,753 North Korean defectors (67% of approximately 34,000 total defectors)<sup>33</sup> received medical care in 2018, 78% of which were women and 70% of which were between the ages of 20 and 40. Unfortunately, however, there are multiple obstacles to accessing health care, one of the most salient of which is an overarching language barrier. A 2020 survey of North Korean defectors – of which 90.4% were women – revealed that there remains some residual linguistic medical illiteracy, with 94.1% of respondents not knowing the term “pap smear”, 85.3% not knowing “nausea”, 74.3% not knowing “dietary”, and 72.1% not knowing “herpes”. With regards to functional health literacy, 61.8% of surveyed

---

<sup>27</sup> Supra note 11.

<sup>28</sup> Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, [A/HRC/43/58](#), 25 Feb 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Matthew Loh, [A North Korean defector says she and others like her are struggling to survive in the South: ‘I want to go back and die there - South Korea is as suffocating as the North’](#), *Insider*, 28 Mar 2023.

<sup>31</sup> Ji-yeon Lee, Sang-Soo Shin, & So Hee Lee, [Quality of Life for North Korean Female Refugees: The Influence of Physical Health, PTSD, and Social Support](#), *Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology*, 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Keun A Kim, Yoon-Sun Jung, Chae-Bong Kim, KiBeom Kim, & Seok-Jun Yoon, [Trend of Disease Burden of North Korean Defectors in South Korea Using Disability-Adjusted Life Years from 2010 to 2018](#), *Journal of Korean Medical Science*, 16 August 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Ministry of Unification, [Policy on North Korean Defectors](#).

defectors were found to have a “high” functional understanding of health, though responses to factual questions about hypertension, lifestyle diseases (i.e., noncommunicable diseases including heart disease, pulmonary disease, diabetes, osteoporosis, etc.), and medications had relatively low accuracy rates.<sup>34</sup>

## VI. Sexual Violence

There have been a few noteworthy cases in which North Korean women and girls have been subjected to sexual violence by South Korean authorities during the transition process to life in a new country and society. In September 2020, two officers of the South Korean Armed Force Intelligence Command were convicted on sexual assault charges for repeatedly raping and sexually abusing a North Korean defector woman named Lee for over a year and a half. Lee was forced to undergo two abortions to terminate pregnancies caused by her abuse, and she described being suicidal. Months earlier, in July 2020, the ROK National Police Agency announced it would be investigating a case involving a local police officer who was accused of raping a defector woman at least 12 times over the course of 2 years.<sup>35</sup>

Ordinary South Korean male citizens also play a horrific role in the online sexual exploitation of North Korean women and girls. Approximately 60% of female North Korean refugees in a third country were trafficked into the sex trade, 50% of whom were then forced into prostitution, 30% sold into fraudulent marriages, and 15% pushed into cybersex activities against their wills.<sup>36</sup> Numerous North Korean women and girls who have survived the abuses of the cybersex industry - in which they are forced to perform sexual acts on camera to a paying audience - have determined that the dialect of the majority of their viewers indicated that they were male South Koreans, and that South Korean websites hosted these illegal “services”.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, other defector women disclose that, while working in the forced prostitution industry in other countries, a large portion of the clientele were wealthy South Korean businessmen and elites; one defector woman recalled that “prostitution was my first experience of meeting a South Korean person”.<sup>38</sup>

The Hankyoreh in April 2023 was granted exclusive access to a research report commissioned by The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family which had surveyed 109 North Korean defector women about their experiences of sexual violence in the ROK. 22.9% of respondents answered that they had been subjected to sexual violence/harassment; however, only 16% of such victims had reported incidents to the authorities or reached out to women’s organizations. Many stated that “they did not know how to respond [to violence] or endured fear of retaliation or rumors”. Article 20 of the Act on Protection and Settlement Support for North Korean Refugees permits

---

<sup>34</sup> Jeong Hee Jeon & Sook Lee, PhD, Health Literacy, Drug Knowledge, and Drug Misuse Behaviors Among North Korean Refugees, *Journal of Forensic Nursing*, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Shim, South Korea to investigate case of defector raped by police, *United Press International*, 29 Jul 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Yoon Hee-soon, Sex Slaves: The Prostitution, Cybersex & Forced Marriage of North Korean Women & Girls in China, *Korea Future Initiative*, 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Choe Sang-Hun, After Fleeing North Korea, Women Get Trapped as Cybersex Slaves in China, *The New York Times*, 13 Sept 2019. ; Subin Kim, Operators of webcam site exploiting defector women indicted, *NK News*, 24 Feb 2015.

<sup>38</sup> Supra note 36.

relocation of defectors outside of their designated residences if “the residence of a person subject to protection has been exposed and there is a clear risk of serious harm to life or body”. However, “it is difficult for victims to consider moving because it is necessary to determine whether it [the act of violence] is ‘significant harm to life and body’, and ‘support necessary for relocation’ does not mean that they [the government] will directly support other rental housing.”<sup>39</sup> Regrettably, in January 2023, the Ministry of Justice Advisory Body formally suspended the activities of the Special Subcommittee for Revision of the Punishment of Gender Violence Act only one year after the entity - which was tasked with improving and expanding pre-existing legislation on gender violence - had been established.<sup>40</sup> Fortunately, however, the Stalking Victims Protection Act was passed in June 2023 after some hurdles in late 2022.<sup>41</sup>

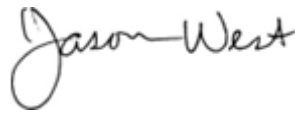
## VII. Conclusion

For the majority of defectors, the ROK is their final destination; however, even there, many women have been left in a state of insecurity and isolation. We urge the Republic of Korea to take measures to empower and protect North Korean defector women, and we renew our call on the Commission on the Status of Women to incorporate consideration for these marginalized women into its program of work.

Respectfully Submitted:



Annigje Buwalda, Esq.  
President, Jubilee Campaign



Jason West, Esq.  
Vice Chairman, North Korea Freedom Coalition

---

<sup>39</sup> Lee Ju-bin, [Exclusive] A North Korean defector who was ‘stalked’ endured fear of retaliation because it was difficult to move, *The Hankyoreh*, 20 Apr 2023.

<sup>40</sup> Oh Se-jin, [Exclusive] Without discussion of stalking, Ministry of Justice Gender Violence Special Committee ‘End of Activity’, *The Hankyoreh*, 7 Feb 2023.

<sup>41</sup> The Korea Times, ‘Long overdue’: South Korea revises law to make it easier to punish stalkers, 22 Jun 2023. ; Oh Se-jin, [Exclusive] Stalking investigation training released by police, Ministry of Justice ‘private’, *The Hankyoreh*, 1 Feb 2023.