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### **Commission on the Status of Women**

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

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

## **Statement**

### INTRODUCTION

Jubilee Campaign promotes the human rights and liberty of ethnic and religious minorities, advocates for the release of prisoners of conscience, and promotes the safety of women and children from sexual exploitation.

This report seeks to inform the United Nations Economic and Social Council Commission on the Status of Women regarding 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

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea lacks both a substantial legal and institutional framework outlining the rights of women, provisions for gender equality, or encouragement of participation in society. The 1948 Socialist Constitution vaguely and negligibly grants women the same social, economic, and educational rights as men (Left Review Online, Gender Equality in the DPRK Seen by Law, 2021), and the Socialist Women's Union of Korea, which is tasked with addressing concerns of the nation's female citizens, is in reality regarded as a method of subjugation and exploitation (Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, NKHR Briefing Report No. 8, 2018). North Korean defector women have recalled that throughout the coronavirus pandemic, the union has conscripted women to participate in strenuous construction projects and relinquish money, foodstuffs, and material goods for redistribution.

Despite their husbands' employment in government-approved workplaces, women must provide for their families; this is because male labor has become irregular and unprofitable. Working in illegal markets, women earn money at the expense of their safety - defectors have reported being coerced into providing sexual favors to escape punishment (Human Rights Watch, 'You Cry at Night but Don't Know Why', 2018) - and the profits they do collect are reserved for sustaining their families' livelihood and financing their male relatives' advancement in the Workers' Party of Korea, the only channel through which a family can truly flourish economically and socially (Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, NKHR Briefing Report No. 8, 2018).

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 – 897 were South Korean husbands and 101 were also North Korean refugees themselves – revealed that 56.1% of North Korean male respondents reported having perpetrated some form of physical violence against their partner within the past year (Boyoung Nam, MSW, Jae Yop Kim, PhD, & Wonjung Ryu, BA, Intimate Partner Violence Against Women Among North Korean Refugees: A Comparison With South Koreans, 2020).

Studies have revealed multiple factors that contribute to North Korean women's defection. Many cite the inability to lift oneself and one's family out of poverty and starvation. Others reflect on their encounters with illegally imported global media depicting relatively lavish lives outside of their home country (Korea Hana Foundation, 2021 Settlement Survey of North Korean Refugees in South Korea, 2022).

## THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

Many female defectors spend their first months or years outside of their home country in the People's Republic of China in a regrettably similar state of insecurity. A common practice involves the manipulation of North Korean women by brokers who make false promises of employment in the new country but who in reality sell these defector women into forced marriages with Chinese men or into the prostitution and cybersex industries (United States Department of State, Trafficking in Persons Report, 2022 ; Yoon Hee-soon, Sex Slaves: The Prostitution, Cybersex & Forced Marriage of North Korean Women & Girls in China, 2019). The latter is a lucrative and relatively new industry by which North Korean defector women and girls are coerced into performing degrading sexual acts - or being subjected to sexual and physical violence - on cameras for the real-time consumption of paying audiences.

North Korean women victims of such inhumane practices are largely unable to escape the cycle of exploitation for a multitude of reasons. Having entered the country with no financial resources, they become dependent on the procurers who exploit them but who also provide them their only source of income and residence. Additionally, the Chinese government's refusal to classify North Korean defectors as legitimate refugees and its unfair labelling of this vulnerable community as economic migrants puts these individuals at risk of being swiftly repatriated to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. In violation of the international obligation of non-refoulement which prohibits nations from returning any individual to a country where one may experience torture and inhumane treatment, the Chinese government in 1986 assented to a bilateral agreement with its North Korean counterpart guaranteeing the return of the latter's nationals who

have escaped. (Jason Bartlett, China's New Land Borders Law Is a Nightmare for North Korean Refugees, 2021). Despite global cognizance that repatriated defector women are subjected to life imprisonment, sexual violence, forced labor, forced abortions and miscarriages by North Korean authorities as punishment for leaving the country, the Chinese government has recently been constructing new detention facilities on the border separating the two nations, signalling the resumption of deportations as pandemic-mitigation border closure measures are discontinued (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Human rights violations against women detained in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, 2020; Ifang Bremer, China expanding prisons where North Korean escapees are held: Investigation, 2023).

#### THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA

The South Korean government guarantees defectors assistance pursuant to the 1997 Protection of Defecting North Korean Residents and Support of Their Settlement Act. Unfortunately, defector women have testified to being subjected to sexual violence and other human rights violations by South Korean authorities who are legally obliged to guide them in their transition to life in the Republic of Korea. In September 2020, two officers of the South Korean Armed Force Intelligence Command were convicted on sexual assault charges for repeatedly raping a North Korean defector woman for over a year and a half and forcing her to undergo two abortions (Reuters, S.Korea charges intelligence officers with raping N.Korean defector, 2020).

Meanwhile, there exists a negative stigma among South Korean society towards defectors who are often mischaracterized as communist sympathizers, uneducated, and welfare dependents (Jeea Yang, Struggles of resettlement: North Koreans in South Korea, 2018). Some South Koreans

hold the false stereotype that North Korean defector women – many of whom have suffered sexual violence before, during, and after migration – are sex workers or sexually immoral. Ironically, however, numerous defector women who have escaped the cybersex industry in the People’s Republic of China have attested that many of their ‘customers’ were South Korean males, identifiable by their dialect (Yoon Hee-soon, 2019).

Even though North Korean women defect in search of a better life elsewhere, many experience difficulties in adapting to an unfamiliar society. Few report that the vocational training classes they attended during their stay at the Settlement Support Center for North Korean Refugees (‘Hanawon’) immediately upon their entry into the country were beneficial in finding sustainable employment, as skills alone are insufficient when applying to jobs that are increasingly requiring certifications and education achievements (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, 2020). In July 2019, one defector woman and her 6-year-old son were found deceased in their apartment, with autopsies concluding that the two had likely succumbed to starvation two months earlier (Choe Sang-Hun, She Fled Famine in North Korea, Then Died Poor in a Prosperous Land, 2019). In October 2022, the skeletal remains of one prominent defector woman whose resettlement in the Republic of Korea had been celebrated as a success story were found by Seoul housing authorities, probably experiencing a similar death to previous defector and her son (Julian Ryall, Defector’s death puts focus on anti-North bias in S. Korea, 2022).

## CONCLUSION

North Korean women are 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. We urge these three nations to take measures to protect and empower 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.