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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by Jubilee Campaign, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[29 January 2024]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.

The Situation of Gender and Faith Minorities in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

Item 4: Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

Jubilee Campaign would like to raise to the Special Rapporteur and Council's attention the continued discrimination and subjugation of gender and religious minorities in North Korea.

Gender Inequality

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 state-mandated workforce became increasingly irregular and unprofitable, women began working in illicit marketplaces which is relatively lucrative but disqualifies them from receiving labor protection. These women are subjected to verbal, physical, and sexual harassment and violence by Party officials; however, they have no choice but to continue to work in order to support their family. Even if women want to report such incidents, there are no legal remedies 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.¹

Meanwhile, the Socialist Women's Union of Korea actively exerts control over women's economic activities in order to prevent their accumulation of 'surplus' wealth and material ownership in a socialist society. 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."² Defectors have reported that the Women's Union is actually a tool "for political indoctrination" and "social control and material coercion"³ through which the government forces women to engage in unpaid labor and relinquish foodstuffs and large sums of money for redistribution. During the COVID-19 pandemic, to counteract the national famine and shortage of materials - exacerbated by the government's refusal of external assistance and food aid⁴ - the Women's Union forcibly mobilized elderly and married women to participate in agricultural labor and construction of a border wall to prevent defections and transnational smuggling.⁵

Women also face subjugation in the home. A 2020 study of the husbands of North Korean defector women revealed that 56.1% of North Korean male respondents reported inflicting some form of physical violence against their partner within the past year. Furthermore, 21.4% of these men reported inflicting severe violence – including choking, beating, and/or use of a weapon – upon their partners.⁶ While rates of domestic violence are statistically significant, negligible efforts are made to investigate cases and apprehend perpetrators. Defector women who shared testimonies in 2022 exposed North Korean authorities' negligible efforts to eradicate intimate partner violence, noting that punishment for abusers is only sanctioned when aggravated assault with a weapon results in physical disability;

¹ Human Rights Watch, *"You Cry at Night but Don't Know Why": Sexual Violence against Women in North Korea*, 2018.

² Christian Davies, "North Korean women pay a heavy price as Kim turns on 'black market breadwinners'", *Financial Times*, 12 January 2022. ; Daye Gang, Joanna Hosaniak, Sohee Kim, Ji-yoon Lee, Eui Hwan Cho, & Sook Yi Oh, *"They only claim that things have changed...": 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.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ The Guardian & Reuters, "'Poisoned candy': North Korean state media shuns food aid despite hunger crisis", 21 February 2023.

⁵ Kang Mi Jin, "N.Korea's women are called on to support farming activities", *Daily NK*, 11 June 2020. ; Lee Chae Eun, "Elderly members of Socialist Women's Union mobilized to take part in farm work", *Daily NK*, 29 June 2021. ; Jieun Kim, "North Korea Mobilizes Women for Border Wall Construction Near China", *Radio Free Asia*, 12 July 2021.

⁶ 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.

even in such severe cases, perpetrators are typically detained for no longer than two months on average.⁷

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. A 2020 report 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, and groping are common for North Korean women who have been repatriated.⁸ Repatriated defector women who have become pregnant while abroad have been subjected to forced abortions and post-birth infanticide, and some have 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 pregnant women, or forcing them into strenuous labor to induce a miscarriage.

Religious Persecution

Article 68 of the Socialist Constitution guarantees citizens the right to “freedom of religious belief”, with the caveat that religion is not used as a tool for the alleged infiltration of foreign or western elements into North Korean society. However, this article is de facto illegitimate as an earlier article establishes Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism (the words and instructions of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il) as the guiding principle of the nation.⁹ While Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism is defined by the DPRK as a political ideology, “the closest institutional analogues” to North Korea’s reverence of the two Kim leaders “in Western discourse are found in examples of organized religion”.

In 2024, Christian woman Ji Ho (pseudonym) recalled to Open Doors the incident in which she witnessed her father being arrested by North Korean security forces after they had searched the home and discovered a Bible wrapped in plastic buried in the residence’s garden. Ji Ho shared that, despite her father’s arrest, she was considered lucky, as typically the entire family of an offender would be interned in political camps or killed for their relation to the ‘criminal’. Ji Ho continues to listen to religious services on her father’s radio which remained confiscated, and she has witnessed the secret church grow in North Korea.¹⁰ In January 2023, Voice of the Martyrs Korea reported that their five daily Christian radio broadcasts - featuring bible recitations and sermons - were the primary target for North Korean frequency blocking efforts, indicating that both Christian fellowship and faith-based persecution are expanding.¹¹

Currently an entire 27-member family of Christian converts remain imprisoned in North Korea. Originally provided smuggled bibles in the early 2000s by a man named Minjae who accepted Christianity while on a prolonged business trip in China and was recruited to receive a package of bibles following his return to North Korea, the family members all came to the Christian faith and initiated regular nightly worship and scripture meetings. After a neighbor reported their religious activities to the police, the entire family was arrested and sent to a prison camp. Minjae, the bible distributor, was later arrested while attempting to defect to China, and he met the imprisoned family to whom he provided the scriptures years prior. He spent seven months in detention and, though he felt guilty for unintentionally endangering the family by introducing them to faith in an illiberal society, he was encouraged to hear the imprisoned Christian family optimistically praying in their cells.¹²

Conclusion & Recommendation(s)

⁷ Korea Institute for National Unification [South Korea], *White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea 2022*, April 2023.

⁸ 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.

⁹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) & Korea Future Initiative, *Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism and the Right to Freedom of Religion, Thought, and Conscience in North Korea*, July 2022.

¹⁰ Open Doors, “In North Korea, Ji Ho counts the cost of following Jesus every day”, 15 January 2024.

¹¹ Voice of the Martyrs Korea (VOMK), “NK Expands Efforts to Jam Gospel Broadcast”, 31 January 2023.

¹² Voice of the Martyrs, “North Korean Smuggles Bibles, Family of 27 Come to Christ”, 18 October 2023.

Jubilee Campaign makes the following recommendations to the Human Rights Council member and observer states:

1. Call for the reinstatement of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, which has been inactive for a decade since the release of its findings report in March 2014, and call for the resumption of investigative activities and defector engagement;
2. Pressure the North Korean government to cooperate with the mandate of the Special Rapporteur and welcome her to visit the country and undertake monitoring of the nation's compliance or non-compliance with international human rights obligations;
3. Provide support to any North Korean defectors (i.e., occupational training; mental counseling; health care; housing assistance; cultural classes; community building efforts) resettling in Human Rights Council member states; and abide by the principle of non-refoulement.
