

The Neglected North Korean Crisis: Women's Rights

Sea Young Kim and Leif-Eric Easley

Human rights are often relegated to the sidelines when international observers focus on the nuclear and missile threats from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) or when governments seek to diplomatically engage the Kim Jong-un regime. Especially overlooked are the rights of North Korean women. Although the DPRK references gender equality in its socialist constitution and other government documents, the regime has a long record of disrespecting the international human rights conventions to which it has acceded. The de facto social and legal circumstances that women face in North Korea are far below the de jure status they are purported to enjoy. In particular, North Korean women endure extremely low public health standards and pervasive harassment. Yet, even while the plight of North Korean women is underappreciated, their growing market power and social influence are underestimated. Women account for the majority of North Korean border crossers, and their economic activities are helping create something of a middle class, at least in Pyongyang. This essay examines the dangers of exploitation that North Korean women face as they marketize the economy and liberalize society in one of the world's worst human rights-violating states.

THE CRISIS OF WOMEN'S STATUS IN NORTH KOREA

North Korea has promulgated various legal provisions in the name of gender equality. Even before the founding of the DPRK, the Provisional People's Committee for North Korea abolished the traditional hierarchical patrilineal registration system for households in 1945.¹ It also implemented the Law on Sex Equality in July 1946, Article 1 of which states that "women hold equal social

Ethics & International Affairs, 35, no. 1 (2021), pp. 19–29.

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doi:10.1017/S0892679421000010

status and rights with men in all areas of state, economic, cultural, social and political life.”² North Korea has encouraged women to participate in the economic sphere since its founding in 1948. Classical Marxist theories highlight the economic liberation of women as key to increasing the productivity of labor. Kim Il-sung mobilized women to expand North Korea’s nation-building capacity and economic development in the late 1950s. The labor participation rate of women continued to rise throughout the 1960s, especially as the Soviet Union drastically reduced its economic assistance.

The country’s 1972 constitution, the Childcare Education Law of 1976, and the Socialist Labor Law of 1978 guarantee legal protections for women in childbirth and child-rearing. However, despite these seemingly progressive policies, the nature of North Korea’s authoritarian and patriarchal society has meant that gender equality laws have lacked implementation at the grassroots level.³ Women are frequently reminded that their primary duties to society are as wives and mothers, as North Korea “places a critical importance on the hierarchical distribution of power between male and female” roles.⁴

By the 1990s, female labor participation neared 50 percent, compared to just 20 percent in 1956.⁵ However, because of the types of employment made available to women by the state and affiliated enterprises,⁶ and women’s disproportionate share of unpaid social and household labor,⁷ serious gender gaps in wages and promotions endured.⁸ Even more significantly, the national famine in the 1990s, known as the “Arduous March,” involved the failure of the public distribution system and forced more women out of their domestic roles to secure basic livelihoods for their families.⁹ As a result, the number of women participating in informal market activities increased dramatically.

North Korea has ratified many international treaties dedicated to human rights.¹⁰ But its implementation and responsiveness to international pressure have varied. Pyongyang ratified the UN’s Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2001. In accordance with CEDAW, North Korea has reported domestic developments regarding gender equality since 2002 and claimed that “all the policies, laws and sector-specific action programmes of the DPRK accord women equal rights with men on the principle of zero tolerance of discrimination against them in all their forms and any affront to their dignity.”¹¹ Yet the regime’s words do not reflect the reality in North Korea.

In February 2014, a UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) published a detailed account of human rights abuses in North Korea, including those related to freedom of thought, expression, and religion; freedom from discrimination; freedom of movement and residence; and the right to food. The COI found that these amounted to “crimes against humanity,” and elevated international attention on human rights in North Korea.¹² The UN was not able to formally refer the Kim regime to the International Criminal Court largely because of China’s noncooperation. The UN Universal Periodic Review reports have also raised issues related to human rights in North Korea, to which the regime has at least felt the need to respond and claim some domestic progress.¹³ However, North Korea has threatened to cut off diplomacy and return to military provocations if the UN Security Council takes action against it in the name of human rights.

VIOLATIONS OF NORTH KOREAN WOMEN’S RIGHTS: HEALTH AND HARASSMENT

Oppressive institutional practices and lack of sex education in North Korea have contributed to high incidents of assault and violence against women. According to defector interviews, North Korean schools rarely provide coverage of sex education.¹⁴ As a result, such topics are taboo and many women feel ashamed of seeking medical or legal support following sexual violence. Officials who utilize their power to exploit women rarely face legal repercussions. With widespread exposure to potential predators, who range from “high-ranking party officials, managers at state-owned enterprises, and gate-keeper officials at the markets and on roads and check-points,”¹⁵ the first sexual experience for approximately a third of North Korean girls is forced.¹⁶

Women in detention facilities, including *rodong danryeondae* (forced labor camps), *kwanliso* (political prison camps), and *kyohwaso* (ordinary prison camps), are particularly vulnerable to sexual violation and rape by prison guards and interrogators who influence the length and severity of their criminal sentence. Female detainees tend to be “dealt with almost exclusively by male officers,” who carry out invasive body searches and physical violence against them.¹⁷ A UN report based on interviews with over one hundred female defectors details harrowing detainee experiences, including hard labor, forced abortions, infanticide, and the contraction of infectious diseases.¹⁸

Many indicators of women's health in North Korea reflect the fact that the nation's economy remains one of the world's poorest. Millions of women and children suffer from malnutrition. Women experience limited access to even basic sanitary needs, with most creating makeshift menstrual pads from cloth or recycled paper. Women also find it difficult to locate public restroom facilities that offer basic supplies and a sense of privacy and safety. One poll of North Korean escapees suggests that almost 80 percent of North Korean women find the sanitary conditions highly inadequate.¹⁹

Since the decline in public health following the 1990s famine, North Korea has relied on international organizations such as UNICEF and the International Federation of the Red Cross for healthcare support. Shortage of medical supplies and services severely affects the health of North Korean women and children. In 2020, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimated that more than 8.7 million North Koreans lacked access to quality healthcare, and that over 90 percent of deaths of children under five years of age could be prevented with adequate nutrition, essential medicines, and clean water.²⁰ International NGOs attempt to fill some of the gaps, but their ability to do so is limited by funding support, sanction restrictions, and most of all, North Korean politics.²¹ Nearly one-third of North Korean female defectors in South Korea are diagnosed with anemia, and nearly one-third are HPV positive.²² The global COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges to women's health in many parts of the world, including resource shortages, delay and lack of medical procedures, and access to prenatal healthcare, all of which are likely even more problematic in the DPRK.

The level of political repression in North Korea impedes civil society organizing efforts separate from the state and has thus far blocked a #MeToo movement in the country. Many North Korean women are resigned to their victimized status and even resort to the sex industry out of economic desperation. Those who leave North Korea for economic reasons often fall victim to international sex trafficking. After paying brokers to cross the tightly controlled border with China, North Korean women are often sold into prostitution or cybersex rings with living conditions "worse than a prison."²³ Yet women largely withstand abuse and other human rights violations in order to retain contact with and help economically support their families in North Korea.

Approximately 70 percent of North Korean refugees in China are women,²⁴ where there is high demand for trafficked North Korean brides because males

outnumber females in the country by more than thirty million. In the process of fulfilling daily chores and farming labor in a foreign household, women become ever more subject to gender-based violence and discrimination. Child-rearing complicates the situation for North Korean brides since, in most cases, their children are not eligible to receive a *hukou*, the official Chinese registration for members of a household.²⁵ Hence, having children makes it more difficult for these women to break free of their circumstances; if they are able to escape, they are forced to make a choice between exposing their children to personal risk and drawing attention from Chinese authorities, or leaving their children behind.

NORTH KOREA'S INCREASED MARKET ACTIVITY: DRIVEN BY WOMEN

Despite tremendous disadvantages, North Korean women make invaluable contributions to the economy. Apart from the handful of *donju* (“masters of money,” or the new mercantile class), who are predominantly male individuals with connections to political elites, those who drive North Korea's grassroots commerce by engaging in lower-level transactions are predominantly women.²⁶ These “mothers of invention” find niche markets in their local economies and often face harrowing circumstances to provide for their families.²⁷ Informal black and grey markets were placed under stricter government surveillance as a result of state-led economic reforms in the early 2000s, but have become ever more important for economic activity.²⁸ These markets endured further stress in 2020 because of government restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, but their fate continues to be intertwined with the role of women.

More North Korean women participate in trade and market activities than men due to their relative freedom from state-centric duties and ability to sell consumer goods in informal markets known as *jangmadang*.²⁹ Haggard and Noland find that the rates for engaging in commercial transactions were 76 percent for women and 63 percent for men in 2008. The same study suggests that women are nearly 50 percent more likely to be retail sellers than men.³⁰ Women's market participation helps to sustain North Korean families, as informal commerce makes up more than 70 percent of total household income.³¹ While the North Korean economy and political regime have come to rely more on the markets, women have managed to pursue economic opportunities that are not available in the formal state-dominated system.

Instead of limiting themselves to local markets, more and more North Korean women are mobile and engage in cross-regional trade to increase their profits.³² Experts estimate that around one hundred thousand undocumented North Koreans reside in China and around fifty thousand cross the border into China annually.³³ China is also the main transition point for North Koreans in an “underground railway” to South Korea via Southeast Asia.³⁴ Compared to 1998, when just 12.2 percent of North Koreans arriving in South Korea were women, female defectors accounted for 80.7 percent of arrivals by 2019.³⁵ Most defectors who resettle in South Korea send remittances to their families in the North in amounts that go beyond providing subsistence, often significant enough to help them start businesses.³⁶ In the process, domestic and international female market activity has significantly contributed to the overall growth of North Korea’s economy.

Women venture across the border for economic opportunities due to the high demand for low-wage labor in China, and many do so without proper legal documentation. Some are granted legal approval by North Korean and Chinese authorities more easily than others because they have relatives in China. Certain permits allow North Koreans to reside in China for up to three months, and officials often demand bribes for extending the duration of stay.³⁷ Mobile North Korean women venture into China on their own accord to work in Chinese small- and medium-sized enterprises and send their earnings back to their families in North Korea. These women serve as guest laborers in restaurants and textile factories, including those in the ethnically Korean Yanbian Autonomous Prefecture.³⁸ Many Yanbian female residents migrate to South Korea for other service opportunities, leaving an employment gap for North Korean women to fill.³⁹

Other women cross the border to work in China as contracted laborers of the North Korean state. These include North Korean factory workers who have one-year contracts to work in cities such as Dandong and Yanji.⁴⁰ The legal status of such female workers varies and is subject to strong surveillance by the North Korean government. Furthermore, the employment conditions that the contract laborers face resemble those of forced labor, with long working hours, payment delays, and restrictions. According to NGO reports, 70–90 percent of the overseas wages of contract laborers is withheld by the North Korean government, which in turn generates an annual revenue of hundreds of millions of dollars for the regime,⁴¹ although the amount has likely declined because of UN sanctions.

Unfortunately, even legal female workers can easily become illegal migrants because many prefer to stay in China even after their permits have expired. This makes many North Korean women targets for repatriation by the Chinese government. China insists on applying its domestic law to the border crossers, and its legal provisions are below international standards. Beijing habitually violates its international treaty obligations by denying asylum seekers refugee status guaranteed under the United Nations 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (or the “Refugee Convention”) and the 1967 Protocol. China instead prioritizes the 1986 Mutual Cooperation Protocol for the Work of Maintaining National Security and Social Order in the Border Area (referred to as the “1986 North Korea-China Bilateral Repatriation Agreement”), set up by China and North Korea, which deems North Korean refugees “illegal economic migrants.”⁴² According to defector accounts, the North Korean government’s punishment of forcibly repatriated women “has become more severe” under the Kim Jong-un regime.⁴³

North Korea’s effective closure of the border with China in January 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic has placed draconian restrictions on the movement of female economic actors. These restrictions, coupled with heightened border control measures by the Chinese government, have caused supply chain disruptions, making it increasingly difficult for female entrepreneurs to maintain their businesses.

CONCLUSION: PROMOTING NORTH KOREAN WOMEN IN THE INTERNATIONAL LEGAL AGENDA

Women’s rights in North Korea are in crisis, yet Korean women represent one of the international community’s greatest opportunities for engaging with and transforming the country. Foreign policy hawks seek to pressure North Korea to denuclearize and to punish its human rights violations, but the Kim regime is not easily coerced, nor is it near collapse. Those in favor of diplomatic engagement argue that North Korea can be gradually and peacefully transformed if the isolated state opens up to international exchange and assistance. But when considering the potential integration of the two Koreas, not only political and economic but also social factors will be critical. As evidenced by North Korean defector accounts, improving economic development in the northern half of the peninsula will not be enough. The most egregious and immediate violations of women’s

rights must cease, public health needs to be improved, and women must be further empowered as market actors.

To counter physical and sexual abuse, better transparency is required so that misdeeds can be observed and costs imposed. Foreign assistance should be conditional on increased transparency of the conditions for North Korean women, including the delivery of food and medicine to mothers and children. Countries with embassies in Pyongyang can further develop outreach programs on labor-training standards to prevent harassment and improve accountability. Customs and border control officials from China and North Korea could be invited to UN-sponsored best practices seminars focused on improving anti-epidemic procedures that also stress increased vigilance against the trafficking of women.

Public health in North Korea is lacking at best, but the situation for women is especially dire. Denuclearization talks and economic engagement are important, but just as urgent is the need for the international community to send female doctors, psychologists, and advocates to support women in North Korea. Construction of women's hospitals and shelters, and the establishment of hotlines for counseling and emergency assistance, would be among the worthiest priorities of international efforts. With better health comes greater opportunities for empowerment.

As women are empowered, they will have more agency to affect outcomes and advance the economy. Labor standards could be improved if inter-Korean economic projects such as the Mount Kumgang tourist resort reopened with female employees receiving their guaranteed wages. International NGOs can promote capacity building by providing start-up funds and microloans for female entrepreneurs. In physical markets, including the *jangmadang*, where most merchants are female, standards can be improved to reduce arbitrary inspections and shutdowns that often involve the exploitation of women at the hands of men. Technologies and legal provisions for virtual markets would allow women to lead in online commerce and help accelerate transformation of the North Korean economy.

North Korean women are not just victims; they are entrepreneurs, market actors, and providers for their families. Without the economic activity of North Korean women, there would be far less price stability, economic growth, and product supply to meet consumer demand. And yet, the condition of women's rights in North Korea is as much a crisis as the Kim regime's nuclear and missile development. To address the North Korean challenge, it is insufficient to just treat the

symptom of the military threat to the region; it is vital to address the endemic abuse of human rights as well. Women are the most deserving recipients of international assistance and they are North Korea's most promising partners to the world.

NOTES

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- ³⁹ Kim, “Mobile North Korean Women and Their Places in the Sino-North Korea Borderland,” p. 123.
- ⁴⁰ Before the UN sanctions of 2017 and the pandemic in 2020, perhaps thirty thousand legal North Korean workers resided in Dandong and around fifteen hundred to three thousand in Yanji. See Kim, “Mobile North Korean Women and Their Places in the Sino-North Korea Borderland,” p. 121.
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Abstract: North Korea references gender equality in its socialist constitution, but the de facto social and legal circumstances that women face in the country are far below the de jure status they are purported to enjoy. North Korean women endure extremely low public health standards and pervasive harassment. Yet their growing market power and social influence are underestimated. Women account for the majority of North Korean border crossers, and their informal economic activities are supporting families while modernizing the economy. This essay examines the dangers of exploitation that North Korean women face and highlights the ethical and legal imperatives of supporting their roles in marketizing the economy and liberalizing the society in one of the worst human rights-violating states. Women are North Korea's most deserving recipients of international assistance and the country's most promising partners to the world.

Keywords: Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK, human rights law, gender equality, public health, cross-border migration, China, marketization, labor exploitation, international organizations