

PSCORE's responses on human rights of women and girls in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

**— For Consideration of the Special Rapporteur's
Report to the UNHRC**



December 2022

www.pscore.org

Human rights of women and girls in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

This document contains PSCORE's answers to the questionnaire as requested by The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. We have used data acquired through in-depth interviews conducted between May and September 2022, with North Korean defectors who have fled the DPRK between 2014 and 2019.

Interviewee Profile

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Def	Education Level	Region	Economic status	Social status (Songbun)	Occupation
Joo Hyo-sung	F	54	2018	Secondary	Musan, North Hamgyong	High	Best	Housewife
Shin Gil-soon	F	54	2018	Secondary	Hyesan, Ryanggang	Worst	Middle	Unemployed
Baek Hye-ok	F	46	2018	Secondary	Musan, North Hamgyong	High	Best	Business
Choi Jeong-hyuk	M	30	2017	Tertiary (University)	Unjong, Pyongyang	Middle	High	Student
Cho Young-chul	M	52	2018	Tertiary (University)	Sosong, Pyongyang	Middle	Middle	Employee
Kim Yoona	F	25	2019	Tertiary (vocational)	Musan, North Hamgyong	Middle	Worst	Nurse
Jang Dong-chul	M	36	2019	Tertiary (University)	Chongjin, North Hamgyong	Middle	Middle	Employee
Kim Hae-Sook	F	48	2018	Secondary	Mundok, South Pyongan	Middle	Middle	Housewife
Kim Bum-soo	M	26	2019	Secondary	Hyesan, Ryanggang	Middle	Worst	Worker
Kim Eun-deok	M	51	2019	Tertiary (University)	Hyesan, Ryanggang	High	Middle	Prosecutor/employed
Kim Gook-sung	M	63	2014	High	Pyongyang	High	High	Colonel
Cho Seon-ju	F	36	2019	Secondary	Hyesan City, Ryanggang	High	High	Business
Kim Cheol Jin	M	30	2017	Secondary	Anju City, South Pyongyang	Low	Middle	Soldier
Kang Jin	M	49	2016	Tertiary (University)	Hyesan, Ryanggang	Middle	Best	Employee



We are focussing on the following questions:

Questionnaire

1. What information do you have about actions that the Government of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea has taken to improve the human rights situation of women and girls and the existing policies to address their human rights?

Efforts of the DPRK government to enhance gender equality have not been far-reaching. While the DPRK’s ‘Voluntary National Review’ (VNR) on the SDGs notes some sound legislation on the issue, including the “Decree on Gender Equality”, the “DPRK Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Women”, and the “DPRK Law on Labor Protection”¹ – women’s rights are at best *de jure*, and not upheld *de facto*. In an interview conducted by PSCORE, a North Korean defector shared that “the state would say they guarantee rights, but after coming here to South Korea I feel that there are too many things to even talk about. Nothing has changed. The state has a ‘mother’s day’ for women where they play songs. July 30th is a ‘men-women equality’ day. But there is a lot of discrimination.”²

The DPRK government has made some lower-executive positions in the party available to women, which has arguably improved their social status to some extent. Defectors explained how there are more female executives, and, while originally office managers were exclusively men, nowadays almost all office managers are women.^{3,4} However, the roles that are open to women are understood to be relatively less influential and underpaid. One male defector described how “there are women in places such as Socialist Women’s Union, but they work under the men.” According to him, “women only work in accounting”.⁶ Moreover, the social discrimination that North Korean women face remains profound, as one female defector explained that “social discrimination against women remains the same. They just hire more women”.⁷

¹ Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda, June 2021, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/282482021_VNR_Report_DPRK.pdf

² Kim Hae-sook, Interview by Kim Tae-hoon, Nam Bada, PSCORE, 27th May 2022.

³ Joo Hyo-sung, Interview by Kim Tae-hoon, Nam Bada, Jo Sol, PSCORE, 7th May 2022.

⁴ Baek Hye-ok, Interview by Kim Tae-hoon, Nam Bada, Jo Sol, PSCORE, 11th May 2022

⁵ Cho Young-chul, Interview by Kim Tae-hoon, Nam Bada, PSCORE, 15th May 2022.

⁶ Kang Jin, Interview by Nam Bada, PSCORE, 27th September 2022.

⁷ Joo Hyo-sung, Interview by Kim Tae-hoon, Nam Bada, Jo Sol, PSCORE, 7th May 2022.



3. What information do you have about North Korean women and girls crossing the border? What are the difficulties they face, including violence, before, during and after crossing the border?

North Korean women and girls face an array of challenges in their attempts to exercise their right to freedom of movement, particularly when they cross the border into China to escape the DPRK. Perhaps most alarming is the 2020 Proclamation that stipulates that any person who makes unauthorized entry into the 1-2 km buffer zone along the country's Northern border "shall be shot unconditionally".⁸ As a result, escaping the DPRK is both dangerous and costly. It was already harder to defect before 2020 and later due to COVID. One female defector who defected in 2019 recounted the difficulty her "broker"⁹ had found a safe route across the Tumen River during the rainy season, which led to a 3-month delay in her escape: "I put my cell phone on vibrate and contacted the broker for 3 months. I was nervous every time the cell phone vibrated";¹⁰ she said in an interview with PSCORE. Moreover, she mentioned the incredible risk of escaping the DPRK: "I recognized that I may die during the defection, so I should be prepared. Those 3 months were the hardest during the process."¹¹

Furthermore, women who defect and are forcibly repatriated by China, face violence and other difficulties when they return to the DPRK. According to one female defector who was held imprisoned from 2014 to 2018, "I heard stories from women who were forced into a North Korean prison. In one case, they grabbed and shook her dyed hair, saying that her thoughts were wrong, or 'were the Chinese men good to you?'. I heard that sexual violence is prevalent in internal body searches."¹² Additionally, a defector who was forcibly repatriated in 2016 recounted her experience in prison when she returned to North Korea: "I took off everything and they made me sit down and stand up to find out if there's any money in the uterus. They made women sit in a row and pee to check everything that came out. They checked the inside of the head. They tried to find hidden money. Then the women who worked in the prison came in and checked the uterus."¹³

⁸ OL PRK 5/2021,

<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=26593>

⁹ Chae Yoon-seo, Interview by Nam Bada, PSCORE, 21st September 2022.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Joo Hyo-sung, Interview by Kim Tae-hoon, Nam Bada, Jo Sol, PSCORE, 7th May 2022.

¹³ Shin Gil-soon, Interview by Kim Tae-hoon, Nam Bada, Jo Sol, PSCORE, 11th May 2022.



4. What is the situation regarding sexual and reproductive health of women and girls in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea?

According to PSCORE’s testimonies, reproductive health is a topic on which misinformation appears to be extremely common in the DPRK. Contraception and reproductive health are topics that are not discussed in North Korean education, students only get to learn about elementary biological principles, for example that women are able to become pregnant once they start menstruating.^{14 15} A former DPRK nurse explained that she “did not learn about reproductive health until [she] entered nursing school”, and that in high school “there wasn’t a course where students were taught about birth control or sex education”.¹⁶ North Korean women are often ignorant about the proper use of contraceptives as a result, abortions due to failed contraception - generally taking place in private clinics that are ill-equipped to perform surgical pregnancy termination - are described to be common.¹⁷ Aside from ignorance around reproductive health, sexual assault and violence against women is extremely common in the DPRK¹⁸, and both social awareness and efforts from the government to tackle the issue are understood to be lacking.¹⁹

5. What is the situation of domestic violence in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea?

Amongst our testimonies on domestic violence are mixed responses from defectors. Some claim that domestic violence has decreased as women’s social standing has improved over the years,²⁰²¹ while others argue the prevalence of domestic violence remains.²²²³²⁴²⁵²⁶ It is important to note, however, that most of the testimonies that claimed the situation has improved for women came from male defectors, while almost all women testified that domestic violence is still common practice in many North Korean households.

¹⁴ Kim Yoona, Interview by Nam Bada, PSCORE, 21th September 2022.

¹⁵ Kim, S. Y., & Easley, L.-E. The Neglected North Korean Crisis: Women's Rights. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 35(1), 19–29. 2021. Cambridge University Press. p.14.

¹⁶ Kim Yoona, Interview by Nam Bada, PSCORE, 21th September 2022.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Kim, S., & Easley, L. (2021). The Neglected North Korean Crisis: Women's Rights. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 35(1), 21.

¹⁹ Jang Dong-chul, Interview by Nam Bada, PSCORE, 27th May 2022. Kang Jin, Interview by Nam Bada, PSCORE, 27th September 2022.

²⁰ Kim Yoona, Interview by Nam Bada, PSCORE, 21th September 2022.

²¹ Kim Bum-soo, Interview by Kim Tae-hoon, Lee Sang-yong, Nam Bada, PSCORE, 4th June 2022.

²² Joo Hyo-sung, Interview by Kim Tae-hoon, Nam Bada, Jo Sol, PSCORE, 7th May 2022.

²³ Shin Gil-soon, Interview by Kim Tae-hoon, Nam Bada, Jo Sol, PSCORE, 11th May 2022.

²⁴ Baek Hye-ok, Interview by Kim Tae-hoon, Nam Bada, Jo Sol, PSCORE, 11th May 2022

²⁵ Cho Young-chul, Interview by Kim Tae-hoon, Nam Bada, PSCORE, 15th May 2022.

²⁶ Cho Seon-ju, Interview by Nam Bada, PSCORE, 23th September 2022.

According to a 54-year old female defector, in the DPRK “people do not care about violence against women. They don’t care if a wife is beaten by her husband or even becomes disabled”.²⁷ Patriarchy is harsh in the DPRK however, a 25-year old interviewee claimed that domestic violence has decreased and is recently socially frowned upon as is hardly criticized by others.²⁸ Several defectors also mentioned that divorce due to domestic violence has become common in the new generation while for the previous generation it was still a struggle for women to take action.²⁹³⁰³¹³² The testimonies collected by PSCORE suggest that interviewees have little to no knowledge about the existence of any laws on domestic violence, and many argue that the government does little to nothing to tackle it through judiciary means.³³³⁴³⁵

6 What is the situation regarding women’s rights in *Jangmadang* (local informal markets)? Has women’s economic and social participation made an impact on women’s lives and opportunities?

Testimonies from numerous defectors, both male and female, suggest that women’s social standing has improved significantly along with their growing economic participation.³⁶³⁷³⁸³⁹ Since the famine of the 1990s, economic desperation has pushed women, who enjoy relative freedom from state-centric duties compared to men, to financially provide for their households through the informal economy. North Korean women generally do this by trading consumer goods at informal *Jangmadang* markets. Recently, women are not limiting their market participation to local levels, but increasingly expanding their trade across regions, greatly increasing their profits.⁴⁰ By doing this, womens’ trade participation is expected to make up over 70 percent of North Korean households’ income on average.⁴¹

Revisiting the topic of domestic violence, its prevalence is understood to have relatively decreased thanks to women’s growing financial power. Testimonies from defectors suggest that economic independence has

²⁷ Joo Hyo-sung, Interview by Kim Tae-hoon, Nam Bada, Jo Sol, PSCORE, 7th May 2022.

²⁸ Kim Yoona, Interview by Nam Bada, PSCORE, 21th September 2022.

²⁹ Cho Seon-ju, Interview by Nam Bada, PSCORE, 23th September 2022.

³⁰ Jang Dong-chul, Interview by Nam Bada, PSCORE, 27th May 2022.

³¹ Kim Eun-deok, Interview by Kim Tae-hoon, Nam Bada, PSCORE, 15th July 2022.

³² Cho Seon-ju, Interview by Nam Bada, PSCORE, 23th September 2022.

³³ Shin Gil-soon, Interview by Kim Tae-hoon, Nam Bada, Jo Sol, PSCORE, 11th May 2022.

³⁴ Baek Hye-ok, Interview by Kim Tae-hoon, Nam Bada, Jo Sol, PSCORE, 11th May 2022

³⁵ Cho Young-chul, Interview by Kim Tae-hoon, Nam Bada, PSCORE, 15th May 2022.

³⁶ Cho Young-chul, Interview by Kim Tae-hoon, Nam Bada, PSCORE, 15th May 2022.

³⁷ Kim Yoona, Interview by Nam Bada, PSCORE, 21th September 2022.

³⁸ Jang Dong-chul, Interview by Nam Bada, PSCORE, 27th May 2022.

³⁹ Cho Seon-ju, Interview by Nam Bada, PSCORE, 23th September 2022.

⁴⁰ Dalton et al., “Fashion and the Social Construction of Femininity in North Korea,” p. 517.

⁴¹ Byung-Yeon Kim, *Unveiling the North Korean Economy: Collapse and Transition*. Cambridge University Press: p. 92.



given women the agency to divorce and leave their husbands in the case of abuse. It is also understood that husbands tend to treat their wives more respectfully as a result of women's independence, or even financial dependence of husbands on their wives in some cases.⁴² As a defector suggested that those women who still suffer from domestic violence are generally those that are financially dependent on their husbands,⁴³ it appears that women's market participation and subsequent financial power plays an important role in minimizing domestic violence, and in extension, their social stance in general.

8. What positive changes do you think women and girls can make to society and human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea? What is the role of women in pursuing peace and security in the region? How do you think the international community should support women and girls in this regard?

While women face great discrimination and often live under dire conditions in the DPRK, they are not just victims. With their market participation, women not only sustain their family's but also contribute to North Korean price stability, economic growth, and a product supply that nears consumer demands. The engagement of North Korean women in trade also allows the creation of somewhat of an informal economic middle class, incrementally mitigating the great economic inequalities that surge through North Korean society. Lastly, seventy to eighty percent of North Korean defectors are women. These women generally resettle in South Korea and China, where they earn money and send remittances to their families in the DPRK in amounts that do not only provide subsistence, but are also often large enough to help them start businesses.⁴⁴ This way, women greatly contribute to the North Korean economy and living standards in extension.

Even more important than the economic aspects are North Korean women's contribution to social change in the DPRK. In the informal markets, women also engage in the trade of foreign media, such as South Korean dramas, music, movies, etc. By consuming these media, North Korean citizens are presented with a different reality of the outside world than what has been taught to them by the North Korean authorities, and increasingly familiarized with freedom and democracy.

⁴² Cho Young-chul, interview by Kim Tae-hoon, Nam Bada, PSCORE, 15th May 2022.

⁴³ Jang Dong-chul, Interview by Nam Bada, PSCORE, 27th May 2022.

⁴⁴ Sea Young Kim and Leif-Eric Easley, The Neglected North Korean Crisis: Women's Rights. Ethics & International Affairs, no. 1. (2021), pp 24.



To conclude, women's economic activities are leading the development and change of North Korean society. Their struggle for survival is contributing greatly to the development of not only their families but also North Korea as a whole.