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Written statement* submitted by People for Successful Corean Reunification, 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.

[6 February 2023]

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

DPRK must stop hiding behind its law and concretely address systematic violence against women

In theory, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has a strong legal framework protecting the rights of women and girls. It is a party to major international human rights conventions such as ICCPR, ICESCR or CEDAW (1), and has passed core laws such as the "Decree on Gender Equality", the "Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Women" and the "Law on Labour Protection", about different aspects of women's rights. However, even if women's rights are projected de jure, they are not de facto. A defector testifies that "The State says it guarantees 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' [...] and July 30th is a 'men-women equality day'. But there is a lot of discrimination" (2). Without the rule of law in the DPRK, changing the legislation is not enough to ensure North Korean women's and girls' rights. In this statement, People for Successful COrean REunification (PSCORE) exposes the abuses they keep suffering from in the DPRK, and makes recommendations to improve their lives.

Labor discrimination

One defector explains that "it is good to live in North Korea if you have money. [...] Because when you get into a problem, you can just solve it with money. North Korea is all about money" (3). But in the DPRK, women have less access to jobs and correct salaries, limiting even more their already amputated freedom. If the Workers' Party has made some lower-executive positions available to women, their roles remain less influential and underpaid. One defector describes how "there are women in places such as Socialist Women's Union, but they work under the men" (4). "Discrimination against women remains the same. They just hire more women" (5), concludes a female defector. To compensate, women work in *jangmadang* (informal markets) to support their families, to the extent that they are estimated to make up over 70% of North Korean households' income on average (6). They do this activity in parallel to their official working hours and housework, resulting in a triple workday. They may even have to resort to more and more illegal activities to support their families, which not only strengthens their exploitation, but also exposes them to harsh punishment if they are caught by the authorities.

Domestic violence

Domestic violence is a widespread, yet completely unaddressed issue 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", denounces a female defector (5). 70% of North Korean women are believed to be regularly victims of violence from their husbands in 2018 (7). But the problem is often treated as a "family" or "neighborhood" issued by the police or the Women's Union, as men are still considered to have authority over their wives. However, as women became breadwinners thanks to their participation in *jangmadang*, they gained more and more power in the family. According to defectors' testimonies, access to economic independence reduced women's exposure to domestic abuse (8), but they gained this new agency by themselves, while the North Korean state has never done anything to support them in this regard.

Sexual violence

Sexual abuse in the DPRK is very common and mostly unpunished, because of the social perception of sexual violence: not only rape is perceived as normal behavior for men, but the victims are also shamed. This starts at a very young age as defectors describe that at school, boys strongly sexualize girls and share with each other what they did or want to do to the girls they picked (3). Men don't view girls as "underaged", and don't feel guilty while making sexual comments about girls. Instead, victims of sexual abuse face stigmatization, and are shamed for what happened to them, sometimes as far as not being able to marry or being sent to psychiatric hospitals. However, this mindset is progressively changing thanks to the spread of K-dramas where sexual assault is depicted as harmful: the younger generation seems to

change their behaviors, especially in marriage. But men with authority still take advantage of their position of power to abuse women, and often ask for sexual intercourse as a bribe. This is especially the case of soldiers, who have the power to send women to prison if they refuse, but who are never punished for their assaults.

Detention

The DPRK's detention system violates women's rights on a systematic basis. A defector detained in 2002 and from 2006 to 2009 explains that "Every evening a new guard comes and the victim is called out and is sexually assaulted" (9). Another defector imprisoned in 2005 confirmed that the all-male prison guards demanded the women detainees "surrender their bodies" to them (1). Testimonies report that women are victims of rape, fondling of breasts, urinating in front of the guards and other degrading treatments. Pregnant women in detention are especially targeted by violence because they are considered "betrayers of the nation". "[They] do not get any special treatment. Rather, they are treated more harshly, being forced to miscarry. [...] Even after the miscarriage, they have to work immediately. Usually, fetuses up to five months old were miscarried through hard labor, but for those that survived until seven months or more, an injection was given in the stomach to kill the fetus", describes a female defector (9). Those harsh treatments often result in serious physical and mental health issues for former female detainees.

Sexual reproductive health

The sexual and reproductive health of North Korean women is not ensured in the DPRK because of the lack of awareness. No proper sex education is provided in school, except for succinct lessons about biological bases. A former North Korean nurse explains that she "didn't learn about reproductive health until [she] entered nursing school" (10). Contraceptives are too expensive for many women, who cannot afford birth control. Thus, they are subjected to many unwanted pregnancies, and are forced to undergo abortion, at home or in private ill-equipped clinics, as the practice is illegal. Multiple abortions in those conditions threaten their lives and damage their reproductive system, causing health issues or infertility. All the burden of birth control is put on women: "the boy doesn't take any responsibility", testifies a female defector (11). Because of information deficiency, many women use contraceptives or menstruation protections in the wrong way, such as keeping their IUD for too many years, or not letting their reusable pads dry correctly, which can cause intoxications or serious diseases. The situation is worsened by the lack of medical facilities for women, who then risk dying or becoming disabled because of the failure of the DPRK authorities to ensure their basic rights.

Conclusion

Even though equal in the law, women are still victims of sexual violence and discrimination based on their gender. The DPRK regime actively organizes and maintains a hierarchy between genders, by supporting a violent and discriminating system, and by silencing the victims. Female defectors testify of a multi-level violence at every stage of their lives, both in the private and public spheres, which places women in precarious positions. In this situation, the DPRK cannot confine itself to changing its legislation, and must stop oppressing North Korean women, and must take concrete measures to guarantee their human rights are effectively protected.

Our recommendations:

Dedicate a specific budget to fund the implementation and monitoring of the existing laws about gender equality and work in collaboration with UN bodies, especially CEDAW.

Provide detailed sex education to both men and women to tackle widespread misinformation about sexual health, and counteract stereotypes to address social discrimination.

Improve the accessibility and quality of standards of medical facilities for women's health.

Protect and support trade in jangmadang to give women access to resources and independent information from foreign media, so that they have more agency in their marriage.

Let international human rights organizations visit and monitor the living conditions of detainees in prison camps.

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- 1: PSCORE, “Patterns of abuse, killing, and sexual violence against North Korean women detained in the DPRK”, 2014.
 - 2: Kim Hae-sook, interview by Kim Tae-hoon and Nam Bada, PSCORE, May 27, 2022.
 - 3: Interview by Nam Bada and Roukhaya, PSCORE, March 29, 2018.
 - 4: Kang Jin, interview by Nam Bada, PSCORE, September 27, 2022.
 - 5: Joo Hyo-sung, interview by Kim Tae-hoon, Nam Bada, and Jo Sol, PSCORE, May 7, 2022.
 - 6: Byung-Yeon Kim, *Unveiling the North Korean Economy: Collapse and Transition*, Cambridge University Press, p.92.
 - 7: Engstran Erin, Flynn Caitlin, Harris Meg, “Gender and migration from North Korea”, *Journal of Public and International Affairs*, 2019.
 - 8: Jang Dong-chul, interview by Nam Bada, PSCORE, May 27, 2022.
 - 9: Ms. Son, interview by Nam Bada, PSCORE, June 24, 2014
 - 10: Kim Yoona, interview by Nam Bada, PSCORE, September 21, 2022.
 - 11: Lee Hee-Eun, interview by Nam Bada, PSCORE, February 22, 2019.