

VIOLATION OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN NORTH KOREA

EDUCATION SYSTEM | CHILD LABOR | CHILD ABUSE



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INTRODUCTION

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) is infamous for the absolute social control and indoctrination system that it exercises over its citizens. The indoctrination of children is a tool, used on at least two levels. First, it has helped the Kim family consolidate its power for three generations. Second, through indoctrination, the burden caused by the economic failures of the regime is transferred to the children who are forced to participate in labor activities.

As a result, the North Korean children are being abused by the social system in their own country. In reality, the government has utterly failed to provide even the most basic protection of the rights of the children, which is expected of any civilized society.

The DPRK is a military powerhouse with ballistic missile and nuclear capabilities. However, the fact that its children are growing up and are being educated in such an aggressive and abusive environment poses a serious challenge to the DPRK’s future. It also has implications for the peace in Northeast Asia and the efforts towards the protection of the children’s rights worldwide.

People for the Successful COrean REunification (PSCORE) is working to raise awareness in the international community on children’s rights in the DPRK. Our research focuses on topics such as the Education System (2016), Child Labor (2017) and Child Abuse (2018), among others.



EDUCATION SYSTEM

“The State shall embody the principles of socialist pedagogy so as to raise the rising generation to be steadfast revolutionaries who will fight for society and the people, to be people of the new Juche type who are knowledgeable, morally sound and physically healthy.”

Article 43, Chapter 3: Culture, North Korean Constitution

Education centers around the idolization of the dictator, falsification of history, and discriminatory and hateful propaganda.

SOCIOECONOMIC DISCRIMINATION

Severe social discrimination and bribes play a large role in admissions and academics, facilitating the formation of an elitist society.

“The students must give bribes to the teachers. We have to give around 10-20 dollars’ worth per week. We also have the ‘Children’s Initiative’, it is referred to as ‘Support Service’, ‘National Initiative’, ‘Advanced Support Service’ and so on. There was always some kind of announcement for a support service next week. They would demand meat, presents, clothes, gloves, socks, etc. to hand over the goods like this was like forfeiting a full meal for each person.”

- Kim Yeon-Ri

MILITARISTIC EDUCATION

From kindergarten on, children are taught to lay down their lives for their country. In high school, students must join the ‘Red Youth Guard’ and receive a full month’s worth of military training. There, children learn to fire AK-47 rifles and are forced into training that resembles sessions of boot camps in South Korea.

“We imitated real battles, we trained for a week and fired around three rounds. There was a training center in each region. They would commission a school to carry out the military training. The training involved target shooting, roll call, military-style reporting, military rules, individual battles, getting past barbed wire, passing obstacles with our rifles, and so on.”

- Kim Cheol-Soo





MONITORING AND ENFORCEMENT

From childhood, North Korean students grow up being told to always watch their words and never be caught off guard.

“There is always at least one spy within your class.”

“Be careful what you say at school and in public places.”

“The bird listens by day, the mouse listens by night.”

Such phrases are widespread in North Korea, and the concept of monitoring enforcement are ingrained in its culture.

IDOLIZATION PROPAGANDA

Idolization education is one of the most important elements of the North Korean ruling system. Other communist countries have enforced this kind of education, but none have demonstrated an idolization education system as entrenched in society as in North Korea.

“After listening to the idolization education every day, we started to think ‘The Supreme Leader is a great leader,’ he was ‘an infallible, supreme being.’”

- Hwang Soo-Min

“It’s been so long since I’ve studied it, but I could never forget it. That’s why indoctrination is such a frightening thing; you can’t help but believe it because it’s all you learn.”

- Kim Yeon-Ri

VIOLENT AND HATEFUL PROPAGANDA

Before the 2018 North Korea-United States Summit, schools used to hold a competition called, “Smash the foreign-nosed Americans to death.” Students would participate from a young age, instilling anti-American, anti-imperialist sentiment. Nowadays, such activities are limited to showing emotive videos amongst others.

Cartoons also infuse hateful ideas. Examples are “Boy General” or “The Squirrel and the Hedgehog” that teach children to hate and exclude capitalist countries at all times.

The *saeng-hwal-chong-hwa* or group criticism sessions is a fear-instilling method. It includes public self-criticisms and mutual criticisms at schools or with-

“At school, if a kid went to the State Security Department for watching South Korean dramas or listening to South Korean music, then everyone’s perception of him would change, and they’d monitor each other to avoid speaking to him. They would voluntarily criticize him and scrutinize his every activity. What’s alarming is that it just happens so naturally. There is even a saying, “Every North Korean is the State Police.”

- Kim Yeon-Ri

“If someone criticized me during saeng-hwal-chong-hwa, I always thought that I should criticize that student later on. So for the entire next week, I only kept an eye on that student’s behaviors.

- Lee Ji Yeon





CHILD LABOR

From a very young age children are forced into various labors, both within and outside the North Korean education system. These include participating in the Agricultural Labor Support, the Item Collection, as well as construction work and other miscellaneous activities. In addition, children in prison camps, orphanages, and relief shelters are also subject to arduous labor.



Students spend more time performing unpaid labor on farms than they do actually studying and receiving appropriate education.

AGRICULTURAL LABOR SUPPORT

“Agricultural Labor Support” refers to mandatory farm labor such as sowing, weeding, rice planting, transplanting “nutrition jars” and harvesting. The government mobilizes children through the education system and sends them to a local partner farm. Because farm work is considered an essential component of the school curriculum, the work is unpaid. The work is strenuous, exhausting, time-consuming, and becomes increasingly onerous as the students get older.

ITEM COLLECTIONS

Item collections are administered by the schools, including the fuel and waste paper collections. This came to exist because of the North Korean government’s failure to honor its obligations to finance educational institutions, including teachers’ salaries and cost of school supplies. The array of items that the government orders students to bring lays an oppressive, inescapable burden of toil on them.



CONSTRUCTION WORK, MASS GAMES AND PROPAGANDA

Students must also participate in construction projects as well as performances that take place on national holidays, such as the birthday of Kim Il-Sung and other special occasions. Consequently, students are mobilized for dangerous manual labor: to assist either with municipal infrastructure, school maintenance, railroad repair, and even private housing of school personnel. The children also have to participate in the mass games in the DPRK, which are known to require a lot of manpower. During the big Arirang Festival, about 50,000 children turn color cards at the same time to create an “animated” mosaic-like background. For Arirang performances especially, children practice tirelessly for 6-12 months.



PRISON CAMPS

The DPRK differentiates their prisons according to convicted crimes. Up to 120,000 people live in prison camps, where children are treated with extreme cruelty. Yet, the authorities in the camp keep them short of dying, knowing that they are needed as the next generation of laborers. The children suffer from all kinds of forced labor within camps and the North Korean society. Despite being in a state of starvation, the children are made to spend most of their time working as to meet certain quotas.



ORPHANAGES AND RELIEF SHELTERS

The types of child labor found across the country are nearly identical. The work required in public schools and in prison camps is also enforced in orphanages and relief shelters alike. However, the children who live in orphanages are forced to live a regimented, military-like lifestyle and are constantly subjected to the whims of their supervisors. Relief shelters are makeshift orphanages with significantly fewer resources. The majority of the children who live there are homeless youth, found begging on the streets. The government claims that these establishments are meant to protect and manage homeless children. The living conditions in a relief shelter, however, are no better than a detention facility.

“We were dirty and basically treated like prisoners. We were shameful to look at, barely clothed and dirty. People from outside the relief shelters thought we looked like prisoners.”

- Jo Dong-Ik



CHILD ABUSE

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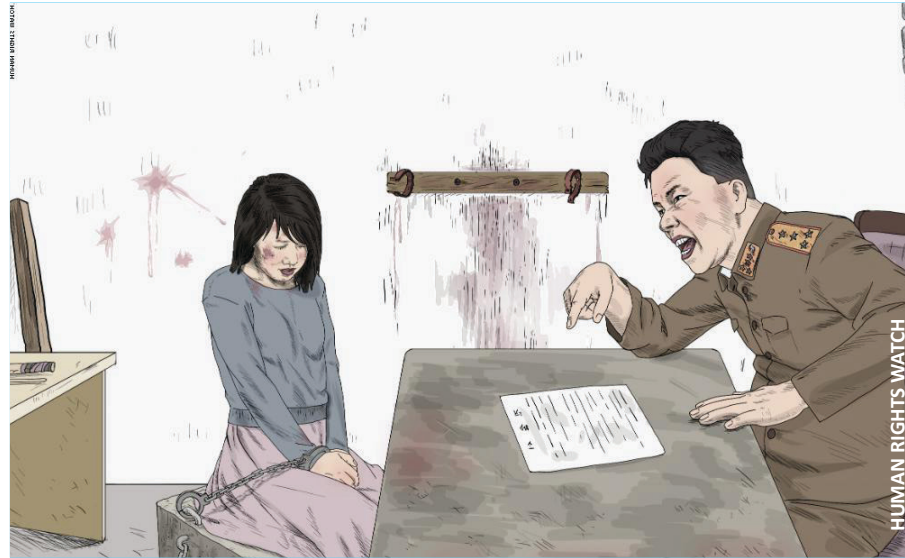
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Violence against children conducted in North Korea is unique due to the Confucius cultural context and the dictatorial political regime. North Korean children are exposed to an unimaginable amount of violence perpetrated by a diverse range of adult actors. **Child abuse is conducted by their family members, at schools, and by military personnel.**

While North Korea does have some form of legal framework according to their constitution, the citizens of North Korea are not aware of any existing legal framework. Even if they experience violence, they have **no means to report the abuse nor can they do anything about the abuses they suffer.** Therefore, incidents continue to happen without legal punishment.



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PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

"When I was in middle school, there was a time I did not listen to my teacher. And I was hit on the back of my head so hard that I fell over on my knees and hit my nose and lips, which started bleeding. However, most times, the teacher is not the one disciplining the student. The responsibility is instead passed on to a subordinate, the class class president (student). Generally, the teacher beats the chairperson and makes him beat the other children. The chairperson will make the children run twenty rounds of the playground and then hit them with a club. Resisting the chairperson was equivalent to resisting the teacher, so it was impossible. Because I was a male, I was often beaten during my childhood in the gwalliso (prison camp). I have more memories of being punished by my classmates than the teacher."

-Han Chul-Min

SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Sexual violence of minors is rampant in North Korea. The abusers range from school teachers and administrators to soldiers who, indiscriminately assault civilians including children.

"[A teacher] sexually assaulted young girls, aged 16-17, at the mountain, and the girls killed themselves. He told others that these children died by accident. However, because within two to three years, about five female children died, rumors spread against his testimony. There was no reason for cautious female students to die by falling off the mountain by accident."

- Han Chul-Min

North Korean women who enter military service are required to serve a minimum of seven years and the youngest age of entry is 18 years old. The North Korean constitution defines children as individuals younger than 16 years old. This differs with the international definition of a child, as seen in the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which considers a child anyone younger than 18 years old. The DPRK's military is the world's fourth largest power. Female defectors, who were part of the force, claim that sexual harassment is rife.



FLICKR / Joseph A Ferris III

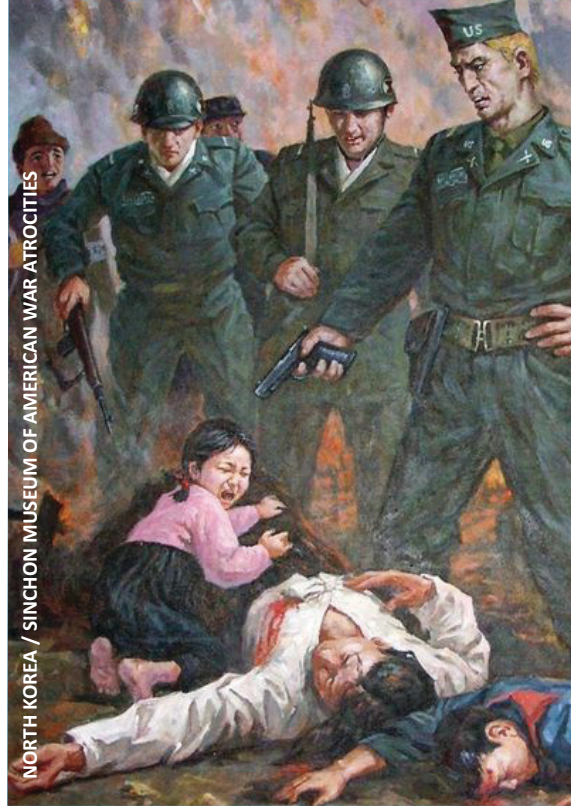
PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE

Children are forced to attend school visits to visually horrifying museums such as the Sinchon Museum of American War Atrocities as well as witness public executions.

"I froze and was speechless with shock. I felt strange. I got goosebumps and felt as if I could smell the blood."
- Hwang Soo-Min

Even elementary school students are forced to watch public executions and it often becomes a source of lifelong trauma.

"I couldn't eat very well from the shock that day."
- Kim Jin-Joo



NEGLECT

PHYSICAL

In the prison camps, the standard ration for a family of four is 1.8kg of corn a month. This is barely enough to feed two people. In order to supplement their diet, children become experts at catching wild animals like snakes, birds, and rats. Otherwise, they have no other source of meat. Children in orphanages or relief shelters are given food that is non-nutritional, barely filling, and detrimental to their growth.

EDUCATIONAL

Not only are children deprived of the bare basics of education that are critical for their growth and development, but at school, children are left to their own devices with regard to bullying, discrimination, and physical abuse.

"Bullying of weaker children at schools is condoned. The weaker children with no money, connections, or power are abused, mercilessly beaten. It's not a matter of slaps on the face but rather severe punching and kicking. Whipping with belts and loss of teeth is a common occurrence. People do not go to courts or reach agreements in North Korea. The assailant never gets in trouble."

-Park Chang-Shik

EMOTIONAL

Victims of abuse lose basic trust in the institutions and environment that they are a part of as the DPRK government fails to provide proper injunctive relief to the victims. There is no identifiable government institution or authority figure to which the victims of violence can report their experienced horror.

Even in the rare cases where assaults are reported, authorities do not render adequate punishments to the perpetrators. Not only does this constitute emotional abuse to the victim in the form of neglect, but it can also be construed as second-hand perpetuation of assault because lack of action can naturally lead to further violence. On a broader level, the oppressive atmosphere of the North Korean society, where children are not free to choose their own path and there are simply no opportunities to break out of their given class (song-bunbun), is enough to stunt the emotional development of any child.

MEDICAL

Children are forced to participate in Agricultural Labor Support and Item Collection and therefore are exposed to severe injuries due to its rigorous and labor-heavy nature. Several types of farm labor, like gathering firewood, require the use of dangerous tools, such as sickles, hoes, and pickaxes. As a result, injuries are common. However, regardless of the severity of injuries acquired during government-mandated labor, no medical treatment is made available to students.

"If you hurt yourself while working, they don't do anything about it and just send you back home. Once I hurt myself, and I applied fermented soybean paste when I got back home to stop bleeding, but the method is not based on sound medical knowledge. It's just a traditional home remedy, that's all."

-Hong Hye-Jin



RECOMMENDATIONS

1

The international community needs to urge the DPRK to comply with international standards and norms regarding education and to end all forms of child labor and abuse. Institutions and organizations, that are able to do so, should continue to communicate the situation of children's rights in the DPRK to the people of the United Nations and the international community needs to continue its important work in raising awareness of the human rights situation by reporting on violations committed by the Government of the DPRK.

3

The international community, including all civil societies, must maintain momentum in raising awareness of the human rights situation in the DPRK. Pressure should be aimed at trying to get governments like the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation to cease defending the DPRK, and let the United Nations Security Council refer Kim Jong-un and other top leaders of the DPRK to the International Criminal Court for their crimes against humanity.

2

United Nations member states need to ensure foreign aid is given to the DPRK only if the DPRK is abiding by the international laws it has ratified. As the DPRK endeavors to comply with international standards, third party experts should be allowed to join in and evaluate the progress made. This process should be conducted with transparency and any progress achieved should be made public.



Through research, PSCORE offers recommendations to expand your knowledge about different aspects of North Korea with a variety of books, movies, documentaries and talks.



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