



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
15 December 2017

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-second session

12–23 March 2018

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

Statement submitted by Jubilee Campaign, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Oppression of North Korean Women, Especially in Rural Areas

Jubilee Campaign submits the following statement for consideration by the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women.

Women in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (hereinafter "North Korea") are faced with dire circumstances. Gender equality is non-existent and institutionalized discrimination and abuses pose serious challenges to all North Korean women. Women in rural areas face these and more challenges with little hope of improvement.

According to the 2008 North Korean census, 40 per cent of women live in rural areas. The accuracy of this census is suspect. For instance, the same census states North Korea has a nearly 100 per cent literacy rate, a figure unmatched in the Republic of Korea or the People's Republic of China (hereinafter "South Korea" and "China" respectively). It is likely that a greater percentage of women live in rural areas. One possible explanation is the definition of rural. In the 1990s, North Korea defined localities smaller than 20,000 as rural, whereas neighbouring South Korea used the figure of 50,000. (Eberstadt, Nicholas, and Judith Banister. The population of North Korea.) However, from comparing figures in the 2008 census, North Korea may have changed the definition of rural to localities smaller than 7,500 skewing the results. Our research shows that using a more normalized figure, < 30,000, to estimate ruralized populations reveals that 60 per cent of women in North Korea live in rural areas.

Another statistic shows that North Korea sees little migration from rural to urban areas. Less than 5 percent of the population migrated to a different county within the previous five years before the census.

Oppression of Women in North Korea

According to the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, "discrimination against women remains pervasive in all-aspects of society" and "might be increasing." ([A/HRC/25/63](#), para. 34).

During the famines of the 1990s, women sought ways to provide for their families. They formed markets, coming from rural areas to sell whatever they could. These were the precursor to the now legal markets of North Korea that feed a large part of the populace. However, they were originally perceived as a threat by the government and repressed. Women had to pay bribes to operate in the markets. Even today, the markets are heavily regulated. Women are the "breadwinners" of North Korea, and they are singled out to pay "fees", "fines", and bribes.

Women also suffer from sexual and gender-based violence in North Korea. Government officials, employers, and others violate women in a culture that prides itself on the chastity of its women. Even holding hands is taboo; yet rape is commonplace.

Lastly, women in North Korea have little access to advanced education or opportunities for advancement. With tightly controlled migration, women born in rural areas must remain there. The only other option is to illegally migrate to China.

North Korean Refugee Women

One can only speculate about the number of North Korean refugees living in China. Given that they must live in hiding, it is impossible to verify the refugee population. Most experts agree that the number is probably between 100,000 to 200,000.

Over 30,000 refugees have reached South Korea. Of those, more than 70 per cent are women, with numbers nearing 80 per cent or more in recent years. Although figures on whether they came from rural areas are unavailable, one can assume that a large percentage came from rural areas.

Refoulement

It is nearly certain that most of these women refugees suffer some sort of human trafficking, rape, or abuse. Women are victimized in such large numbers in China because the government, in violation of the Refugee Convention and Protocol, does not extend refugee protection to North Koreans. Instead, the Chinese government classifies them as economic migrants, making them susceptible to being jailed and forcibly repatriated. The government of China even utilizes special units to seek out and capture refugees. They patrol the border areas, work to uncover human rights activists and missionaries aiding refugees, and patrol foreign embassies where refugees might escape and receive protection. In addition, the Chinese government allows North Korean agents to operate freely in their territory without restraint or oversight. These agents capture refugees and have likely abducted or summarily executed many human rights activists and refugees.

North Korean defectors are undoubtedly refugees. Even if they leave North Korea to find food or work, they become refugees *sur place* because of the brutal treatment they will receive on being forcibly repatriated. At a minimum they will be imprisoned, starved, and tortured for their perceived disloyalty to the regime. In more extreme cases, refugees who have had contact with foreigners - especially Christians - or are caught fleeing China or aiding other refugees will be executed. Worse still, if women are pregnant when they are repatriated, the government will forcibly terminate the pregnancy.

Because of this failure by the Chinese government to protect North Korean refugees, they are at risk of severe human rights violations.

Human Rights Violations Suffered by North Korean Refugee Women in China

In addition to refoulement, North Korean refugee women are subjected to multiple forms of human trafficking and sexual and gender-based violence in China. The most prevalent forms of trafficking are forced marriages and sex trafficking.

Due to conscription and government work assignments for the male population of North Korea, women have better ability to cross the North Korean/Chinese border. They seek to cross the border in search of food and employment. However, they are often intercepted by human traffickers and sometimes unwittingly transported to China by human traffickers under false pretences.

Once in China, women, often in their teens and early 20s, are faced with two bleak choices — either be sold into human trafficking or sent back to North Korea. Trafficking means they will either be sold to a Chinese man, often a poor farmer in an isolated rural area, or sold to a brothel and forced into a life of prostitution. Choosing to return to North Korea is hardly a choice at all. Refugees know, and

traffickers remind them, that they and their families will be severely punished by the regime if they are caught. Far too many of these women “willingly” accept being sold into human trafficking; many of them will never see their families again.

If sold to a farmer, North Korean women are treated as slaves and forced to perform back-breaking labour. They are beaten for disobeying or for no reason at all, and they are constantly raped, sometimes by multiple men. The result is that many are subjected to unwanted pregnancies with little access to proper food, medicine, or sanitary conditions. If they can escape, they often have no rights or access to their children.

Prostitution is no better a fate. These women are placed in brothels, and though they are paid wages that are often much higher than their earnings in North Korea, they live in inhumane conditions. They are forced to work long hours as a prostitute, sex cam, or pornography worker and are often subjected to beatings by their customers or their “employer”. They also suffer from sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies.

Lastly, North Korean women in China are subjected to sexual and gender-based violence. As outlined above, human trafficking victims are beaten and raped. They may also be raped by the human traffickers themselves in front of other women or relatives. Any North Korean woman in China is at risk of being raped or abducted because they have no access to justice. If they report these crimes, they will be arrested and forcibly repatriated to North Korea.

For a more in-depth report on these cases, see *Lives for Sale, Personal Accounts of North Korea to China* by the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (bit.ly/2ioej4m).

Conclusion

Born into one of the most repressive regimes, it is no wonder that North Korean women are some of the most oppressed and victimized people groups in the world. With a high percentage of women in rural areas, it is the hope of this Working Group that the Commission on the Status of Women will consider and seek to improve the lives of these women.
