

United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW)  
Panel Session organized by the North Korea Freedom Coalition  
*Entitled: "Total Lack of Protection for North Korean Women and Girls"*  
March 15, 2019 New York City  
Testimonies of North Korean Defectors (transcript)

Opening remarks by Suzanne Scholte Chair, North Korea Freedom Coalition, with testimony by North Korean defectors: Kim Hye Sook, longest survivor of North Korea's Political Prison Camps, and Pak Tae-Kyung; This first panel session was followed by a second panel where recommendations were presented by Greg Scarlatiou, Executive Director of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, and Ann Buwalda, Founder and Director of Jubilee Campaign, through NKFC Vice Chair, Jason West.



**Scholte:** Good afternoon I am Suzanne Scholte and I am very honored to welcome you on behalf of the North Korea Freedom Coalition to today's panel. It is a wonderful message of encouragement to the people of North Korea that you are here today. Your presence means so much to us, it means so much to Ms Park and Mrs Kim, our brave witnesses, and it means so much to the people of North Korea. Today we also have present representatives of Free North Korea Radio, a radio station that broadcasts to North Korea every day. They will be reporting about this panel today to the PEOPLE of North Korea. They will know that you were here today in New York City at the UN Commission on the Status of Women because you CARED about the WOMEN of North Korea.

Our Coalition is dedicated to promoting the freedom, human rights, and dignity of the North Korean people and we welcome everyone interested to join in our efforts. It has taken many decades for the international community to recognize the gravity of the human rights violations occurring in North Korea every day. It is the bravery of the North Koreans who have escaped – most of them women – that finally there is no doubt that the Kim regime is

committing gross violations of human rights every day and unspeakable atrocities. And in fact the UN commission of Inquiry of Crimes Against Humanity in North Korea concluded in February 2014 that the violations of human rights in North Korea have no parallel in the world.

So, the theme for this year's UN CSW is: "*Social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.*" We selected our two special witnesses today to provide you evidence that there are absolutely NO social protection systems in North Korea to provide or protect women and girls in North Korea.

Because we want you to hear from them as much as possible I am going to briefly describe their backgrounds and then turn the program over to them.

Ms. Kim Hye Sook was in fact sent to a political prison camp with her entire family when she was a teen ager. The family had no idea what crime they committed for many years until they found out it was because her grandfather had fled to South Korea. She is the longest survivor of a North Korean political prison camp having spent 28 years in camp 18 where she suffered many violations of human rights and witnessed the death of nearly all her family members. When she was finally released she ended up being sold to work in China at a restaurant, but was arrested and repatriated to North Korea only to be sent back to PRISON. She eventually escaped and made it to South Korea in 2009. Mrs. Kim's life is a stark illustration that women in North Korea from childhood to adulthood have no human rights and have no human rights protections.

Ms. Park is from a small town on the border of North Korea and China. She graduated from a teaching university and spent six years as a teacher before she escaped from North Korea in 2008. Her testimony today will illustrate from her own life's experience the fact that not only are there no social protection systems in North Korea, but even the legal systems in North Korea are not designed to protect women and girls, but to surveil them and to exploit and abuse them. We will have our two witnesses speak and then take your questions.

**Kim Hye-sook:** I was born in the Moranbong District of Pyongyang, the center region of the city, and had a very good life in my younger age. But in February of 1975, without any notice or given any reason, my whole family was sent to the political prison camp No.18, which is located in Bukchang, South Pyongahn Province, where I spent the next 28 years. I was only thirteen years old, and they put me in a school for three years so that I could finish the middle school program, and from the age of 16, I started to work in the coal mines. The provision regulated that each worker should work up to 8 hours a day, but I was forced to work 10 to 14 hours of hard labor a day. I worked at the coal mine for 14 years.

During that time, I lost both my parents in the political prison camp. My father served in the military for 10 years, confronted the authorities and asked why his whole family was sent to the political prison camp, even though they didn't commit any crime. The authorities took him away and I haven't seen him since, and did not know his whereabouts for 40 years. After my father was disappeared, my mother took care of my family. My mother, who was suffering from starvation, went up the mountain to pluck some grass. But, later, she lost her step and fell off a cliff and died in front of my eyes. As the oldest daughter of 5 children, from then on I had to take care of my siblings by working in the coal mine. For coal miners, authorities provided a small portion of cooked jasmine rice which they named a 'nutritional supplement', but I never took it for myself. I always wrapped it in a plastic bag, and brought it back home, mixed it with water, and made a thin porridge for my siblings and grandmother so we could all survive.

In the Kwanliso (Korean political prison camps), when women inmates were 28 and men

were 30, authorities could grant marriage. However, only those who had not skipped or been late to work for 10 years, and were acknowledged as loyal to the Workers' Party, were allowed to marry as an examples. Once married, authorities encouraged them to have as many children as possible, since many laborers died due to mine accidents. These children would provide labor as they grew up in the camp. However, due malnutrition, mothers could not produce enough breast milk to feed their babies, so the babies rarely grew healthy. The most common food distributed was raw corn. Mothers often soaked the corn in water, made a porridge with it, and chewed the porridge to make it softer and easier for the babies to swallow. There were no diapers, so I had to make my own diaper with a vinyl sheet and a rag. During the day there were no clothes for children, so I had to leave my child bare-naked to play outside. There was no soap, so in the morning I always drew water from the well and left it during the day, or collected rainwater or snow, so I could wash my children without soap. I had a miscarriage in my first pregnancy, but this is basically how I raised my daughter and son.

On May 13, 1991, when I gave birth to my first daughter, even though I was almost due, I had to go up to the mountain wearing a big backpack to gather oak tree sprouts because of the serious food shortage in the camp. I gave a birth to my daughter on my way back. Because it was such a sudden delivery, I couldn't stand up, and I didn't have anything but my backpack to wrap my infant baby. So, I wrapped her in my backpack which was filled with oak tree sprouts, as well as my placenta which came out with the infant. Since I could barely walk, I crawled down the mountain, pushing the backpack and my baby slowly. Fortunately, I met an old man soon after who had come up the mountain to feed his goat, and he helped me to get home. There was absolutely no support or medical service provided in the camp even though I had given birth to a child. So the other prisoners, especially old ladies in my village, took care of me. They taught me how to cook the placenta. The food shortage was so severe, and we hadn't seen any meat in a long time, so it could not be wasted. First, I punched holes in it so that the blood could be drained out, and washed it several times. Then I cooked it, and fed my husband, who passed away due to an accident in the coal mine a couple of years later. After having children, I was assigned to the construction division within the camp, and raised hogs, dogs, and rabbits. I took care of livestock really well, and raised hundreds of them for the Party. I lived by the book. It was really hard to raise and feed livestock, since we didn't have enough to feed ourselves. There were no sanitary napkins in the camp, so women had to use rags when they had their period. Moreover, we couldn't waste even the water we used to wash the blood from the pad, but were told to give it to the hogs because it was believed to be beneficial for the animals.

All the hard work finally paid off in 2001. In celebration of Kim Jong-il's birthday on February 16, I was released from the camp. For those who are released, the Party issues an "identification of release". When you bring that document to the Social Security Bureau, the equivalent of a police station in the US, they would tell you where your relatives lived. I found out my father's older brother was in Hoechang of South Pyongahn Province, so I went to meet him. He told me the reason I had lived for 28 years in the political prison camp was because my grandfather, my father's father, was allegedly missing, and believed to have fled to South Korea during the Korean War. I was only thirteen when I was sent to the political prison camp, and I had never met him. Now I finally knew why I had spent 28 years in the Yoduk system. My three brothers, who still live in North Korea, do not know this.

While I was working in the coal mine, we were provided a pair of work clothes once a year, which we had to manage to wear until we got a new one, even if they were worn out and looked like a rag. After I was released, I lost my two children during a flood, and I thought to myself I couldn't live in this land any more. In 2005, I was trafficked and sold by the border guards to China. When I arrived in China, I found that two young North Korean women, ages

23 and 27, had also been trafficked by the same broker. They later were sold for 30,000 yuan to Chinese men. I was 43 years old, but since I had worked in the coal mine throughout my life and couldn't take care of myself, I looked older. By the time the customer came to buy me, the broker wrote '三十七 san shi qi' in Chinese character on my palm, which means 37 in Chinese. I didn't know what that meant. Then he said when the customers asked '几岁 jisui', then I should reply 'san shi qi'. But when I answered their questions, the customers said, 'you don't look like 37. You look like 57!' and refused to buy me. So in the end, the broker who had bought me for 3,000 yuan from the border guards, couldn't find anyone willing to pay that much because of my aged look and seriously underweight body. He had to sell me to a restaurant for 2,500 yuan where I worked really hard. But I was arrested, and repatriated, in 2008. It was the first time I returned to North Korea, and the situation inside the country was miserable. I thought, 'since I lost my children and husband, I don't have any reason to live in this land alone.' So I escaped again to China, and came to South Korea in 2009.

As you can see from my stories, there is no social protection for women or children living in dire circumstances in North Korea's political prison camps. Thousands of people are dying at this moment in these camps. During the so-called 'Arduous March', it was said that 3 million people died due to starvation, and it is believed that the situation right now is worse than ever. So, I urge all of you to pay attention to the North Korean people who are suffering under a brutal dictatorship. It is impossible to tell you all that I have experienced in my 28 years in the political prison system in this short time, but I really appreciate your time to come here to listen to my story. Thank you.

**Pak Tae-Kyung:** First, I would like to express my gratitude for having been invited to speak at such an important event. I would also like to thank you all very much for your concern for the human rights of North Korean women. Today, using my experiences in North Korea as a basis, I want to speak realistically about the welfare system for women in North Korea. Today, I live in South Korea. In South Korea, the welfare system for defectors like me is very well developed. However, the North Korea in which I lived was not like that. Here, I will discuss a number of examples.

This is a story about a family that lived in my neighborhood. There were three daughters in that house hold and, among them, the oldest daughter was tall, beautiful, and, in place of her aging parents, took responsibility for the welfare of the family. Her method for making money was using her good looks to form good relationships with well-known men and, using their influence, run a business. As a result of her efforts, the household was fed and lived well. But one day she was suddenly apprehended by the police. Her offense was running a business not authorized in North Korea, but we believed that they had arrested her because the police, for their own livelihood and promotions, would take money from average people when they needed it – and so they were doing it to her, too.

After being interrogated for days, we thought that she would get out by offering a bribe; however, an entire month passed and she was not released. After six months, she died as a result of an interrogation. The interrogation of criminals in North Korea often involves serious violence, and because of this, she was not able to survive the interrogation. The police only sent the family a notice that she had died, and did not even return her body. At that time, we villagers speculated that she may have been killed because she knew many influential people and, of course, a lot about their corruption.

The powerful in North Korea all regularly engage in corruption, and I will discuss what sort of corruption they commit. In my village, there was a widow who lived on the second floor of an apartment building. She was raising a daughter in elementary school. Trade with China was

her livelihood, and she would personally go to the border with China, and after conducting trade, would hand over the sold goods. Of course, with only two mouths to feed, she had no great need for resources – so, she not only made a lot of money, but because she was good-looking, she became well known in our village. However, as she lived alone, strange men would come and go whenever she needed a man's help around the house. We thought that, due to living alone, she just had a desire for men. However, one day, a security officer began to come and go from the house. At first, he visited under the pretext of controlling her illegal business with China. At that time, the man visiting the house ate well, had white skin, and was overweight. However, later he began to lose weight, his eyes became cloudy, and anyone could see that he was on drugs. While on drugs, he formed an inappropriate relationship with her and so blatantly frequented her house it seemed like he lived there. The villagers whispered, but because he was a high-ranking security official, they could not speak publicly and, until the time I defected, he was still doing drugs.

The North Korean security officers are bad people and have greater regard for the lives of flies than for the lives of North Koreans, and when they interrogate a criminal, they typically show their inhuman attitude. Starting in the 90s, North Korean defectors who crossed into and lived in China but were later returned to North Korea were almost all women. If these women were repatriated, they would be sent back to their area of residence, where they would be tortured by the security officials. You could hear the cries of pain from the windows when they were tortured, including those who were pregnant. I once personally witnessed a male security official use a belt to beat woman without reason, after making her take off her clothes. After many strikes, her back was covered in cuts and red sores. The agent grilled her, asking questions such as what kind of man she met in China and whether or not she slept with him – questions that a woman might be embarrassed to answer. If she was too embarrassed and did not answer, she was beaten even harder. The security officials also took women who were pregnant to the hospital and forced them to have an abortion. Their justification for the abortion was that it was not right to give birth to a child that does not know their father. Postnatal care was inconceivable for women who received forced abortions, and they were taken back to prison.

Lastly, I have personal experience with the interrogation process, and will talk about that now. Computers are still not very common in North Korea, and generally most people, even high-ranking people such as prosecutors, are computer illiterate and cannot even type. In North Korea, until the time I defected, all forms were written by hand, and they could be written by registrars with comparatively pretty handwriting. This was not a profession and it was mostly done part time. I did this work a number of times, and I helped a prosecutor I knew create records about interrogations. There was one file that contained detailed information about a woman who went to China and was sent back to North Korea. The record was filled with horrible questions asked by the prosecutor. What man did you meet in China? Was he South Korean? How did you meet him, and where did he work? These were all general questions, but they were related to later questions.

Did you sleep with him? How many times? Did you live together? How many times did you have sex per day? Describe the sex in detail. When he mounted you, did he mount from the right or left? Was his penis large?

These questions were meant to insult their humanity, as they were questions that women would not want to answer. My face turned red with embarrassment for this woman who had to answer all of these questions so that she would be beaten less. These sorts of details are not reported up the chain, but the fact that the security agent asked these questions to satisfy his own curiosity is an example of how evil the security officials could be.

Through incidents like these and others, one can see how corrupt authority figures in North

Korea are. In North Korea, women are also socially powerless. Shouldn't a country take care of and look after the powerless? I want to stand on the world stage and blow the whistle on the North Korean elites who use their power as a weapon to harass and oppress women. It is bad to the point that so many women turn their backs on their beloved hometowns and families to come to South Korea or the US. North Korea is and has long been a society made exclusively for the elites. My story today will not be a large warning to the North Korean elites, but if everyone listens to the stories of defectors like me, then someday I believe that even North Korea can change. I ask for everyone's continued interest and support and ask that you please do not forget the people of North Korea.

## **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

Q: I met with women in Pyongyang through 'Women Cross DMZ'. The women we have met with seemed to be highly connected, very personable. I wonder whether they can be the avenue of help.

A: (PAK) The change of North Korea would not come from a personal connection with women in Pyongyang. And Pyongyang is a special city where only chosen people are allowed to live, for example, 'the royal family', which is Kim Jong-un's family. They are most privileged people who receive lots of favors from the Workers' Party, and I assume their viewpoint is totally different from ours, the ordinary citizens'. Maybe in the future we might encounter some issues that would require us to meet and solve together, but it is the North Korean regime that holds the key to real internal change in North Korea, not a mere citizen in Pyongyang.

SCHOLTE: I was going about to make a quick comment about that too, because just from my familiarity with defectors, I did meet a young woman who had lived in Pyongyang. She did not leave flee North Korea, like so many because she was starving or because of human rights violations, she fled North Korea because her family was falling out of favor with the Korean Worker's Party. Her family were among the elites in Pyongyang, and they had the means to be able to get out of North Korea and make it to Thailand to try to come to South Korea. While she was in Thailand, in the detention center with other North Korean women, she found out about what was happening to other people in the country – the trafficking and the starvation. But because she lived in Pyongyang, she didn't want for anything. So there's a complete disconnect between people living in Pyongyang and people that are outside of Pyongyang.

I also want to tell you a quick story about a North Korean defector who made it to the United States and resettled here. There is not that many, I think about 200 or 180 something, but only a small number of refugees from North Korea have actually resettled in the United States. But her story really illustrated for me the mindset of what they've gone through. She opened up a bakery in a city in Virginia. She tells this story about one of her first customers was a police officer. A police officer came in and ordered a cup of coffee, and she, very nervously, hands him a cup of coffee. And the police officer goes to pay her, and she doesn't know what to do because she thinks 'I can't take the money!', because she didn't realize that the police officer was there to help her. And it was just a moment that was very confusing for her, because the police, so called 'security' are there (in North Korea) to monitor, surveil and persecute people and citizens. So it was an interesting cultural thing for her to realize, 'oh, no, he is not trying to steal from me or take from me, but he actually wants to have a cup of coffee. So it was kind of interesting because it is hard for us, because we have so many freedoms, we don't realize how separated and isolated the North Korean people are.

Q: What do you think about China? Is there anything that men can do, government can do,

or women can do?

A: (KIM) Anyone who escapes from North Korea must go through China. Also, North Koreans living in the border area often cross the border to find food in China and bring it back home. Kim Jong-un and Xi Jinping have been having meetings because North Korea cannot survive without China's assistance. But when it comes to human rights, North Korean women have been trafficked and sold in China. I believe it is really important to work with China to solve this issue, but personally I don't think the trafficking of North Korean women will stop anytime soon. North Koreans must go through China to a third country, such as Mongolia, Laos or Thailand. I have ambivalent feelings about China because we need China in order to escape, and we need help from Chinese brokers who would help us to get to South Korea. However, more than 300,000 North Korean refugees are staying in China even now. Many of them don't have the financial resources to come to South Korea, and some of them are women who were sold to Chinese men and gave birth to children, which makes it hard for them to leave. So, I think the role of international organizations and community, for instance, the UN, is to put pressure on China to stop trafficking and selling of North Korean women, rather than expecting the (Chinese) government to solve the problem.

Q: I wonder how your new life in South Korea is, and what the most difficult thing was. And how do you think about the social protection in South Korea?

A: (KIM) When I first came to South Korea, I was provided an apartment at a permanent rental apartment complex where low-income families such as disabled or North Korean defectors are settled. The most difficult thing I experienced was the lack of respect that some people showed to North Korean defectors. One time I saw some people take out unwanted clothes for donations from their houses and said 'we can throw these out to North Korean defectors.' North Korean defectors have risked their lives to come to South Korea, just to have a full bowl of rice for a meal. Now we have arrived in South Korea only to suffer discrimination. Also, the differences in language and culture between the two Koreas is another problem.

In terms of social protection, for a North Korean defector who finishes the resettlement education program from Hanawon, the South Korean government provides allowances for six months. It used to be one-time payment, but they changed the policy to divide up the money over six months. Because most North Koreans hired brokers to escape to South Korea, they have to pay them. For example, I paid 20 million Korean won (18,000 USD) to get to South Korea, but the resettlement allowance was lower than that. So in many cases North Koreans cannot pay back to the broker and ended up in debt. This is why the South Korean government decided to divide up the payment, in order to protect North Korean defectors from being deprived by the brokers.

Also when a defector tries to learn something, for example, computer skills, or get a driver's license or a care worker's license, then the government continues to support them financially even after the first six months of resettlement. When I got my license, I also received about \$5,000 from a congratulatory fund. So I think at government level, the support system for North Korean defectors, is well established.

The problem is, however, even though you have all these licenses, it is really hard to get a job in South Korean society as a defector. Whenever I saw an advertisement recruiting part-time staff, I noticed that the business owners preferred Korean Chinese, rather than North Korean defectors. So sometimes I lied and said I was a Korean Chinese in order to get a job. The two Koreas recently started a dialogue and Kim Jong-un and President Moon Jae-in had summits several times. During the summit, although President Moon didn't mention anything

about North Korean defectors, or those who left North Korea during the Korean War, Kim Jong-un said “we should open this road to anyone who fled to South Korea during the Korean War, or families of North Korean defectors, so that they could travel back and forth freely.” It seems that South Koreans received such a comment as a sign of imminent reunification between two Koreas. But as North Korean defectors, it haunted us as a sign of warning that North Korean authorities would soon come down to South Korea and drag us all back to North Korea. As a result, many of my North Korean defector friends decided to immigrate to other countries.

For further information contact [Suzanne@defenseforumfoundation.org](mailto:Suzanne@defenseforumfoundation.org) or visit [www.nkfreedom.org](http://www.nkfreedom.org)