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Status of Women in North Korea: Tracing its History and Status Quo

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Abstract

According to famous philosopher John Locke, all people are equal in the sense that they are born with certain "inalienable" inherent rights. Women in North Korea, on the other hand, do not have access to the rights and privileges they are entitled to as human beings. Oh Yoon Hee, a North Korean defector, once said, "Sometimes, out of nowhere, you cry at night and don't know why." (Human Rights Watch, 2018). This paper is a study of the struggles faced by many other women like Oh Yoon Hee. Throughout history, they have been victims of patriarchal society's prejudice and injustices. The origins of the patriarchal aspect of the society may be traced back to Confucianism's ideas, which affected the Korean peninsula's political and social structures. This study attempts to explore the origins and foundations of North Korean women's suffering, as well as how the status quo affects them. Further, the study delves into the difficulties they face while migrating to a different country in the hope of a better future for themselves and aid available for them in the country they migrate to. This has been achieved through an analysis of interviews and articles by the North Koreans themselves. The paper concludes by putting forth recommendations in order to create a fair and just society with zero or minimal human rights violations, regardless of gender.

Keywords: *north korea, women, migration*

1.0 Introduction

North Korea is a country that is constantly in the unpleasant spotlight for its humanitarian concerns, which are based on the authoritarian structure of its leadership. This calls into doubt the safety of a society's vulnerable people, which include women. Women have been subjected to injustice in all aspects of life on a worldwide scale from the dawn of time: women have been denied education, pushed into early marriages, denied equal political rights, and so on. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has perpetrated and continues to conduct systematic, widespread and grave human rights abuses, according to the *Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*. The state is guilty of breaching people's freedoms of thinking, speech and religion, as well as their freedoms of travel and

residence, discrimination, and arbitrary imprisonment and torture, according to the report. The commission also discovered that crimes against humanity are still being committed in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea because the policies, institutions and patterns of impunity that underpin them are still in existence (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2014). It is only logical to presume that the women of society, who occupy one of the levels of the pyramid of vulnerable populations, are the ones who have been disproportionately harmed by the country's past and present transgressions.

As famous historian Eric Hobsbawm rightly said, "*What makes a nation is the past, what justifies one nation against others is the past and historians are the people who produce it.*" Are the humanitarian crises, such as crimes and injustices against women, a result of the country's unwillingness to come to grips with its colonial past? Or is it the lingering repercussions of the horrific Cold War and Korean War, which tore the Korean peninsula apart and scarred both North and South Korean populations? During the occupation of the Japanese, Korean women were often victims of sex slavery and forced prostitution. According to documents, a Japanese-run brothel for the troops was established in 1932. By 1937, the scheme had evolved into a network of brothels for army personnel known as comfort stations. There were 400 comfort stations dispersed over Asia as of September 1942 (Riddell, 2018). Even if it appeared that certain aspects of the official culture during the 1980s of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) were attempts to combat the legacy of this colonial past, it is important to remember that sexism and discrimination against women existed long before Japan occupied the Korean peninsula (Halliday, 1985). The impact of Confucianism principles such as *puja yu ch'in* which reflected the importance of the family patriarch's authority and the patrilineal order as well as *samjong chi to* which emphasized that a woman must follow three men in her lifetime: her father, husband, and eldest son, in the country's political and social structure in modern times is clear evidence of this sexist heritage (Kang, 2011).

The DPRK government has stated its complete support for the 2030 Agenda and has acknowledged the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (Democratic People's Republic of

Korea...Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, 2021). In order to ensure that "no one is left behind," the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals place a heavy emphasis on enhancing equality to fulfill the needs of disadvantaged people in particular (*Sustainable Development Goals*, n.d.). However, in a country that is politically isolated and has a long history of sexism, achieving the SDGs, which include achieving gender equality via education and adequate medical facilities, can be a difficult task. As a result, this study attempts to investigate not only the status of women in North Korea in the past but also the status quo. We want to see how effective the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has been in providing women with access to education, medical care and economic possibilities. Furthermore, we dive into the lives of women who choose to flee the nation in order to escape the atrocities inflicted against them and in a desire for a better life for themselves.

2.0 The Past

2.1 Influence of Patriarchal Notions of Confucianism in the Lives of North Korean Women

Confucianism is a faith or a religion considered by some to be devoid of any priests or shrines. There is no place where the believers of this faith go to provide allegiance to a mighty figure. It is a system of philosophy founded in China in 551-479 BCE; numerous East Asian countries' history and social systems in the past are shaped by this philosophy. The beginnings of Confucianism in Korea seem to go back to the first period of the formation of states in the peninsula. From an early period, the Confucian Classics influenced the intellectual life of those classes concerned with ruling the country (Yang & Henderson, 1958). The system started to have firm roots in the peninsula's society during the Goguryeo dynasty but it didn't become the state's ideology until the Yi Dynasty. Although Confucianism has had a rich history in the peninsula with its ideology rooted in the way of living and political and social systems of the people of the peninsula, Korean Confucianism has been described as "*the enemy of feminism*" by a number of feminists, who frequently claim that Confucianism is the root of patriarchal society. Feminist scholars have produced significant works about Confucianism's role in preserving the idea of

women's subordination to men such as theologian Kang Namsun's newspaper article entitled "Confucianism and feminism: about their impossible encounter" (The Women's News, December 25 1999) and Huh Ra-Gum's "Yugyowa Peminijumui Mannam" (Meeting of Confucianism and Feminism); they argue that the idea of men's superiority to women is embedded in Confucian philosophy (Koh, 2008). The contentions are often rooted in a few controversial Confucian notions that include the "*patrilineal*" notion of the family. What this essentially was that a woman was always supposed to be guided by a male figure. Be it her, husband, father, or son. Women had a crucial role in protecting their husbands' families and clans, hence marriage was considered obligatory. A young lady was expected to prepare herself in the four characteristics of feminine character before marrying: virtue, speech, comportment and work (Book of Rites, ch. 12 and 44). As a result, Korean girls' education was often intended to equip them for the marital ideal of a "*wise mother and a good wife*." When a daughter married a guy, she was labelled "*an outsider abandoning (her natal) family*" very immediately. In other words, she became a member of her husband's family and her domestic responsibilities included serving him and his parents, as well as teaching children and upholding traditional practices and family reputation (CEFIA, n.d.). The predominance of men over women is reflected in the Confucian marriage system as well. Confucianism valued marriage but believed in a wife obeying her husband and teachings and also set forth the "*seven evils*" (Chilgo Chiak) justifying the expulsion of a wife from the household: disobeying parents-in-law, bearing no son, committing adultery, jealousy, carrying a hereditary disease, garrulousness (talkativeness) and larceny (theft) (Park, 1992).

During the Yi dynasty when Confucianism was undertaken as the state ideology, things became adverse for the women as this was the time when the patriarchal system evolved. It has been established that as the native structure was incorporated into Confucian patriarchy, women, at least upper-class yangban (a high social class of Yi dynasty) women, lost much of their social space, were deprived of legal and property rights, and were increasingly confined to the inner quarters behind the walls of their husband's homes and that these changes were more or less in place by the mid-seventeenth century. According to this view, the normative behaviour of women

and their gender roles were scripted and determined by male authorities and male-dominated institutions (*Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan*, 2003). Women before the Yi dynasty came into power appeared to have had more freedom and legal rights and to have enjoyed a higher status. Three queens assumed the throne during the Shilla era (fourth century–918). Shilla women had the right to be the head of their households. During the Koryo period (918-1392), equal property inheritance between men and women was a common practice and a woman's remarriage was socially acceptable. However, it in no way meant that women were considered to be equal to men (Park,1992).

The Japanese annexed the peninsula and ruled over its people till the end of World War II. The new force did not support the ideals of Confucianism and hence there was a decline in the popularity of the system. The indication of lingering effects of the ideals however resurfaces when one tries to look into the current political and social ideology of North Korea. "*Whereas both China and Vietnam have waged major campaigns of varying effectiveness against their Confucian pasts, the DPRK stands out among the East Asian post-revolutionary regimes by its silence on this score.*" (Halliday, 1985). It would not be illogical to assume that the political system that supports the allegiance to the "*Supreme Leader*" is a residual consequence of the country's failure to abandon its patriarchal practices suggested by the Confucian philosophical system.

2.2 War: Comfort Women During WWII

Japan took over the Korean peninsula in 1910 but the tug of war between three countries for occupying Korea began from 1894 until 1904 when Japan gained control over Korea. By 1905, Japan started taking control of the government and army with the promise of independence. However, Japan broke its promise and shut down Korean newspapers, banned anti-Japanese materials and abolished the Korean Army. In return, the Koreans organized several rallies against Japanese acts, including prostitution. Years of riots and battles between the two nations resulted in Japan going one step further and annexing Korea in 1910 (Riddell, 2018). The situation of women which was already pitiful worsened after the occupation of Japan. The

imperial power used Korean women as sex labourers while urging Japanese women to marry young and bear many children to fulfil "*the national mission of motherhood*" (Soh, 1992). Approximately 200,000 Asian women were summoned from military brothels to sexually serve Japanese soldiers during the Asian and Pacific War (1937-451). Unmarried young Korean women made up the majority of the victims (Min, 2003). Sexual slaves were forced to have 10 to 30 times a day intercourse with Japanese troops, confined to filthy shanties. Torture, beatings, burnings and stabbings were all common occurrences. In military brothels, several women died of venereal illness, while others committed suicide. When Japan was defeated in World War II, both victims and Japanese witnesses testified that Japanese soldiers abandoned the comfort ladies, in some cases murdering them (Yun, 1997) (Min, 2003).

These "*comfort women*"(*wianbu* in Korean) could not tell their stories of what they went through because of the patriarchal nature of the society. Society had a high influence on Confucianism which believed if the men sexually indulge themselves, it was the woman's responsibility, with the comfort woman being blamed for the sexual exploitation. Confucianism also emphasized the importance of respecting one's family. If the comfort women revealed anybody about their role as comfort women, they would be dishonouring their families. Soon after the end of WWII and the departure of the Japanese troops, the Korean War divided the peninsula and which also divided the women and resulted in Korean comfort women from both North and South Korea lacking the ability to share their stories together (Riddell, 2018).

Sexual slavery however did not stop after the Japanese left. Even though there aren't enough written records to prove it, when the Soviet Army initially came to North Korea, it perpetrated a huge number of rapes and other acts of brutality against women. During the war, the DPRK lost 12–15% of its people; men made up just over half of the Koreans killed. The importance of population growth was crucial to the development of North Korea. Women were "encouraged a high birth rate, partly by making contraception and abortion difficult to obtain….*All women in our country want children. Any woman who did not would be considered abnormal*." (Halliday 1985)

2.3 Rights for Women in the Past

It is very unlikely that a society that follows ideals that promotes injustice treatments towards a gender, would not see a retaliation. The steady revolution was evident in the 19th century that challenged social order over the century. With Christian influence, new schools of thought such as Silhak (Practical Learning) and Tonghak (Eastern Learning) believed in human rights and equality for all people, regardless of socio-economic rank or gender. They pushed for the growth of women's rights and universal education for both men and women. Around the conclusion of the Yi Dynasty, missionaries pushed for women's education, and the first modern school for women, Ewha Haktang, was founded in 1886. (Park, 1992)

Following the partition of the peninsula, North Korea's dedication to gender equality began in 1946 with Article 15 of the "*Land Reform Law*," which claimed that becoming equal landowners to men would improve women's social status (mostly peasants). They would become landowners when the bill was passed because property allocation would no longer be dependent on gender, but rather on labour potential (Spezza, 2013). The Labor Law, which took effect on June 24, 1946, had specific provisions for the protection of children and mothers, as well as more general requirements like an eight-hour workday, paid vacations, equal pay for equal effort, and improvements in working conditions such as health insurance. Expectant mothers were given paid maternity leave for 35 days before and 42 days after birth, lighter work starting in the sixth month of pregnancy, and thirty-minute nursing breaks twice a day for women with children under the age of one year. As a result, motherhood was tightly guarded (Kim, 2010),

On July 30, 1946, the country's first extensive gender law, the Law on Sex Equality, was passed. Article 1 through Article 3 of the law encapsulated clauses concerning women having equal rights to men when it comes to all arenas of the nation, including rights pertaining to voting, wages and education. Articles 4 through 8 all had to do with family law, regulating marriage and divorce, attesting to the centrality of the family in the North Korean woman question. Article 9 nullified all Japanese imperial laws and regulations pertaining to women’s rights (Kim, 2010). This act of legislation which was considered revolutionary at the time would ratify women's right

to vote, equal labour, pay and education, abolish forced marriage, provide the right to divorce (only decades later, European countries like Italy and Ireland legalised divorce), and end the sale of women, polygamy, concubinage and the extraction of money or gifts in connection with marriage (matchmaking). The Democratic Women's Union of North Korea was founded the same year, and the DPRK took substantial steps to increase women's participation in socio-economic activities (Spezza, 2013). The North devised a five-year economic development plan in 1957 to encourage more women to participate in the country's economic growth, emphasizing that the ideological makeover would help them become communist builders. In the 1970s and 1980s, North Korea strived to complete the development of women as builders of communism, ready to support the cause of the Juche ideology which roughly translates as "self-reliance" and which borrowed much of its ideas from Marxism, Confucianism, 20th-century Japanese imperialism, and traditional Korean nationalism (Beauchamp, 2018) (Kim, 2014). The 1972 constitution emphasized '*revolutionization of women, the institution of the class line, and development of women as intellectuals*' to realize the ideal of the communist state. During the 1980s, women in the workforce reached 49 percent. Numerous laws were enacted during this time aimed at women and child welfare: Socialist Constitution (December 1972), the document regarding the all-out implementation of the 11- year compulsory education (September 1975), the Child Care and Education Law (April 1976), the Socialist Labor Law (April 1978), and the Family Law (October 1990). Economic difficulties and the return of women to their families characterized the post-1990s period. A variety of internal and foreign causes impacted the time, including the fall of communist governments, Kim II Sung's death (1994), a succession of natural catastrophes, and the accumulation of inefficiencies in the socialist economy (Kim, 2014).

3.0 The Status Quo

3.1 Violence North Korean Women Face

According to the conclusions of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, a number of human rights abuses against women have

occurred, putting them in a vulnerable position. Women and girls have been more exposed to human trafficking, transactional sex and prostitution, detention, and, in some circumstances, sexual abuse, especially during intrusive body searches, as a result of violations of their right to food and freedom of movement. Many women are trafficked into or inside China from the DPRK for exploitation in forced marriage or concubinage, as well as prostitution under pressure (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2014). These findings are evidence of the horror the women of the country have to go through. It is heartbreaking to see that even if a woman tries to rise up her status and engage in economic activities, she would still face violations by third parties while travelling to other regions to find goods and sell them in the markets. "*To escape this, women often looked for male partners but would be the prey of other forms of violence because of them*" (*The Battered Wheel Of The Revolution: Briefing Report On The Situation Of Violence Against North Korean Women*, 2011). What makes things more worrisome is that heinous crimes like domestic violence, which, according to the authorities, "are *not a social problem in the DPRK* " do not get labelled as a crime at all. Even though the Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Women (LPPRW) prohibits violence against women including domestic violence, it fails to provide a clear definition of '*domestic violence*,' or any specific provision to prosecute and to protect victims (Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 2017).

Mere talks about the rights and necessities that each and every individual requires are clearly not enough. There have been numerous incidents of violation of basic human rights around the globe. Listing the rights is one thing and the implementation of the same is a totally different thing. Many countries fail to do so, be it developed or developing nations. Freedom in the World Report 2021 which rated people's access to political rights and civil liberties in 210 countries found North Korea to be "*not free*" (Freedom House, n.d.). This essentially makes one conclude that North Korea is one of the repressive countries in the world and hence one wouldn't be shocked to see the distressing status quo of the women residing there. Female night shift employees have been sexually assaulted by intruders such as college students or kotjebi

(homeless young beggars), and also by their superiors. A 2010-2013 survey carried out by Korea Institute for National Unification, revealed that 49.0 percent of respondents of the survey who were North Koreans who fled to South Korea said that sexual violence and sexual harassment against women were frequent, 565 and 39.9 percent said they were not frequent. 566 in the 2013 survey, 42.1 percent (24 out of 57 answers) said sex violence and sexual harassment were frequent, and 45.6 percent (26 out of 57 answers) said they were not frequent (Center for North Korean Human Rights Studies, KINU, 2014). Needless to say, incidents of sexual abuse, enslavement, forced abortion, domestic violence, etc. are as common as dirt in the streets of North Korea. "*In other words, the conflation of power with masculinity and disempowerment with femininity reproduces hegemonic gendered formations that preclude alternative formulations of gendered subjects.*" (Kim, 2014)

Throughout times women all around the globe have faced violence against them. However, in a country like North Korea which is politically isolated and highly censors its media, the lives of the women can be worse than we can ever imagine. There aren't enough reports that can entail the atrocities this section of people are facing. It is so horrifying that there have been instances of rape by an official authority or even a fellow colleague who the women have been trusting for years. In an interview with Human Watch, Oh Jung Hee who left the country in 2014 told that: "*I was a victim many times … On the days they felt like it, market guards or police officials could ask me to follow them to an empty room outside the market, or some other place they'd pick. What can we do? They consider us [sex] toys … We [women] are at the mercy of men. Now, women cannot survive without having men with power near them.*" (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

There must be many Oh Jung Hees still living in the country who do not have the power to report these abuses, who are not given any legal remedies. They have no justice's door to knock on and are left with no option but to stay quiet about the horrifying atrocities they face and are scarred for their entire lives. Even though there exist legal facilities like the Women's Rights Act which was enacted in 2010 but the Act itself is faulty and makes its effectiveness unlikely. "*The Act*

omits definitions, lacks attention to gender stereotyping in society or sexual harassment, and might exist on paper only, without a serious intent of implementation." (Hosaniak, 2013).

3.2 Education

"*Education in North Korea is controlled by the government*" (*Education and Literacy in Korea*, n.d.). Students in North Korea are taught to foster loyalty towards the dictatorship. In case of disagreements, they are humiliated in front of the entire school, for not adhering to the so-called '*Great Leader*'. Verbal and physical attacks are how the school days looked like. The literacy rates are shown to be as high as 99% for both girls and boys. However, the statistical figures fail to shed any light on the qualitative aspect of education imparted there. All the subjects are centred around the greatness of their leader. While learning any new language the first word is usually their leader's name. This is how deeply loyalty is instilled amongst these young minds. Animated cartoons such as "*Boy General*" and "*The Squirrel and the Hedgehog*" educate youngsters to despise and exclude capitalist countries at all times, while also indoctrinating them to believe that North Korea is the finest country on the planet (*Forced to Hate*, n.d.).

"*Until the late 19th Century most Korean women were excluded from obtaining literacy because society dismissed the intellectual capabilities of women*." (Choi, 2016). For the longest time Korean women were equated to motherhood and expected to obey the males of the family. Being submissive and homemaker was a natural role assigned to the gender. It would be faulty on our part to assume that the society did not see any changes. Article 3 of Gender Equality Law states "*Women have the same rights as men to workers' rights, equal wages, social insurance, and education*." The enactment of such a law might have seen some developments for the women's education sector. Women accounted for 80 per cent of the elementary school teachers, while the figures for middle and high school, technical school, and college were 35 percent, 30 percent, and 15 percent, respectively. Women made up just 14.6 percent of professionals and technicians in 1963, but by 1989, they accounted for more than 37 percent (Kim, 1990) (Park, 1992). Kim

Hwa Suk, who had graduated from compulsory education (senior middle school), decided to work in the fields as a regular farmer in a cooperative located in the P'yongyang suburbs, and gradually rose to positions of responsibility as her talents and dedication became known, was profiled in an August 1991 article in the official newspaper P'yongyang Times. She was also elected to the Supreme People's Assembly as a delegate (Savada, 1993). However, it looked that women were not entirely liberated during the majority of the 1990s. Daughters were still valued above sons. In addition to working outside the home, women undertook the majority, if not all, of the housework, including cooking a morning and evening meal. (1993, Savada)

However, hunger caused a significant reduction in school attendance in the 1990s. In the following years, the rates increased to the point that children whose mothers work in the private sector frequently attend school. However, education remained expensive for women who had children as the state provided nothing. It is usual for low-income mothers to expect their young daughters to assist with private activities and learn the market business rather than completing their education after high school. It is both a relic of ancient patriarchal social customs and a reflection of the country's economic realities, in which a young woman is expected to marry promptly, give up her official job and support her family through private economic activity. Such parents believe that investing in a female child's education is pointless because women can earn money without it. The burden is always placed on the girls while boys are expected to stay in school and not participate in private activities (Hosaniak, 2013).

3.3 Health and Medical Facilities

"*North Koreans received better medical care under Kim II Sung than they do these days*." (Shim, 2020) Tae-el Shim, a North Korean defector, writes about the healthcare system in DPRK. He says during the 1970s and 1980s, people enjoyed free medical treatment in stark contrast to the contemporary times when the healthcare system was restricted to the higher income groups. Wages earned by labourers are very low while the compensation bribes to the hospital staff are huge. Tae-el Shim further writes, "*North Koreans see their lives as left to fate. They no longer expect anything from the government in terms of health care*". Having said that,

one would simply fail to visualize the plight of women's healthcare in DPRK (Shim, 2020). Maternal deaths are defined as the annual number of female deaths from any cause related to or aggravated by the pregnancy or its management (excluding accidental or incidental causes) during pregnancy, childbirth, or within 42 days of termination of pregnancy, regardless of the duration and location of the pregnancy (World Health Organization, n.d.). North Korea's maternal mortality rate for 2017 was 89.00, a 1.11% decline from 2016 (North Korea Maternal Mortality Rate 2000–2021, n.d.).

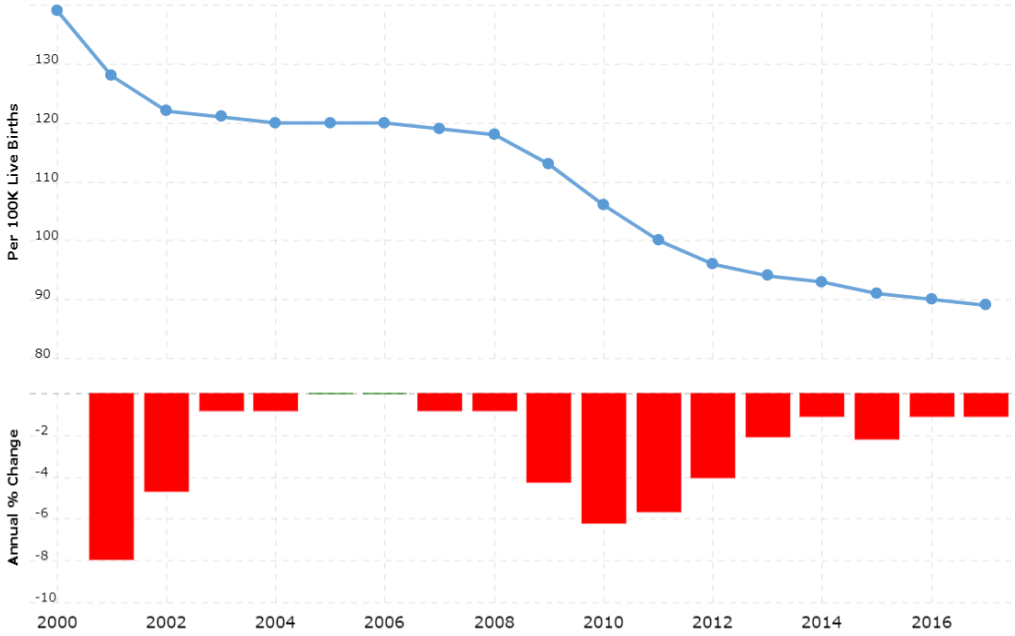

Fig 1.0: Maternal Mortality Rate in North Korea

Source: *North Korea Maternal Mortality Rate 2000–2021, n.d.*

The maternal mortality ratio has significantly declined from being as high as 139 in 2000 to nearly 89 in 2017. The annual percentage change has fluctuated over the years but has declined over the past decade.

"The fertility rate is the average number of children a hypothetical cohort of women would have at the end of their reproductive period if they were subject during their whole lives to the fertility

rates of a given period and if they were not subject to mortality." (*Indicator Metadata Registry Details*, n.d.). High fertility rates are associated with increased hazards to maternal health because the intervals between pregnancies are reduced. According to the world population report by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the total fertility rate for women in North Korea in 2021 was 1.9, way below the global average of 2.3 (*My Body Is My Own*, 2021). "*At one time, the country praised mothers with many children as 'heroines' and praised their fertility as 'patriotic,' but the burden of raising children is so great that most families now acknowledge that they have to be more in control of pregnancy and childbirth to match with their means*," says a resident of Hyesan in an interview with Radio Free Asia. There might be several reasons for this change of attitude but the major reason is the serious food crisis that has been grappling the nation on and off since the 90s (Whong, 2021).

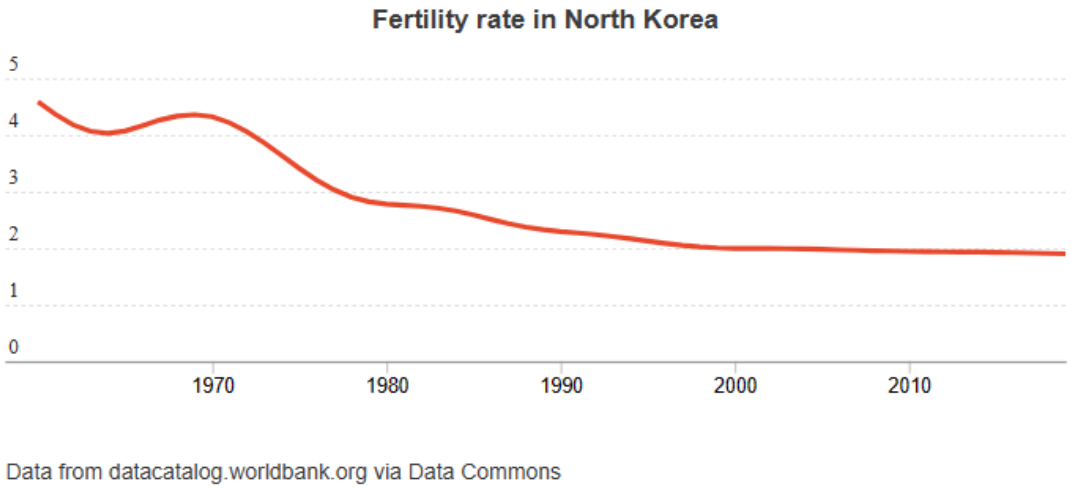

Fig 2: Fertility Rate in North Korea

Source: *Datacommons, n.d*

Women in North Korea have also been subjected to high-risk reproductive health circumstances including unsafe abortion, inadequate contraceptive usage and accompanying problems like a lack of prenatal and postpartum care and hunger. Most have purchased contraceptives in the black market with neither the side-effects nor any guidelines being mentioned. There aren't any

means of sexual awareness amongst the youth, making them unaware of sex education which aggravates the issue (Kim et al., n.d.). Cervical cancer is a type of cancer that occurs in the cells of the cervix which is the lower part of the uterus (Mayoclinic, n.d.). It is very common in women, particularly in under-developed nations. To a lot of women in DPRK, this term would be foreign. Since they are unaware of breast and cervical cancers, no tests are done in North Korea. Thus, no cancer deaths are also recorded; they are also not aware of sexually transmitted diseases like HIV. North Korean refugee women are frequently involved in human trafficking and sexual exploitation during migration (Kim, 2009). This increases the risks to the reproductive health of a woman. It is only upon their arrival in South Korea that they are diagnosed with the gynaecological problems they have been facing for years. They are then completely unaware of the heavy medical terms that the doctors associate them with. A recent report on the human papillomavirus (HPV) and related cancers among North Korean women revealed that the crude incidence rate of cervical cancer is 15.0 per 100,000 (Bruni et al., 2015), greater than the average incidence rates around the world (Kim, et al.,2017)

Article 11 of North Korea's Public Health Law outlines the state obligation to provide "*deep attention to the health protection of women and children*" (*The Crumbling State of Health Care in North Korea*, 2010). However, the prolonged food shortages in DPRK adversely affected women and children, contradicting the state law. Famines have a significant impact on a person's mental health in addition to their physical well-being. This deteriorates the reproductive health of women, leading to falling birth rates and negatively affecting newborns. "*The prolonged famine and economic aggravation is an ongoing obstacle to improving fertility and reproductive health conditions in North Korea*" (Kim et al., n.d.). Women and children comprise the vulnerable section and hence are affected miserably during a national crisis.

3.4 Economic Opportunities

In 2019, North Korea ranked 12 among 181 countries in female labour force participation rates (*North Korea: Female Labour Force Participation*, n.d.). The labour force participation rate is the proportion of the population aged 15 and up who are economically active, defined as

all people who supply labour for the production of goods and services over a given time period. (*North Korea: Female Labor Force Participation*, n.d.). Despite the seemingly impressive rankings, there lie truths to be uncovered. Since Kim Jong Un's ascension to power, North Korea has pushed women to work at a policy level and attempted to integrate women into the formal labour force by promoting exceptional female professionals. However, a survey carried out in November 2008 by Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland of 300 North Korean refugees living in South Korea has revealed that there is a gendered division of labour in the form of male-official labour vs. female-unofficial labour divide (Haggard & Nolan, 2011). This means that there are very limited job fields where North Korean women can find jobs (Cho et al., 2020).

When we look at the past we find at the party's Fifth Congress in 1970, the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) made alleviation from the severe burden of domestic work a primary objective. This is reflected in Article 62 of the Socialist Constitution of 1972, which includes paid maternity leave, maternity hospitals, free nurseries and kindergartens, and reduced working hours for mothers with big families (however what was meant by big families is ambiguous). Simultaneously, the Child Nursing and Upbringing Law of 1976 and the Socialist Labor Law of 1978 stipulated that women with three or more children under the age of thirteen be paid for eight hours of labour for six hours of work. The legislation made it plain that it was the state's and society's obligation to nurture children and safeguard working women (Park, 1992).
"*When the famine began in the early 1990s, it was the women who took responsibility for family survival, going out to sell products and exchange goods*" (Lim, 2018). After the 1990s economic crisis hit North Korea the entire labour situation changed. All the members of the family started working irrespective of their gender. Even before the crisis women were earning low wages but the crisis made it even harder for women to earn. Women were first on the list for staff reductions, leading many of them to pursue careers in commerce. Engaging in sideline economic activities while continuing their regular jobs and managing household chores and child care became the two major roles of a woman during the 90s. They also started selling homegrown vegetables in the market at going rates or trading them with industrial products. This provided

them with greater economic self-sufficiency **(**Kim, 2014). North Korean women were also engaged in private trades like the illegal purchase of goods from Korean-Chinese in border areas and resale in North Korea at a premium, sale of homemade rice cakes, bread, or noodles in (unauthorized) stalls etc. (Bae, 2010).

Women faced discrimination on the basis of the biological differences that prevailed between the two genders. Since the beginning of time, women have been considered to be 'weak', 'submissive', 'docile', and whatnot and this affects their career choices too. Single women in North Korea, according to female defectors, utilize bribery, sicknesses and false marriages to quit their official positions and rush into the market. Married women who worked in official occupations prior to marriage are more likely to quit working after marriage and work in the informal sector (Cho et al., 2020).

4.0 Migration

4.1 Violence Faced While Migrating

The North Korean/China border region is sometimes depicted as a centre of recent North Korean migration, which began in the aftermath of the early 1990s famine and escalated as poverty and economic woes became a permanent component of the North Korean economy (Smith, n.d.). At a TEDtalk Lee Hyunseo, a North Korean activist and an author mentioned how she was sent to China to live at her relative's during the mid 90s famine. She also talks about the horrors of the famine: "*A lifeless woman was lying on the ground, while an emaciated child in her arms just stared helplessly at his mother's face. But nobody helped them because they were so focused on taking care of themselves and their families*" (TED, 2013). North Korea asserts that between 225,000 and 235,000 people died as a result of the famine, although outside assessments suggest that the figure could be as high as 3.5 million (Fuhrman, 2021). But escaping the country isn't easy: Sunny, a North Korean defector in an interview with Asian Boss tells that a person trying to escape the country has to cross either the Tumen River or the Amnok River. She shares her own experience of walking the frozen river in the cold month of February.

She added that North Korean soldiers would be underground pointing guns through holes. So in order to not get caught, people have to pay the nearby soldiers in advance and tell them to not shoot while they are escaping (Boss, 2016).

But life did not get easier for the women who escaped to China; a lot of women were forced into sex slavery. Jihyun who escaped North Korea twice tells in an interview with LADbibble TV that when she escaped to China she was threatened to get married to a Chinese man and if she didn't do so, she was told that she would be sent to the police. She was then sold to a Chinese farmer (Tv, 2021). For each woman they deliver to a buyer, traffickers can earn between 1,000 and 10,000 yuan (120 to 1,200 euros). If these women live with Chinese men, it is much simpler for them to remain disguised in China and obtain work, which is usually in the service industry, but they are still illegal immigrants (Eschborn & Apel, 2014). The women trying to escape risk their lives to cross the river. A person might get shot by the soldiers while they are trying to escape or might be publicly executed. When Kim Jong-II was in charge, it was only those who were caught trying to escape that were executed. But after Kim Jong-Un came to power, if one person got caught, the whole family was subjected to death (Boss, 2016). Brokers are also available that assist persons in escaping in exchange for a fee. Because the process is risky, these individuals demand a large sum of money. However, due to the pandemic and increased security, the commission has increased. Prices have skyrocketed as a result of the heightened risk. According to some Seoul-based defectors and activists, remittance brokers used to charge roughly 30% commission before the outbreak, but that figure is now closer to 50% (Gallo & Lee, 2021).

4.2 Problems Faced in the Country They Escape To

According to the Unification Ministry in South Korea, in 2017 there were 31,093 defectors registered with them and out of which 71% were women. Life is not easy for these North Korean women even after they escape and try building their new life in a completely new country. Many are stigmatized as aliens, face discrimination and suffer from depression and anxiety. "*I had no idea what to do, I had no friends. I stayed at home all weekend. I was always*

depressed then" tells Nara, a North Korean defector. (DIMPLE, 2020) South Korea is a fast-moving country with its flashy culture and anyone fleeing from North Korea whose culture is contrastingly different from South Korea might face difficulties adjusting to the culture. Women in North Korea already become victims of human trafficking and sexual violence and resettling and the difficulties that entail it makes these women more susceptible to mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and PTSD.

When we look at the refugee situation in China, the exact number of North Korean migrants and asylum seekers in China is unknown. The Chinese government often recognises North Koreans as illegal "*economic migrants*" and forcibly repatriates them under a bilateral border treaty signed in 1986. As a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, as well as the UN Convention Against Torture, China is obligated not to deport anybody who would be subjected to repression or brutality if they returned. But China has been time and again forcefully sending back North Korean refugees (Yoon, 2021). The uncertainty of being sent back to the hell they escaped and being labelled illegal makes the reality for young North Koreans in China bleak. To avoid being discovered, those fleeing stay at home all day. They are unable to work. They are always concerned about their family, whether they are in North Korea or China. As a survival tactic, women seeking to reside in China hunt for Chinese men to marry through brokers or directly. Although they may find love, they are also at risk of being trafficked or sold to brothels. Sixty per cent of female North Korean migrants are sold into the sex trade, with the majority being sold many times. Around 30% of women sold into the sex trade end up in forced marriages, 50% in prostitution, and 15% in cybersex (using the internet for sexual reasons, particularly through the exchange of sexual messages with another person) dens (Collins Dictionary, n.d.) (Engstran et al., n.d.).

4.3 Aim Available For Them

North Koreans are recognised as South Korean citizens by the South Korean Constitution. Despite being entitled to South Korean citizenship, once North Koreans arrive in

South Korea, a formal evaluation is launched to determine the individual's North Korean citizenship. The process involves a thorough background check where determining why the individual decided to leave North Korea is the key. If they are determined to be non-suspicious, the defectors are moved to Hanawon, a resettlement centre in Ansong, where they stay for three months before their status as South Korean citizens is made official (Poorman, 2019). During this time, defectors are taught about South Korean life in a span of three months. The lessons include how to take public transportation, how to open a bank account and lessons on democracy and capitalism. Some defectors even elect to do a homestay with a South Korean family to acclimate to the country. According to the Ministry of Unification, the Republic of Korea the Settlement benefits provided to North Korean refugees KRW 8 million for a single-person household, a maximum of KRW 25.1 million for those who receive vocational training, obtain a certificate of qualification, or get a job and a maximum of KRW 15.4 million for seniors aged 60 years or older, the mentally or physically challenged, people in long-term medical treatment, children of single parents and children born in third countries (Ministry of Unification, n.d.). For housing support, the government helps with arranging rental apartments along with a subsidy of KRW 16 million for a single-person household. Other benefits include a vocational training allowance (Ministry of Employment and Labor), half of the pay (up to half a million won) per worker for a maximum of four years, offering career counseling and job placement at 65 employment centers nationwide, exemption from tuition for those enrolled in middle school, high school, a national or public university and subsidizing 50% of tuition for study at a private university etc. (Ministry of Unification, n.d.).

North Korean refugees are given $200 worth of food stamps and $250 in cash for up to eight months after arrival, according to Grace Jo, who has fled North Korea three times and now lives in the United States. As a result, they must fund all of their living expenditures, including rent, which is significantly greater than the amount they receive. Young individuals find it simpler to adjust to a new culture and language, whereas elderly people find it more difficult. Gracy spent nine months at ENoK's Empower House, which provided her with lodging and food while also

assisting her in improving her English and completing the equivalent of an American high school so she could begin college (Son & Hong, 2018).

North Korean defectors have been hiding across Northeast and Southeast Asia to evade forcible repatriation by the People's Republic of China and neighbouring countries, exposing themselves to human rights violations. While North Korean nationals in South Korea have been granted legal citizenship, many North Korean asylum seekers in other countries have not (Kang, 2013). Despite international pressure to campaign for universal human rights for North Koreans, the concerned nations continue to enforce refugee rules to serve their own political and economic objectives. As a result, since refugee rights are shaped by the political and economic objectives of interested states, as well as international relations, North Koreans' position is precarious and jeopardized (Kang, 2013).

5.0 Recommendations

There are various factors that have put women of North Korea in a vulnerable position in the past as well as in the status quo. While past injustices cannot be rectified, the present, which inherits the issues of the past, may certainly be improved. To combat the violations conducted against women in North Korea the following solutions can be taken into consideration:

- The state should acknowledge human rights violations, which includes prison camps and detention centres. The state should also provide access to international humanitarian groups and human rights monitors to the camps and their surviving victims on an urgent basis. All political prison camps should be disassembled and all political prisoners should be released (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2014).
- The state should produce reports including accurate information about females attending schools, as well as follow-up on the services offered to them if they come from a low-income family.
- The legal remedies available to women who are victims of sexual and/or domestic abuse should be revised. Ensure that women reporting abuse have their identities protected and

that the accused, if proven guilty, be held accountable for their conduct regardless of their socioeconomic background. To put it another way, the state should ensure that the law applies equally to everyone.

- Proper implementation of the Women's Rights Act 2010 should be looked into along with the inclusion of a definition of the phrase "discrimination against women". Effective anti-discrimination measures require a precise definition of discrimination that is consistently implemented and identifies the actions and behaviours that constitute discrimination (Forster & Jivan, 2009).
- The formation of multinational groups with volunteers from all over the globe, with the primary goal of offering relief to North Korean women who have been sexually abused. International pressure would force North Korea to take stronger measures to protect women's rights in the country.
- China should recognize the refugee status of North Korean refugees and work towards providing them with aid. The state should also recognize the marriages of North Korean women with Chinese men and provide citizenship to these women.
- Raising awareness about the stigmas surrounding North Korean refugees in South Korea so that resettlers can start their lives without fear of prejudice.

6.0 Conclusion

The peninsula of Korea saw patriarchy being deeply entrenched in the social system in the past and how it still can be blamed for the contemporary ideologies that North Korea dearly follows like the idea of "Supreme Leader". This also has shown an effect on the roles women the North Korean society expects women to take up. The paper traced the history of the pain and suffering these Korean women have been going through and investigated if or not the contemporary scenario is any better for them. North Korea fails at acknowledging the atrocities the women go through in their own country and sometimes in their own office or neighbourhood. The state fails to recognize and serve justice to these victims. The state also fails women at providing adequate education, medical facilities and economic opportunities. The paper goes on

to highlight the struggles these over-burdened women face while escaping. In addition to the difficulties faced during migration, the refugees undergo even more exploitation in the new country. The South Korean government supports the migrants to some extent, on the other hand, the plight of the refugees in China is miserable. The Chinese government routinely labels North Koreans as illegal "*economic migrants*" and forcibly repatriates them under a 1986 bilateral border protocol (Yoon, 2021). It is critical that the respective international authorities firmly take the required actions to provide justice to these violated individuals. Also, it is extremely critical for the North Korean government and the neighbouring countries, where the migrants usually escape to, to act in line with Human Rights and sacredly uphold the values that it suggests.

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