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**Different Chains, Same Vulnerability: North Korean Women in North Korea and North
Korean Women Defectors in China**

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In 2023, Statista, a global platform that specializes in providing statistics, ranked North Korea as the country with the lowest human rights index, solidifying what those who have been following North Korean politics have long claimed: Of the world's 195 countries, North Korea is the locus of the worst human rights crisis in the world.¹ Out of one hundred points, Freedom House, a non-profit organization that advocates for democracy and human rights, gave North Korea a Global Freedom Score of 3/100.

Yet the most prevalent topics in Western media surrounding North Korea have consistently been non-humanitarian issues. Popular media, whether that be news publications or online entertainment, predominantly portrays North Korea as a nuclear threat ruled by a widely memed dictator. A *Washington Post* article from the 2000s began with a verse meant to be sung to the tune of "My Favorite Things" from the movie *The Sound of Music*.² The ditty highlights North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong Un's lavish taste:³

Fake fur and real fur and jewelry and jet skis

Crystal and Segways and bubbly and Caddies

Race cars and leather and plasma TVs—

These are a few of Kim's favorite things.

As another example, in April 2025, YouTuber and Scottish citizen Lewis Buchan uploaded a video of his participation in the Pyongyang Marathon, an annual event held in North

¹ "Countries with the lowest Human Rights Index scores as of 2023 Human rights index 0.020.02 0.050.05 0.060.06 0.110.11 0.110.11 0.130.13 0.130.13 0.150.15 0.170.17 0.170.17 0.180.18 0.180.18 0.190.19 0.210.21 0.210.21 North Korea Afghanistan Eritrea Turkmenistan Myanmar Nicaragua Syria Laos Saudi Arabia China Eswatini Tajikistan Rwanda South Sudan Belarus 00.0250.050.0750.10.1250.150.1750.20.2250.25 Afghanistan • 0.05 Expand statistic Additional Information © Statista 2026 Show source," Statista, last modified 2023, accessed February 8, 2026, https://www.statista.com/statistics/1255578/lowest-human-rights-scores-by-country/?srsltid=AfmBOop7uLQH_jjC_yhM1HtozrT0rFvHaJks7gmKymSlpJTh7n2erw-Z.

² Hugh Gusterton, "Paranoid, Potbellied Stalinist Gets Nuclear Weapons: How the U.S. Print Media Cover North Korea," *Nonproliferation Review* 15, no. 1 (2008): 30, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/journals/npr/v15i1/f_0015579_13590.pdf.

³ Gusterton, "Paranoid, Potbellied," 30.

Korea's capital.⁴ In his video, Buchan repeatedly referenced common images and stereotypes that came up concerning the country.⁵ Alluding to Kim's stout figure, for instance, Buchan joked that if Kim were to run the marathon, he would not likely be able to run very far.⁶

According to Kyung Hye Kim, a scholar of media translation, these examples aren't terribly unique. Hye Kim used concordance lines—a list of sentences that shows all the times a word, phrase, or clause appears in a piece of work—to draw conclusions about how US news depicted North Korea.⁷ She found the concordance lines by using certain phrases such as “North Korea” or “countries like North Korea” as search terms.⁸ As a result, Kim discovered that, of the 179 concordance lines that came up for the phrase “countries like North Korea,” more than forty percent of the lines featured North Korea alongside Iran, and the most common phrases that recurred throughout these lines were “missile defence against,” “threat from,” and “attack.”⁹ Kim concluded that US news media frequently portrayed North Korea as “a threat to the international community.”¹⁰

European newspapers were not much different. Scholars Max Nurnus and Maël Alan van Beek found that the most common way in which media platforms depicted North Korea was as a belligerent nation with an authoritarian dictatorship.¹¹ In contrast, North Korea's humanitarian

⁴ Maren Dunn, "Marathons, memes, and misunderstanding: The West's flawed view of North Korea," NK Insider, last modified August 27, 2025, accessed September 8, 2025, <https://www.nkinsider.org/marathons-memes-and-misunderstanding-the-wests-flawed-view-of-north-korea/>.

⁵ Dunn, "Marathons, memes," NK Insider.

⁶ Dunn, "Marathons, memes," NK Insider.

⁷ Kyung Hye Kim, "Examining US news media discourses about North Korea: A corpus-based critical discourse analysis," *JSTOR*, last modified March 2014, https://www.jstor.org/tc/accept?origin=%2Fstable%2Fpdf%2F24441496.pdf&is_image=False.

⁸ Kim, "Examining US news."

⁹ Kim, "Examining US news."

¹⁰ Kim, "Examining US news."

¹¹ Max Nurnus and Maël 'Alan' van Beek, "North Korea in the European Press: An Analysis of Stereotypes in British, French, and German Newspapers," *The Yonsei Journal*, accessed September 8, 2025, https://theyonseijournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/YJIS-Fall_Winter-2016-NORTH-KOREA-IN-THE-EUROPEAN-PRESS-AN-ANALYSIS-OF-STEREOTYPES-IN-BRITISH-FRENCH-AND-GERMAN-NEWSPAPERS.pdf.

issue was brought up much more infrequently.¹² Indeed, North Korea's inhumane treatment of its people remains a topic that is widely unknown and oversimplified. A 2018 Care International study concluded that North Korea's human rights crisis was "the least reported" across the globe.¹³

As a result of the sidelining of North Korea's humanitarian emergency, another relevant and crucial issue has been underrepresented in the Western media's narrative of North Korea: the vulnerability of women. Deeply intertwined with the country's dire human rights situation, gender discrimination runs rampant throughout North Korea and, as the most common escape route for North Korean refugees, in China.

Aside from the media's overrepresentation of North Korea's nuclear weapons and authoritarian system, there remains another key reason women's rights violations in North Korea have received comparatively less attention. That is, it has been a consistent challenge to gather information regarding how women are treated in North Korea.¹⁴ The North Korean regime very rarely publishes data on North Korean society, and conducting research within North Korea's borders has been hindered by the regime's strict border controls ever since the arrival of COVID-19.¹⁵ Therefore, most information on gender injustice in North Korea has originated from anecdotal reports, whether that be from residents of North Korea or, more commonly, from North Koreans who fled the country.¹⁶

¹² Nurnus and van Beek, "North Korea," The Yonsei Journal.

¹³ Rebecca Ratcliffe, "This article is more than 7 years old North Korea tops list of world's most neglected humanitarian crises," The Guardian, last modified January 23, 2018, accessed September 8, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/jan/23/north-korea-tops-list-most-neglected-humanitarian-crises>.

¹⁴ Sang Yong Lee, "The Dire State of Women's Rights in North Korea," The Diplomat, last modified April 18, 2024, accessed September 8, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/04/the-dire-state-of-womens-rights-in-north-korea>.

¹⁵ "Gender equality and discrimination against women in North Korea," HanVoice, last modified August 3, 2022, accessed August 13, 2025, <https://hanvoice.ca/blog/gender-equality>.

¹⁶ Lee, "The Dire," The Diplomat.

This paper explores how the lives of women in North Korea compare to or differ from the lives of North Korean women defectors in China. I argue that, although China and North Korea are politically distinct countries, patriarchy enables men to control women's lives and bodies in both contexts, by means of different mechanisms. Such a decision would have a crucial impact on the freedom of North Korean citizens, making their escape much safer and easier. I make this argument by means of explaining the present situation regarding women's rights violations in North Korea and China, then by synthesizing existing literature and analyzing defector testimonies circulating in various forms of media.

Women in North Korea

As a result of deeply rooted patriarchal beliefs, North Korean women face harsh discrimination in numerous aspects of society. Women are governed by absurd restrictions that do not apply to men—for instance, women are prohibited from riding bicycles¹⁷—and countless women endure sexual abuse as part of their daily life.¹⁸ Men in official positions of power, such as government officials, prison guards, police, and soldiers, regularly take advantage of their elevated status to prey on women.¹⁹ Domestic violence is equally rampant,²⁰ with approximately seventy percent of women having been continually subjected to violence from their husbands in 2018. Because domestic violence is considered a “private matter,”²¹ the vast majority of cases are not

¹⁷ Daniel Defraia, “North Korea Bans Women from Riding Bicycles...Again,” CNBC, January 17, 2013, <https://www.cnbc.com/2013/01/17/north-korea-bans-women-from-riding-bicyclesagain.html>.

¹⁸ “‘They Considered US Toys’: North Korean Women Reveal Extent of Sexual Violence,” The Guardian, November 1, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/01/north-korea-women-sexual-violence-report>.

¹⁹ Lina Yoon, “‘You Cry at Night But Don’t Know Why,’” Human Rights Watch, May 6, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/11/01/you-cry-night-dont-know-why/sexual-violence-against-women-north-korea>.

²⁰ “Document Viewer,” United Nations, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://docs.un.org/en/E/CN.6/2023/NGO/163>.

²¹ GE.24-08690 (E) human rights council fifty-second session, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g24/082/60/pdf/g2408260.pdf>.

reported—even those that happen in public.²² In fact, domestic violence has become so normalized in North Korea that many women perceive the cruelty they suffer as natural.²³

Moreover, there is little indication that these circumstances are changing, for North Korea has failed to take adequate measures to protect its women. Despite domestic laws that criminalize gender discrimination,²⁴ as well as women’s rights-related international treaties that North Korea has signed, the country has not stayed true to what it has promised on paper.²⁵ A Daily NK survey, in which thirty women residing in North Korea participated, found that approximately seventy percent of the respondents had never heard of North Korea’s Law on the Protection and Promotion of Women's Rights, which enumerates basic protections for women.²⁶ Many women do not even understand the concept of sexual abuse.²⁷

However, women living in North Korea do not have the power to speak up against the injustices they face. The fact that the police officers themselves are often the abusers makes victims afraid of approaching them for fear of having to suffer again.²⁸ In addition, there is a strong stigma around being a victim of sexual violence,²⁹ compelling women to stay silent on the

²² “Submission on Rights of Women and Girls in North Korea for the Special Rapporteur’s Report to the 52nd Human Rights Council Session in March 2023,” Human Rights Watch, February 6, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/21/submission-rights-women-and-girls-north-korea-special-rapporteurs-report-52nd-human>.

²³ “The Price of Freedom,” IWMF, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://www.iwmf.org/reporting/the-price-of-freedom>.

²⁴ Kinu, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://repo.kinu.or.kr/bitstream/2015.oak/2345/1/0001469026.pdf>.

²⁵ Jina Yang, “Women’s Rights in the DPRK: Discrepancies between International and Domestic Legal Instruments in Promoting Women’s Rights and the Reality Reflected by North Korean Defectors,” Legal Information Institute, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/cilj/vol51/iss1/6/>.

²⁶ Global Human Rights Defence and Valentina Palcovicova, “Women’s Rights and Gender Inequality in North Korea: The Impact of State Policies and Social Norms,” Global Human Rights Defence, October 30, 2025, <https://www.ghrd.org/womens-rights-and-gender-inequality-in-north-korea-the-impact-of-state-policies-and-social-norms/>.

²⁷ “North Korea Women Suffer Serious Sexual Abuse but No ‘Metoo,’” AP News, April 20, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/342392fc30c747d0a586f1576bb71cac>.

²⁸ International Women’s Media Foundation, “*The Price of Freedom*,” International Women’s Media Foundation, accessed January X, 2026, <https://www.iwmf.org/reporting/the-price-of-freedom>

²⁹ Park Young Hee, “North Korea: Sexual Violence against Women by Officials,” Human Rights Watch, January 29, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/11/01/north-korea-sexual-violence-against-women-officials>.

matter. Therefore, as Human Rights Watch executive director Kenneth Roth stated,³⁰ North Korean women do not have the chance to say “MeToo,” despite the worldwide #MeToo movement through which survivors of sexual abuse have shared their stories.³¹

Additionally, as a totalitarian regime whose power depends on the loyalty of its people, North Korea harshly punishes those who criticize the country or express dissent. Ironically, while North Korea would undoubtedly punish those who point out the country’s rampant sexual violence, it has done very little to punish the actual perpetrators of sexual violence.³² In 2015, in fact, only five people were convicted of rape in North Korea.³³ In 2021, the government stated that “the DPRK [had] achieved gender equality [a] long time ago,” the blatantly false claim indicating the extent to which the state is willing to deny sexism in North Korea.³⁴

North Korea is a totalitarian country with a cult of personality revolving around the ruling Kim Dynasty: North Korea’s founder, Kim Il Sung, son Kim Jong Il, and grandson Kim Jong Un. To maintain the Kim family’s dictatorial rule, the North Korean government indoctrinates its citizens with the belief that North Korea’s system is superior to that of other countries in all respects.³⁵ Through relentless propaganda, people are brainwashed to believe outrageous myths,³⁶ one claiming, for instance, that Kim Jong Il was able to drive a car from the age of three.³⁷

³⁰ “North Korea Women Suffer Serious Sexual Abuse but No ‘Metoo,’” AP News, April 20, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/342392fc30c747d0a586f1576bb71cac>.

³¹ “‘Me Too’ Global Movement - What Is the ‘Me Too’ Movement,” Global Fund for Women, April 15, 2025, <https://www.globalfundforwomen.org/movements/me-too/>.

³² “UN: North Korea Commits ‘Unspeakable Atrocities,’” PBS, January 20, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/un-north-korea-commits-unspeakable-atrocities/>.

³³ “UN: North Korea Commits ‘Unspeakable Atrocities,’” PBS, January 20, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/un-north-korea-commits-unspeakable-atrocities/>.

³⁴ HanVoice, “Gender Equality and Discrimination against Women in North Korea,” HanVoice, November 27, 2022, <https://hanvoice.ca/blog/gender-equality>.

³⁵ “The North Korean People’s Challenges,” The North Korean People’s Challenges, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://libertyinnorthkorea.org/learn-nk-challenges>

³⁶ Gill, “North Korea: The Role of Propaganda in the Sustainability of the Kim Regime,” DG, January 1, 1970, <https://repository.digital.georgetown.edu/handle/10822/557700>.

³⁷ “The Wall Street Journal,” Facebook, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://www.facebook.com/WSJ/posts/north-koreas-totalitarian-leaders-have-long-fed-the-population-bland-propaganda-1126074609379135/>.

The government's Propaganda and Agitation Department (PAD), the government body that spreads all propaganda, controls the entirety of North Korea's media, from news outlets to arts and entertainment.³⁸ Almost all of North Korea's movies have nothing to do with telling engaging stories; rather, they focus on praising the North Korean regime and telling people that North Korea is a socialist paradise.³⁹ Additionally, North Korean children are taught from their kindergarten days to worship the regime, for PAD controls all of North Korea's schools.⁴⁰ Approximately eighty percent of textbook content exists to glorify the Kim family.⁴¹ Children are taught songs that celebrate the Kim family, and they are continuously told the message that South Korea and the United States are enemies of the state. To prevent its myths and lies from being disproven, North Korea forbids its people from leaving the country.

On Women Defecting

Nevertheless, every year, more than a thousand people escape North Korea, and these refugees are commonly referred to by the media as "defectors."⁴² Most defectors choose to cross the Sino-North Korean border into China as their first step to escape.⁴³ Escaping from North Korea

³⁸ HRNK, accessed January 2, 2026, https://www.hrnk.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/PAD_web.pdf.

³⁹ "North Korean Films," KBS WORLD Radio, accessed January 2, 2026, https://world.kbs.co.kr/special/northkorea/contents/news/closeup_view.htm?lang=e¤t_page=13&No=369948.

⁴⁰ Bryanbetts, "Pioneers, Propaganda and Play: North Korean Children's Education - in Photos: NK News," NK News - North Korea News, December 14, 2021, <https://www.nknews.org/2021/12/pioneers-propaganda-and-play-north-korean-childrens-education-in-photos/>.

⁴¹ "Indoctrination in the Name of Education: A Tool for Maintaining the North Korean Dictatorship," NKHIDDENGULAG, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://www.nkhiddengulag.org/blog/indoctrination-in-the-name-of-education-a-tool-for-maintaining-the-north-korean-dictatorship>

⁴² Andy Hong, "Number of North Korean Defectors Going to South Korea Remains Low, but They Are Receiving Increased Attention," Korea Economic Institute of America, July 30, 2024, <https://keia.org/the-peninsula/number-of-north-korean-defectors-going-to-south-korea-remains-low-but-they-are-receiving-increased-attention/>.

⁴³ By Julia Davatzes, "The Plight of North Korean Refugees in China," Wilson Center, March 6, 2025, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/plight-north-korean-refugees-china>.

directly to South Korea is impossible, for the border is too militarized—it is too easy to be caught by North Korean border guards—for people to make it through.

Yet prior to the Arduous March, a national famine in the 1990s that caused as many as two to three million North Koreans to starve to death,⁴⁴ very few people defected from North Korea. During the decades before the famine, most people relied on North Korea's Public Distribution System (PDS),⁴⁵ a rationing system, for sustenance. But the food shortages brought by the famine caused the PDS to cut its rations increasingly more until the system collapsed entirely.⁴⁶ As a result, the starving citizens could only cultivate or forage for food, markets being illegal. Because the grain crop was all but decimated, people had to find alternatives to what they usually ate.⁴⁷ One of the most popular food substitutes was pine bark cake. Others survived on grass roots⁴⁸ while the government issued propaganda such as "Let's Eat Two Meals A Day!"

Eventually, people were so desperate that they resorted to breaking the law, trading goods at markets called *jangmadang*⁴⁹ until the country witnessed the complex development of a grassroots capitalist economy.⁵⁰ As a deeply patriarchal society, North Korea required its men to

⁴⁴ Korean famine toll: More than 2 million (published 1999), accessed January 2, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/08/20/world/korean-famine-toll-more-than-2-million.html>.

⁴⁵ MPRA Munich Personal Repec Archive Turning Back the clock: The changing, accessed January 2, 2026, https://mpr.ub.uni-muenchen.de/120950/1/MPRA_paper_120950.pdf.

⁴⁶ Nova Mercier Daniel Schwegendiek, "A Contemporary History of North Korea : The Socioeconomic Rise of Women in the Post-Cold War Era as Witnessed in Different Regions: DBpia," Asian Women, November 30, 2016, https://www.dbpia.co.kr/journal/articleDetail?nodeId=NODE07079864&mobileYN=N&mediaTypeCode=185005&isPDFSizeAllowed=true&locale=ko&foreignIpYn=N&articleTitle=A%2BContemporary%2BHistory%2Bof%2BNorth%2BKorea&articleTitleEn=A%2BContemporary%2BHistory%2Bof%2BNorth%2BKorea&voisId=VOIS00291334&voisName=Asian%2BWomen%2BVol.32%2BNo.4&voisCnt=8&searchResultKey=%2FIMfWK6MWZi5N74t6Fqz8Vx3XVara2yNEUSfMKCSqdO6vz6jZIoA1VsGNYq0PUY&language=ko_KR&hasTopBanner=true.

⁴⁷ North Korea's 1990s famine in Historical Perspective - Association for Asian Studies, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/north-koreas-1990s-famine-in-historical-perspective/>.

⁴⁸ "N. Korea's Forestation Policy Reflected in Literature," KBS WORLD Radio, accessed January 2, 2026, http://world.kbs.co.kr/special/northkorea/contents/news/koreatoday_view.htm?lang=e¤t_page=12&No=420832.

⁴⁹ "Official Markets in N. Korea," Official Markets in N. Korea I, December 31, 2025, https://world.kbs.co.kr/service/contents_view.htm?lang=e&menu_cate=northkorea&id=&board_seq=447447.

⁵⁰ Matthew Tsang, "North Korean Market Vendors: The Rise of Grassroots Capitalists in a Post-Stalinist Society," Pacific Affairs (UBC Journal), March 17, 2021, <https://pacificaffairs.ubc.ca/articles/north-korean-market-vendors-the-rise-of-grassroots-capitalists-in-a-post-stalinist-society/>.

work, while women were expected to stay at home and take care of their children.⁵¹ As those who had more time on their hands, women were the ones who primarily traded with each other at markets while their husbands worked at factories.⁵² Because the factories were too poor to provide the men with any salary, women became the main breadwinners of the family, a role that stayed the same in recent years.⁵³

While some survived by making money at markets, others found food by escaping the country. To seek more economic opportunities, many women used their abundant time to cross to China and find work⁵⁴ or trade with Chinese entrepreneurs.⁵⁵ While some women went back and forth between North Korea and China, some women settled in China permanently.⁵⁶ During the famine, the annual number of defectors surged, being less than ten each pre-famine year and increasing to approximately 200,000 to 300,000 defectors per annum during the Arduous March.⁵⁷ Today, food insecurity remains a dire issue in North Korea,⁵⁸ with approximately sixty percent of the population in poverty.⁵⁹ The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated North

⁵¹ "Ernst-Satellitedatawomen-2016.PDF," Google Drive, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1fhf8LTHxoawNInyx864fAMsnABycgDHT/view?usp=sharing>.

⁵² "Ernst-Satellitedatawomen-2016.PDF," Google Drive, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1fhf8LTHxoawNInyx864fAMsnABycgDHT/view?usp=sharing>.

⁵³ "N. Korean Women Challenging Taboos," KBS WORLD Radio, accessed January 2, 2026, https://world.kbs.co.kr/special/northkorea/contents/news/koreatoday_view.htm?lang=e&No=431875.

⁵⁴ "Forced Migration and Mortality (2001)," The National Academies Press, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/read/10086/chapter/5>.

⁵⁵ "North Korean Women Pay Heavy Price as Kim Turns on 'Black Market Breadwinners,'" The Irish Times, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/asia-pacific/north-korean-women-pay-heavy-price-as-kim-turns-on-black-market-breadwinners-1.4775536>.

⁵⁶ "Ernst-Satellitedatawomen-2016.PDF," Google Drive, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1fhf8LTHxoawNInyx864fAMsnABycgDHT/view?usp=sharing>.

⁵⁷ "https://Drive.Google.Com/File/d/1qypri7i3qritq-T_uqkmam-Ch4vujd6f/View?Usp=sharing This File Not O," Google Drive Community, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://support.google.com/drive/thread/106962103/https-drive-google-com-file-d-1qypri7i3qritq-t-uqkmam-ch4vujd6f-view-usp-sharing-this-file-not-o?hl=en>.

⁵⁸ "Food Security in North Korea Remains Critical," Welthungerhilfe.de - Für eine Welt ohne Hunger und Armut, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://www.welthungerhilfe.org/global-food-journal/rubrics/crises-humanitarian-aid/food-security-in-north-korea-remains-critical>.

⁵⁹ J. Crespo Cuaresma et al., "What Do We Know about Poverty in North Korea?," Palgrave Communications, March 18, 2020, <https://pure.iiasa.ac.at/id/eprint/16359/>.

Korea's food crisis, the 38 North stating that "food availability has likely fallen below the bare minimum with regard to human needs."⁶⁰ Due to such intense food insecurity, numerous people—especially women—are driven to escape North Korea, but not without consequences that are often devastating.

Women Defectors in China

More than eighty to ninety percent of the women who escape to China are trafficked,⁶¹ and more than sixty to seventy percent of these trafficking victims are subjected to physical violence, sexual abuse, and emotional manipulation.⁶² Trafficked women are often sold off to Chinese husbands,⁶³ while many others are coerced into working as prostitutes or karaoke bar hostesses.⁶⁴ The most tragic aspect of this practice is that some women cross to China wanting to be trafficked,⁶⁵ because—as one victim said—"it is better to find a man, any man, than to starve to death in North Korea."⁶⁶ The fact that women would rather sacrifice their bodies, dignity, and safety than remain in North Korea speaks volumes about just how destitute people are in North Korea.

Just like victims of abuse and discrimination in North Korea, women defectors in China are unable to report their abusers, as they live in hiding from Chinese authorities. Since signing a

⁶⁰ Food insecurity in North Korea is at its worst since the 1990s famine - 38 north: Informed analysis of North Korea, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://www.38north.org/2023/01/food-insecurity-in-north-korea-is-at-its-worst-since-the-1990s-famine/>.

⁶¹ Davis, "Brides, Bruises," 133.

⁶² Nationalist army officers during the Sino-Japanese war, 1937-1945 on JSTOR, accessed January 2, 2026, https://www.jstor.org/stable/312958?searchText=whampoa&=&searchUri=/action/doBasicSearch?Query%3Dwhampoa&so=rel&=&ab_segments=0/basic_search_gsv2/control&=&refreqid=fastly-default:12a1da6cf351bc84e6b5d3f95ec0604e&=&seq=22.

⁶³ Davis, "Brides, Bruises," 133.

⁶⁴ Nationalist army officers during the Sino-Japanese war, 1937-1945 on JSTOR, accessed January 2, 2026, https://www.jstor.org/stable/312958?searchText=whampoa&=&searchUri=/action/doBasicSearch?Query%3Dwhampoa&so=rel&=&ab_segments=0/basic_search_gsv2/control&=&refreqid=fastly-default:12a1da6cf351bc84e6b5d3f95ec0604e&=&seq=22.

⁶⁵ Davis, "Brides, Bruises," 133.

⁶⁶ Davis, "Brides, Bruises," 133.

repatriation agreement in 1986, China has caught and forcefully returned North Korean refugees to North Korea.⁶⁷ Back in North Korea, inhumane punishments such as torture, years of forced labor, and even execution await those who attempted to escape. If a woman is returned pregnant, she is either subjected to forced abortion without anesthesia or forced to watch as her baby is thrown into a garbage can.⁶⁸ Yet China repatriated approximately six hundred defectors in October 2023 alone.⁶⁹ As a result, North Korean women in China must live in constant fear and wariness, knowing that there is always a chance of being sent back. For those who enter abusive marriages or workforces, keeping quiet is the only option, for the police consider them to be criminals. To analyze the existing data online regarding North Korean woman defectors, the following paragraphs employ the mixed-methods approach to discuss gender in North Korea and in China.

Mixed-Methods Approach to Thinking Gender in North Korea

This mixed-methods analysis brings together data from multiple sources, including speeches, documentaries, memoirs, and scholarly papers that contained snippets from defector interviews. I draw substantially from “Lives for Sale,” a report written by members of the Washington D.C.-based nonprofit organization Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK).⁷⁰ The report includes numerous testimonies of women defectors who recounted their experience hiding

⁶⁷ By Julia Davatzes, “The Plight of North Korean Refugees in China,” Wilson Center, March 6, 2025, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/plight-north-korean-refugees-china>.

⁶⁸ “https://drive.google.com/file/d/1qypri7i3qritq-T_uqkmam-Ch4vujd6f/view?usp=sharing This File Not O,” Google Drive Community, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://support.google.com/drive/thread/106962103/https-drive-google-com-file-d-1qypri7i3qritq-t-uqkmam-ch4vujd6f-view-usp-sharing-this-file-not-o?hl=en>.

⁶⁹ “North Koreans in China: Marginalized, Exploited and Repatriated,” CECC, August 15, 2025, <https://www.cecc.gov/publications/commission-analysis/north-koreans-china-marginalized-exploited-and-repatriated#:~:text=Findings,Convention%20and%20its%201967%20Protocols>.

⁷⁰ Hee-woong Yoon, “Lives for Sale: Personal Accounts of North Korean Women and Girls Trafficked into China,” The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, last modified 2009, accessed February 9, 2026, <https://www.hrnk.org/documentations/lives-for-sale-personal-accounts-of-women-fleeing-north-korea-to-china/>.

in China after escaping from North Korea. I also consider the defector memoirs posted on the website of the organization People for Successful Corean Reunification (PSCORE), and scholarly papers—many of which I have cited—were also useful in providing defector quotes from interviews. The Human Rights Watch report “‘You Cry at Night But Don’t Know Why’: Sexual Violence Against Women in North Korea” was instrumental in offering insight into the rampant sexual abuse in North Korea. Blogs from Liberty in North Korea (LiNK), the content of which ranges from facts about North Korean culture to heavier subjects like defection and state oppression, as well as blogs from HRNK’s Hidden Gulag Blogs, peer-edited and fact-checked articles about various aspects of North Korea, also proved useful. Furthermore, famous defector and activist Yeonmi Park’s memoir *In Order to Live: A North Korean Girl’s Journey to Freedom* provided detailed descriptions of the horrors she and her mother experienced being deceived by brokers (people who help defectors escape) into being sold as brides;⁷¹ and Hyeonseo Lee’s *The Girl With Seven Names* similarly offered valuable insights into the life of a woman defector in China.⁷² All of these sources were published between the years 2003 and 2018, and I collected these anecdotes between June and December of 2025.

In short, defectors have shared their stories through various means: many memoirs and speeches made by defectors have received worldwide attention, and interview snippets that are incorporated into articles and scholarly papers further raise awareness about human rights violations in North Korea.

Memoirs such as Yeonmi Park’s *In Order to Live* and defector and activist Hyeonseo Lee’s *The Girl With Seven Names* are *New York Times* best sellers. Lee’s TED Talk, titled “My escape from North Korea” and hosted on YouTube, has garnered more than 22 million views as

⁷¹ Yeonmi Park et al., *In Order to Live : a North Korean Girl's Journey to Freedom* (Penguin Books, 2016).

⁷² Hyeonseo Lee and David John, *The Girl with Seven Names : a North Korean Defector's Story* (William Collins, 2015).

of November 2025.⁷³ Defectors who give testimonies that get included in articles, blogs, and scholarly papers are less well known, perhaps because their accounts are much shorter than those of full-length memoirs. Indeed, media such as articles and blogs often incorporate only one or two sentences, or a single paragraph, of testimony. For instance, HRNK's report "Lives for Sale" gathers various defector voices, but most of the stories cover a page, half a page, or a third of a page.

Another reason could simply be that the women of the HRNK report are less public than some of the more well-known defectors. While defectors such as Yeonmi Park and Hyeonseo Lee regularly discuss North Korean human rights on the internet and travel all over the world to deliver speeches about their journeys to freedom, many women included in the HRNK report, as well as many women in other articles such as those of Human Rights Watch or PSCORE, do not have as much of a public presence. In fact, many women who were interviewed for the HRNK report were still in hiding in China when the report was first published. Such circumstances may explain why all women who participated in the interviews for the HRNK report did not reveal their names, being labeled only as surnames such as "Ms. Park" or "Ms. Kim."⁷⁴ To conduct the interviews in the first place, HRNK hired a South Korean human rights specialist to contact women in China who might have been victims of human trafficking.

Well-Known Defector Stories

Yeonmi Park is one of the most famous North Korean defectors in the world. Her 2014 "One Young World" speech on her heartbreaking and resilient journey to freedom, delivered in Dublin,

⁷³ Hyeonseo Lee, "My Escape from North Korea," TED, last modified March 20, 2013, accessed February 9, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PdxPCeWw75k>.

⁷⁴ Hee-woong Yoon, "Lives for Sale: Personal Accounts of North Korean Women and Girls Trafficked into China.," The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, last modified 2009, accessed February 9, 2026, <https://www.hrnk.org/documentations/lives-for-sale-personal-accounts-of-women-fleeing-north-korea-to-china/>.

Ireland, went viral and started her career as a human rights activist who advocated for North Koreans to live in a better society under a better government. Her memoir, *In Order to Live*, discusses her time in North Korea, in hiding in China, and in South Korea, where she finally became free. While detailing her childhood in North Korea, Park focuses on the collective North Korean experience of indoctrination and oppression, rather than experiences that are likely to resonate mostly with women. It is only when she begins talking about her time as a defector in China that the harsh realities of being a North Korean woman become clear. In one chapter, she writes about her distrust toward brokers: “I was so terrified that my hands were shaking. Every broker I had met in China had wanted to rape me, and I assumed this one was no different.”⁷⁵

In *In Order to Live*, Yeonmi Park tells her story by means of three different parts: one, her experience living in North Korea under the oppressive North Korean regime; two, her escape to China and the harrowing consequences of being a woman defector vulnerable to traffickers; and three, her settlement in South Korea, where she finally found freedom and safety.⁷⁶ In Part 1, titled “North Korea,” she details how she was subjected to heavy state indoctrination from an early age, being taught to worship the Kim family like divinity.⁷⁷ She was taught that Kim Jong Un could read her mind, so she always made an effort to think the “right” things.⁷⁸ She also recounts the severe economic hardships she endured during the mid- to late-1990s Arduous March famine, which led her family to suffer from intense food insecurity. Such factors influenced Park and her mother to escape North Korea by crossing the Yalu River, a river that connected North Korea to China.⁷⁹ (Park’s father was too physically ill to make the journey with them, so he stayed in North Korea, resolving to escape to China when fully recovered.)⁸⁰ Part 2,

⁷⁵ Park et al., *In Order*.

⁷⁶ Park et al., *In Order*.

⁷⁷ Park et al., *In Order*.

⁷⁸ Park et al., *In Order*.

⁷⁹ Park et al., *In Order*.

⁸⁰ Park et al., *In Order*.

China, details Park's and her mother's challenges in China. Upon arriving in China, Park—only thirteen—and her mother were met with numerous miserable situations, falling victim to exploitative traffickers and being deceived by “helpers” who were operating under the guise of helping them hide from Chinese officials.⁸¹ Part 3, *South Korea*, takes place after Park and her mother—after years of struggle in China—crossed the Gobi Desert and finally reached South Korea, where freedom awaited.⁸² Ultimately, Park's novel reveals the devastating sacrifices that North Korean defectors must make throughout their journey to freedom.

Although Park does not detail the sexism she experienced while escaping North Korea, she writes about the painful and often dehumanizing experiences she had as a woman living in hiding in China. After being tricked by a broker (someone who specializes in helping North Koreans escape North Korea) into being trapped in the trafficking industry, Park heard her traffickers negotiate the price of her and her mother, remembering:

I will never forget the burning humiliation of listening to these negotiations, of being turned into a piece of merchandise in the space of a few hours. It was a feeling beyond anger. It's still hard to fathom why we went along with all of this, except that we were caught between fear and hope. We were numb, and our purpose was reduced to our immediate needs: Get away from the dangerous border... get something to eat and figure out the rest of it later.⁸³

What makes the passage so heartwrenching is that Park and her mother, despite the fact that they were being treated as if they were property, their primary concern was still safety and food. The passage demonstrates that, when one's most basic necessities are on the line, other situations—even ones as terrible as being sold as brides—seem inconsequential in comparison.

⁸¹ Park et al., *In Order*.

⁸² Park et al., *In Order*.

⁸³ Park et al., *In Order*.

After being sold to Hong Wei, Park was showered with various kinds of luxurious material gifts, but he did so because he actually had the sinister motive of stopping her from always resisting when he tried to rape her:

The next morning, Hongwei tried to win me over with gifts and kindness. He took me to a store and bought me a pair of jeans, a sweater, and some running shoes. I had seen those kinds of shoes while I was secretly watching Chinese television in North Korea. It had been my dream to own a pair. Now that dream had come true and I was still miserable. I was beginning to realize that all the food in the world, and all the running shoes, could not make me happy. The material things were worthless. I had lost my family. I wasn't loved, I wasn't free, and I wasn't safe. I was alive, but everything that made life worth living was gone.⁸⁴

Hong Wei's belief that Park will be more yielding if only he gave her material gifts serves as a clear representation of how the "kindness" that these brokers and traffickers show to their victims is really just a way for the perpetrators to justify their violence. Moreover, Hong Wei's belief illuminates how no luxurious gift matters when it comes at the cost of one's safety and dignity.

Later, sitting beside her mother, Park looked out her apartment window and saw schoolgirls playing:

From our window, I could look out and see girls my own age carrying school bags and playing with their friends. I asked my mother, "Umma [Mother], when can I be like that?" She had no way of responding.⁸⁵

The brevity of the scene makes the moment all the more powerful, as the dialogue indicates just how unfair it is that Yeonmi, only a young teenager, needed to endure so much pain and darkness and could only silently watch as girls her age engaged in normal activities like going to school or hanging out with friends, without having to worry about whether they were being watched by

⁸⁴ Park et al., *In Order*.

⁸⁵ Park et al., *In Order*.

Chinese officials or whether they would reach freedom or not. Despite not having chosen such a horrifying life, Yeonmi had to live every devastating second of it, and earn her freedom—something that many girls around her got for free.

In *The Girl With Seven Names*, Hyeonseo Lee—like Park—divides her story into three parts.⁸⁶ Lee's memoir, however, sometimes involves countries different from those that appeared in *In Order to Live*. In *The Girl With Seven Names*, the first part of the story is set in North Korea, the second in China, and the third in South Korea and Laos.⁸⁷ In the first two parts, Lee shares her experiences of receiving indoctrinatory education at school and working in China after defecting from North Korea.⁸⁸ In the third part, she finally reached South Korea, only to take a flight back to China to bring her mother and brother to South Korea with her.⁸⁹ The journey took them all the way to Laos, where they were even arrested for a bit before, miraculously, a kind stranger helped pay for Lee, her mother, and her brother to get out of jail, allowing them to fly to South Korea and find freedom.⁹⁰

Like Park, Lee does not recount her experiences of sexism while escaping North Korea. However, also like Park, there are moments in the book in which Lee's experiences as a woman defector is shown. For instance, while conversing with a Korean-Chinese police officer who falsely believed her to be a Chinese worker, she heard him complain about how tiring rounding up North Korean women to be repatriated to North Korea was, and he impersonated them:

He described how some of them cried and begged when they were cornered, and seemed to think I'd find this as funny as he did. 'Please don't send me back,' he said, putting on a high-pitched North Korean accent.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Lee and John, *The Girl*.

⁸⁷ Lee and John, *The Girl*.

⁸⁸ Lee and John, *The Girl*.

⁸⁹ Lee and John, *The Girl*.

⁹⁰ Lee and John, *The Girl*.

⁹¹ Lee and John, *The Girl*.

Such an impersonation reveals the sick degree of apathy that officers may hold toward the North Korean defectors they capture to send back to North Korea. Despite knowing the horrifying consequences of being repatriated, officials like the one in the passage may just treat rounding up defectors as another dreary part of their job instead of decisions that could send someone straight to a political prison or to execution.

Perhaps Park's and Lee's popular stories owe their fame to how publicized they are on the internet, but another potential reason the stories have had such an immense influence may be their hopeful nature. Both stories end happily, with the defectors having settled in South Korea, where no Chinese officials are in hot pursuit and where no North Korean authoritarian policies dictate their lives. This observation is not to say that the accounts have been glazed over or embellished to provide the reader with less brutal, less harrowing insight into the lives of North Korean women. That said, the reader does finish the story having read about the two women reaching freedom, an ending that many North Korean defectors do not get to arrive at. Safe in South Korea, Park marvels at the autonomy she has in South Korea: "The vocabulary in South Korea was so much richer than the one I had known, and when you have more words to describe the world, you increase your ability to think complex thoughts."⁹² After all the emotional and physical hardship she had gone through in China, she was finally able to let go of her fears and breathe. The reader also feels relief for her after having read hundreds of pages of Park's impoverished childhood in North Korea and risk-filled, horrifying experience in China.

Similarly, Lee's TEDx defector story takes a positive turn toward the end of the video, right after a desperate and seemingly hopeless part of the narrative. In Laos, during a time she describes as "one of the lowest points in [her] life," when she and her family were jailed and kept because of their illegal immigrant status, Lee met a kind stranger who offered to pay her and the

⁹² Lee and John, *The Girl*.

rest of her family to get out of jail.⁹³ “I asked, ‘Why are you helping me?’ ‘I’m not helping you,’ he said. ‘I’m helping the North Korean people.’ I realized that this was a symbolic moment in my life. The kind stranger symbolized new hope for me and the North Korean people, when we needed it most. And he showed me that the kindness of strangers and the support of the international community are truly the rays of hope we North Korean people need most,” says Lee.⁹⁴ While a moving and hopeful change of fate, it was by complete luck that Lee encountered the stranger; most other defectors would not be able to have such kindness extended to them. Instead of stumbling upon a stranger who happens to have the money and heart to bring them to safety, many defectors end up meeting a much crueler fate. Coincidentally, I could not find any popular defector account that did not end with the defector successfully finding freedom. My observation makes me wonder: Is it necessarily a good thing for only happy-ending accounts to be the most common way through which people learn about North Korea? Is there a possibility that people view defection as an endeavor that is likely to succeed as long as one puts one’s mind to it?

Some sources evoke feelings of hope not necessarily through accounts of escape, but through other means. For example, the Liberty in North Korea (LiNK) documentary *The Jangmadang Generation* gives people hope that North Korea itself is capable of change.⁹⁵ The title refers to the recent generations of North Korea that have been exposed to foreign content, unlike the older generations that have been educated through solely the ideological indoctrination that state-run schools administer. The documentary itself disproves the misconception that all North Koreans have been brainwashed by the government to believe in outrageous things,

⁹³ Lee, "My Escape," TED.

⁹⁴ Lee, "My Escape," TED.

⁹⁵ Chad Vickery Sokeel Park, "The Jangmadang Generation," Liberty in North Korea, last modified January 2017, accessed February 9, 2026, <https://www.nkmillennials.com/>.

sharing the stories of various North Korean millennials who became disillusioned with the government following the devastating mid-1990s famine. The illegal markets that sprang from the famine brought into the country foreign books, movies, and shows that showed North Koreans a completely different side of the world. Danbi Kim, now a North Korean defector living in South Korea, remembers the effect foreign content had on her mind:

When you watch foreign media, you start to realize various things. At first, you see the cars, apartment buildings, and markets, and you think it must be a movie set. But the more you watch, there are so many streets with tall buildings and cars. There is no way it can be a movie set, so [you know] South Koreans must be very rich. If you watch one or two [pieces of content], it always raises these doubts, and if you keep watching, then you know for sure. You realize how well South Koreans and other foreigners live.⁹⁶

Similarly, an anonymous defector in the documentary recalls, “[When I started watching South Korean movies and dramas], I noticed that... there were no themes that condemned North Korea.”⁹⁷ Despite the harsh consequences that came with consuming foreign content—if caught, people could even be executed—many watched shows in secret. The documentary shows that, although knowing the truth about the outside world is only the first step to seeing change in the North Korean political system, the country has hope of changing for the better if enough people become aware of the lies they have been fed by the regime.

⁹⁶ Park, "The Jangmadang," Liberty in North Korea.

⁹⁷ Park, "The Jangmadang," Liberty in North Korea.

Overall, the data studied showed that there were still many holes in the research conducted around women in North Korea and in China. Because North Korea is an extremely isolated country, having upheld the value of self-sufficiency ever since its founding in 1948, it is difficult to conduct large-scale statistical research on North Koreans living in North Korea. For instance, there are very few sources on the internet that provide information on women's experiences in the military. While HRNK's Hidden Gulag Blogs contain an article on the topic, and while HRNK has also interviewed a former female soldier on her time serving in the military, those are some of the only sources that document the experiences of women soldiers.⁹⁸ Even the Human Rights Watch report on the sexual abuse that women must endure in North Korea is the result of interviews with only 62 North Koreans.⁹⁹ Despite the fact that these harrowing stories further shed light on the atrocious nature of the North Korean regime, it is difficult to make proper inferences with such a small sample of people. Additionally, when it comes to women defectors in China, because the vast majority of the defectors are in hiding, the data collected that relates to these women cannot be fully reliable or accurate. In other words, definitive conclusions cannot be reached for numerous aspects of North Korea.

Conclusion

Although North Korea's isolated nature means that much of the outside world's information on the country has numerous missing pieces, it is crucial that activists and scholars alike continue to uncover details of the secretive regime and its political system, so that the international community can work together to help North Koreans reach the freedom that they deserve. While

⁹⁸ Julia Campbell, "The Horrors of Being a Woman in the North Korean Military," The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, last modified July 4, 2022, accessed February 9, 2026, <https://www.nkhiddengulag.org/blog/the-horrors-of-being-a-woman-in-the-north-korean-military>.

⁹⁹ Lina Yoon, "'You Cry at Night But Don't Know Why,'" Human Rights Watch, May 6, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/11/01/you-cry-night-dont-know-why/sexual-violence-against-women-north-korea>.

the activism that North Korean defectors carry out undoubtedly has a reverberant impact on the international community and very much has the capability to galvanize people to action, defectors alone cannot handle the job of spreading awareness of the North Korean human rights crisis. Non-profit organizations and research think tanks work in tandem with these defectors to disperse information on the oppressive North Korean regime across the world. Ultimately, the international community should do its best to funnel information related to the outside world into people living in North Korea, aiming to break North Koreans out of the influence the government trapped them in and to provide them with the hope that the world is on their side in their fight for liberty.

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