

Final Report of Daily NK's 2023 Investigation on Women's Rights Inside North Korea

**North Korean Women Speak:
The DPRK's Failure to Protect
the Rights of Women**

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This report is based on a Daily NK research project funded by the Embassy of Canada Fund for Human Rights in North Korea entitled "Perception of Gender Inequality & Discrimination Against Women in North Korea."

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Project Background and Research Objectives

This report grew out of concern about the government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)'s efforts to block access to outside information and distort information among North Koreans, particularly North Korean women. Since the enactment of the Women's Rights Protection Law in December 2010, the North Korean government has claimed that North Korean women are the happiest in the world, that life is difficult for women living in a capitalist society, and that there are inequalities in rights between men and women in other societies. The one-sided education and guidance that comes from the central government fails to account for the realities of North Korea, where women are subordinated at the home, forced into certain roles by the state, and lack protection from significant levels of violence and sexual assault. There are still few opportunities for North Korean women to understand the importance of women's rights and they lack the opportunity to properly communicate these rights to other women.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further intensified the level of control the North Korean state has over its people, which means that researchers face challenges in obtaining useful data to examine the country's realities. Through this report, Daily NK has used its information network inside the DPRK to better understand the realities faced by North Korean women under Kim Jong Un's rule with a view to provide data and analysis of the situation inside the country.

The outside world has both a direct and indirect impact on North Korean women, and advances in women's rights are significant, especially in U.N. mechanisms in which the North Korean authorities participate. However, the tendency of the North Korean authorities to distort information and exaggerate the state of affairs for certain regions and social classes is evident throughout North Korean government reports. Therefore, Daily NK believes that examining various aspects of women's rights through this research and identifying recent changes in the country will contribute to the international movement to promote human rights inside the DPRK.

In this report, North Korean women's human rights are examined through various lenses: legal and institutional awareness, social and political participation, education and labor rights, equality in the family, and the impact of sexual violence. Daily NK hopes that the report will serve as a useful resource for various

stakeholders, including the North Korean authorities, to improve the quality of education for North Korean women and to provide practical guidance to those who enforce laws and institutions inside the country.

This report is based on a Daily NK research project funded by the Embassy of Canada Fund for Human Rights in North Korea entitled "Perception of Gender Inequality & Discrimination Against Women in North Korea."

Survey Methodology

This research is based primarily on a survey of 30 women currently living in North Korea. The survey was conducted using “snowball sampling,” in which a group of key informants were asked to refer others to participate in the survey. For security reasons, Daily NK cannot specify the time frame of the survey, but it can confirm that the data is from within the past year.

In order to categorize the respondents, Daily NK asked basic questions about their gender, age range, region of residence, highest level of education, and occupation. Daily NK’s first priority was to avoid harming the respondents or their loved ones, as the organization would not be able to take immediate action to protect them if our investigation was disclosed. For this reason, Daily NK has minimized the publication of personal information or how it obtained the information in this report. Daily NK promised its respondents confidentiality during the survey, and the organization has made all efforts to abide by that promise by minimizing the disclosure of information that identifies the timing of the survey and the identities of the respondents.

In addition, Daily NK designed in-depth questions based on the results of the baseline survey and conducted in-depth interviews with 10 North Korean defectors who have lived in South Korea for less than five years. Daily NK promised the participants that the content of these interviews would be confidential, which was again a measure to protect their family members remaining in North Korea. The one-on-one in-depth interviews lasted about an hour and a half each and were based on a questionnaire designed beforehand. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Information about Survey Respondents

All respondents identified as female and were current residents of North Korea. Disaggregated by region, four respondents lived in Pyongyang (13.3%), five in South Pyongan Province (16.7%), four in North Pyongan Province (13.3%), three in North Hamgyong Province (10%), three in South Hamgyong Province (10%), two in Kangwon Province (6.7%), three in North Hwanghae Province (10%), three in South Hwanghae Province (10%), one in Yanggang Province (3.3%), and two in Jagang Province (6.7%). In terms of age, there were three respondents in their 20s (10%), eight respondents in their 30s (26.7%), 10 respondents in their 40s (33.3%), seven respondents in their 50s (23.3%), and two respondents in their 60s (6.7%).

In terms of their current occupation, two (6.7%) were students/educators, two (6.7%) were in science/technology, one (3.3%) was a soldier, one (3.3%) was a party/government official, six (20.0%) were members of an enterprise/organization, 15 (50%) were in business/trade, one (3.3%) was a housewife, and two (6.7%) were either a farmer or part of a Three Revolution team.¹ Workers in business and trade made up half of those surveyed. In terms of education, 18 (60.0%) had graduated from high school and 12 (40%) had attended university or higher.

Looking at family size, one respondent (3.3%) lived alone, four (13.3%) were part of a two-person family, 12 (40%) belonged to a three-person family, 10 (33.3%) in a four-person family, and three (10%) in a five-person family.

As for the North Korean defectors interviewed, the respondents were all women who have been in South Korea for less than five years and included: three (30%) from Pyongyang, three (30%) from North Hamgyong Province, one (10%) from South Hamgyong Province, and three (30%) from South Hwanghae Province. In terms of age, three (30%) were in their 20s, three (30%) in their 40s, 3 (30%) in their 50s and one (10%) in their 60s. Looking at their occupations before defection, five (50%) were students/teachers, three (30.0%) were employees of companies/organizations, and two (20.0%) were housewives.

¹ The Three Revolution movement was originally devised by Kim Il Sung to continue “the revolution in the realms of ideology, technology and culture even after the establishment of the socialist system.” In recent years, the movement has been revived as part of efforts to promote loyalty among the younger generation and increase production.

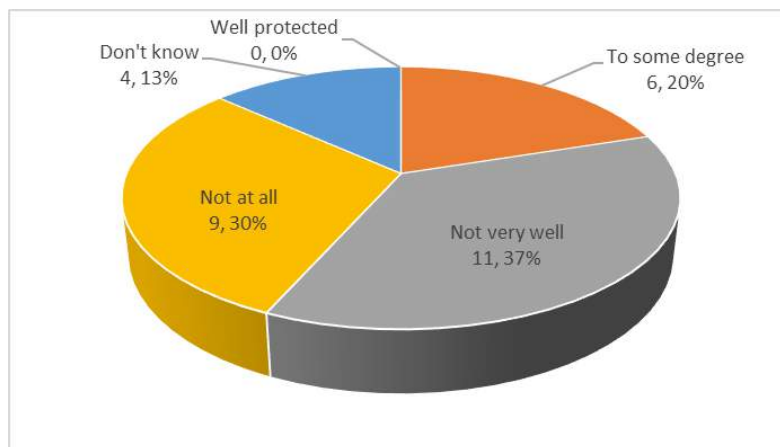
In terms of educational level, six (60%) were high school dropouts/graduates and four (40%) had attended university or a higher educational institution. In terms of family size, three (30%) lived alone, three (30%) lived in a two-person household, and four (40%) lived in a four-person household.

Perceptions Regarding Women’s Rights

According to the North Korean authorities, public awareness of the important role of North Korean women in social progress and family well-being has increased, leading all institutions, enterprises, organizations, families and individuals to accept the protection and promotion of women's rights as a legal obligation, as stipulated in the Law on the Protection and Promotion of Women's Rights. (2019 DPRK Universal Periodic Review)

However, out of the 30 women inside North Korea surveyed by Daily NK, not a single respondent rated women's rights in North Korea as "well protected" [Question 1]: Six (30%) said that they were "protected to some degree," 11 (36.7%) said they were "not very well protected," and nine (30%) said they were "not protected at all." Four respondents (13.3%) said they were "not sure."

[Graph 1] Is the DPRK Government protecting women’s rights? (Question 1)



Next, of the 30 respondents, only nine (30%) had heard of the Women's Rights Protection Law, while 21 (70%) had not heard of it [Question 2]. This suggests that the law has not been adequately communicated

to the public since its enactment in 2010.² In short, there is a significant lack of awareness among North Korean women about the areas in which they are entitled to legal protection.

Survey respondents were given a free response question about what it means to have women's rights in North Korea [Question 3]. The majority of respondents said it meant being freed from the burden of domestic roles. Responses such as "Women can have the same jobs as men" (South Pyongan 1) or "It means the right to participate in all areas of society and be respected" (North Pyongan 1) confirm that North Korean women are very concerned about the unequal distribution of social roles between men and women.

Daily NK asked the respondents what role women play in social development in North Korea today [Question 4]. According to the respondents, women in North Korea are most often expected to take on the role of raising children (23 respondents, 25.6%), followed by "supporting the household economy" (20 respondents, 22.2%).

**[Table 1] What kind of role do women play in social development today?
(Question 4; multiple responses allowed)**

Role	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Supporting the household economy	20	22.2
Raising children	23	25.6
Serving as a member of the Socialist Women's Union of Korea	12	13.3
Serving as a guardian of the household	9	10.0
Have value as an asset to society	5	5.6
Serve as a loyal party member	5	5.6
Other	16	17.8
Sum	90	100

² The nine respondents who had heard about the Women's Rights Protection Law were specific about how they heard about it: Three of the nine respondents heard about it from friends/acquaintances (North Pyongan 1, North Pyongan 2, and South Hamgyong 3), three heard about it at formal meetings such as a neighborhood watch unit meeting (2013, North Pyongan1), an organization's lecture (2014, Pyongyang 3), or an all-party meeting (2019, Jagang 1), two heard about it at their institution (company, school), and one heard about it from an unknown source.

North Korea claims that women are "the main actors in society who are in charge of one wheel of the revolution" (Jagang 1), but, in reality, this means fulfilling the role of a "faithful housekeeper at home" (13 respondents). On the other hand, 12 respondents (13.3%) said that being members of the Socialist Women's Union of Korea is their social role, not that of women managing the home.

Participation in the Social and Political Spheres

According to the North Korean authorities, measures have been taken to appoint capable women to key positions and to widely publicize their achievements. As a result, the percentage of female leaders in ministries and ministerial-level organizations increased significantly in 2018 (2019 DPRK Universal Periodic Review).³

Daily NK asked what needs to be done to ensure that women actually become leaders in the workplace.

[Question 7]. The most common response was that women need to have good *songbun*,⁴ or social background (21 respondents, 39.6%), rather than improving their skills (7 respondents, 13.2%) to become leaders in the workplace. According to In-depth Interviewee 1, it is very rare for women to become leaders, and it is a matter of having power at home or having special experiences such as meeting Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il or shaking hands with Kim Jong-un. *Songbun*-based discrimination is a common human rights violation reported in North Korea, as is discrimination against women. A small minority (five respondents, 9.4%) believe that women will never be able to become officials, which suggests the glass ceiling is very real. Other opinions expressed during the survey included the need to pay bribes (19 respondents, 35.8%) to gain favor or to have good connections (Pyongyang 3).⁵

Daily NK asked respondents about their experiences with government policies that encourage more women to participate in social and political life [Question 8].⁶ Fifteen respondents (50%) said they had encountered such policies, and 15 respondents (50%) said they had not. Of those with experience with these

³ Please see <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/kp-index>.

⁴ The North Korean system of ascribed status.

⁵ The Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in North Korea has noted that bribery is a consistent feature of all testimonies relating to North Korea.

⁶ According to In-depth Interviewee 1, during Kim Jong Il's reign, there were many directives from the central government to turn more women into officials. In reality, however, these directives never led to real change.

policies, Six had encountered a relevant directive or policy between 2010 and 2013, four in 2016, one in 2019, and four between late 2020 and 2023.

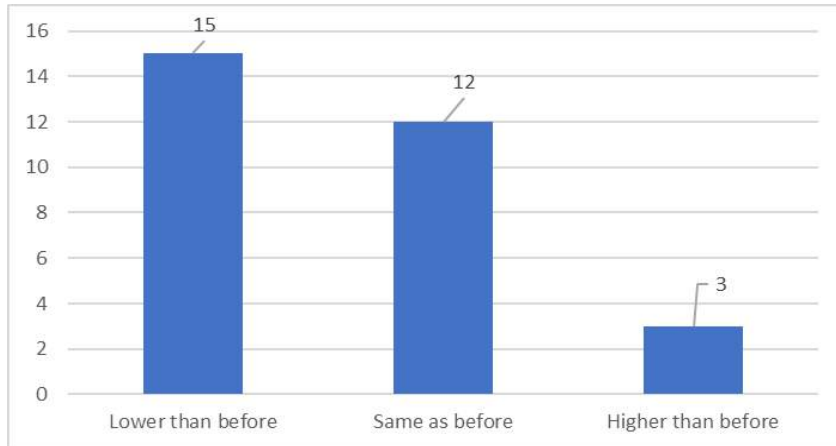
The main channels of transmission for these measures appear to have been people's units and workplaces, with specific instructions coming from higher levels of government after 2016.⁷ In particular, according to one survey participant, a directive was issued in February 2016 to increase the proportion of female party members at the party level, and included the statement: "Discuss measures to address the decline in the proportion of female party and administrative workers compared to the time of the General [Kim Jong-il], and take measures to implement the ratified [approved] tasks and systematically cultivate female party members."

It is worth noting that in recent years there have been directives from high levels of government to promote women's entry into the Workers' Party. Specific examples include instructions from the 2020 Socialist Women's Union of Korea conference to "increase the proportion of women entering the party from the women's union and develop them into party members." In addition, there were instructions from a provincial party committee in 2021 to "utilize and promote more women to become party members," along with instructions from a people's committee in 2023 to "utilize more women as key officials" and "increase the proportion of women entering the military academy and train them." However, according to In-depth Interviewee 2, no matter how hard they try, women still face challenges in becoming officials.

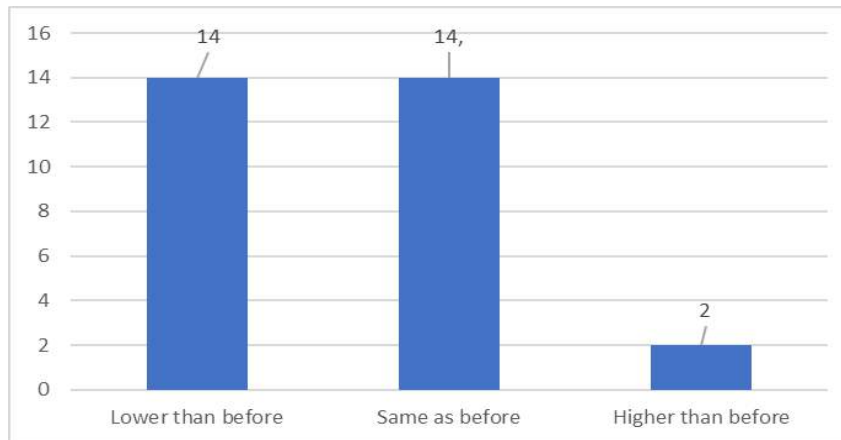
When asked about the proportion of female people's committee members in their area [Question 5], 15 (50%) of the respondents said it was lower than before, 12 (40%) said it was the same as before, and only 3 (10%) said it was higher than before. **When asked about the proportion of female party members in their area [Question 6],** 14 (46.7%) of the respondents said it was lower than before, 14 (46.7%) said it was the same as before, and only two (6.7%) of the respondents said it was higher than before. This suggests that the unilateral top-down policies to encourage women to become party members are not being fully achieved on-the-ground. One reason that this top-down approach may be struggling is the fact that party membership remains closely linked to military enlistment, leaving few opportunities for women in society to join the party (In-depth Interviewee 1).

⁷ Policies issued around 2016 include the following: "We were instructed to abandon previous ideas and allow the emergence of power female delegates and even officials at companies"; (South Pyongan 4); "We were told to cultivate female discharged soldiers (military officers) and women into loyal members of the party" (South Hwanghae 2).

[Graph 2] What is the percentage of female representatives in people’s committees in your area? (Question 5)



[Graph 3] What is the percentage of female Workers’ Party members in your area? (Question 6)



Right to Education

North Korean women’s social and economic growth is based on how well they can access educational opportunities. In analyzing the 30 respondents' answers to a question about **policies to expand educational opportunities for North Korean women [Question 11]**, six respondents said that specific policies had been established. There was a policy that allowed girls - equal to boys - to go to university if they had good grades (South Pyongan 5, Jagang 1); a policy that encouraged girls to apply to universities (North Pyongan

4); and a policy that did not limit the number of enrollment spots (male and female) (North Hwanghae 4, Jagang 2). However, there were some restrictions that limited women to certain majors (teaching, nursing, accounting). There was also skepticism among the respondents that even if a policy was issued, the situation on the ground in the provinces was different (Jagang 1, Kangwon 2).

On the other hand, 18 respondents had never heard of policies to protect women's education. Therefore, there is a need to verify whether information on women's right to education has been sufficiently communicated to local levels and whether these policies have been implemented.

When asked to select the opinions they agree with regarding women's education in North Korea [Question 12], 11 out of 30 respondents (36.7%) agreed with the statement that some majors should be restricted to women,⁸ and 15 respondents (50%)⁹ agreed with the statement that female students should work to support their families if their families are poor. This suggests that the low expectations for women in terms of societal roles may lead to a lack of support for girls' right to education from teachers and parents.

Of the 30 respondents, 25 (83.3%) of the respondents had **never received any education on women's rights to education [Question 13]**, and only five (16.7%) had received some level of education.

Of the three who received information, their responses were as follows:

At a 2012 neighborhood watch unit meeting¹⁰ "we were told that women have the same rights in marriage and can choose the same social positions as men" (South Hamgyong 2); In 2015, a company meeting told employees about the "pre- and post-natal leave system and the prohibition on assaulting women at home" (South Pyongan 3); and at a 2019 neighborhood watch unit meeting, attendees were told "women have the same right to education as men and there is a need to train more educators for women" (North Pyongan 3).

⁸ There should be no restrictions on majors between boys and girls (18 respondents, 60%); one survey participant did not respond (3.3%). However, according to In-depth Interviewee 1, discrimination in majors is not perceived as a major issue. This is because power and money take precedence. Recently, women are also entering the National Defense University, entrance into which is determined by how much money (bribes) can be provided.

⁹ The contrasting option "even if one's family economic conditions are difficult, female students should still receive proper levels of education" was chosen by 14 respondents (46.7%); one person did not respond (3.3%)

¹⁰ Neighborhood watch units (*inminban*, people's units) are North Korea's lowest administrative unit and are typically made up of around 20 households.

According to In-depth Interviewee 1, she received materials from the Socialist Women's Union of Korea on July 30, the anniversary of the proclamation of equal rights for men and women. However, she felt that the content did not reflect the actual situation.

“In the education provided on the anniversary of the promulgation of the Law on Equal Rights for Women and Men (July 30), it was said that ‘women are one wheel of the revolution and should make great contributions to the construction of the DPRK’ (Pyongyang 1); and in 2018 people were told that “we should repay the party's great love and consideration for our boys and men by carrying out the revolutionary work entrusted to them” (Pyongyang 2).

Labor Rights

At the Workplace

Regarding the right to choose one's job, the question "Do you think that men and women in North Korea are equal in terms of the right to choose one's job?" [Question 21] elicited 0 (0%) respondents who thought that women were equal to men, while all 30 (100%) said that men and women were not equal. The responses indicate the serious challenges facing equality between men and women in North Korea. However, according to In-depth Interviewee 1, both women and men are not free to choose their workplaces in North Korea, so both men and women's rights in this regard are not protected by law. However, in terms of discrimination, women are mainly assigned to textile factories or food factories, and it is not easy for women to join the military. Moreover, women cannot be assigned to places where men are sent. In-depth Interviewee 2 opined that she wanted to be a soldier but was not selected due to the fact that the military recruits only a small number of women.

Daily NK also analyzed **cases of women in the workforce [Question 22]** and found a significant gap between men's and women's salaries.¹¹ Even considering that salaries contribute little to the household economy, the difference between men's and women's salaries is an indicator of social discrimination and

¹¹ Daily NK cannot share the name of the workplaces or when people worked there due to security concerns. An analysis of the nine people who provided responses in regard to the levels of monthly salaries between men and women showed that an average monthly salary for a man during the Kim Jong-un era (2013 - present) is KPW 2,000 to 4,000; an average women's salary during the same period is KPW 1,500 to 2,600.

confirms the structure of inequality in North Korea. Unmarried women typically work only 30 to 40% of the time, less than half the rate of men. North Korean culture expects women to quit their jobs if they become pregnant after marriage. Some survey respondents said that if they become pregnant, they are "retired" (Kangwon 1), "have to stop working" (Kangwon 2, South Hwanghae 3), or are "asked to leave" (North Hwanghae 2, Jagang 2). As a result, only 5-10% of women remain in the workplace.¹²

In order to protect the labor rights of married women, various measures must be taken to enable them to combine childcare with work. The North Korean authorities have stated that they are working to amend the country's labor law to **guarantee pre- and post-natal leave for women in the workplace [Question 23]**. However, respondents reported that there are "only words and regulations" (North Hwanghae 1) regarding the implementation of the pre- and post-natal leave system which, as stated in the Socialist Labor Law, should grant 240 days of maternity leave (2019 DPRK Universal Periodic Review). Half of the respondents, 15 (50%), reported that they are usually granted three months of prenatal leave and five months of post-natal leave.¹³

Some women with children have benefited from adjustments to work hours at their workplaces [Question 24].¹⁴ In some cases, breastfeeding breaks were provided for nursing children,¹⁵ but government instructions to reduce work hours were not well implemented (North Pyongan 4)¹⁶; meanwhile, 21 respondents said they had not witnessed any breaks or reductions in work hours.

At the Third Plenary Session of the Eighth Plenum of the Central Committee in June 2021, Kim Jong-un said, "It is the supreme policy and supreme desire of the Workers' Party and the country to create better child-rearing conditions, even if it costs tens of millions of won." In such a situation where childbirth is encouraged by the state, **are facilities such as maternity centers, day care centers, and kindergartens**

¹² According to In-depth Interviewee 1, unmarried women in North Korea prefer to retire after marriage because it gives them the "opportunity" to go out to the markets and start their own businesses. The only people who are allowed to work after marriage are children of cadres and cadres themselves. On the other hand, the proportion of women working on farms is said to be around 60% compared to men. (South Hamgyong 1)

¹³ There are slight differences in how long these periods last. South Hamgyong 3 and North Hamgyong 2 said they received five months of prenatal and five months of post-natal leave; North Hamgyong 3 said she received just two months of prenatal and three months of post-natal leave. Meanwhile, Jagang 2 received a total of eight months of leave due to pregnancy.

¹⁴ North Hamgyong 1 said she was given a reduction of 1 hour from her eight-hour workday; North Hwanghae 3 said that she received leave when the opportunity presented itself, just like holidays.

¹⁵ Women with breastfeeding children are given 30 minutes twice a day to go to daycare for breastfeeding (South Pyongan 5); North Hwanghae 1 said that 10 minute breaks (10 minutes every 2 hours) are given to mothers with breastfeeding children; Jagang 2 said that 10 minutes is given every two hours for mothers with breastfeeding babies.

¹⁶ Pyongyang 3 said that regulations related to being able to start work one hour later than normal or leave work one hour before quitting time were nothing but words because her employer did not make her feel comfortable doing so.

sufficiently supplied and utilized by families? [Question 25]. Seventeen (56.7%) of the respondents said they had experience using such facilities, while 13 (43.3%) said they had not. Interestingly, there were many positive responses regarding the availability of playgrounds for children.

“Various playground equipment is installed in daycare centers and kindergarten playgrounds. Kindergarten children enjoy using the playgrounds” (North Pyongan 4); “They have a lot of fun using the adjustable beds for children to sleep, toys aimed at increasing children’s intelligence, and other games.” (North Hamgyong 2).

However, people still face limitations in the use of various facilities because they have to pay to use them.¹⁷ *“I stopped having my child go there after six months because they asked me to pay for too many things. The facility is good because it's a new building, but they tell me to pay for everything.” (Kangwon 1); “The children are responsible for everything they eat, wear, sleep, and live in. If we don't have rice, they don't give them lunch or snacks.” (North Hwanghae 3); “People who don't have money can't go to the daycare center because they have to donate food every month.” (Pyongyang 1); “You have to give dollars to the teacher [every month]. There is a big difference between paying and not paying” (Pyongyang 3).*

The Socialist Women’s Union of Korea

Most women who are not in the labor force belong to the Socialist Women's Union of Korea.¹⁸ **What is the level of work imposed on women who are mobilized for various projects [Question 26]?** With the exception of eight (26.7%) women who are mobilized on average one to four times a month, 22 (73.3%) respondents said they are mobilized by their branch of the women’s union at least twice a week and up to five times a week.¹⁹

According to In-depth Interviewee 1, mobilization takes place throughout the year and the amount of work required varies according to the season. In the beginning of the year, they are responsible for composting

¹⁷ According to In-depth Interviewee 4, kindergartens feed kids lunch at school. However, parents pay for meals, whose prices are calculated per 100 grams, and they have to pay KPW 500 for 2 kilograms of rice. Parents also have to pay other food costs, such as for side dishes and even condiments. They have to pay KPW 20,000 to keep the classroom clean, and even have to donate firewood (for heating during the winter).

¹⁸ Founded in 1945, the union is one of North Korea’s most important and oldest mass organizations.

¹⁹ According to In-depth Interviewee 2, the government believes that if women just hang out at home and fail to participate in organizational life, they will feel meaningless, so their participation in activities outside of the home is encouraged to “awaken” them.

and cocoon production, and in the summer, they go out to support rural areas to plant rice for about 50 days, and they also do construction work.²⁰ In the fall, they are mobilized to harvest rice. In addition to cleaning garbage dumps and sweeping streets as part of beautification campaigns, they are also involved in construction projects at the local level, mobilized to build houses, and construct fish farms and local amusement parks at the national level. At construction sites, they provide heavy labor, such as carrying mortar and collecting gravel. "We are mobilized for all events at the national, regional, county and neighborhood watch unit levels" (North Hwanghae 3, Pyongyang 3).

In addition, **the number of economic tasks assigned to women's union members for holidays and anniversaries [Question 27] is considerable**, including on January 8 (Kim Jong-un's birthday), February 16 (Kim Jong-il's birthday), April 15 (Kim Il-sung's birthday), Day of the Foundation of the Republic (September 9), the anniversary of the founding of the Workers' Party of Korea (October 10), and Kim Jong-suk's birthday (December 24). Depending on the anniversary, women are mobilized for morning propaganda events on the streets (North Pyongan 3) and engage in "crackdowns on women who do not wear skirts on the streets" (South Hamgyong 2). They are also mobilized for special security, night watches, decorating voting stations during election season (North Pyongan 2), and providing cash to support the guards at voting stations (North Pyongan 1).

In particular, each household is forced to contribute a certain amount of money for gifts to be provided by the state (North Pyongan 1); in November 2023, they collected "raw materials" such as "goods for soldiers, notebooks, books, paper, and pens" for children (South Pyongan 2) to celebrate the successful launch of a satellite (North Hwanghae 2); they provided in-kind goods for soldiers at a motivational training session held each year in late November (North Hwanghae 3); and provided underwear, socks, insoles and guaranteed meals for soldiers at a military ceremony (Pyongyang 3). Support for the military, while mainly in the form of cash assistance, also includes providing meals, beans and eggs, compost, and other items such as gloves.

The amount of money that women had to provide in order to be exempted from organizational life activities [Question 28] varied, but the amount of money that they had to provide in order to be "exempted

²⁰ According to In-depth Interviewee 2, during the "agricultural community support period," women have to head out to the fields nearly every day, and at least 10 days a month.

from all the activities of the women's union" was about USD 100 (KPW 850,000²¹) per year. Despite being exempted from various mobilizations, however, women who received exemptions still face intense levels of organizational life, including participation in study sessions, lectures, singing competitions, morning propaganda readings, and weekly and monthly criticism sessions.

If a woman had participated in women's union activities but did not submit the exemption fee [Question 34], the union would continue to press and pursue her, and if this failed, union leaders would call on non-participants to be subjected to criticism sessions. In more serious cases, women who fail to participate in women's union activities are treated as ideologically problematic and called to a local party committee for individual interviews and criticism. In order to avoid this, such women have to somehow come up with the money to exempt themselves from women's union activities (South Hwanghae 3).

For North Korean women, the **existence of the women's union [Question 30]** is "not only a burden, but also places restrictions on our freedom" (North Pyongan 2) and is a "means of controlling all women in North Korea" (South Hamgyong 2). The union requires women to be members until death (Pyongyang 4), so "members are just used as free labor" (North Pyongan 1). North Hwanghae 2 called being in the women's union akin to being trapped in a "lifelong prison of torture." **Daily NK asked the women whether they think the concerns of North Korean women being heard by the women's union [Question 29]**. In response to this question, all 30 interviewees said that this is not the case.

Market Activities

The mobilization of women in the Socialist Women's Union of Korea limits their ability to participate in the market economy, which means their survival is closely linked to their participation in women's union activities. According to the respondents, **North Korean women's income from the markets [Question 31]** consists mainly of food from production activities such as gathering herbs and fruit, greenhouse farming, and raising domestic animals, as well as profits from selling seafood, processing and selling clothes and shoes, the distribution of goods, and foreign currency transactions.

²¹ As of February 2024, USD 1 was equal to 8,510 North Korean won in Pyongyang.

The household monthly income of women and men [Question 32] is difficult to average because it varies depending on the types of goods and market trading and distribution conditions. For reference, 12 of the respondents said that they earn between KPW 300,000 and 500,000²² per month from the markets, while their husbands do not earn any income. According to In-depth Interviewee 1, men do not earn money in North Korea unless they become government officials and receive bribes.

Beyond the household economy, the costs imposed on women by the state [Question 33] are significant. According to the survey, there are monthly, quarterly, holiday, and anniversary taxes imposed on North Koreans, as well so-called “volunteer tasks” (Pyongyang 4); patriotic support and donation campaign fees at the end of the year and the beginning of the year (North Hwanghae 2); and the nationwide levying of tasks requiring people to collect “10 kilograms of scrap metal per person per month and various materials [including scrap metal and bottles]” (South Pyongan 2). In addition, women are asked to help pay for construction projects in Pyongyang, provide funds for the construction of neighborhoods in their areas, come up with funds to send to the military,²³ and even donate funds for relief efforts for flood victims (North Pyongan 4). At home, they pay for their children's education,²⁴ come up with bribes so their husbands can be promoted (North Hwanghae 2, South Hwanghae 2), and prepare funds to host meals for their in-laws' friends on holidays (North Hwanghae 2).

Can North Korean women complain about their unfair situation through the DPRK’s petition system [Question 35]? Some respondents said that North Koreans have become more proactive in raising complaints related to their lives than before.²⁵ However, most respondents said that it is useless to complain about unfair conditions.²⁶ Moreover, it is difficult to speak out for fear of retaliation. It is also very difficult to direct blame or criticism at the state or institutions that would normally have the responsibility to improve the situation.

²² As of February 2024, USD 1 was equal to 8,510 North Korean won in Pyongyang.

²³ At least five kilograms of food have to be donated to support the military each year (North Pyongan 2); while people are forced to provide two pigs each year for military bases (South Hamgyong 1)

²⁴ Children’s education fees equaled KPW 50,000 per month, along with KPW 20,000 for school cleaning collected early each year (North Hwanghae 2); fees included hospital fees, children’s university fees, and dormitory fees (South Hwanghae 2)

²⁵ “The government has become more careful [than before]. [They know] that women are not as simple-minded as before.” (South Pyongan 4)

²⁶ “Nobody brings up things that can't be solved” (South Pyongan 5); “If you bring an issue up, you are deemed ‘complicated.’ They tell me to keep quiet because I am not the only one with the problem” (Pyongyang 4); According to In-depth Interviewee 4, protections for whistleblowers are not well implemented in the petition submission process.

While many North Koreans are aware of the existence of a “petition processing department” at municipal party or people's committees, others are still unaware of the existence of such a department, or “have heard that there is a complaint box at each institution but are not sure exactly where they are.” There is a need for North Koreans to be informed about the types of issues they can report to these departments, to be given detailed examples of petitions, to be guided through the process, and for the government to take measures for dealing with submitted reports.

Protection of Rights Related to Quality of Life

Right to Participate in Cultural Life

When respondents were asked about **whether women enjoyed sufficient leisure time [Question 9]**, six respondents (20%) claimed that they had sufficient leisure time, while twenty four (80%) asserted that they did not have sufficient leisure time. Since women are responsible for the household’s finances, it is exceedingly hard for them to take time off for themselves (South Hwanghae 1). By contrast, men are free to use their time outside of the workplace for their own leisure (North Pyongan 1).

“Most women are living horrible lives, and there’s no down time. However, there are a precious handful of women who make enough money to set aside the time to enjoy things like traveling with their families, seeing movies with friends, or going to watch performances.” (South Hamgyong 2); “No matter where you go, women have no time to rest. Holidays are even worse. Men can’t even cook properly.. [Men] are only necessary when you’re building a house or something else that requires [a lot of] strength.” (South Hwanghae 2)

The North Korean government claims that it has made efforts to satisfy the people’s desire for better cultural relaxation by decorating famous scenic sites and building or remodeling leisure sites like parks, theaters, and amusement parks (2019 DPRK Universal Periodic Review).

The most common leisure activities included bathing in hot springs, touring Mount Myohyang, flower-viewing, and going to the movies. In the case of farmers in rural villages, however, making these kinds of trips for leisure activities is difficult. Only three respondents (10%) reported the existence of leisure facilities for women in rural areas, while the other twenty seven (90%) reported no such facilities,

suggesting a marked lack of support for women in rural areas. **Regarding facilities for women in rural areas [Question 10]**, respondents reported visiting obstetrics and gynecology facilities (South Pyongan 4), day care centers and fertility clinics (North Hamgyong 2), cultural centers, art circle practice centers, daycare centers, and propaganda rooms (Pyongyang 3).

Right to Health Care

Daily NK asked respondents about how women’s right to healthcare was protected during the COVID-19 crisis [Question 14].²⁷ According to the respondents, not only were there not enough doctors available, but none of the respondents had been able to rely on the so-called “section doctor system”²⁸ for anything beyond simple procedures. One woman (North Hwanghae 1) testified that “In one neighborhood, one doctor was in charge of everyone. As the patients started growing in number, [the doctor] was unbelievably busy. We all got better by using our own money to handle things ourselves and help each other out.”

Doctors are generally in charge of three to five residential blocks (150 - 300 households). This has produced a situation in which “households had to get their own medicine to survive” (Kangwon 2) and “even for something like medical treatment, doctors prioritized house calls to the households that could pay the most” (Kangwon 1). One respondent (Jagang 2) testified that patients had to pay their own money to get even [basic] things like thermometers, medicine, and shots, so [North Koreans] overcame COVID-19 through ‘self-reliance.’” By contrast, respondents from Pyongyang reported that one doctor might be responsible for a single residential block (Pyongyang 1) or just five to seven households. During COVID-19, this resulted in a massive gap between health care in Pyongyang and health care in the provinces, with Pyongyang doctors checking temperatures and looking for fevers six times a day, giving vaccinations, making house visits, administering shots upon request, enforcing household quarantines, and confirming deaths.

²⁷ According to In-depth Interviewee 4, “On top of the way things came to a halt and you couldn’t earn money during COVID, the country only took care of itself. People went crazy. The number of hours the markets could be open decreased too, there was a lot of resentment [about that].”

²⁸ A system where doctors manage the health of people of designated households or workplaces.

While doctors cannot officially receive money from patients under North Korea's free healthcare system, the reality is that patients have to pay bribes for everything, including surgery, use of medical facilities, and medications (North Pyongan 1). Failing to pay a bribe can have fatal consequences; one woman testified to a case in which a patient died before being able to undergo surgery (North Pyongan 3). Testimony also suggested that bribes were necessary to receive surgical assistance during childbirth as well.²⁹ Despite the regime's promise of free health care, access to even routine surgical procedures in North Korea hinges on patients' ability to pay, posing a great risk to both mothers and infants.

Considering this environment, **to what extent does the government support women, through government-provided health exams or basic explanations, to self-diagnose and handle issues related to birth control and childbirth [Question 16]?** Daily NK's survey found that childbirth support generally involved the ability to visit obstetrics and gynecology clinics to undergo a pregnancy test and receive a basic explanation from the doctor (South Pyongan 4) as well as checkups every three months of the pregnancy (North Pyongan 1). None of the respondents had experience with receiving basic education about contraception.

While education on contraception was lacking, multiple respondents did indicate familiarity with prohibitions on the use of birth control. Two respondents (South Pyongan 4, South Hamgyong 3) mentioned knowledge of a national law banning birth control, while another reported being told at a residential block meeting that "women need to raise the national birth rate, so any doctor that does a surgery to get rid of a fetus will be punished" (North Pyongan 1). Another respondent testified that going to the hospital for birth control was made illegal and that if a woman became pregnant she must go to the obstetrics and gynecology clinic once a month for an examination (North Pyongan 3).

When North Korean women do use birth control, all thirty respondents reported that IUDs were the primary means of contraception. Nine respondents also added that some women took oral contraceptives, given the financial means to do so. When seeking an abortion, respondents indicated that one of the most common methods was to seek out a retired obstetrics and gynecology doctor to perform the surgery, generally for around 100,000 - 150,000 won.³⁰ It appeared that women could also get abortions performed at a hospital,

²⁹ One respondent paid KPW 200,000 in bribes to a hospital for her daughter to be admitted and receive birth surgery (C-section). Another woman paid six cartons of "7.27 Cigarettes" (a cigarette brand) to give birth. (Respondent's areas of residence have been withheld for security regions.)

³⁰ As of February 2024, USD 1 was equal to 8,510 North Korean won in Pyongyang.

but for a significantly greater fee. North Korea's medical law prohibits abortions, with exceptions only for cases in which the mother's health is in danger (Article 28 of the Medical Law of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea).

What kind of education do female students receive about matters of sexual relations, sexual violence, pregnancy, and childbirth [Question 19]? The majority of respondents reported receiving no sex education whatsoever, although two respondents testified that they had heard of schools conducting education aimed at underage female students regarding childbirth (South Hwanghae 1, Pyongyang 2).³¹ However, this sort of education is reportedly slipped into practical training classes for female students once every two semesters or so (North Hwanghae 2). One respondent, who had worked as a teacher, admitted that “I am a teacher, but when I participated in the [sex education] class for girls, I didn't know what I was supposed to do as a teacher” (North Hwanghae 1). These testimonies suggest that neither schools nor medical clinics provide women with much in the way of sex education.

Without comprehensive sex education or sufficient information, **how do adults obtain information about AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases [Question 20]?** Testimonies confirmed that there are rumors surrounding AIDS and STDs through North Korean society. Only three respondents indicated that they had received a proper explanation of STDs from a doctor.³² Quite a few women reported that they had never received any information related to STDs, including one respondent who mentioned that she had heard that there “were no AIDS patients in North Korea” (North Hamgyong 3).

Right to Equality Inside the Home

Status and Rights Within the Home

Has North Korean women's status at home improved [Question 37]? Thirteen respondents (32.5%) replied that women's rights had improved as a result of their ability to earn money and support themselves.

³¹ Regarding the timing of sex education, three respondents indicated that sex education is offered beginning in the first year of high school (Yanggang 1, Pyongyang 2, Pyongyang 3), while another reported that sex education was taught during practical training for female students in middle and high school (South Hwanghae 1). These classes reportedly only covered getting one's period, coping strategies for dealing with periods, and puberty as a time when women's breasts begin to develop (Jagang 1).

³² Three women reported being told by a doctor that AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases are transmitted through sexual contact and that they are serious diseases (North Pyongan 1, North Pyongan 2, South Hamgyong 3).

Eight women (20%) responded that women’s status had improved but that these improvements varied regionally. None of the respondents believed that women’s status had improved “enough,” and the majority agreed that there were differences depending on region and households’ financial situations. Nine women (22.5%) believed that women are still unequal to men, and ten (25%) responded that North Korean society was structured such that women could never be equal to men.

[Table 2] Has North Korean women’s status improved in the home?

(Question 37)

Changes in Role	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Women’s status has improved enough.	0	0.0
There are regional differences, but women’s rights have improved.	8	20.0
Rights have improved for women who can earn money and support themselves.	13	32.5
Men and women are still unequal.	9	22.5
The structure of North Korean society makes it impossible for women to be equal to men.	10	25.0
Sum	40	100

When asked **which areas of domestic life improved the most for women [Question 38]**, the most common response (16 respondents) was a reduction in their role as caretaker for their parents-in-law. The second most-cited area of improvement was housework (10 respondents), followed by childcare (five respondents), and economic burdens (three respondents), while four gave other opinions.³³ At least one respondent indicated that there had been no improvement whatsoever, as well as ten respondents indicating that some areas of domestic life had not improved.

³³ Other areas of notable improvement cited by respondents included: being able to sit down and drink with other women during family gatherings (Yanggang 1); [husbands] helping with business (South Hwanghae 3); working together to gather money to manage the household’s financial burdens (Pyongyang 1) and help with labor mobilizations (Pyongyang 2).

By contrast, the most common areas of domestic life that respondents identified as having not improved were childcare (21 respondents) followed by housework (17 respondents). Childcare and housework were the most important areas in which women expected their husbands to contribute their share of labor, yet these were overwhelmingly named as the two areas of domestic life that had yet to improve. Seventeen respondents also indicated an awareness that they were engaged in labor mobilizations significantly more than their husbands, and sixteen women indicated their husbands played only a marginal role in their children's education. Many respondents (16 people) also highlighted women's economic burden as an area that had not improved, as well as the responsibility to care for their spouse's parents (nine respondents), while three had other opinions.³⁴

In-depth Interviewee 1 described her typical daily schedule as follows:

I wake up at 5:10 in the morning to light briquettes [in the stove] to make [breakfast]. On days when I have dawn mobilizations, I make the food ahead of time the night before. I feed the kids, and once the kids head off to school at 7:30, if I've ordered prawns [to sell], I'll prepare for business. Most afternoons I have neighborhood watch unit [inminban or people's unit] or women's union meetings, so I go to those too. In the afternoon, I go to the market. Women have to maintain their households, so even the government gives us the afternoons [for our own affairs]. I'll do business until 9 at night (or 8 in winter) then go home.

On the one hand, women do not have legal recognition of their role as the head of the household and are frequently discriminated against in matters of housing and property ownership, but what do North Korean women think about this situation? When asked **whether North Korean women can become the de facto owner of their household's assets [Question 39]**, 50% (15 people) of respondents replied that property ownership is exclusive to men.

When North Koreans buy a house, they first need to get an employment certificate, which is usually in the name of the [male] head of the household (South Pyongan 1, Kangwon 1). When housing is assigned by a workplace, only the man working at that company is recognized as having a right to the house (North

³⁴ Other areas of domestic life that women cited as having not improved included not having the right to talk back (North Hwanghae 2); work placements for officials (North Hwanghae 3); and the burden of womanly responsibilities like standing behind one's husband to wait on him or preparing bribes for the officials in one's husband's department (Pyongyang 3).

Hamgyong 3). However, women are not barred from owning the house, and in instances of divorce, the house belongs to whoever bought the house (South Pyongan 1). There is also a growing belief that assets produced while living and working together should be treated as joint assets (South Pyongan 3, South Pyongan 5). This improvement in women's rights appears to be caused by women's ability to earn money, rather than being a product of successful government gender equality policy (South Pyongan 4). By contrast, on farms in rural villages, men continue to dominate household ownership (South Hamgyong 1).

In recent years, North Korean women have become increasingly reluctant to have children, so much so that the government is actively encouraging women to have children.³⁵ The primary drivers behind this trend appear to be the outsized costs of childhood education and household financial difficulties.³⁶ Daily NK asked respondents if **they felt free to exercise their reproductive rights to not have children, if they so desired [Question 40]**. Twenty-three respondents (76.7%) responded that they felt they had the option to forgo childbirth, while seven (23.3%) replied that they felt they did not have the freedom to choose. The majority of women responded that “having children or not having children is a woman's freedom and not something that can be forced on her.”

However, two respondents reported a change following a recent directive that “[women] must have one child but can choose not to have a second. [A woman] who doesn't have any children will be in violation of this directive” (Jagang 1, Jagang 2). According to reporting from Daily NK, women eschewing marriage or avoiding childbirth after marriage has become a widespread social phenomenon. In response, the Organization and Guidance Department (OGD) of the Workers' Party of Korea's Central Committee even developed and passed down an internal plan to provincial, municipal, and country branches to conduct ideological investigations into women who were avoiding marriage or not having many children.³⁷

Simultaneously, in rural areas, social constraints for women are reportedly even more limiting, and women are pressured into having children by both their own and their spouse's parents (South Hamgyong 1).

³⁵ “If women don't have a plan for children, then they don't have them. The low birthrate problem is a serious issue” (South Pyongan 2).

“There's been a trend towards more and more women considering not having children” (South Pyongan 3).

³⁶ “The economy is tough right now, so if raising a child would be a burden, [then they] don't have kids” (North Pyongan 1, North Pyongan 4). “It's hard [to have children] because there's too much that kids are told to pay up [at kindergarten, school, college, and in society]” (North Hwanghae 3). If you're trying to make a living off of business, having a child can make things a bit tougher” (Yanggang 1). In-depth Interviewee 4 shared that “in the past, women raised tons of children, and North Korea was the same. Bringing up a child takes a lot of money. It's not easy to buy even a single piece of clothing.”

³⁷ Kim, Jeong Yoon. “A look behind N. Korea's clumsy efforts to improve its birthrate,” *The Daily NK*, originally published in Korean on June 30, 2023, published in English July 5, 2023. ([Link](#))

Additionally, old-fashioned attitudes towards women continue to prevail, with women who don't have children being "treated as lesser. They'll say you're lacking as a woman, and if your husband cheats, that it is the woman's fault [for not having children]" (Kangwon 1, Kangwon 2). These attitudes and younger generations' disinclination towards childbirth has resulted in social clashes, with some respondents taking issue with what they see as "women being forced by their parents-in-law, neighbors, and husband to move into his family's house and [become] tools for having babies" (North Hwanghae 2).

Exposure to Domestic Violence

To what degree do North Korean women experience domestic violence at the hands of their husbands [Question 41]? According to some respondents, there are still men who engage in domestic violence. In particular, one woman attributed a rise in domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic to increased national and household economic hardships (North Hwanghae 3).

However, the majority of women (22 respondents) responded that domestic violence has markedly decreased compared to the past. This change was credited to a significant change in men's views regarding women (South Pyongan 4) and a shift in social attitudes that now looks down on men who commit domestic violence (South Pyongan 3). These responses go to show that efforts to improve social views and attitudes are an essential component in addressing problems in the domestic sphere.

In particular, it is important to understand women's perceptions regarding the severity of domestic violence. In one woman's words: "If men commit violence, they can no longer live with women. We can see that women's views of men in married life have changed a lot" (North Hamgyong 2). The ability to file for divorce also appears to play an important role, with one respondent testifying that "since women can file for divorce if their husband is violent to them, domestic violence has largely disappeared" (South Pyongan 1). Unlike in the past when men were the undisputed heads of the household and wives were subordinated to their husbands, the opportunity to make money independently has allowed women greater independence. Combined with this newfound policy improved social attitudes towards women and the option to divorce abusive husbands is gradually freeing North Korean women from violence inside the home.³⁸

³⁸ However, In-depth Interviewee 4 reported a trend towards preventing divorces during the COVID-19 pandemic, with courts frequently not allowing women to get divorced. This appeared to be caused by an uptick in common law marriages and a government effort to tie down and control couples through marriage.

However, male violence has not disappeared. There remain gaps in the government's efforts to improve social attitudes towards women and systems to support women, as well as weaknesses in criminal punishment for men who commit violence against women. When asked about **which institutions or individuals women would expect to intervene in a case of domestic violence [Question 32]**, the majority of respondents (17 people) indicated the local police (Ministry of Social Security). Incidents are generally reported by fellow residents or the head of the residential unit to the local police station, but the authorities generally do not intervene except in particularly severe instances. The survey results suggest that prevalent beliefs that domestic violence is a family matter may prevent many women from being able to receive the protection they need.³⁹

The way that police officers handle reported cases also poses an issue. Experiences in which “there was a policeman on the case, but he told us to resolve the matter amongst ourselves” (Pyongyang 2) or “an officer from the Ministry of Social Security came and investigated but didn't resolve the issue” (South Hwanghae 1) create a sense of helplessness or futility that likely discourages women from proactively responding to domestic violence. There were cases where legal measures were taken against perpetrators, but the sole example was of “a police officer intervening and taking the husband down to the police station for two days of education” (South Pyongan 4).

Interestingly, many survey respondents indicated that they felt government mandates calling for respect toward women by men are effective. The respondents said that they believed government institutional intervention benefited women, such as police punishments for violent men, which had not necessarily been the norm in the past (South Hamgyong 3, North Hamgyong 1, North Hamgyong 2, North Hamgyong 3). There remains a need, however, for the authorities to add regulations related to domestic violence to North Korea's criminal code.

There also remains an imperative for more detailed and well-crafted **measures to support women who have been victims of domestic violence [Question 43]**. In cases in which a woman has suffered bodily harm, she must undergo an examination at a hospital and personally submit the documentation to the neighborhood or city police to report the incident. These documents are then submitted to the court during

³⁹ “Your husband and family play judge and jury. I wish the state would intervene” (Pyongyang 4). “Men say it's a personal matter and nobody else's business whether they hit their wives or not” (Pyongyang 3). “If [the authorities] intervene, it brings disgrace onto your family” (South Hwanghae 3). “[Domestic violence] is resolved at home among family and relatives. A woman would basically have to be beaten to death for the matter to get turned over to the police. If you survive it, it gets resolved by the family” (North Hwanghae 3, North Hwanghae 1).

divorce proceedings. A significant number of respondents (11 people), however, were unaware of the existence of these policies or processes. Moreover, all respondents indicated that there were **no government-backed measures to protect or offer psychological support to women who are experiencing severe domestic violence [Question 44]**.

Respondents were also asked about **attitudes towards forced sexual relations between married couples [Question 45]**. The majority of respondents indicated that coercion in sexual relations was seen as “something that sometimes happens between couples” and was not thought of as a problem. Some women indicated that forcing sex upon one’s wife was regarded as inconsiderate, and some responses indicated an awareness that the issue was related to women’s rights. There is a critical need to inform North Korean women about their right to bodily autonomy and the ability to cite various forms of spousal violence as grounds for divorce, as well to create a space for women to discuss their circumstances and at the very least have their complaints sufficiently investigated/examined by the authorities.

One respondent’s opinion illustrates the reality faced by North Korean women.

“[Sexual relations] are a natural right for women. But there’s nowhere to go and ask [if there’s an issue]. There’s nowhere I can go to find out if what I’m thinking is right or where someone will discuss [the matter] with me.” (North Hwanghae 3)

Daily NK also asked respondents if they knew of any **examples where violence had led women to divorce their husbands [Question 46]**. In one case, a man mistook his wife’s interest in improving her appearance as evidence she was cheating and “beat her from head to toe with a wooden plank” (South Pyongan 1). Another man, claiming his wife had disgraced his mistress, beat her so badly he broke her ribs (South Pyongan 2). In another common case, a verbal fight over the wife saying she was unable to take care of her husband’s parents escalated into physical violence (South Pyongan 3). Other examples included violence while under the influence of alcohol, violence after the wife refused her husband’s sexual advances, and violence in response to the wife’s adultery. These testimonies indicated that in most cases of severe violence, women can be legally granted a divorce.

North Korean Women's Exposure to Verbal Abuse

Next, we asked about instances of men verbally assaulting or sexually harassing women [Question 47]. Most respondents answered that women have more authority now and people have grown more culturally sophisticated, so men no longer make senseless comments. While some of the respondents did not understand the meaning of the word “verbal violence,” others said men often make vulgar, awkward or inappropriate comments toward women, or that men refer to women using various iterations of the word *nyeon*, a derogatory Korean term for women. In-depth Interviewee 3 said when a vehicle such as a bus carrying men and women gets a flat tire, people say it is because one of the women on board “is on her period.”

Some of the respondents said they had experienced verbal violence and comments degrading women, including sexual harassment, from their superiors at work. This includes a case of a party secretary in charge of event rehearsals calling women “bitch,” “old bitch,” “ugly bitch” or “bitch with the big breasts;” a case of the neighborhood office chief assembling members of the Socialist Women's Union of Korea for a lecture and telling them to be polite to their husbands; and a case of a male headmaster telling unmarried female teachers that they have “eyes like a rotten fish.” Likewise, in the army, battalion commanders blurt out violent language toward female soldiers during drills, constantly calling them “bitches” or telling them to “get their posture right when they practice firing in a prone position.”⁴⁰

When asked if they have ever appropriately reported or taken legal measures regarding verbal violence [Question 48], most respondents said they did not think such matters warranted reporting. That is to say, they did not know one must report such matters, and the authorities do not punish such behavior on the part of men. Kangwon 2 said that women who report such common speech are “treated like mental patients” who take things too seriously and that they are “making a mountain out of a molehill.”

⁴⁰ Daily NK cannot reveal the area due to security concerns.

It is important to avoid overlooking how women are placed in power relationships where they are unable to even think of reporting abuse at the workplace. They wonder how anyone “could report on a superior” and worry that they may be disgraced or become the subject of rumors after making such reports.

Examples of Sexual Violence

Daily NK’s survey found various examples of sex-related violence perpetrated against women, which are detailed in the sub-sections below.

Assaults by market inspectors and street enforcement personnel

Six instances of verbal violence and forced sexual relations by market inspectors and enforcement personnel were reported through the survey [Question 51]. In particular, the survey turned up regular instances of victimization, with instances of women subject to physical contact and insults that resulted in them feeling sexual shame during crackdowns. In one incident at a market in 2023, a plainclothes policeman grabbed a woman’s hair during a crackdown. “If the women complain, the women are disgraced, but the men are fine” (North Hwanghae 1).

In one area of Kangwon Province, a woman was caught by an enforcement officer while she was carrying goods on a bicycle. Complaining that the woman was dressed inappropriately, the officer pulled her clothing and a button fell off, revealing her underwear (Kangwon 2). At one market in Pyongyang, an officer went about with a stick and struck women sitting at their stalls in the chest for failing to sit in a line (Pyongyang 3).

In more serious incidents, enforcement agents demanded sex from women who were caught selling memory sticks and CDs, and the authorities took no issue with these unprofessional acts (South Pyongan 1). South Hamgyong 3 said officers frequently demand sex during crackdowns, and women are punished for saying no. North Hamgyong 2 said women are too ashamed to raise issues with sexual harassment or sexual molestation.

Victimization of women in the military

More than 21 instances of sexual molestation or violence against female soldiers during their military duties were reported through the survey [Question 50]. Sexual assaults are a serious problem in military units, but the victims or their families often do not aggressively take issue with it. This is because the violence results in no active measures or serious punishment. For example, even if a female army officer is sexually molested by a superior and reports it, the superior is simply transferred to another unit while the victim serves out her time until she is discharged at the completion of her stint (South Pyongan 3). Several instances of serious sexual assault were found. Because sexual misconduct by superior commanders is both serious and easily covered up, a more sweeping study about this issue will be necessary.

In-depth Interviewee 4 said women feel they must sexually approach men so they can become party members. In-depth Interviewee 3 said men frequently ask for sexual favors from female soldiers under the guise of helping them become party members.

Sexual victimization in confinement facilities

Through the survey, six cases of sexual violence by guards or prison officers at detention facilities while the victims were undergoing criminal punishment were reported through the survey. The incidents took place in vehicles while the women were being repatriated to North Korea, at unknown confinement facilities and detention such as roundup centers, and at forced labor camps in the provinces.

In particular, the survey showed that women are frequently subject to sexual molestation by guards in vehicles while being repatriated to North Korea or by prison guards while being strip searched during preliminary examinations.⁴¹ However, victims had to stay silent for fear of retaliation by male guards if they reported it to the lockup superiors (South Pyongan 4). One prison guard in Onsong County, North

Hamgyong Province, sexually molested an inmate, ostensibly while asking her to clean. He called for her often afterward, and when a security agent in charge at the detention facility found out, he was pressed on

⁴¹ Also referred to as “pretrials,” the preliminary examination is a unique procedure in North Korea’s criminal proceedings that rests between the investigation phase and the indictment.

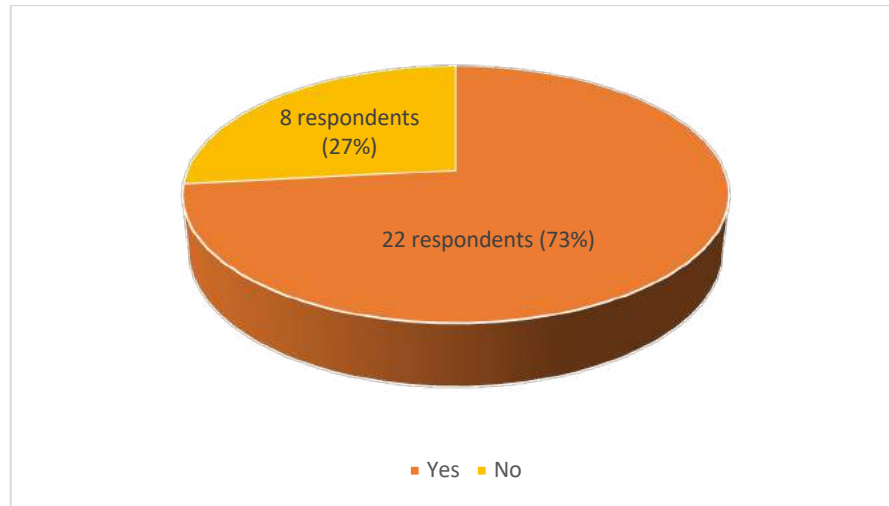
it and moved to a different place (North Hamgyong 2). Another prison guard who committed a sexual assault while transporting an inmate was transferred after rumors of the attack spread (Kangwon 1).

The Reporting and Punishment of Sex-related Victimization

Sexual Coercion by Men in Authority

Given that so much sexual violence takes place at the hands of those in power, we can presume demands for sex are also commonplace. Some 22 of the 30 respondents (73%) said they had heard of **instances of being asked for sex for jobs, promotions or commercial opportunities at the workplace, military or market or being forced, coaxed or duped into sex [Question 53].**

[Graph 4] Have you heard of instances of sex being demanded at the workplace, in the military or at markets? [Question 53]

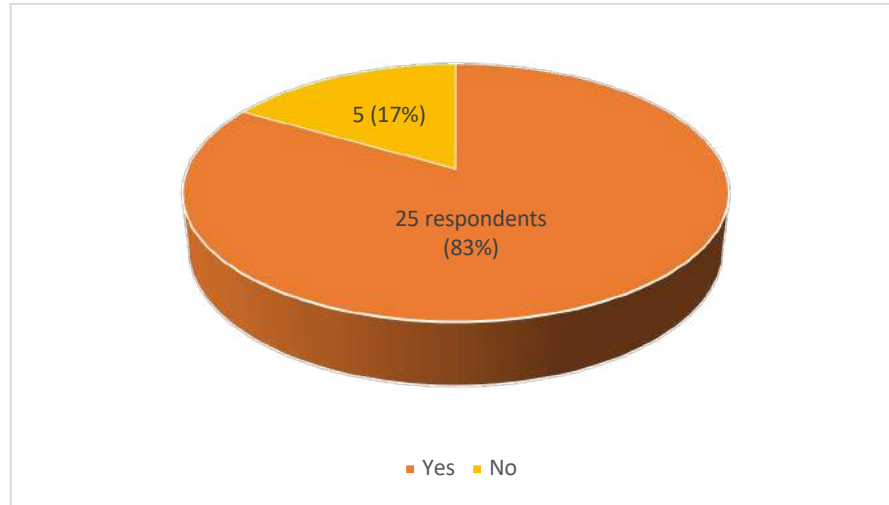


Of the workplace demands for sex disclosed by respondents, one instance took place in the 2000s, 13 in the 2010s and eight in the 2020s. Most incidents took place in factories or at companies, while six took place in the military, two were at the hands of state security officers, three were committed by government officers, and one happened during inspections. The victims reported the misconduct in only two instances, and the assailants went unpunished except for one instance when the perpetrator was transferred.

Workplace Victimization

Some 25 of 30 respondents (83%) said they had **heard of instances of sexual violence at the workplace** [Question 52].

[Graph 5] Have you heard of instances of sexual violence at the workplace? (Question 52)



Of the 25 cases, three happened in the 1990s, three in the 2000s, nine in the 2010s and eight in the 2020s. Two people said there were too many instances to count. Most of the assailants were workplace or factory superiors, upper-level managers at educational facilities, state agency managers, or powerful people at important posts in law enforcement agencies such as the Ministry of State Security, party agencies or the military.

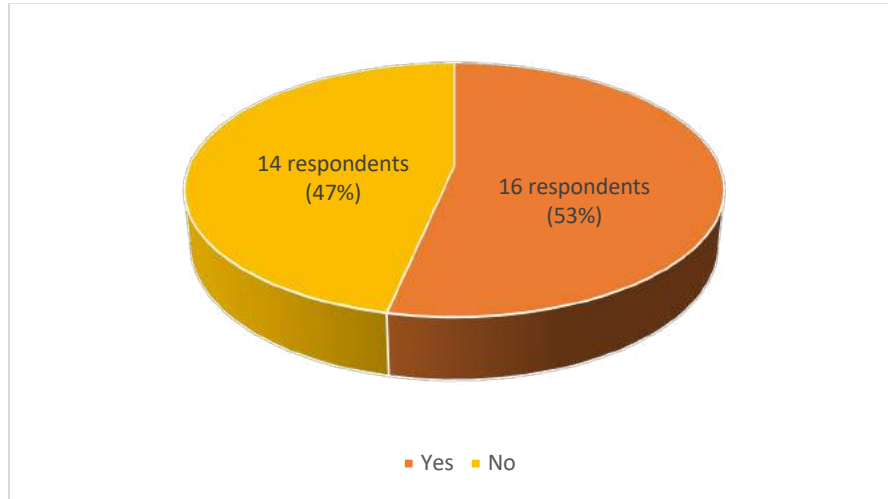
Only five incidents were reported, resulting in two cases of victims receiving monetary compensation, one case of a perpetrator simply undergoing training, one case of a transfer to another workplace and one case of the assailant losing his job and being subjected to forced labor. The other 20 cases went unpunished.

In the more recent cases in the 2020s, seven of the eight cases were committed by people in power, namely high positions in law enforcement, party agencies, the military or education bodies. None of the cases were reported or punished.

Victimization of Women by Officials at State-run Facilities

Sixteen respondents (53%) said they had **encountered instances of sexual victimization by officers at state facilities, including one case in the 2000s, four cases in the 2010s and 11 cases in the 2020s [Question 54]**. The facilities referred to in the survey included police stations, state-run security facilities, work camps, reeducation camps, political prison camps and military security facilities.

[Graph 6] Have you ever encountered instances of sexual victimization by officers at state-run facilities? [Question 54]



Of these cases, only one victim's report was successfully submitted and none of the perpetrators were punished.

Conclusion

North Korea commemorates the declaration of gender equality each year on July 30. The declaration includes the protection of the rights of women not only in terms of housework and child rearing but also in terms of lifelong educational opportunities, opportunities to choose their profession and opportunities for economic advancement, as well as freedom from exploitation at home and in social labor.

As for gender equality at home and the right of women to choose their careers, women's rights are being violated more by the government than by men. Gender equality in North Korea is unlikely to be realized until the role structurally granted to men by the state is abolished.

Meanwhile, in terms of sexual violence, the situation is very serious and needs urgent improvement. According to the North Korean authorities, abuse of authority and other crimes committed by legal officers in the course of their duties were made subject to more severe punishments following the July 22, 2015 amendment to the country's criminal code. North Korea also claims that many people filed complaints about official misconduct, and that the authorities took the complaints and petitions seriously and dealt with cases fairly in accordance with the principles and procedures laid out in laws regarding said complaints and petitions (2019 DPRK Universal Periodic Review). Nevertheless, the authorities must prevent law enforcement officers from violating the law, including continuous cases of abuse of power, by raising fear of heavy punishment, determining the level of abuse and bolstering the function of the prosecutors.

Moreover, the authorities must pay particular attention to improving awareness of human rights among bureaucrats in positions of authority, including law enforcement, who must protect human rights rather than violate them. Accordingly, international mechanisms must continuously verify how much effort the authorities have put into elevating powerful officials' understanding of human rights, including in law enforcement, to eradicate North Korea's serious sexual violence problem.

Accordingly, there is an imperative to investigate who is responsible for the North Korean authorities' poor awareness and their failure to take proper steps. The authorities must survey sexual victimization across all sectors, uncover criminal acts by officials, and punish officials who failed to take proper actions.

Finally, the authorities must provide North Korean women, especially young students, with the knowledge they need to protect themselves. The government must draw up concrete plans to increase educational opportunities related to women's rights and knowledge of the legal system. The authorities must also verify women's understanding of their rights and identify appropriate expressions and examples to communicate these rights rather than adhering to a unilateral top-down approach to educating them about their rights.