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**Alternative NGO Report on the
Convention on the Elimination of
All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
First Periodic Report of the
Democratic People's Republic of Korea**

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Alternative NGO Report on the
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women of the
First Periodic Report of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea¹

The focus of this report is on the impact of the food shortage of the mid 1990s on women's rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). In particular, with the right to life, the traffic and exploitation of prostitution of women, their right to access to health care and the specific situation of North Korean women in China.

Based on the data collected from 1996 to 2001 by the Good Friends: Centre for Peace Human Rights and Refugees, from the direct interactions and independent research. In order to reflect recent changes, Good Friends conducted a follow-up research and collected testimonies from the North Korean 'New-Settlers'² in South Korea, who entered South Korea after 2003 and spent short period of time in other countries after they left the DPRK. We also conducted an extensive literature review of the previous reports from other organizations and governments on the DPRK.

It should be noted that the international NGOs do not have the possibility to enquire in the DPRK on the situation of human rights, which makes their work much more difficult and obliges them to rely on secondary sources of information.

¹This report is submitted with the support of the International Federation for Human Right (FIDH)

² 'new-settlers' – a new term given by the government of South Korea (Ministry of Unification) for North Korean Defectors

In addition, current restrictions on freedom of association in the DPRK make it impossible for North Korean women to organise and to carry out activities in favour of their own rights. This situation violates Article 7 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which states that “*States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right (...) To participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country*”.

1. Understanding the food shortage in the DPRK

The food shortage in the DPRK is central to the understanding of women’s right in the DPRK, since it was a tremendous, often traumatic experience for the DPRK society overall. For a background, we offer a brief analysis of the food shortage in the DPRK in relation to the changes it brought to the DPRK society.

1) Threat to Life

The long-term economic crisis in the DPRK is threatening the lives of the North Korean people. According to the testimonies of the North Korean refugees, the food shortage in the DPRK began in the early 1990s. According to our research in 1997 and 1998 with 1855 North Korean refugees, 64.4% of the refugees answered that the food distribution was suspended before 1994. The major flood in the DPRK in 1995 exacerbated the food shortage to the extent that the food shortage could not remain unknown to the international community.

The year 1997 was when the food shortage in the DPRK was the most severe. Many people died of starvation from malnutrition and related diseases. The following tables illustrate the impact of the Food Shortage on the population growth.

[Table 1] Annual Birth and Mortality Rates of Interviewees’ Family Members³
(Unit: Person, %)

³ Based on the sample size of 1,855 interviewees. Annual birth rate: the number of annual birth/ the population of the particular year \times 1,000; the annual birth rate is on the number of births per 1000 persons. The North Korean government annual birth rate figures are: 47.0‰ in 1958; 44.7‰ in 1970; 25.9‰ in 1975; and 21.8‰ in 1980. On the other hand, the United Nations reported the annual birth rate of North Korea as: 22.1‰ in 1995; 22.5‰ in 1996; 21.4‰ in 1997; and 21.0‰ in 1998.

Year	Total Number of Family members	No. of Births	Birth Rate	No. of the Death	Mortality Rate
1996	9,921	100	1.01	650	6.55
1997	9,371	70	0.75	1,700	18.14

※ Source: Good Friends (1999)

According to the first research on the Food Shortage conducted by the Good Friends with North Korean refugees, the 0.75% birth rate⁴ of 1997 indicates a drastic decline in comparison to the 1.01% birth rate of 1996, and the mortality rate⁵ of 1997 (18.14%) is much higher than 1996 (6.55%). Moreover, the mortality of interviewed refugees' family members reached 28.7%. (See Table 1)

2) Living Conditions of the food shortage in the DPRK

People's struggled in the DPRK after the suspension of the public food distribution is nothing but astonishing. The North Korean refugees' response to the question "How did you survive after the suspension of the Public Distribution System (PDS)?" is shown as below.

[Table 4] Types of Livelihood after the Suspension of Public Food Distribution System (PDS)

[Multiple Responses]

Life after the Suspension of Food Distribution	No. of Responses	Rate of Responses
Subsist on wild greens, bark of pine tree, and roots of rice plants	1,024	28.4
Peddling	801	22.3
Exchange of Furniture, Households with Food	720	20.0
Aid from Relatives	354	9.8

⁴ The birth rate = the number of interviewees' family members in 1997 / the number of the family members in 1997 × 100

⁵ The mortality = the number of interviewees' family members in 1997 / the number of the family members in 1997 × 100

Cultivation of Patch	249	6.9
Exchange Medical Herbs with Food	107	3.0
Theft	74	2.1
Others	271	7.5
Total	3,600	100.0

※ Source: Good Friends, I want to live like a human-being (1998)

The interviews with the North Korean young people from the age of 12 to 18, '*Kotjebi*⁶', in China demonstrate that the survival is not easy despite the tremendous effort of the people. Asked on what kind of food they ate during the food shortage in the DPRK, 92% answered that they ate wild vegetable porridges and grassroots, whereas 4.7% said they ate anything from begging.

[Table 5] Food for Survival [Multiple Responses (Unit: %)]

Food Item	Frequency of Responses	Rate of Responses
Wild Vegetables Porridge	298	61.8
Wile Greens and Grassroots	71	14.7
Begging	19	3.9
Others	13	2.7
No Response	81	16.8
Total	482	100.0

※Source: Good Friends (1998) Status analysis of Kotjebi Youths

⁶ Kotjebi: a common term used in the DPRK for Street People – mostly used to call young people on the street

– Aggregated Examination of 482 Kotjebi Youths in China [table 5: 18p]

[Table 6] Frequency of Meals per Day (Unit: %)

Frequency per Day	Frequency of Responses	Rate of Responses	Rate ⁷
Once	234	48.5	70.3
Twice	99	20.5	29.7
No Response	149	30.9	-
Total	482	100.0	-

※ Source: Good Friends (1998) *Status analysis of Kotjebi Youths*

– *Aggregated Examination of 482 Kotjebi Youths in China* (The rates excludes non responses)

In a research, Good Friends conducted on Kotjebi, 70% of the Kotjebi said that they could not have a meal more than once a day, and there was no one who had three meals a day (See Table 6). As provided above in Table 5 and 6, it should be noted that they fed themselves with anything that was available at the time. Among the 70% of the respondents who were able to feed themselves at least once a day, 70% ate grass soup and wild vegetables porridge, while the rest consumed wild greens and grass roots or begged for food.

The North Korean society is going through harsh living conditions, which makes mere survival difficult. The food shortage in the DPRK brought the breakdown of the overall social infrastructure including education, health care, and transportation, and thus resulted in serious human rights violations.

2. Women's rights in the DPRK

In its State report to CEDAW, the DPRK claims that discrimination against women has been eliminated through various institutions and policies favourable towards women. Admittedly, the DPRK made a considerable effort to eradicate discrimination against women through legal and policy measures, including solid maternity policies and punitive measures against sexual violence. Yet, as the report of the DPRK also acknowledges, discriminatory traditions in the DPRK still persist and they affect the ways in which policies and legal measures are implemented. Especially, the food shortage in the DPRK

⁷ Percentage excluding 'no responses'.

since the mid 1990s has transformed the lives of many North Korean people in a profound way.

1) **Article 6. Traffic and Exploitation of Prostitution of Women**

i. Prostitution

The DPRK claims that “traffic in women and prostitution are regarded as the most shameful crime and there has not been a report of such a case for many years” (Para. 105). Yet, this is far from the reality of the DPRK today. According to countless testimonies of North Korean people we collected, prostitution in the DPRK existed, and it grew drastically after the food shortage. The prostitution in the DPRK takes a different form from the sex industry in the capitalistic societies. Although it is not open in the public sphere, the prostitution of women in the DPRK is pervasive, for instance, as a bribe to the officials or policemen for favour, or for mere survival. The following testimonies support this fact.

[case 1] I asked them (the prostitutes) how much money they make a day. One of them told me that they earned 200 won when they were lucky, but many times, they just sold their body for one meal. She also said that these days even businessmen or military or governmental personnel offer such a small amount of money or one meal, they have to steal with other male thieves, or beg each meal from these thieves in exchange of sex.

[case 2] Prostitutes gather in front of the train station where the food peddlers are around and in the waiting room inside the station, looking for businessmen, soldiers and those who look rich. They bring those male customers to the houses that they know and have sex there overnight.

As these cases demonstrate, under extremely harsh economic conditions, many women in the DPRK use their sexuality to get food or to save money for small trading (peddling).

The DPRK government should acknowledge this existing prostitution and find ways to combat its structural causes under the food shortage.

ii. Trafficking of Women into China

Difficult living conditions in the DPRK, many North Korean people were pushed to cross the national border to China. Women’s migration was central to this population flow. Some women went to China after having lost their family members due to famine, while others choose to cross the border to provide basic food to their families. For young women, the common path in China is marriage to rural Chinese men. Although some women plan this path, these marriage arrangements are forced through trafficking. Many young women went to China following a hearsay that they can live better in China,

but most of them ended up in rural China through trafficking.

[case 6] When I visited my childhood friend's place, there was a guest in her place from China. He told me that the life in China is very good and if a woman is young and pretty, she can make a lot of money easily and her parents can live comfortably with the money from China. (...) I went to China and entered a house. I then realized that they are not businessmen, but traffickers who sold North Korean women who dream of a better life in China. A woman next to me told them that she would like to return to North Korea and they beat her. I was sold to a man in Jilin Sheng for 3000 yuan, only three hours after I left North Korea.

[case 7] My life in North Korea was so difficult, and I crossed the river to Huirong city in China. Then, I was sold to Yanji for 4000 yuan. But, when I was sent to Yanji, those traffickers told me that they would sell me again to another province for a higher price.

As the women choose to go to China for survival, they face scarcity of information when crossing the border, which lead them to rely on the traffickers who take advantage of such a desperate situation.

Trafficking in women in the border areas in the DPRK causes serious violation of women's human rights, as it largely involves violence, rape, and confinement of women during and after the trafficking.

The DPRK should acknowledge the magnitude of seriousness of trafficking of women, and make every effort to eliminate its structural causes as well as to implement strict punitive measures against the traffickers. According to our research, a majority of DPRK women who crossed the national border to China said that their decision was based on the severe economic difficulty in the DPRK. This demonstrates that the livelihood in the DPRK should be restored in a fundamental way to stop trafficking in women.

2) Article 12. Equality in Access to Health Care

When researchers from the Good Friends asked North Korean refugees how the disease got treated in North Korea to, 63.4% of the respondents answered that they could never go to hospitals or take medicine. 34.7% of the interviewees said that they were able to get a diagnosis from hospitals, but had to buy medicine personally. This shows that, approximately 98.1% of people in North Korea did not gain access to the most elementary medical support.

[Table 9] Method of Medical Treatment Received for Ill Family Members

(Unit: Case, %)

How to Treat Illness of Family Members	Cases	Rate (%)
No Medical Treatment or Hospitalisation	330	63.4
Diagnosis by Hospital, but Individual Purchase of Medicine	181	34.7
Public Medical Treatment (Treatment Fee waived)	1	0.2
Others	9	1.7
Total	521	100.0

※ Source: *The Changes in the North Korean Society* Good Friends (2001)

The medical system, of which North Korea had been proud of for its free medical care, became completely paralysed by the lack of medical supplies resulting from the food shortage.

[case 10] Almost all our medical supplies are dependent on the foreign aid, including aid from UN. Our pharmacy has a lot of difficulties producing medicines. We could only make glucose. When the patients buy sugar from marketplaces, pharmacists make it into inverted sugar. But this inverted sugar is sticky and diuretic, and we cannot use much of it. Sometimes patients buy glucose imported from China, but it costs more than 350 won only for one 500g bottle, and it is quite a burden to the patients. (<North Korea Today> 3. November 2004. Good Friends)

[case 11] Before the food shortage, each hospital received about 100 of one million units of penicillin every month, and divided that to different departments. Adults got one million per day, and children had half million. But these days, hospitals only receive under 10 of one million units per month. Some departments should buy their own penicillin from marketplaces. But those from marketplaces are often fake and not good, so children' wards and emergency care units get the medicine from UN fist. In marketplaces, one unit of penicillin is about the same as one

kilogram of corn. (<North Korea Today> 3. November 2004. Good Friends)

The right to health care in the DPRK is not only about the shortage of medicine, but is also related to supply of electricity. Without a reliable supply of electricity, any medical activities cannot be performed safely.

[**Case 12**] Without electricity, doctors should do their work with a torch when there's an emergency at night. Or they see their patients when they have electricity supply. But if there's no supply, and the patient still has to see the doctor, he or she should bring torch, lamp, or lighter oneself. . (<North Korea Today> 3. November 2004. Good Friends)

[**case 13**] We cannot sterilize the injection needles properly. We just boil some water and put the needles for about two hours. We do not have disposable needles, either. We sterilize those plastic needles, and sometimes it is burned. (<North Korea Today 3>. November 2004. Good Friends)

Such breakdown of health care system in the DPRK put women in danger in their pregnancy and delivery.

[**case 14**] My brother had a son after one year of marriage. When the baby was born, the mother did not have anything to eat, and was not able to breastfeed the baby. The baby died after a few days. The mother went through the delivery without enough food and grieved so much for her loss, and could not be treated for her illness because they had no money. She became handicapped after that. (a woman from Haeju city, Southern Hwanghae province, 30 years old: left the DPRK)

[**case 15: Abortion**] After I got married, I became pregnant. However, it was too hard for me to maintain the pregnancy so that I tried aspirin to abort several times. I also tried bittern several times, but I failed to abort. After 10 months I gave birth, yet the child could not keep his /her own head steady and the bones of his/her body were seriously weak. My placenta failed to abort the baby, but the heavy salt water and the chemical substances led my child kept from being steady. (39-year-old female, Erang County, Northern Hamkyung Province)

2) North Korean Women in China

North Korean women in China experience severe human rights violations. They face trafficking, rape and violence during and after they cross the border to China. Because of their illegal status, they

easily become victims of sexual violence, as they cannot rely on official protection measures in China.

[case 17] It was around 10 pm on July 5, 1996 that I crossed the river to China. In China, I had a regular customer named Han, who was a driver. He was hitting on me, but because I did not respond to him at all, he became upset. I changed karaoke bar, where I was working a few times, but he found me every time, and threatened me that he would report to the police that I am a North Korean. I was about to return to North Korea with the money that I had saved, and was thinking of opening a little stall in a market. But a man called Han found out where my house was, and he raped me. It was March 1998. He then sold me to a Chinese man in a rural area for 3000 yuan. I had nowhere to go because I was only an illegal North Korean in China. (Human rights2. 632. 137. 29-year-old woman from Chungjin city, Northern Hamkyung province)

(2) Entering Sex Industries

The usual jobs for North Korean women in China are mostly in sex industries, such as massage parlours or karaoke bars. The process that women enter such workplaces involves trafficking rather than voluntary job search. Even those who choose to work in sex related industries in the first place, they are exposed to same kind of violence and danger since their status in China is illegal.

[case 18] We entered a massage parlour with the car that was sent to bring us. There two of us were sent to another place, and it was only my friend Young Hee and I who were left there. We changed our clothing and learned how to give massage for fifteen days. Then I realized that we were supposed to give massage to the men who finished bathing. The owner said: "I bought all of you with 3000 yuan. You can earn a lot of money here, and it's safe from the police. You even don't know how to speak Chinese, and the police will catch you if you go out and send you back to North Korea. You will be killed if you are sent back there." After we began our work, we realized that massage is only for the cover, and we were just prostitutes. (26-year-old woman, Onsung county, Northern Hamkyung province)

[case 19] I was working in a karaoke in Ando city, but after a few days the owner insisted us to sleep with the customers. He threatened us that if you don't do it, he will report us to the police. Then I got sexually transmitted disease, and I was kicked out from that place. The owner had all the money I earned, and he only gave me half of it. (27-year-old women, a farmer, Onsung country, Northern Hamkyung province)

(3) Domestic Violence

Many North Korean women in China marry Chinese or Ethnic-Korean Chinese men. In many cases, they are trafficked into their marriage partners, and suffer from sexual and domestic violence in their marriages. The unstable status of North Korean women, along with the prejudice against North Koreans, makes these women more vulnerable to such violence.

[**case 20**] I visited my relative's house in Musan and was kidnapped by someone I don't know, and was sold to Chinese people. The house that I was sold to was in Heirongjiang Sheng. The owner of the house was a Chinese, and he was over 60 years old. He beat me as soon as he saw me and cursed me in Chinese. I didn't understand a word he said, but I felt like he's saying that he bought me with 5000 yuan, because he showed me five fingers when he beat me. That night, he locked the door, and battered me like crazy. (551, 22. 25-year-old woman, Hamhung city, Southern Hamkyung province)

(4) Punishment of the women after repatriation to the DPRK

The North Korean women experience severe human rights violations when they are repatriated to the DPRK. Crossing the border to China constitutes a crime; in addition, women who had sexual relationships with non-North Korean or who married a non-North Korean face even more severe treatment.

[**case 22: Examination of Vagina**] I crossed the river at the border into North Korea from China to catch a train on time, but there was an unexpected examination and I was arrested. I was imprisoned in the Onsung prison. The examiners inspected me with abusing language, 'You are coming from China? You put on weight'. In the beginning, I denied. However, the examiners battered me so terribly that I answered yes to their question. Then, they spoke to me, 'You bitch, did you like the Chinese man that much?' They did not stop throwing all the insults to me, and beat me. Then, they checked all my body and even the vagina on suspicion that I would hide something inside. I couldn't stand it, but I had no way to escape from it. (32-year-old female, Musan County, Hamgyong Province)

[**case 23: Sexual Violence**] They continually shouted at me, 'How did you make money? Answer that you were a street-girl with your pretty face'. I cried out that I did not even know what a street-girl meant. Then, they said, 'you don't know how much we can hurt you yet. We can figure out whether you did prostitution or not through the examination. We will check if you are a virgin.' Although I resisted against it by crying out, they rushed at me and stripped off my clothes. Then, they did electrical torture on my breasts. I lost my consciousness in a moment. When I woke up, I realised that I was discharging blood from my private part. I was

tortured like this for two months. (25-year-old female, Onsung County, Northern Hamgyong Province)

The North Korean women who are repatriated are accused of having sexual relationships with foreign men in China and tortured to admit such accusation. The interrogation and torture are also sexually abusive as verbal and physical violence against women.

3. Recommendation to the DPRK Government

Decriminalise the border-crossing to China and guarantee the status of North Korean women in China

The first step that the DPRK should take is to decriminalize its people's border-crossing to China based on the understanding that it is for them a question of survival and in respect with Article 13 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR), which states that "*Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country*".

The illegal status of North Korean women in China makes them particularly vulnerable, and increases the risk of being victim of trafficking and prostitution. The illegal status of North Korean women in china leads to violations of their children's rights. Those children who are born to North Korean mothers have no legal status, and consequently have no access to education.

The DPRK government should cooperate with the Chinese government to ensure that these women and their children get a proper status.

Take concrete and immediate measures to put an end to the acts of torture and cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment against North Korean women returnees

The massive migration from the DPRK to China happened because the state was no longer able to guarantee the basic living conditions, and thus falls into the state's responsibility. Especially the migration flow during 1997-1998 mainly took place for economic reasons rather than political resistance.

The DPRK government should stop treating these migrants as national traitors and impose on them inhumane treatment and torture. In case of women migrants, sexually abusive treatment towards them, both verbally and physically, should be stopped immediately. The authors of such acts should

be identified and prosecuted promptly in order to put an end to those deeply entrenched practices.

Social infrastructures including the health care system need to be restored.

Women's right to appropriate health care (Article 12 of CEDAW) in the DPRK is closely related to the drastic deterioration of the social security system during the Food Shortage. The DPRK should ask for outside assistance and international cooperation in order to satisfy the immediate needs in terms of health care and education and stabilize the health care and educational system in the long term. For this purpose, the DPRK should conduct an extensive survey of the current situation in the DPRK and make the result open and public in a transparent way in order to ask for international assistance.

Protect the vulnerable population including women, children, and the elderly

During the food shortage in the DPRK, the mortality of the children and the elderly was considerably higher and their human rights violation became severer with the breakdown of the health care and education system. The suspension of the food distribution led the women with fewer resources into prostitution or trafficking in women. Also the policies and social institutions for women such as those relating to pregnancy and child care became ineffective under the food shortage, thus violating women's right to reproductive health. The DPRK government should take into account the vulnerability of certain groups, including women, and offer them appropriate care and protection. In addition, an increased part of the national budget should be devoted to those sectors⁸.

Fully ensure the right to freedom of association, including for women, in conformity with Article 7 of CEDAW

Allow international and regional human rights NGOs to visit the DPRK and issue a standing invitation to UN thematic human rights mechanisms.

⁸ According to UNDP 2004 annual development report, 1,9% of GDP was devoted to health in 2001 and no statistics were available on education.

Annex.1 Map of North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea)



Annex 2.



Good Friends: Centre for Peace, Human Rights and Refugees, was originally established as the **KBSM (Korean Buddhist Sharing Movement)** in 1996. It is directed by the **Venerable Pomnyun Sunim**, who is well known as one of the first people to interview North Koreans on the Korean/Chinese border. The first visit was made in August 1996, and Good Friends has been active in the area ever since. Through the research of the Good Friends (the then KBSM), the extent of the famine in North Korea first became known. Good Friends work also provided the first insight into the peril and risks suffered by North Koreans living in China.

Good Friends is still conducting independent research in the border area to learn about the reality inside North Korea and the situation of displaced people in China based on the testimonies of the North Korean refugees. In addition, Good Friends has the following current programs working with North Koreans:

▶ **Immediate Aid to North Korean Refugees** Over the border assistance and the refugees in the vicinity of the Sino-Korean border, providing immediate food and daily essentials in the border area.

▶ **NEWS LETTER: North Korea Today (Monthly)**

Providing a close look at how the real people live in North Korea dealing with issues of food, transport, education, health care to market development and including the border area updates.

▶ **Assistance for the former North Koreans Residing in South Korea**

Helps North Koreans settlements in South Korea by addressing their cultural and social needs.

The annual budget for Good Friends is 128,000,000 Won (Korean). 98% of the funds are contributed by individual donors and 2% are funded by the South Korean government for education on the Unification. There are currently 11 staffs working in the Good Friends.

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