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Situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

Submission for the Committee on the Elimination

of Discrimination Against Women

68th Session 2017

For this submission, 23 women and 3 men were interviewed during September of 2017. The interviewees left DPRK (North Korea) between 2013 and 2016 and came from various areas ranging from Pyongyang to the most northern provinces bordering China (North Hamgyung and Yanggang Provinces). Few of the interviewees lived in the deeply rural areas. A similar set of questions were asked of 60 other women in 2013¹, thus allowing us to compare whether there have been positive changes in certain areas.

Provision of Health Services

The DPRK has reported formulating the Reproductive Health Strategy (2011-2015) according to its CEDAW report² and during the recent CRC review session in September 2017. However, we received no reports that maternal and child health outcomes have improved since 2011; nor is there enough sexual health education to suggest that more North Koreans know how to prevent sexually transmitted diseases.

Ten women of 15 respondents reported receiving prenatal care, which indicates an increase in the number of women accessing prenatal care compared to our 2013 research. However,

¹ "Status of Women's Rights in the Context of Socio-Economic Changes in the DPRK", Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, Seoul: 2013.

² "Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention; Second, third and fourth periodic reports of States parties due in 2014; Democratic People's Republic of Korea," June 1, 2016 <http://undocs.org/CEDAW/C/PRK/2-4> (Search date: September 2017), p.165.

prenatal care in the majority of cases did not include blood tests or ultrasonography. Majority of time, the doctors did not perform any tests, but only checked the position with their hands, which is similar to our findings in the research in previous years. Many women also reported that pregnant women only visit a doctor if the pregnancy causes health issues.

Table 1: Perinatal Care

Question	Yes		No		No Answer	
I received perinatal care in hospital while I was pregnant	10	43%	5	22%	8	35%
During pregnancy, I went regularly to the hospital to consult with the doctor and have check-ups	8	35%	7	30%	8	35%
I gave birth at home with the help of someone I know because hospital births are expensive	2	9%	9	39%	12	52%
I gave birth at home with the help of someone I know because I had no nearby hospital to go to	2	9%	9	39%	12	52%
I gave birth at a medical facility for free	6	26%	6	26%	11	48%
I received medical consultations or medication for free after giving birth	4	17%	8	35%	11	48%

As in the past, sex education and education related to contraception has been reported to be non-existent at all levels of schools. We also interviewed six young women (born in or after 1990) who graduated from high schools in North Korea only recently. They confirmed that nothing has changed in terms of such education in the textbooks or in the classrooms in recent years. Women mostly reported that, if they were informed about the contraception method, it was by medical personnel after giving birth. Since women learn little about contraception, childbirth and abortion, it diminishes the informed nature of the consent they give to medical procedures such as the insertion of contraceptive devices and different methods of abortion.

Of 18 women who responded to the question whether male contraception is normalized, 16 disagreed. All interviewees expressed surprise at questions about male contraception. They reported that they only learned of the existence of condoms when they arrived in South Korea, albeit one interviewee reported seeing them on the black market. Our 2013 research on the

status of women found that contraception remains the responsibility of women, as admitted by the DPRK in 2005.³ The present research confirmed that this trend continues. The majority of women used intravaginal contraceptive rings, most of which were never removed or were not changed for years. Medication was not mentioned by any women as their main method of contraception. It is unclear whether contraceptive rings are the device the DPRK describes when it states that 67.3 per cent of married women who use contraceptives use the “modern contraceptive method”.⁴ Rings are most effective when used together with oral contraceptives, and most brands also do not protect against sexually transmitted infections. It is difficult to say that a ring, without more, is “modern”.

Abortion is in fact used as a method of contraception in North Korea and reported rates continue to be high. Of 19 women, 8 reported to have had an abortion at least once, which is consistent with our findings in 2013 (also 40% confirmed abortion at the time). This would indicate unchanging reproductive health policies and practices. The DPRK reports in 2016 that abortions are legal “upon request by the woman concerned for reasons of risks to her life, physical and mental health and fetal malformation.”⁵ However, both in 2017 (52%) and in 2013 (68%) women reported that abortion was illegal and that they had to buy the services from medical personnel. Women also reported that there is a punishment for performing abortions and that they are being performed secretly, most often at the patient’s home. This is because the official policy of the state is to promote childbirth, since childbirth has decreased drastically in the past two decades, due to famine and economic changes which forced women to take primary financial responsibility for the family.⁶

³ “Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women; Thirty-third session: Summary record of the 699th meeting,” CEDAW/C/SR.699, September 8, 2005, <http://undocs.org/CEDAW/C/SR.699> (Search date: September 2017), p. 50.

⁴ “Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention; Second, third and fourth periodic reports of States parties due in 2014; Democratic People’s Republic of Korea,” June 1, 2016 <http://undocs.org/CEDAW/C/PRK/2-4> (Search date: September 2017), p.192.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

⁶ Radio Free Asia also reported in October 2015 that the government has forbidden abortions due to low birth rates. It was mentioned as the special order of the Supreme Leader: “North Korea Forbids Doctors to Perform Abortions, Implant Birth Control Devices,” Radio Free Asia, October 14, 2015. <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/north-korea-forbids-doctors-to-perform-abortions-implant-birth-control-devices-10142015145920.html>. (Search date September 30, 2017).

Women reported that men do not use contraception and see it as a woman’s natural responsibility rather than a shared duty between intimate partners. One woman reported that she was very fertile and her contraception failed her approximately once a year, and had to abort every year as a result. Despite having a good relationship with her husband, he never took responsibility for her repeated abortions and considered that it was the rightful thing for her to do alone.

Table 2: Contraceptive Methods

Question	Yes		No		No Answer	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Women are usually the ones to take responsibility for contraception	18	78%	2	9%	3	13%
It is normal for men to use contraception	2	9%	16	69%	5	22%
Abortion is illegal in North Korea	12	52%	11	48%	0	0%
Abortion is a normal contraceptive method in North Korea	16	70%	6	26%	1	4%
I aborted in secret at home with the help of a medical professional because abortion is illegal	6	26%	11	48%	6	26%
I aborted in secret at home with the help of someone I know because abortion is illegal	4	17%	13	57%	6	26%

Women also are not aware of common sexually transmittable diseases such as AIDS and syphilis. A doctor from Pyongyang reported that the number of AIDS patients had grown rapidly in recent years, but that the cases were unreported due to fear of official sanctions and societal ostracism and so all cases that she knew of were treated secretly. Asked about education for such patients, she mentioned that of course the doctors provided some education, but did not mentor the patients on the usage of condoms in order to prevent the disease from spreading.

Unlike what is reported by the North Korean government, healthcare in North Korea can hardly be considered “free”. In the cities and provinces outside of Pyongyang, access to doctors was available, but treatment would only be possible if the patient had enough money to buy syringes or medicines on the black markets or from hospital personnel. Also, a patient who needed more complicated procedures requiring admission need to bring their own food, or have it delivered

by family members, as meals are not provided in hospitals.

Official North Korean reports to the UN claimed that several new medical facilities had been recently built, but our research shows only residents of the capital saw them; persons living outside Pyongyang reported seeing no new facilities. The doctor from Pyongyang compared the situation of hospitals in the provinces to being “50 years behind the hospitals in Pyongyang and 100 hundred years behind the hospitals in South Korea”. No new investments in schools and medical facilities were reported in big cities outside Pyongyang or in the provinces, despite the fact that the state produces enormous wealth by extracting de facto taxes from private economic activities, most of which are in fact conducted by women.

In general, access to health care services varies widely depending on whether the person belongs to the politically privileged caste group; or has economic resources generated through private economic activities; or lives in well-equipped areas, such as Pyongyang, which accommodates the most privileged in the society (party officials, military and government officials, etc.). Asked whether persons from outside could receive medical treatment in Pyongyang, the answer was yes if the person had political privileges or good economic standing. It is not open to average citizens.

Table 3: Awareness and Medical Services

Question	Yes		No		No Answer /	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Sex education is provided in schools for young people these days	1	4%	21	92%	1	4%
I received education related to AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases	6	26%	16	70%	1	4%
I received education on women's medical issues such as ovarian cancer and menopause	0	0%	23	100%	0	0%
I received preventive breast cancer screening tests	0	0%	23	100%	0	0%
I received preventive gynecological screening tests	2	9%	21	91%	0	0%
A new medical facility was recently constructed close to where I lived	3	13%	19	83%	1	4%

People with Disability

Almost all interviewees said there were no special facilities for the disabled persons in North Korea, nor special welfare care for them: see [Table 4](#). Awareness of disability was very low: when asked to describe disability, most interviewees only mentioned physical disability, especially amputations and limbs – and this referred mostly to injured soldiers discharged from the army. Cases in which someone went to school with a disabled person were extremely rarely reported; only in one case a person who escaped in 2016 saw a program on TV related to persons with disabilities, however the whole program was about wounded soldiers who honorably served the country and the leader. As in 2013, the medical personnel reported this time as well that children with Down syndrome are hardly seen being born in North Korea; which would be a phenomenon given world statistics.

There are hearsay reports about the existence of special facilities for people with disabilities in North Korea. While no direct testimonies are available, interviewees routinely mention the existence of separate places for persons with dwarfism, or the existence of “special island” for the disabled⁷.

Table 4: People with Disability

Question	Yes		No		No Answer	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
I saw people with disability around me in North Korea	22	96%	1	4%	0	0%
I have heard that infants with disabilities are sent away in North Korea	6	26%	17	74%	0	0%
I have seen people with disability discussed in the media or in books	3	13%	20	87%	0	0%
There are medical facilities which help people with disabilities to receive comprehensive healthcare	1	4%	21	91%	1	4%
I have seen special accommodations in a building or a hospital for people with disabilities	4	17%	19	83%	0	0%

⁷ Our research on women in 2013 quoted testimony related to a secluded island upon which Hospital 83 was built. It allegedly conducts tests with chemical and biological weapons on people with disability who are given up by their families. There has also been research by other organizations on a Hospital 49 for the involuntary commitment of people with serious mental illness.

Women and Institutions

The DPRK enacted the Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Women in 2010, but only two women in our 2017 research had heard of it, consistently with our 2013 research. These women heard about it from the TV program, but did not know the details. Neither had any interviewee heard of any government policy or order to increase the proportion of women in positions of influence, and no interviewee reported hearing about any institution delegated to monitor the situation of women in institutions, enterprises and organizations, let alone the National Committee for Implementing International Human Rights Treaties which the DPRK claims to be in operation.⁸ Although many women reported an increase in the number of women who were party officials or held power in other institutions, they also said that there was little positive improvement on their day-to-day life: see Table 5. One male interviewee, who was formerly a high-ranking party official, claimed that women lack the “ability, organization and leadership skills” to succeed in the Party, which is why they usually only occupy administrative and note-taking positions. Consistent with this testimony, several women who variously worked in hospitals, the army and the party explained that the proportion of women diminished as one climbed the ranks of that institution.

There are no voluntary organizations which would promote women’s issues or advocate for women’s causes. The Women’s Union (or Women’s League), which is often quoted in official DPRK reports, is a governmental institution for housewives. Employed women belong to workplace organizations, and students to the Youth League. Women’s League is de facto the largest women’s organization, but by no means does it improve women’s lives or address complaints.

Asked about the possibility of raising complaints during meetings, the majority of interviewees did not understand the concept of complaint as a form of action to improve the lives of women, but rather thought of complaints against individual women’s actions. It was reported that the

⁸ “Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention; Second, third and fourth periodic reports of States parties due in 2014; Democratic People’s Republic of Korea,” June 1, 2016 <http://undocs.org/CEDAW/C/PRK/2-4> (Search date: September 2017), p. 20.

Women's League routinely held collective criticism sessions where certain women and their teams were singled out by standing in front of others for underperforming in the orders given by the institution (for example by not submitting the required state quota of raw materials or money) and had to apologize for their wrongdoings. Only these criticism sessions were understood by our interviewees as "complaints". Women reported that any other type of complaint against the Women's League or any other institution or negative situation in the society would be met with reprisals.

This research, similarly to our 2013 research and the research of other organizations, confirmed that domestic violence against women was widespread, but that there was no institutionalized system of support for women and children suffering from such violence. The majority of women have never seen a female police officer (other than a typist at police stations) or any other female personnel entitled to respond and provide assistance to women and children in such cases, nor were there any special shelters or restriction orders available for women and children escaping violence: see Table 5. Police reportedly rarely intervened in such cases, treating it as a domestic issue. The doctor who was interviewed also reported that no forms exist to report medical examinations of victims of violence, which could be submitted to police as evidence.

Most women also reported that divorces are difficult to obtain; one respondent with a relative who worked as a note-taker in the Family Court explained that the current regime severely limits divorces, claiming to protect the rights of children to a family. Some women mentioned that if the man files for divorce, he may obtain it more easily than the woman, but one of the biggest obstacles in divorce proceedings was reportedly the bribes required by the judges and payments to the court. Women also reported that violence is not a reason for divorce; the majority of women rather suffer violence for the benefit of their children. A few women reported cases around them where the judge did not grant a divorce based on a domestic violence claim.

Table 5: Women and Institutions

Question	Yes		No		Don't Know		No Answer	
I have heard of the Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Women introduced in North Korea in 2010	2	9%	21	91%	0	0%	0	0%
The proportion of female representatives has increased in the People's Assembly	11	48%	9	39%	3	13%	0	0%
There has been practical progress in women's rights thanks to the work of female representatives	2	9%	17	74%	4	17%	0	0%
Female police officers help women with domestic abuse issues	0	0%	20	87%	3	13%	0	0%
It is possible to receive an intervention order for family violence and sexual violence perpetrators	1	4%	22	96%	0	0%	0	0%
There are facilities for women and children who have experienced family violence	0	0%	22	96%	0	0%	1	4%
Police officers these days consider family violence very seriously compared to the past	1	4%	22	96%	0	0%	0	0%
Police officers come to actively conciliate when they receive calls about family violence	4	17%	17	74%	0	0%	2	9%
I know of a case where judge did not grant divorce to a woman in case of domestic violence	14	61%	5	21%	2	9%	2	9%
If men file for divorce, they are granted it more easily	10	43%	8	35%	3	13%	2	9%

Questions to the DPRK Government:

- 1. Describe the content of sexual education that young people receive, especially with regard to sexually transmitted diseases. Since which grade such education is provided, during which classes and in which textbooks the content is available?**
- 2. Provide information how many children with Down syndrome are born in ratio to all births in the DPRK and how many persons with Down syndrome live in North Korea, segregated by gender.**

- 3. What are preventive breast cancer/ovarian cancer programs in the country? How many women and in which age groups receive them? How many medical facilities provide such screening tests in the country?**
- 4. Describe in detail specific programs that were implemented in work places, schools and through Women's League around the country, as a result of the 2010 Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Women?**
- 5. How Women's League improves daily lives of women other than through education sessions? How membership fees and quotas of materials provided to Women's Union (Women's League) are invested to improve the lives of women?**
- 6. How many female police officers are delegated to police duties other than clerical work?**
- 7. How many female police officers in and outside of Pyongyang are trained and delegated to the domestic violence/sexual violence instances to provide assistance to women and children?**
- 8. Describe the proceedings on how victims of domestic violence may use shelters and receive medical and psychological counseling. How many shelters for victims of domestic violence the state built and in which areas?**