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CYCLE OF OPPRESSION: VIOLATIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS AGAINST WOMEN INSIDE AND OUTSIDE NORTH KOREA

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Zusammenfassung

Aussagen von Flüchtlingen aus Nordkorea dokumentieren gravierende Menschenrechtsverletzungen an Frauen in Nordkorea und in China sowie beim Grenzübertritt nach China oder bei der Rückführung nach Nordkorea. Auch meine lebensgeschichtlichen Interviews mit 14 Männern und Frauen, die die nordkoreanisch-chinesische Grenze illegal passiert haben, verdeutlichen den kontinuierlichen Kreislauf der ungeheuerlichen Misshandlung von Frauen auch jenseits der Regimegrenzen. Die nordkoreanische Regierung hat zwar seit 1946 Gesetze zur Gleichstellung der Geschlechter erlassen, doch in der Realität hat sich die Unterordnung von Frauen fortgesetzt, und die Trennung zwischen den Geschlechtern im familiären, wirtschaftlichen und politischen Bereich ist weiterhin fest etabliert. Meine Daten deuten darauf hin, dass häusliche Gewalt und sexuelle Belästigung weit verbreitet sind und Frauen keine reellen Möglichkeiten haben, sich dagegen zu wehren, und dass die Gesundheitsversorgung für sie unzureichend ist. Außerdem hat die Tatsache, dass das Regime nicht in der Lage ist, ein Mindestmaß an Ernährungssicherheit zu gewährleisten, in Verbindung mit der Nachfrage aus China nach nordkoreanischen Ehefrauen und Sexarbeitern viele Frauen dazu gebracht, unter Lebensgefahr selbst organisiert die Grenze illegal zu überqueren, um das Leben ihrer Familien und sich selbst zu retten, wobei sie dabei häufig Opfer von Menschenhandel und/oder -schmuggel wurden. Aufgrund ihres illegalen Status sind sie zudem leichtes Opfer von Ausbeutungen durch ihre Käufer bzw. Dorfbewohner. Noch schlimmer trifft es diejenigen, die erwischt und nach Nordkorea abgeschoben werden und in Haftanstalten unmenschlicher Behandlung einschließlich Zwangsabtreibung und Einschränkung ihrer Bewegungsfreiheit ausgesetzt werden. Ich argumentiere, dass nordkoreanische Frauen während ihres gesamten Lebens innerhalb und außerhalb Nordkoreas einen kontinuierlichen Kreislauf der Unterdrückung erleben, der sich aus den in Nordkorea tief verwurzelten patriarchalischen Strukturen, dem harten globalen Grenzregime und der regionalen Politik speist, bei der der Schutz der nationalen Interessen im Vordergrund steht und Menschenrechtsfragen, die nordkoreanische Frauen betreffen, übersehen werden.

Abstract

Testimonies by those who have fled North Korea have exposed a plight of human rights abuse against women within North Korea and in China, as well as in the process of either crossing the border to China or being repatriated to the North. Consistent with this, my life history interviews with 14 male and female defectors have elucidated the continuous cycle of egregious maltreatment of women beyond the physical boundary of the regime. Whilst the North Korean government stipulated gender equality laws since 1946, in reality the subordination of women has continued, with segregation between the genders in the domestic, economic and political spheres firmly in place. My data suggests widespread incidents of domestic violence and sexual harassment with no realistic recourse for women, together with an insufficient level of healthcare for them. Additionally, the regime's failure to provide a basic level of food security in conjunction with demands on North Korean brides and sex workers from China have forced many women to risk their lives by mobilising themselves to illegally cross the border to save the lives of their families and themselves, often being subject to trafficking and/or smuggling. Due to their illegal status, they become an easy target of exploitation by their buyers and villagers. Even worse, those who get caught and deported back to North Korea are exposed to inhumane treatment in detention centres, including forced abortion and restrictions in their physical movements. I argue that North Korean women experience such a continuous cycle of oppression throughout their life inside and outside the country because of the combination of the patriarchal structure deeply entrenched in the North with the harsh global border regime and regional politics that place primary interests in protecting national interests, overlooking human rights issues faced by North Korean females.

Über die Autorin

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Cycle of oppression: Violations of human rights against women inside and outside North Korea

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Content

1. Introduction

This paper examines the human rights abuse experienced by North Korean women inside and outside the regime. These topic areas have been investigated and debated widely by scholars and human rights organisations. Whilst they have been elucidating a range of gender-based rights violations faced by North Korean women inside the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and China, these studies mostly focus on their experiences within a particular country: e.g. gender issues in the DPRK (Lim, 2005; Jung and Dalton, 2006; Kang, 2008; Park, 2010; Park, 2011; Haggard and Noland, 2012; Hosaniak, 2013; Kim, 2014; Eom and Kim, 2016; Gooptar, 2017; Cho et al., 2020); or women's experiences in the process of migration to China and/or in China (Charny, 2004; Lankov, 2004; Muico, 2005; CRS, 2007; Chang et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2009; Choi, 2014; Kook, 2018; Garcia, 2019); or/and their treatment upon repatriation to the DPRK (Charny, 2004; Muico, 2005). By investigating North Korean females' gendered experiences using a circular framework between North Korea, China and back to North Korea, this paper seeks to bring together these debates and examine a common thread interwoven in the lives of these women throughout their circular move, applying critical feminist perspectives on gender, human smuggling/trafficking, and agency/victimhood.

Meanwhile, gender segregation also characterises North Korean women's lives in other countries, such as South Korea, for instance, being subject to high rates of physical, emotional, economic and sexual abuse (Um et al., 2016). Nonetheless, the gravity of human rights issues is arguably less severe in these countries, compared to those in the DPRK and China, because of intersecting factors between the two countries deriving from their patriarchal and sexist cultures and structures, and the punitive border regime, as well as the bilateral agreement that denies basic rights of North Koreans in China and forcibly returns them to the DPRK. Therefore, my paper aims to call attention to their pronounced gendered experiences in this cycle of space as a result of such an intersection, rather than broadening the spatial dimension beyond these two nation-states.

Consonant with extant works on female migrant trafficking and smuggling, the experiences of North Korean women who have migrated to China illegally have been the subject of contentious debates. Numerous scholars (Sharma, 2005; Choi, 2014; Sanchez, 2016, 2018; Kook, 2018; Zhang et al., 2018) have criticised dominant views on women who are smuggled and/or human trafficked to another country as powerless victims whilst emphasising the importance of their agency in navigating extremely oppressive global border regimes. The experiences of North Korean women reflect these contested discourses. In the human rights discourse dominated by international organisations, such as

the UN, they are uniformly depicted and represented as victims of trafficking who have been forced. On the other hand, some feminist researchers have highlighted that some North Korean women voluntarily choose to be smuggled or trafficked as a survival tactic. Founded on the examination of my interviewees' narratives, alongside these extant debates, I argue that the patriarchal structure deeply embedded in North Korea and the punitive border regime have 'forced' these women to make such choices even if they appear to be voluntary and even if 'voluntary' movements have symbolic and practical significance for some women to claim their agency and sculpture their lives (and their 'families'). In conjunction with this criminogenic regime of mobility, I argue that the geopolitics that prioritises the political and economic interests of individual nation-states over protecting human rights has engendered the continuous violations of North Korean women's basic rights within and beyond the geographical boundary of the DPRK.

The paper consists of five parts. The first part presents a brief overview of continuities and changes in North Korea since 1994 when Kim Jong-Il took over the power after the death of his father, Kim Il-Sung, relating to the spheres of politics, economy, gender, and human rights. The second part explores methodology. The third part focuses on the narratives of human rights issues faced by women in the DPRK, such as domestic violence and sexual harassment. The fourth part explores women's experiences during and after their escape to China, primarily focusing on human trafficking and forced/voluntary marriages to Chinese men. The final part investigates violations of the fundamental rights of women during and after repatriation to the DPRK.

2. DPRK since 1994

Over the last 25 years North Korea has undergone transitions in its leaderships from Kim Jong-Il (1994-2011) to Kim Jong-Un since 2011, following the death of the former. This period has also been marked by the severe famine and economic crisis, which has driven the rise of the informal economy. Some scholars have argued that there have been changes since the reign of Kim Jong-Un, through the re-emphasis on economic development to improve the livelihoods of people, reflected in the shift from the military first Songun policy to the Byungjin policy in 2013 that entails the parallel development of military and economic sectors (Cathcart et al., 2017). However, Green and Denney (2017) argue that there have been no profound and substantive changes in North Korean politics despite the introduction of such policy reforms. The 'fragility' of the regime built on the hereditary inheritance of power and its dictatorial rule relies on the military for its own survival (Cho, 2020). Hence, the principle of Songun remains as a dominant doctrine in policy making (Denney et al., 2017). At the same time,

the economic development is essentially centred on the protection of the Kim family's power, rather than the aim of improving the wider economy, exemplified by the separate existence of the relatively productive 'Royal Court Economy' that funds the private interests of the dynasty and its elite coalition through mostly 'illicit' economic activities from the failing civilian economy (Green and Denney, 2017). On this basis, it is arguable that much anticipated changes post-Kim Jong-Un have not materialised with its totalitarian rule intact, supported by the highly bureaucratised Korean Workers' Party and Organisation & Guidance Department (Collins, 2019).

Whilst the political system remains unchanged, the collapse of the Public Distribution System has driven the emergence of the shadow economy (Dukalskis, 2016) or marketisation from below (Haggard and Noland, 2012). In order to secure food, households and other social units, such as military and local party organs, have become involved in entrepreneurial activities, which has become the main source of food and income after 1993. This has generated significant social changes with increasing inequality and rampant corruption (Haggard and Noland, 2012). More importantly, the rise of marketisation has triggered changes in gendered roles as women became the main breadwinner (Park, 2010).

Such transition in the female role has brought modifications in gender policies, social relations, and people's perceptions of women (Park, 2010; Cho et al., 2020). Additionally, women's voices have become stronger and their value systems have altered, having developed desire for freedom and independence from the state through their market activities. This has been demonstrated in some women's initiation of divorce from unhappy marriages (Cho et al., 2020). Reflecting these changes and international pressures, the DPRK enacted The Women's Rights Act in 2010 (Hosaniak, 2013). Although this might have some symbolic significance of potentially inducing behavioural changes in women's lives, it has failed to produce mould-breaking effects in reality. In fact, many of the policies are at odds with the notion of rights and freedoms with women continuously facing sexist norms and unequal gender relations (Jung and Dalton, 2006; Cho et al., 2020). Furthermore, shifts in gender have taken place unevenly throughout the country, with most substantial changes in the regions bordering China, such as North Hamgyong and Ryanggang Provinces, as a consequence of considerable economic transitions in these areas (Schwekendiek and Mercier, 2016).

With regard to human rights, there is some evidence that suggests improvement in the nutritional level. For instance, the study of Hosaniak (2013) on surveys and interviews with defectors in South Korea indicates reductions in deaths related to malnutrition compared to the 1990s when starvation was the main motivator for defection. However, the data does not represent the whole population,

especially the most vulnerable groups who would not have capacity to leave the country. Moreover, concerns regarding other human rights issues abound. For example, a lack of medical resources and poor maintenance of hospital facilities have led to inadequate healthcare services for people, together with the shortage of even basic medicines like antibiotics (Collins, 2018). The detention and imprisonment of people with no legal protection remain serious concerns as there are no minimum standards of treatment of the detainees and they are subject to long hours of physical labour with sub-standard nourishment and unhygienic conditions causing high rates of diseases and deaths (UNHRC, 2014; Baek, 2016; Garcia, 2019). In parallel with this, deeply entrenched cultural aspects of gendered violence have not been addressed, as encapsulated in the atrocious treatment of repatriated women in detention centres through the practice of forced abortion and infanticide (KINU, 2016). Furthermore, there is an indication of increased penalisation among repatriated women from China since the amendment of its Criminal Code in 2009, getting sentences in long-term detention centres unlike prior to the reinforcement of the law when women were mostly sent to short-term detention centres (Hosaniak, 2013).

Consistent with this, China's treatment of North Korean border crossers has been harsh by forcibly sending them back to the DPRK since the sharp rise of those entering China illegally in the late 1990s, having abandoned its generally tolerant approach towards North Koreans in its territory (Eom and Kim, 2016). Unlike in the mid-1990s when its foreign policy remained insular, China has developed 'a more sophisticated, coherent, and internationalist foreign policy' since then as it has undergone transformations in economy and relations with other nation-states (Kurlantzick and Mason, 2006: 34). As a result, it allows asylum seekers of all nationalities to seek refugee status in China by openly approaching UNHCR offices in China (ibid.). However, North Koreans are explicitly precluded from this, stemming from a special bilateral agreement between the two countries as well as China's concerns about the repercussions of political instability of the DPRK on China (CRS, 2007).

3. Methodology

This research is founded on a phenomenological approach (Weber, 1949; Schutz, 1967) since it explores the subjective experiences of North Korean defectors. The data is drawn from ten North Korean female and four male defectors living in the UK, which was collected by two separate and inter-related research projects. The initial project examined life histories of nine North Korean human rights activists in the UK (five females and four males) and the meaning of their activism in their identity. During this project, the gender specific experiences of North Korean women emerged as a prominent

theme, which became the basis of follow-up research with seven female defectors using life history interviews to explore such gendered experiences in more depth. Two females from the first research took part in the follow-up project.

3.1 Recruitment

Getting access to North Korean refugees in the UK is difficult because of their general weariness about being identified for the safety of their families and themselves. Hence, it was crucial for me to access them via an authority figure within the community who is trusted and respected by their members. On this understanding, for the initial project I approached a founder of a North Korean human rights organisation based near London via email by introducing myself and my research interest. Through this initial contact, I met the founder with whom I discussed my research plan in more detail and asked for his help. In this meeting he agreed to take part in the project and introduced other human rights activists. Then, I used snowball sampling to recruit further participants. In this process a female defector who was also part of female human rights activism participated in the project and introduced other female defectors for the follow-up project.

3.2 Data collection

Consistent with the phenomenological approach, life history interviews were used to explore their subjectivities at different times/spaces in depth. The first interviews were conducted in 2016 and the second project interviews were carried out in 2017. For the first project, the interview started with the outline of the principal aims of the research and asking the interviewees to tell their life stories however they wanted, focusing on their life in North Korea, how and why they escaped the regime and their human rights activism. The follow-up research began similarly but the focus of their story was given to their experiences of human rights violations in the DPRK and in China. Whilst the participants talked, I just listened intently with occasional nods or a ‘yes’ of acknowledgement. Once they finished their talk, I asked questions to explore issues that arose during the interviews or topics that I wished to examine further. All the interviews were conducted in Korean. The interviews lasted between two and over four hours. Most interviews were carried out in the human rights organisation’s office in New Malden (near London), some interviews were conducted in a hotel room where the researcher was staying for the interview trip, and one interview was conducted via Skype. All the interviews were audio recorded with consent from the interviewees, and transcribed verbatim in Korean.

3.3 Data analysis

A thematic method (Ritchie et al., 2003) was used to analyse the data. The analysis began with familiarising relevant data sets through reading and re-reading as well as listening to the interview recordings to pick up emotional subtleties and nuances. The data were organised under the main headings of inside and outside the DPRK, and repatriation. Once this process was complete, I translated the Korean extracts into English (Pitchforth and van Teijlingen, 2005). It was logical to conduct translation at this stage prior to systematic categorisation and indexing so the researcher could organise and analyse the data in English. Following this, multiple readings and re-readings of the data further identified sub-themes, under which all the relevant data were organised, according to 'thematic sets' (Ritchie et al., 2003: 229). Interview extracts under these themes were reorganised into different hierarchies of main themes and subthemes.

3.4 Ethics

Ethical issues for both projects were reviewed and approved carefully by the researcher's university Research Ethics Committee (IDs: 7382, 14631). In order to minimize any potential risks and harm to the participants and their families remaining in the DPRK, all the necessary considerations and measures were taken, from protecting their anonymity and confidentiality, to data collection, storage and use of the data. All the names were altered, and some identifiable facts were excluded from the analysis. At the end of each interview, the participants were debriefed and provided with contact details of local free counselling and refugee services in case they needed or wished to access these.

4. Human rights abuse inside North Korea

Historically, the DPRK's stance and practice on gender issues have been ambiguous and paradoxical, reflecting the concoctive influence of Marxism-Leninism, Confucianism and *Juche*, a unique *Suryoung*-centred North Korean ideology that implicitly embodies male domination over women. Whilst the regime adopted the Soviet style gender equality measures earlier on and female labour was seen as an integral part of its nation building (Halliday, 1985; Lankov and Kim, 2014), in reality the subjugation of women has continued (Kim, 2011). For example, the DPRK instituted the 'Act of Equal Rights for Men and Women' in 1946, with the intention of transforming the old feudal gender relations and encouraging women to take part in all spheres of life, together with other measures that supposedly emancipate them (Park, 1992-1993; Lee, 2005). However, although the Northern government has

insisted on women's participation in the labour market, there has been less emphasis on their economic role and significantly more emphasis on the traditional domestic role as home carer, compared to the Soviet and Eastern Europe (Lankov and Kim, 2014). Consonant with this, Jung and Dalton (2006) question the genuine commitment to achieving gender equality by the Kim regime despite its rhetoric found in official documents. They continue to highlight that the traditional gendered division of labour is deeply entrenched in North Korea and thus women do the majority of domestic work, with little contribution from men. In similar fashion, Park (1992-3) proposes that equal status between the two genders has not been achieved, and rigid patriarchal structure is deeply embedded in every institution of North Korean society, as illuminated by Ms A:

> In North Korea there are no women's human rights. There is a saying in North Korea, 'men are the sky and women are the earth.' So even if women are academically brilliant and graduated high school and university with excellent grades better than men, they are always below men, no social status… From a societal perspective, men are superior in all aspects of society. Also, when women get married, they automatically lose their jobs and spend their life as housewives. However, when I looked at my mom's case, in fact, women (housewives) don't have comfortable free time for themselves. Getting up from 5 a.m. even before preparing breakfast for their families, they have to clean streets and yards, and after sending their husbands and children to work and school, they have to do painting or clean the village, or go to an agricultural village to perform their agricultural duties and many works, they do tens of times more than men who work in the factories. But the ration, a daily food ration allocated to them is only 300 g, same as kindergarten children. Because the living conditions for women are bad, especially when women get pregnant, there are many cases of women having anaemia and they experience many other illnesses; they get many female diseases after births because they don't eat properly.

This highlights the many burdens North Korean women face: loss of their employment status as a consequence of marriage[1] and continuing heavy workloads carried out by housewives. Numerous scholars have suggested that the process of re-traditionalisation took place in the DPRK between the early 1980s and mid-1990s by making women return to the domestic sphere after marriage as the economy slowed down, contrary to the previous period between 1958-82, which was characterised by the mobilisation of the female labour force to address labour shortage (Lee, 2005; Jung and Dalton, 2006; Kang, 2008; Park, 2011). Consistent with Ms A's account, Lankov and Kim (2014) note that the daily ration eligible for housewives was 300 grams of grain, less than half of the 700 grams entitled to

[1] Park (1992-3) notes a decline in married women's labour market participation since the late 1980s, especially those who married high earners. Similarly, Jung and Dalton (2006) suggest a full-time housewifisation of married women between 1983-1995 owing to the stagnated economy and the increasing official pronouncements that emphasised women's traditional role.

employed women. This indicates the lower social status granted to housewives, especially compared to employed women, even though they had to perform heavy workloads imposed by the state. This also raises issues around women's healthcare and the impact of poor diet on them, especially those who are pregnant, as noted by Ms A. Related health concerns affecting females have also been raised by the UN (2005) and UNICEF (2006), as will be discussed later. Moreover, Kim (2014) points out significant occupational segregation and gender pay gaps despite the establishment of equal employment and pay law since 1972. According to Kim, women are predominantly employed in low-skilled and low-paid jobs in light industries and service sectors.

Consonant with the unequal gender structure in the domestic and economic spheres, the violations of female human rights are found to be rampant in the DRPK, including the widespread incidents of domestic violence and verbal abuse. A white paper by the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) (2016) indicates that domestic violence is common and changing economic roles between the genders since the economic collapse have contributed to its rise. According to this report, there are no legal provisions stipulating penalties for domestic violence in North Korea even though a provision of prohibiting domestic violence is included in Article 46 of the Law for the Protection of Women's Rights. Ms C's narrative also suggests that appropriate protection and support are not provided by the state with no recourse to justice and legal protection:

> In North Korea the idea that men are superior to women is so prevalent that women are always beaten by their husbands. Even if we don't have anything to eat, we have to serve alcohol to our husbands. I was also beaten by my husband for 25 years. We have to put up with it.

Gooptar (2017) maintains that the prevalent perception of domestic violence as a family matter contributes to persistent injustice towards women. Ms C's relief when her husband died is a clear indication of this lack of redress in practice as it was the only way to stop his lifelong abuse. This excerpt also reveals compounded hardships placed on women since the economic crisis in the mid-1990s who are expected to continue to serve the demands of their husbands whilst also struggling to feed their families. Some scholars have suggested the elevated power of women and shifts in gendered roles within the family as a result of women's increased participation in the shadow economy and their rise as a major breadwinner (Kang, 2008; Schwekendiek and Mercier, 2016). However, such improvement in women's positions and men's contribution to domestic tasks have not altered the established gender order in which men are still considered to be the head of the household. Moreover, some degree of elevation of women's position in the domestic sphere since the marketisation from below (Haggard and Noland, 2012) was undermined by wife battering by frustrated husbands who have lost

their position as breadwinner (Park, 2011; Schwekendiek and Mercier, 2016). Additionally, Park (2011) argues that women's workloads inside and outside the private realm have substantially increased since the changes in female economic roles, taking the double burden. The hardship women had to endure since the famine was also confirmed by both my male and female interviewees. For instance, Mr S expressed that women suffered most hardships after the economic collapse by utilising their resourcefulness in feeding the family while men did not know what to do, and as a consequence, 'women called men a house guard dog', which implies their 'empty' figurehead status with no real financial contributions. In a similar fashion, Ryang (2005: 343) argues that the abrogation of the patrilineal system, albeit its appearance as a gender emancipatory step, has created 'a new form of women's oppression by transforming women into the bearers of multiple burdens as producer, reproducer, and child-rearer.' Hosaniak (2013) similarly claims that the regime has reinforced the traditional role of women through ideological education to bear more children without protecting women's rights to choose or providing education on contraception, leaving dangerous abortions in unsanitary conditions as a main form of birth control. Additionally, Cho et al. (2020) point out the mobilisation of women and gender politics in the Kim Jong-Un era for their dual role as a worker in advancing the socialist economy and a mother who nurtures children into 'obedient' subjects. Moreover, Cho et al. argue that the current regime mobilises women to fill in the state shortfalls of welfare provision by praising their maternal instincts and sacrifice, so they take responsibility for caring for the vulnerable in society.

Furthermore, Park (2011) points out a rise in violence against women by third parties as women travel around the country to source goods to sell in the markets and the emergence of 'chance assault' by male officials and border guards demanding sexual favours from females who cannot afford fines for minor offences by conducting illegal economic activities, or when they are repatriated from China. A 2003 KINU report highlights that sexual harassment is widespread, and sex is regularly demanded in return for privileges such as party membership. This kind of sexual violence pervades in North Korea, including the military (Cho et al., 2013; Gooptar, 2017). A verdict from Ms B illustrates rampant sexual harassment and the common use of the threat by senior officials in the army to block young women from joining the party, which is a vital pathway to a secure and successful future:

> When you are about to join the party, if a senior member demands, with a threat "if you refuse, you can't be a party member forever," then what do you do? So you're absolutely forced. Then if women get pregnant as a result, men don't get punished. Women get blamed for their misbehaviour and get kicked out of the military. Other women also blamed women not men. The total military service is seven years but even if she has just served one year, they just force her out.

> And their future gets ruined as it remains in the official record. So many pregnant women use all sorts of dangerous methods to abort. Tightening their stomach with an army belt to hide their growing stomach, taking anthelmintic medicine, jumping from the high mountain hill and rolling down the hill. People can see a foetus in the toilet once or twice a year.

It is widely reported that sexual violence against women has been increasing in North Korea since the onset of the food crisis in the 1990s (Lim, 2005). Even though legislation stipulating punishment for sexual offences exists in North Korea's Criminal Law, defector testimonies indicate a significant problem in protecting women against such offences (Gooptar, 2017), as exemplified by Ms B's account. Parallel with this, Lim (2005) points out an absence in official acknowledgements of the existence of sexual harassment. This inaction in implementing appropriate measures to protect women who have been unjustly exploited by men force many women to depend on unsafe methods of abolition, putting their health and safety in danger. Phipps (2020: 10) eloquently captures that 'acts, threats and allegations of sexual violence are all tools of oppression. Sexual violence is terror; so is the way it is tackled and policed.' Walby (1989) in her theorisation of patriarchy argues that male violence is structural despite its frequent appearance as random individual acts. Walby postulates that the absence of state intervention to put an end to male violence structurally enables men to use violence as a resource to dominate women. Furthermore, gendered violence is perpetuated through the culture of victim blaming in which women themselves become complicit. As Taylor (2020) maintains, the gendered structure and patriarchal culture therefore breeds women who blame other women.

Alongside the violations of women's human rights through sexual violence, their rights are infringed by the neglect of women's hygiene issues with no appropriate sanitary towels or tampons available to them, as noted by Ms B:

> Female soldiers get wound dressings once a year, something like four for their period. Then, during our period we have to wash diligently, dry and reuse them as we don't have much spare. But if you have training all day, you don't have time to change them… so female soldiers get lots of female hygiene related diseases.

According to Ms B, this is worse for civilian women who have to do with used male vests or socks, indicating prevailing systemic disregard for female specific needs in the DPRK, founded on a male-dominated standpoint. This male-centred perspective is arguably attenuated by the high degree of militarisation in North Korea (Halliday, 1985; Park, 2010), which holds the 4th largest army in the world and more than 1.2 million military personnel (Clemens Jr., 2016; Albert, 2020). The male-centred operational system that neglects female soldiers' basic needs potentially jeopardises female health. A

report by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the DPRK (2005) also finds women, among the most vulnerable groups, are disadvantaged in their access to health services and medicine. There are major issues with the availability of medical equipment and medication to the masses, which affects women and young girls particularly in relation to maternal mortality, reproductive health and female diseases. Consistent with this, The UNICEF's report (2006) suggests that access to, and the low quality of services remain the biggest causes of morbidity and mortality amongst women in the DPRK. A more recent report by Robinson (2019) indicates that maternal healthcare remains an area of recuperation from dramatic decline in the 1990s, despite an improvement in the maternal mortality rate between 2000 and 2015, with the help of international organisations, such as WHO and UNICEF.

5. Human rights abuse outside North Korea

Gendered issues and sexual violence facing North Korean women continue to shape their experiences outside the DPRK, during the processes of and following their escape to China. Gender violence against North Korean women has some overlapping characteristics with the experiences of forced female migrants from such countries as Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea, Syria, who come to European countries. For instance, similar to North Korean female border-crossers to China, they experience sexual violence during their journeys by smugglers or traffickers, and in their destination countries or in detention centres without recourse to protection (UN Women, 2017). The precarious and illegal status of these women make their situation even more vulnerable, including domestic violence caused by their male partners due to fear of deportation (Freeman and Jamal, 2008).

There are also some commonalities between violence against North Korean female defectors and violence inflicted on 'comfort women' by Japanese soldiers and medics from 1937 to 1945, such as deception as a main form of recruitment, the way women were treated by men and its lifelong impact on the female subjects (Tongsuthi, 1994; Min, 2003). However, 'comfort women' bear distinctive features rooted in a specific historical context of Japanese colonisation of the Korean peninsula and neighbouring regions, together with distinct purposes the victims were exploited to serve.

In a similar vein, gender violence experienced by North Korean women arguably has unique characteristics distinguishable from other groups, stemming from intersectional factors pertaining to historical, political, economic and cultural milieu in the DPRK and China. Whilst deception was the main form of recruitment for 'comfort women', voluntary movements have also been common among North Korean border crossers by relying on smugglers. Additionally, the DPRK government's failure to provide basic food security for its people since the collapse of the economy has driven the exodus of a

large number of North Koreans to China as a survival strategy (Charny, 2004; Lankov, 2004; CRS Report, 2007; Chang et al., 2008; Fahy, 2019). This is especially the case for women because of their housewife status and subsequent relative invisibility in state employment under its patriarchal structure, which enabled them to evade the official system (Park, 2011). Moreover, the demand for North Korean brides in combination with their vulnerable position has led to high rates of 'forced' marriage, which is the most common form of trafficking involving North Korean women in China (Robinson, 2019). The narrative of Ms D supports this:

> When I left North Korea for the first time, it was the period of the March of Suffering and many people died of hunger. Everybody had a hard life. I also struggled and went to China with a sister in the same village to do trades but couldn't get back as we were caught by the human traffickers. For North Korean women, when they go to China, a way to survive is marriage. This kind of story is true not only to myself but about 80-90% of North Korean women. When we went to China, we didn't know the language, or writing and anything, so in order to survive, we didn't have choice. In my case as well, in the end I was sold.

The research of Kim et al. (2009), using telephone interviews with trafficked North Korean women from shelters and safe houses in China and Thailand, identifies that the primary method used by traffickers in recruiting them was deception, with mendacious promises of helping them find secure employment or good marriages. Their research also discovers that traffickers used forced kidnapping or voluntary consent under deception – either sold to marriage or the sex industry, such as karaoke and brothels. The treatment of North Koreans by the Chinese Government as illegal economic migrants in conjunction with desperate needs of survival drive many women into extremely vulnerable positions with little power to control the situation (Charny, 2005), as illustrated by Ms A. When she crossed to China, she was helped by a Chinese family near the border but then they introduced her to their friend who turned out to be a trafficker:

> After listening to my father's dying wish to save my brother (he was a wanted man due to his escape from the army after failing to earn foreign currencies for the 'loyal funds[2]' (*choongsung jageum*) that he was obliged to submit to the government, which rendered him and his team mates political criminals, who all ran away), I went to China. I believed if I went to China, I could save my brother. But when we went to China, I was trafficked and separated from my brother, and after one year, my brother was repatriated to the North. It's been 17 years since he was repatriated. I still don't know whether he is alive or dead… The friend of the person who housed me told me if I

[2] Jin (2011) similarly writes about the clandestine "Royal Court Economy", an unseen and unnamed military and industrial complex that raises hard foreign currencies, which contribute to the development of nuclear weapons and the Kim family's personal interests.

> wanted to save my brother, I needed money. I said I was prepared to do any job, it's OK to work in a restaurant or teach children, thinking like North Korea (she used to be a schoolteacher). But that person said he knew a quick way to earn lots of money. I said I was willing to do anything for my brother and he told me to get married to a Chinese man. When I heard it first time, I objected it. I lived in North Korea for 30 years and I never imagined getting married to a foreigner. When I said no, he said 'I can't take responsibility for your family, whether your brother or you get repatriated, it's up to you.' And I got scared. If we got repatriated, I could get released after a few years of labour, but it was completely different for my brother because he was the wanted man. So I agreed to get married reluctantly, also because I thought of my father's last wish and I just thought marriage was like spending money that a husband earned and raising children. I hadn't heard the word human trafficking at that time. Before I was sold, many people came to see me. There were about five North Korean women. The price differed depending on the age and the people who came to see us were a wide range from disabled, old, divorced men. I was sold at 5,000 won and I believed I could save my brother with that money but the broker took all the money and disconnected me from my brother.

The vulnerable situation of North Korean women becomes the breeding ground for the exploitation of human traffickers. Under the DPRK's law, defection, attempt to defect, or helping others to defect constitute serious crimes (Muico, 2005; Fahy, 2019). This criminalisation of anyone who escapes the North without government permission exposes them into potentially extremely dangerous situations with few options available to them. Although some women 'proactively and voluntarily' seek marriages to Chinese men as a survival tactic, many women are forced into such a dire situation through deception and threat. As exemplified in Ms A's story, the false hope of earning lots of money quickly, saving her brother's life and getting married to a 'decent' man never materialised. In fact, Ms A was sold to a gambler in the countryside and was impregnated. She was forced to work in the field to the last day of her pregnancy like a slave without proper food. After their child was born, the man tried to sell him to spend the money on his gambling. This dehumanising treatment of North Korean women as 'disposable commodities' is astutely described by Ms A:

> When Chinese people buy trafficked women, they don't think of them as part of their family but as objects. When they need, they use us, and when we are not needed, they sell us, sell us to other people. Also, women are a labour force and once they get sold, they have to work from morning till evening… In the village where I was sold, there were five North Korean women. When we walked past, we couldn't talk because the family who bought us didn't let us interact because they feared we might escape. We couldn't hold hands even once or share a single word. They monitored us together and the village people told us that if we escaped, they could catch us, rape us or kill us or report to the police, and because we were illegal migrants, nobody would blame them; only we

> would get punished. Out of five women, I didn't see one person at all and I heard she was left at home completely naked. Two men bought her because if one person bought her, it was burdensome so the two bought her together. They imprisoned her in the house and took turns to rape her and they also beat her. Because of the only reason to be born in North Korea, we were maltreated, we were like lives cornered to the cliff edge.

The stories of the whole village turned into pseudo prison guards are common, together with the 'chain sale' through which women are sold to different men a number of times, as mentioned by Ms A. Similarly, Kim et al. (2009) find that some women are re-trafficked after being targeted by criminal gangs who abduct and sell those who have escaped from their buyers and hidden somewhere in China to the sex industry. Chiming with Ms A's narrative, Robinson (2019) highlights that trafficked women in her study were seven times more likely than non-trafficked women to have experienced forced sex in China, and they were more likely than non-trafficked women to have experienced some form of intimate partner violence and verbal abuse. In this respect, the word 'marriage' seems rather inadequate to describe the reality of many North Korean women when their so-called husbands and their families in practice act as 'captors and masters', built on sheer exploitative relationships. Garcia (2019: 68) holds that 'once their bodies are treated as commodities and objects to trade with, their humanity fades', leaving them in a state of 'bare life' (Agamben, 1998). Standing (2011), in his examination of the emergence of 'the precariat' as a distinctive social group with a denizen-like precarious status, proposes that commodification and its permeation into every sphere of life are the central facets of globalisation. In this process everything becomes a commodity to be bought and sold, whose values are determined by demand and supply in the market, with little space for 'effective 'agency' (a capacity to resist)' (p. 31), as illuminated by Ms A's narrative.

Not surprisingly, North Korean refugees in China suffer psychological stress akin to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), due to their pre-migration trauma plus post-migration precariousness (Chang et al., 2008). This study highlights some evidence of women being more vulnerable to psychological distress than men, having experienced higher anxiety and fear for other family members than men. My research also suggests similar issues faced by both male and female defectors as a result of traumatic experiences in their life in China; for instance, rising palpitations every time they hear police car sirens. Ms D also expressed the pain she felt every time she talked about 'what happened in China': 'If I think about it, it hurts my self-esteem even if I didn't have much choice, I don't want to remember such unpleasant things… It is a secret that I have to bury and carry in my mind so I don't talk about what happened in China in detail because if I did, it just hurts my heart.' As suggested in this account,

many women live with the pain without being able to talk about it openly even if they have managed to escape from repressive regimes and circumstances to 'free' countries like the UK.

On the other hand, some scholars have critiqued the dominant discourse on human trafficking and smuggling founded on powerless female victims with no agency (Sharma, 2005; Sanchez, 2016, 2018; Zhang et al., 2018), in particular its blanket approach towards North Korean trafficking as 'forced' (Choi, 2014; Kook, 2018). As noted above, some women voluntarily seek marriages to Chinese men as a strategic move to go to China and make money whilst also getting involved in trafficking as helpers or facilitators. The story of Ms B who was a soldier in the DPRK exemplifies these. She initially came to China with her father and younger brother to earn money to tackle ongoing hunger that affected her whole family. However, they were caught by the Chinese police twice and sent back to the DPRK. Luckily, the head of the prison turned out to be the father of her subordinate who she treated kindly when she was in the army so thanks to his help, they were released from their second imprisonment:

> When we were released, even more anger (against the regime) was left and we felt we couldn't live in North Korea anymore, so we crossed the border again. But we had to change the tactics and I said to my father that 'if three of us move together, we get continuously caught and if we get caught the third time, it is too dangerous, so sell me to a Chinese man, and using that money, you and the younger brother take mother and sister somewhere safe. I will do it.' My father cried saying 'it's nonsense that parents sell their own child.' 'Don't think you're selling me but think ah, our daughter has gone somewhere and is living well.' So I talked to the owner of the house where we were staying to buy me and he said we could get 5,000 won and I said yes and asked him to give that money quickly. They asked whether my father agreed and I almost pushed him to agree, then I sent my father back to North Korea with the money.

Choi (2014), drawing on her interviews with North Korean women who were trafficked to China, challenges a totalising approach towards North Korean human trafficking, founded on the Western liberal notions of universal human rights. Choi argues that such a Western hegemonic discourse overlooks the complicated structural economic and geopolitical conditions faced by North Korean women who rely on border-crossing for survival. Choi (2014) further critiques the way North Korean trafficked women are uniformly framed as powerless victims who need to be rescued by developed Western countries. Choi claims that foreign policy interventions adopted, built on these premises, do not benefit North Korean women; instead such one-dimensional discourse negatively affects them through the tighter border control, having resulted in much higher rates of broker fees as well as forcing them to go further underground.

In a similar vein, Kook (2018) highlights the complexity of North Korean women's migration to China and points out the futility of an either-or dichotomous approach in unpacking their experiences. Kook, based on her qualitative study of North Korean women who escaped to China, challenges the totalising framing of North Korean women's migration to China as human trafficking, illuminating complex and symbiotic relationships between migrants and smugglers. Kook highlights that most of her interviewees commenced contact with smugglers directly and all of them went to China voluntarily with the assistance of informal border smugglers. Zhang et al. (2018) argue that illegal migrants deploy smuggling as a means of alleviating the uncertainty and danger ingrained in their illicit journeys to build security from below. In this sense, their voluntary action becomes an enabler of tackling precarious and unjust circumstances, notwithstanding limitations, and potentially improving the (future) life of some women and their families, as exemplified by the story of Ms B. Therefore, some females proactively seek marriage with the help of smugglers as a channel to migrate to China in the pursuit of greater economic and financial opportunities. This can also be viewed as their attempt to claim the ownership of their life and destiny by taking initiative in navigating the constraining environment to overcome poverty and dead-end situations in the DPRK. This agency and their endeavour to take such ownership are vital catalysts for their survival throughout their journey.

De Hass (2009: 11) claims that 'the sharp distinction between forced and voluntary migration is primarily a policy and legal distinction driven by the interest of states in classifying migrants.' Supporting this, Kook (2018) argues that the distinction between 'forced' and 'voluntary' migration is not definite for North Koreans in China and there is an overlap between trafficking and smuggling. This is also consistent with the critical argument against the dominant anti-trafficking discourse presented by Sharma (2005), who criticises how it diverts attention from the punitive laws that prevent safe and secure channels of mobility for women by drawing attention to secretive processes of migrations. Sharma maintains that anti-trafficking interventions for the sake of rescuing trafficked victims have legitimated harsher border controls by repressive states. Hence, what victimises these women is not trafficking or smuggling *per se* but the global migration regime that places national and international security as a priority and ideologies of racism, sexism and nationalism that render the routine practice of female oppression and exploitation (Sharma, 2005).

In further unpacking the experiences of North Korean women, the concept of 'embedded agency' proposed by Korteweg (2008) can be instrumental. Korteweg, in her analysis of the Sharia debate over arbitration in family disputes in Canada, differentiates 'embedded agency' from agency based on the notion of liberal ideas that challenge dominant forces (in her case Islam and the Sharia law). Contrary to the latter, embedded agency is exercised within intersecting 'historic cultural, social and economic

contexts', such as religion and gender (Korteweg, 2008: 437). Thus, agency is seen as embedded in social forces, rather than being construed as the practice of 'free will' and 'free choice'. Korteweg argues that the application of embedded agency in unravelling ethnic minority women's experiences can reveal more nuanced approaches taken by women and guards against racialisation through the treatment of them as homogeneous subjects. Using Korteweg's concept, it is also possible to unpack the narratives of North Korean female mobility to China. As illustrated in the interview data of Ms A and Ms B, they had a certain degree of choice. However, it is vital to understand the social forces that directly influenced their 'choice' and decision-making at that particular juncture. Going back to Ms A's previous narrative, whilst it was her who eventually consented to the marriage to a Chinese man, there is clear evidence of deception, threat and coercion: false promise of 'making lots of money quickly'; being able to 'save her brother's life'; implying her refusal would result in their repatriation and her brother's inevitable fate in the DPRK. A number of political, economic, and cultural factors 'forced' her to choose the marriage. First, the dire economic situation in the DPRK where the state failed to provide minimum food security to its people forced Ms A to 'illegally' leave the country, together with her attempt to save her brother who became a criminal without 'genuine' conviction. Secondly, the political structure of North Korea and China, both of which criminalise North Korean border-crossers put her into an extremely vulnerable position in which she had very limited options. Thirdly, the dominant cultural forces of Confucianism[3] that strongly supports filial piety undoubtedly also affected her decision as evidenced in her endeavour to realise her father's dying wish. These embedded structural factors are salient in shaping her experiences. This is similar in the case of Ms B. Although she volunteered herself to be sold, the circumstances in which her family was situated had limited options of safety and survival. As claimed by Sharma (2005), it is the oppressive and restrictive border control that 'forced' Ms B to take a drastic measure to put herself forward not to endanger the lives of the whole family. In this situation volunteering herself for the marriage seemed to be the 'best' possible option they had. Additionally, her 'voluntary' action for the family following the market demands indicates the dominant power of not only the Confucian patriarchal culture but also the underlying logic of capitalism that routinely exploits women's labour (Chang, 2010), which pervades North Korea under the pretense of the official state-led economy (Joo, 2010). Consonant with Korteweg's (2008) notion of embedded agency, Smart and Shipman (2004) critically question the

[3] Confucianism delineates the ancient Chinese tradition that had a significant influence in the cultural formation of East Asian countries, which began during the political and cultural expansion of the Han dynasty (Oldstone-Moore, 2003). Confucianism is founded on the belief that human relationships are fulfilled through the idea of a natural hierarchy. The most critical relationships in Confucian principles are those between parents and child, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother, and ruler and subject (Lau, 1979; Oldstone-Moore, 2003). Amongst these, filial piety is regarded as the lynchpin of Confucian virtue: parents have a duty to take care of a child with the provision of education, care, and moral formation, while a child has an obligation to be obedient, respectful and to look after his parents in old age and after death (Bell, 2008).

concept of 'choice'. They problematise the idea of a 'free' and 'individual' choice as it discounts social contexts in which such a choice is made. Instead, Smart and Shipman propose contextual or relational choice that highlights structural and social forces that influence individuals' decision-making. Hence, it is vital to fathom the social, cultural, economic and political milieu, which steered them to make such choices, albeit they appeared to be 'voluntary' with the potentiality to transform their existing circumstances.

6. Human rights abuse during and after repatriation

Sadly, North Korean women's ordeal does not end when they leave their own country and go to China to seek opportunities to forge a better life or save struggling families with poverty. China does not recognise North Koreans as refugees but regards them as illegal economic migrants (Eom and Kim, 2016), whilst sending captured refugees back on the basis of its bilateral repatriation agreement with North Korea in 1986 (CRS, 2007). Reflecting this, my interviews with both male and female defectors suggest it was common for many of them to be caught and deported back to the North a number of times. Although escaping the DPRK is legally stipulated as treason against the fatherland and the people, treatment upon repatriation is reported to vary depending on a number of factors: for example, relative leniency towards those who have gone to China for economic reasons, compared to political reasons (Charny, 2004; CRS, 2007). Plsek (2015) similarly disputes many claims of the uniformly harsh treatment applied to those who have escaped the country, arguing that Pyongyang's punishments for escape are highly flexible, depending on a number of different components, such as age, gender and motive for escape, alongside family background and former status or profession. My interview data also supports this argument to a certain extent and some participants expressed lenient treatments they received as a result of their informal connections with officials or bribery their families provided. Nonetheless, it is evident from defector testimonies that this flexibility does not warrant humane treatment for the majority of captives and repatriated North Koreans are liable for arbitrary imprisonment, forced labour, torture or execution (Baek, 2016; Garcia, 2019). In line with this, some of my interviewees also reported the loss of family members through execution after being caught during their escape. Hence, despite highly precarious and dangerous realities, many women expressed their wish to stay in China, rather than being deported back to the DPRK, because at least they could eat in China; plus owing to the inhumane treatment they have to face upon repatriation (Muico, 2005). Given this, intense fear of deportation felt by escapees is expected as their capture could also affect their family members (Chung, 2003). Desperate wish to avoid repatriation to the DPRK was also illustrated by Ms D who made a number of dangerous attempts with the other three North Korean

female prisoners to find opportunities to escape from the Chinese prison, including a 20-day hunger strike and attempts to cut her wrist with the other female inmates using broken glasses from a fluorescent light lamp found in the toilet. When these attempts failed, they deployed a more extreme method:

> The last thing we did was we cut the bra wire into pieces, two pieces per person with intention to swallow them so they could take us to the hospital and we could escape. You might think if you put them in your throat, you could swallow them. It never happened. In order to swallow them, we struggled a half day… Then one of us said she ate it so we asked how she did it and she said she pushed it hard and then swallowed saliva and it went. So we all did it together. Then about 2 hours passed and our stomach started to become painful… We knocked on the door and told the guards we had bad stomach aches and they asked what we ate so we told them. The officers were very surprised… So we went to the hospital and the first hospital said we needed to be operated as soon as possible because otherwise the metals would be rusted and it would cause inflammation and cause holes in the stomach. We were stupid to think if they took us to the hospital, they would unshackle us. One guard was in charge of one of us and shackled us so we couldn't escape. They took us to another hospital and took the X-Ray. If they had to operate us, they had to use their money so we were transferred to another hospital, but after measuring the length of the metals, the doctor in the hospital said that they were not that long; 7 or 8 cm was not long. To get stuck in the stomach, they needed to be at least 10 cm to create a hole in the stomach, and the doctor told the guards to give us lots of vegetables with fibre and feed us antiphlogistics (a remedy reducing inflammation).

Ms D's narrative elucidates the extreme length some North Korean women are prepared to go not to get sent back to the DPRK as they are clearly aware of the egregious treatment they would receive back 'home'. The UN's 2016 report, based on defector testimonies in Seoul, highlights evidence of human rights violations at detention facilities. The humiliating treatment of women's bodies continues in the process of being deported back to the DPRK, as expressed by Ms B who was caught with her father and younger brother:

> A female guard should do when they search female bodies. But a male guard ordered me to take clothes off completely and they even opened the anus to check whether we hid money inside. They make people exercise to loosen the muscle of the body so money inside comes out automatically. They made me do that exercise naked and how shameful it was doing it in front of men. My father and brother said they wanted to die at that moment.

The narrative of Ms C echoes Ms B's experiences, encapsulating the inhumane situation they are forced to face:

> Once you get repatriated to North Korea, you are not a human but a dog from then on. At first, we went to a *bowibu* in Moosan. From then on, they made us stand in line tying arms in case we ran away and there were 10 in one rope. They made us naked completely. When men ordered us to take clothes off repeatedly pointing guns at us, how could you not do it? Once we took our clothes off, they searched everywhere, tore bras to find money. If it ended there, how good that would be! But we had to bend over towards the wall, bend like animals with four legs towards the wall. Then, they opened our anuses and vaginas using the clothes we took off as covers for their hands. Then they beat our bum three times and because of the shock, the money hidden inside the anus fell out… If women had long hair, they checked it to see whether money was hidden inside hair. For them money was the target. If they couldn't find money, they didn't let us go to the toilet and made us wee and poo in a bucket in front of them and two guards poured them in the field to find money wrapped inside vinyl. They picked up, washed the money and gave it to the senior officials. Those guards had to find money to avoid being beaten. If they couldn't find any money, the senior officials beat them thinking they stole the money… There is something called *pump*; it is a method to make the hidden money come out. You had to spread your legs at a shoulder length and do sit-ups 100 times naked. You could not do it as they forced you with guns pointing at you. Once you did it 100 times, there were no strength left in your legs so people collapsed. While collapsing, laughter and wee all came out because all your muscles became loosened. Money came out as well as poo and we had to clean it up. We had to give the money to the guards after cleaning it.

Ms C's account reveals the systemic oppression and exploitation in which not only prisoners but also junior prison guards become the 'semi-victims' of structural abuse by senior officials. The reports by Hong (2019) and the UK's Home Office (2016) suggest widespread corruption as well as the pervasive practice of bribery in North Korean society. What emerged in this narrative indicates the extent of abuse and exploitation those in power exert to make money, overriding basic human dignity and rights of fellow North Koreans. Paradoxical to its propagated communist ideology run by the state, capitalist ideology appears to have deeply seeped into the DPRK where 'money can buy or solve anything' (Baek, 2016: 63) and has become the most valued commodity, trumping over everything else.

Numerous government and academic reports have also highlighted forced abortion carried out on repatriated North Korean women who are pregnant in China (CRS, 2007; Chang et al., 2008; Home Office, 2016). The narrative of Ms C elucidates this:

> There were pregnant women, and they had to stay in the *jipkwulso* until they delivered their babies. When they began contractions, there was not enough space to deliver the baby because about 100 people were sat in a small room, so we all had to be stuck to the wall in two or three rows and watched the woman delivering the baby. We had to stand up until she delivered the baby whether

> it took 2 days or 3 days. Once the baby was delivered, the person who received the baby put them upside down next to the mothers because they had to die. Because they were not Korean men's babies but Chinese, spreading foreign seeds in the North Korean soil was not allowed. Because the baby cried for three days, we were really going mad inside, getting stressed. There were no textiles to wrap the baby so the mother tore her winter underwear and wrapped them while crying and they died in three or four days because they were left lying upside down without any water or milk. These days when I hear cats cry, I get goose-bumps because baby's cry just sounds like cats' and my teeth get itchy like crazy. Do you know where they placed the dead babies? In the toilet. They left them stand along the toilet wall in a row. When I was in the prison, there were seven dead babies. The reason why they displayed them in the toilet was to teach us not to go to China and not to bring Chinese seeds inside our wombs betraying our own country.

This infanticide is driven by racist and nationalist ideologies that see any babies with the Chinese heritage as a marker of betrayal of the motherland (Charny, 2004, 2005; Chang et al., 2008; Home Office, 2016). Halliday (1985) argues that sexism in Korean society pre-dates the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula in 1910, as evidenced by the decapitation of Korean women who 'consorted' with Japanese men, which was not equally applied to Korean men. The DPRK's unacceptance of children born between North Korean women and Chinese men has rendered repatriated women's separation from their children (Chang et al., 2008), whilst concurrently raising serious concerns about human rights issues of these stateless children (Charny, 2004).

Further to these, imprisoned females are subject to poor diet and physically demanding labour, normally lasting from 5 a.m. till 7 or 8 in the evening (Charny, 2005; Muico, 2005). Additionally, prisoners are forced to sleep while kneeling and are punished by any physical movement in harsh and crammed space (Charny, 2005), as exemplified by Ms E:

> We sat bending our heads in the prison all day, doing nothing for a month. So our neck bone at the back stuck out. Because it was so painful, you couldn't lift your head all of sudden. Otherwise, it felt like dying. In our prison room, luckily, we didn't have a camera, so we occasionally were able to stretch our legs when there were no officers watching. But other rooms had CCTV cameras so if anyone was found to move, the officers called out 'Come out so and so in room X!' and they got beaten really hard, even though they moved their heads just a tiny bit. Imagine sitting like that all day. It really drove you mad, and in the end made you think it's better to die.

What Phipps (2020: 124) calls 'the social death of incarceration: a loss of humanity, neglect and reduction to 'bare life'' encapsulates the experiences of North Korean women in detention facilities.

According to a United Nations Commission of Inquiry report on human rights in the DPRK (2014), China has violated its obligations under international human rights and refugee law over its treatment of North Korean refugees. It states that particularly China's practice of repatriating refugees to the DPRK can be regarded as a crime against humanity. Human Rights Watch (2002) finds some North Koreans crossing the border into China leave the North owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of political oppression. In addition, even if North Koreans did not qualify for the Refugee Convention prior to crossing into China, they are most likely to do after the fact as *refugees sur place* because they have a well-founded fear of persecution if they ever return to North Korea (Human Rights Watch, 2002; Aldrich, 2011; Garcia, 2019), as examined so far. China ignores the Western claims of its human rights abuse against North Korean females, citing it as a matter of sovereignty (Eom and Kim, 2016). Nor does China want to anger its ally, destabilise the Korean peninsula, or encourage North Koreans to come to China (Lankov, 2004). According to Lankov, repatriation is a cheaper option for China than granting refugee status that will require it to provide aid. Moreover, Shulong (2015) claims that most Chinese do not want China to pressurise the North too much, causing further imbalance of the strategic structure in Northeast Asia. In a similar vein, neither does the Republic of Korea (ROK) want military conflict or any other disastrous situations that would have a direct impact on the South nor the responsibility of accepting millions of people unaccustomed or hostile to South Korean culture (Linantud and Beatty, 2011). These scholars continue to argue that China, USA, South Korea and Japan believe they need North Korea to survive, instead of it undergoing unpredictable change, for the interests of individual nation-states and Northeast Asian regional stability.

7. Conclusion

As examined in this paper, North Korean women are subject to the ongoing cycle of oppression and exploitation despite supposedly increased opportunities for them to navigate the economic sphere and to negotiate gendered roles with their husbands through the weakening of the official command economy. It is evident from the examination that the political, economic and cultural structures of the DPRK and China in combination with geopolitical relations and individual nation-states' interests are responsible for North Korean women's oppressive lives inside and outside North Korea. Despite efforts made by international organisations, such as the UN, human rights of North Korean women remain largely unsolved, subsumed to the harsh global mobility regime that centres on the protection of national security, and the political and economic interests of individual nation-states. In this the role of North Korean women themselves can be vital, together with endeavour by the international bodies.

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