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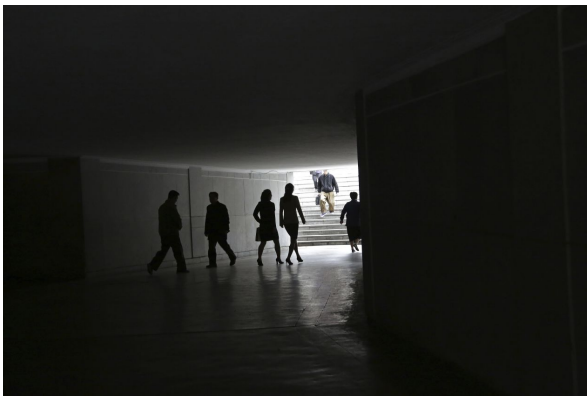
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Sex Abuse is Rampant in North Korea, Reports Say

Women are found increasingly vulnerable to sexual violence in a market economy



Women in North Korea have become increasingly exposed to sexual violence as the country's market economy expanded, according to a recent report. Above, an underpass in Pyongyang last year. PHOTO: WONG MAYE-E/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By *Eun-Young Jeong*

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SEOUL—The recent diplomatic thaw between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and his American and South Korean counterparts has sometimes featured supporting roles for several women close to leader Kim Jong Un, including his sister Kim Yo Jong, his wife Ri Sol Ju and even one of the country's most famous pop singers, Hyon Song Wol.

But behind the public display is a grim reality for many women across North Korea who are sexually abused on a regular basis, aren't in a position to resist and don't have channels to report abuse, according to human-rights groups and North Koreans who have fled the country.

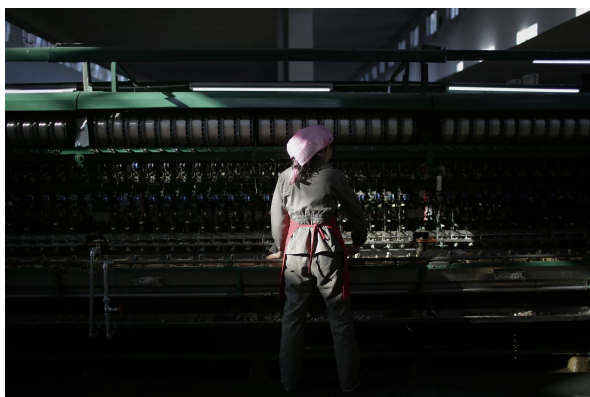
"Having sex with men who have power over you or letting them touch all over your body is a necessity to survive," a North Korean woman in her 20s who traded goods for a living before escaping the country in 2014 told Human Rights Watch.

In North Korea—an authoritarian state where men dominate official positions and exercise control surpassing that in other countries—the power imbalance between genders is extreme. Reporting sexual abuse is virtually inconceivable.

Women have become increasingly exposed to sexual violence as North Korea's market economy expanded: Corruption has become more prevalent while sexual violence is used as a form of punishment and sex is often demanded as a bribe, according to a report released on Thursday by Human Rights Watch, a New York-based nonprofit.

The report, which drew on interviews with 62 North Korean defectors, is one of two released by human-rights groups in recent weeks aimed at highlighting the abuses faced by North Korean women.

Following a severe famine in the mid-1990s, North Korea began to take on elements of a private



North Korea's male-dominated society has benefited from the earning power of women without improving their standing, said Joanna Hosaniak, whose Seoul nonprofit has reported on discrimination in the country. Above, a silk mill in Pyongyang, North Korea, last year. PHOTO: WONG MAYE-E/ASSOCIATED PRESS

capitalist economy, loosely regulated by the state. The market economy continued to expand after Mr. Kim came to power in 2011. Women became key players in this market-driven economy, filling the gaps of a broken public distribution system. Many became the breadwinners in families that couldn't depend on a husband's salary alone to survive.

That financial empowerment, however, did little to improve the standing of women, said Joanna Hosaniak, deputy director general at the Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, a Seoul-based nonprofit organization that published a report on discrimination against North Korean women.

"The male-dominant society is benefiting from the earning power of women," said Ms. Hosaniak. While the market economy has improved women's economic survival abilities, she said, it has also exposed them to sexual abuse by officials, who know the women have no choice but to comply to feed their families.

A 2014 study by a South Korean government think tank, the Korea Institute of National Unification, found that 48.6% of 1,125 North Koreans who had resettled in the South over the prior four years considered rape and sexual harassment of women in North Korea a common occurrence.

At a United Nations session on discrimination against women last year, North Korean officials reported that it had convicted nine people of rape in 2008, seven in 2011, and five in 2015. The country has a population of roughly 25 million people.

The subjects interviewed for the Human Rights Watch report, all of whom left North Korea after Mr. Kim's ascension to power in 2011, spoke of sexual violence against women taking place in markets, at checkpoints, on roads, on trains, in prison and detention facilities, in university dorm rooms and in workplaces.

Most of them said that they never questioned the practice, which they saw merely as a necessary means of survival.

"Corruption is so rampant that anybody without power has no choice," said a former university instructor in his 40s from North Korea's Ryanggang province who was included in the Human Rights Watch report.

He said that he was aware of the sexual assault that his wife had to endure working in the markets to maintain the family's livelihood, but couldn't do anything about it.

The North Korean trader who escaped in 2014 said she never reported any of her sexual assaults. "It never occurred to me that I could or would want to do anything about it," she said. "It was just how things are."

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