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peace for the twenty-first century”**

Statement submitted by Jubilee Campaign, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Economic Oppression of North Korean Women in China

A lack of economic empowerment for women is undoubtedly a worldwide phenomenon. Though there has been a significant and positive progression of women's roles in recent history, this progression has unveiled yet more inequalities that women must overcome. Wage gaps, limited access to occupations, and discrimination within the workplace are rampant around the globe and are clear indicators that even within the developed world there is a lot of work to do. As the international community considers the issues that are surfacing for women in the midst of a changing world of work, it is also critical that we not look past the women whose worlds have still not changed. The movement of empowering women is truly only as strong as its weakest link.

It is substantial that the United Nations has pledged to address the hardships that many women are facing as they pave a new era of equality and empowerment in the workplace. Alongside its efforts to promote and celebrate this development, the United Nations must also work with and speak out for the women who have not yet seen such opportunity for empowerment and change. Women living in closed regimes such as those in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea face severe challenges for empowerment and change. The United Nations, especially the Commission on the Status of Women, must commit to be their allies so that this changing world does not leave them behind and under the control of a government that denies them basic human rights.

North Korean women who have escaped from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, hereinafter North Korea, and have fled to the People's Republic of China, hereinafter China, face severe economic and societal oppression. The refugee women are completely denied ownership of their own lives. They fight tirelessly to get ahead, only to realize that the government systems of North Korea and China will not allow basic human rights and freedom. Therefore, they are left oppressed and vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence, often from economic mires.

Estimates of how many North Koreans are in hiding in China greatly range. Conservative estimates report at least 100,000 while some estimate 300,000 or even as many as 1,000,000 remain hidden within China's borders. Of those who defect from North Korea, roughly 70 percent are women. Therefore, there are a significant number of North Korean women in China. Against the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol, both of which China acceded to in 1982, China has an agreement with North Korea that it will send back North Korean defectors found within its borders. China refuses to see North Koreans as refugees and instead considers them illegal migrants. In doing so, they evade their obligation of protecting these defectors. The moment North Korean women cross into Chinese territory, they completely lose status. For many of them, this makes life in China just as hard as the life they tried to leave behind. They cannot find official employment and must live in hiding from Chinese authorities. Their vulnerable status and fear of being sent back to North Korea puts these women in an extremely dangerous position in

which they are at the mercy of those they encounter in China and often suffer sexual exploitation and oppression at their hands.

One of the best options that these women feel they have is to live under the “safeguard” of a Chinese man. Many North Korean women form quasi-marriages with Chinese men. The Database Center for North Korean Human Rights estimated in 2013 that almost 40 percent of North Korean women enter into these informal marriages. Though the man provides somewhat of a veil to cover the woman’s illegal status, these relationships themselves are often abusive. Numerous North Korean women have told of their marriages with Chinese men who physically, verbally, and sexually abused them. Moreover, these relationships do not give the women rights, so they remain prohibited from the formal work sector and confined to the sole identity of a wife. Some have been restricted to only do chores for and have sex with their husbands. These husbands are often poor farmers who were unable to find Chinese wives. Some women have recounted how their husbands did not work, which caused them to be the only ones bringing in an income from the illegal side jobs they worked. One woman stated that all of her income was squandered on her husband’s gambling habits.

Though some women end up in these relationships by choice in hopes that the relationship will provide some sort of security, oftentimes, these marriages are not chosen, but forced. Because the trafficking of North Korean women is a lucrative business for traffickers in China, becoming trafficked is possibly the biggest danger that women who cross the border face. These women are completely robbed of any economic opportunity and their freedom when they are either picked up by traffickers stationed along the Chinese border or tricked into a forced marriage while they look for a job. Traffickers abduct these women and sell them into a Chinese family. Once placed in a family, they have little hope of escaping. Because China denies them legal protection, they essentially become a slave to the family they are sold into. If they disobey, displease, or try to leave their family, the family may report them to the police. Furthermore, if they have children with their Chinese husband, their children are born stateless and unable to receive education or other government provisions because the paperwork needed to obtain status requires disclosure of the mother’s origins. China’s denial of granting North Korean women basic human rights also directly affects their next generation.

Though less common than forced marriage, prostitution is another probable fate for these women. Unfortunately, it is by far the most profitable job they can acquire under their illegal status. These women are employed in bars, beauty salons, bathhouses, and night clubs. Many women are trafficked into the sex industry; others hear about its economic advantages and choose to join for their own survival, as other jobs often do not provide liveable incomes. Again, fear of repatriation hangs over their heads as their bosses will threaten to report them if they try to refuse customers. Also, the vulnerable situation that these women are in gives their employers leverage to cheat them of their wages. If the women demand full pay, they would likely risk getting reported and repatriated.

China’s intentional refusal to give North Korean women legal status denies these women of any opportunity to advance economically or make a life for themselves. These women are forced to become both invisible and dependent on men who have more power and who often sexually exploit and further oppress

them. Their lack of status has expounded North Korean women's problems and has condoned and proliferated the economic disempowerment of women. China views these women as subordinate and disposable, allowing them to fill in as prostitutes and wives, and then promptly sending them back to North Korea if they create any disruption. Refoulement to North Korea usually places these women in prison camps where they face physical and sexual abuse and various forms of torture.

Women who have courageously escaped oppression should be facilitated in creating a fulfilling life where they have ample opportunity to thrive and live up to their full potential. China must step up to protect these women and help them to be engaged and valuable members of society, whether in China or elsewhere. If these women are not given permission and protection by the Chinese government to pursue legitimate economic opportunities, then they themselves will continue to be viewed as economic opportunities by those who wish to exploit them.

With the mission of economic empowerment, we request that the United Nations address the plight of North Korean women in China who thus far have been ostracized and severely oppressed. The United Nations must urge China to uphold its commitment to the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol. They must be expected to categorize North Korean defectors as refugees or "refugees sur place" in accord with the findings in the past by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in categorizing this vulnerable population, and China must treat them as such. Until China steps up to this responsibility, North Korean women will continue to suffer and be denied the economic rights they deserve.
