

“How Can I be Sold Like This?”

The trafficking of North Korean women refugees

Donna M. Hughes

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In late May, a female North Korean refugee hiding in China sent this plea for help to an operative in the underground railroad:

Please help us. Please save us from this darkness full of danger. We are currently living in China risking danger every day. It is not just me alone, but my mother, elder sister, and my elder sister's 3-year-old daughter. The only crime we have is coming here to find something to eat because we were hungry. What is worse than being hungry is the constant worry and fear that at any moment we might get caught.

An estimated 200,000 North Koreans have escaped to northeast China. Some of them are looking for food. Some of them are fleeing for their lives from prison camps or political persecution. Some of them are Christians who the Kim Jong-Il regime targets for the worst torture. Some of them are relatives of an arrested person, fleeing for their own safety because when one person is accused of a crime, all members of the family are arrested and imprisoned.

China, in support of the North Korean regime and in violation of the United Nations treaty on treatment of refugees, arrests the refugees and sends them back to be interrogated, put in camps, and even executed. China reportedly has special units to hunt down and arrest refugees and pays bounties to people who turn in refugees in hiding.

Women and children are increasingly the majority of refugees crossing the river into China. If they can locate a friend or relative's house, they have a chance at finding a safe haven. But if the ethnic Korean Chinese traffickers find them first, they are abducted and sold, either to men as informal wives or concubines or to karaoke clubs for prostitution. Their price and destination are determined by their age and appearance. China's one-child policy has resulted in a deficit of women from selective abortions, infanticide, and the selling off of girl babies. Kidnapping and trafficking have become common ways that Chinese men acquire women.

The women are raped by sellers and buyers. Some of the traffickers are looking for a woman for themselves, and they sell the other ones. According to an activist who makes regular trips to China to assist refugees, women are mostly sold in cities in Jilin Province in northeast China. He has gone to karaoke clubs in search of women and found that the clubs were protected by Chinese police. A young woman refugee said that Chinese officials are complicit in the trafficking of North Korean women.

Once a woman is sold, she is completely powerless. If she offers any protest, she is threatened with exposure to the Chinese authorities. There are reported cases of vengeful men reporting women to

the police. They are then deported to North Korea. Most often, women are resold to another man after the original buyer tires of them.

To hide from the Chinese police, families or small groups of refugees climb into the mountains of northeast China and build shelters to hide in and sleep at night. During the day, they walk down into towns in search of food or work.



Dugout shelter in the mountains of northeast China, where three North Korean refugees lived in hiding for seven years. Photo taken by an activist in the underground railroad who assists refugees.

A secret underground railroad, run mostly by Christian activists, operates to get refugees to safety. If the conductors on this railroad are caught, they are arrested and sentenced to prison in China. Brave North Korean activists, who could be deported if they are caught — and certainly executed — risk their lives to help the refugees.

One woman refugee said that ethnic Korean Chinese men hunt for them in the forests and mountains. If they find them they rape them and force them to "marry." An activist reported seeing a family victimized by Chinese men. Last October he went in search of a family — a father, mother, and 22-year-old daughter — who had requested help. The family had been working on a frog farm in exchange for food, but the farmer refused to pay them. On the day he visited, five Chinese men were there to collect a shipment of frogs and had spotted the family. The activist saw the daughter with ripped clothing. She had been raped by the men. Her parents were powerless to protect their daughter. When the activist later returned to help the family, they were gone.

There is evidence that women are trafficked to China from inside North Korea as well. Tim Peters, director of Helping Hands, assisted a 26-year-old woman refugee who was sold to a violent man. After the death of her father and mother in North Korea, a sympathetic woman offered to help her get to China where she could live with the woman's relatives. But after they crossed the Tumen River, she observed the woman being paid 1,500 yuan (\$190) by a man. She was sold to a married man who bought her to be his concubine. She escaped with the help of a Christian activist.

There are numerous reports of women in North Korea being so hungry and desperate that they allow traffickers to sell them to someone in China. As awful as this is, it enables them to live, eat, and maybe send some money or food back to other family members.

South Korea has been reluctant to accept North Korean refugees for fear it will displease Kim Jong-Il. Consequently, there are relatively few refugees there officially. Of the estimated 6,700 North Koreans in South Korea, 4,000 of them are women. Pastor Chun Ki-won, director of the Durihana Mission based in Seoul, South Korea, is active in assisting refugees. A modern-day liberator, he has been arrested and imprisoned in China for his part in running the underground railroad. According to him, 80 to 90 percent of the women refugees in South Korea have been victims of sex trafficking.

Pastor Chun Ki-won's name and his mission are well-known among refugees hiding in China. He receives one to two letters a day from women describing how they have been sold and asking for assistance. He said, "Women are treated like animals. They have no rights. Whoever finds them first can sleep with them. Then he sells them later."

Refugees caught in China are routinely arrested and deported to North Korea. Those who flee from North Korea are considered traitors to the government and the ruling ideology of *Juche* or self reliance. The returnees are imprisoned in detention centers, interrogated, mistreated, and starved. Pregnant women are forcibly aborted or newborns killed to keep "foreign" blood out of North Korea.

According to a first-hand report, in March 1999, a 26-year-old woman in a detention center was executed for "selling herself" in China. Yun Hye-ryeon, wife of *Aquariums of Pyongyang* author Kang Chul-hwan, was in the cell next to this woman. The woman had crossed into China to feed herself and her baby, but according to the North Korean officials she fell under the influence of capitalism and sold herself for money. She was publicly executed as a lesson to others.

Yun Hye-ryeon works with her husband for their human-rights organization — NK Gulag — to collect testimonies from refugees. She says that the majority of women refugees in China are raped and trafficked. Even those who have made it to South Korea still suffer from the trauma of their experience. "North Korean women in South Korea have painful memories in their hearts." As a result of being sold several times, they don't trust men any more. They still suffer from the trauma of their experience and have a difficult time adapting to life in South Korea.

Yet, all the letters that Pastor Chun Ki-won receives beg for help to escape and come to South Korea. The author of one letter wrote: "I want to live like a human being for one day. I am a human being. How can I be sold like this? I need freedom."

— *Donna M. Hughes is professor and Carlson Endowed Chair in Women's Studies at the University of Rhode Island. She was recently in Seoul where she interviewed North Korean refugees and activists in the underground railroad.*