

# “We want our stories to be heard”

Barriers to North Korean women’s leadership  
and participation in the human rights movement



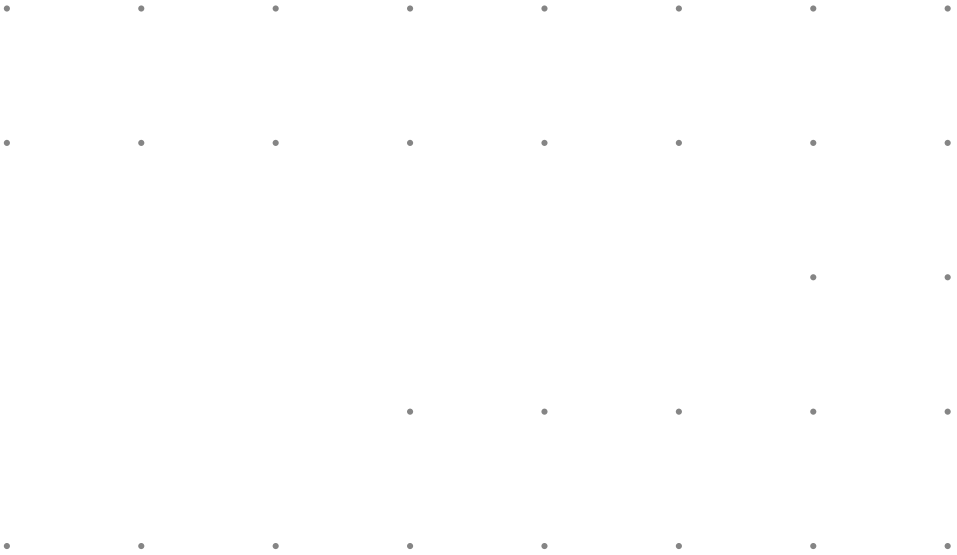
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## Acknowledgements

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We are indebted to the 178 exiled North Koreans living in South Korea who participated in this project. Their candour contributed immeasurably to the findings and recommendations contained in this report. We thank emerging and established women leaders in the diaspora for their involvement, particularly: Jinee Choi, Mi Jin Kang, Eun Ju Kim, Jade Kim, Jung Ah Kim, Ye Young Park, and Esther Uom. We especially thank the staff and students at Jangdaehyun School, Nambuk Sarang School, Baul Local Centre for Children, and Priming School. Their collective passion for improving human rights in North Korea served as an inspiration for the project. We also express our thanks to Woorion and to Hema Gokal (Lean In, Asia Pacific) for their support.

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# CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	4
Executive Summary	6
Findings	7
Recommendations	13
Methodology	14
The Impact of Gender	16
Barriers to Participation and Leadership	22
Identity-Based Discrimination	23
Gender-Based Discrimination	28
Unequal Opportunities for Employment	32
Perceived Inadequacy in Professional Training and Experience	37
Conclusion	41
Endnotes	42

# Executive Summary

**This report draws on the experiences of 178 exiled North Korean women to highlight the barriers that prevent their full participation and leadership in civil society organisations focused on North Korea.**

This research is intended to provide a range of audiences, including civil society organisations, grant makers and philanthropic entities, and the media, with an understanding of the many limitations that exiled women face, from gender-based cultural biases to issues concerning representation. This research can provide a platform for developing practical actions to increase exiled women's involvement in the North Korean human rights movement.

This report draws attention to the unique challenges facing exiled women who wish to enter and succeed in civil society organisations focused on North Korea. It presents information on the structural barriers of identity-based and gender-based discrimination that dampen the aspirations and downplay the abilities of exiled women. And the report describes indirect forms of discrimination resulting from lack of access to employment and unfair treatment that create hidden barriers and glass ceilings. While this report delineates the challenges of addressing deeply entrenched social and cultural norms, it also points to attainable targets that can actively engage and incorporate more exiled women in civil society organisations focused on North Korea.

This report finds that gender parity in participation and leadership will be fundamental for an effective, representative, and legitimate civil society that is dedicated to improving human rights for all North Koreans. Enabling women in the diaspora to realise their ambitions and encouraging more young women to reshape civil society and advocate on the human rights concerns they prioritise—including human trafficking and gender-based violence—can lead to richer outcomes and better organisations. In turn, this can grow collective action to address the ongoing commission of mass human rights violations in North Korea.

# Findings

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## Identity-Based Discrimination

- Exiled women's experiences represent the majority-experience in the diaspora, yet their own experiences of human rights violations and ideas for human rights interventions are underrepresented in civil society organisations focused on North Korea, which discourages greater numbers of exiled women from seeking employment in such organisations.
- Identity-based discrimination against exiled North Koreans in South Korea is prevalent and results in exiled women consciously distancing themselves from their own North Korean identities, which creates lasting barriers that deters their participation in civil society organisations focused on North Korea.

## Gender-Based Discrimination

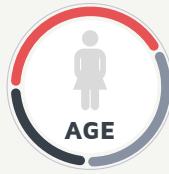
- Persistent cultural and social norms pressure exiled women to forgo, defer, or leave their careers to assume family and parental duties, thus serving as a key disabler for exiled women who might seek employment in civil society organisations focused on North Korea.
- Cultural and social norms that disadvantage women lead to material consequences for civil society organisations focused on North Korea, including exiled women being unaware of women leaders or not perceiving gender equality as a priority in the workplace.

## Unequal Opportunities for Employment

- Inadequate modes of recruitment and a continued perception of low paid roles and an unbreakable glass ceiling collectively dissuade many exiled women from seeking employment and succeeding in civil society organisations focused on North Korea.
- Participation by exiled women in civil society organisations focused on North Korea can be encouraged by prominent women acting as role models.

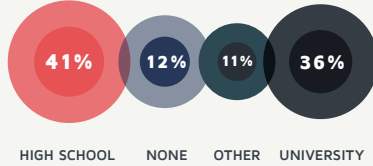
## Perceived Inadequacy in Professional Training and Experience

- Exiled women possess the education necessary for employment in civil society organisations focused on North Korea, yet they lack the requisite involvement in civil society and experience in leadership roles.
- Broadening the scope and audiences of North Korean human rights is important to exiled women, many of whom sought to work with women's rights organisations and South Koreans.

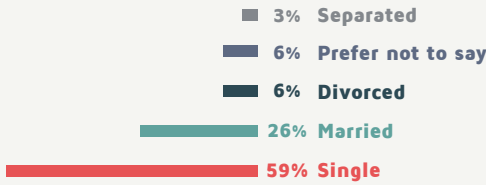


- 20/25 years old
- 25/30 years old
- 30/35 years old

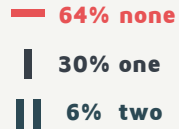
## EDUCATION



## RELATIONSHIP STATUS



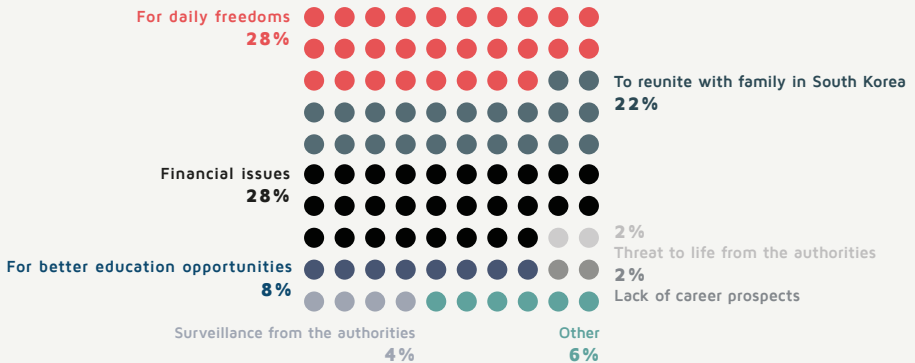
## CHILDREN



## LIVING IN SOUTH KOREA FOR

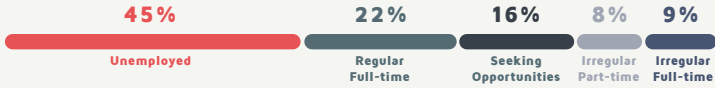


## ESCAPE REASON

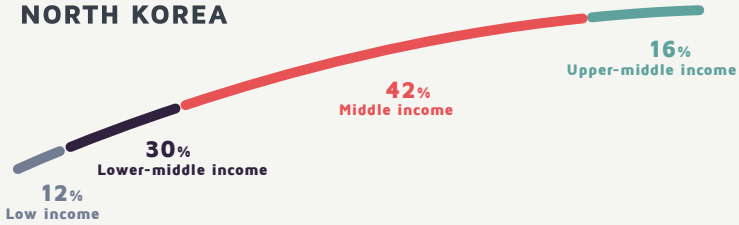




## EMPLOYMENT STATUS



## ECONOMIC STATUS IN NORTH KOREA

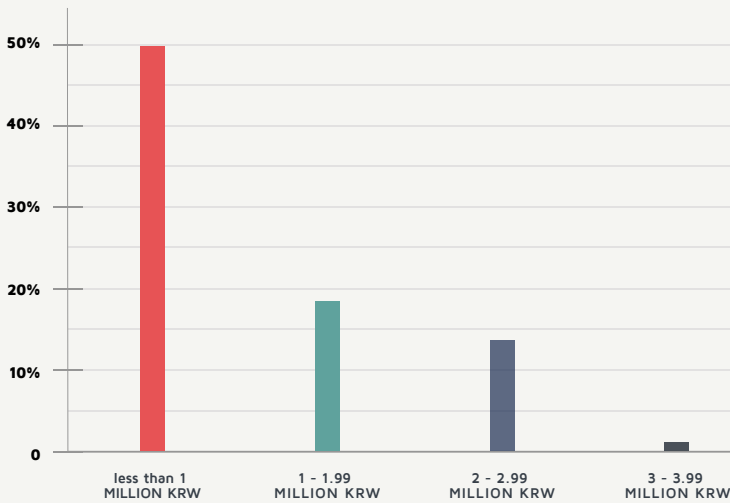


## HOUSEHOLD MONTHLY INCOME IN KRW\*

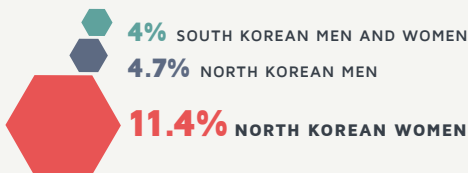
\*1 KRW=0,00090 USD

SOUTH KOREA'S MINIMUM WAGE = KRW 8,720 (APPROX. \$7.83 USD)

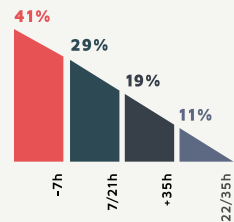
**17%** PREFER NOT TO SAY



## UNEMPLOYMENT IN SOUTH KOREA



## WEEKLY TIME ON UNPAID DOMESTIC WORK



**HAVE NOT CONSIDERED WORKING IN THE NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS FIELD BECAUSE**

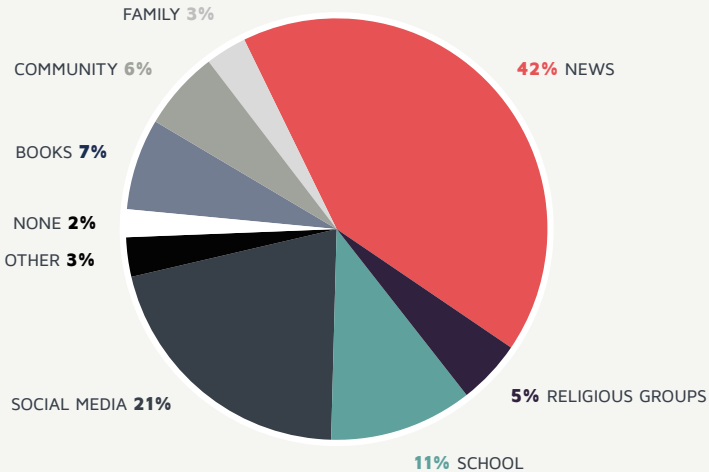


**43%**  
**HAVE EXPERIENCED DISCRIMINATION**  
 BASED UPON NORTH KOREAN EXILE STATUS

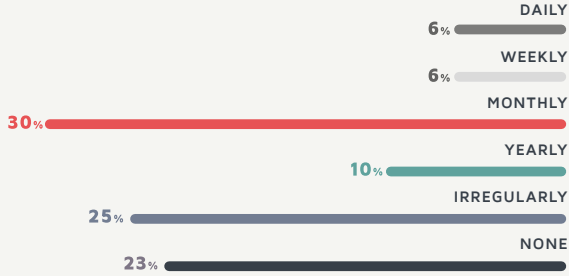
**FOR 63%**  
 TALKING AND/OR READING ABOUT NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS  
**IS MENTALLY AND/OR EMOTIONALLY TRAUMATIC**

**52%** ARE LOOKING FOR OPPORTUNITIES TO BE INVOLVED IN NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISM

**GETS THE MAJORITY OF INFORMATION ABOUT NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS FROM**



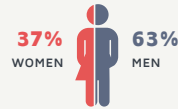
## RECEIVED EDUCATION IN HUMAN RIGHTS IN FORMAL EDUCATION SETTINGS IN SOUTH KOREA (INCLUDING HANAWON AND HANA CENTERS)



### GENDER RATIO IN THE NORTH KOREAN DIASPORA IN SOUTH KOREA



### GENDER SPLIT IN LEADERSHIP OF NORTH KOREA-FOCUSED CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS



**DO NOT HAVE THE NETWORKS AND CONNECTIONS**  
TO LEARN ABOUT OPPORTUNITIES AND/OR ADVANCE CAREER



**DO NOT UNDERSTAND HOW TO APPLY FOR A JOB**  
(writing CV, interviews, etc.)



**NOT ABLE TO EASILY GET ALL OF THE INFORMATION**  
NEEDED TO APPLY TO JOBS IN NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANISATIONS



**LACK CONFIDENCE AND DOES NOT POSSESS THE QUALIFICATIONS**  
TO APPLY FOR A ROLE IN A NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANISATION



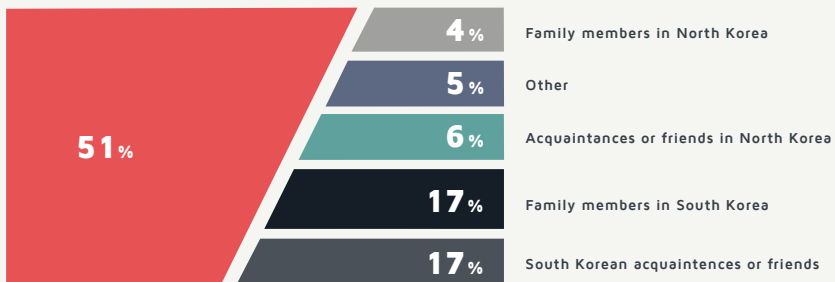
ARE MORE COMFORTABLE ABOUT ENGAGING WITH NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS  
**IF THERE WERE MORE WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP ROLES**



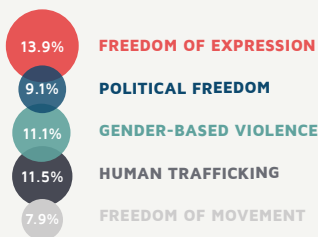
WANT TO WORK FOR AN  
**ORGANISATION THAT PRIORITISES GENDER EQUALITY**

## DISCUSSES NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS MOST FREQUENTLY WITH

Exile acquaintances or friends in South Korea



## AS A YOUNG NORTH KOREAN WOMAN LIVING IN SOUTH KOREA THE 5 MOST IMPORTANT NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES ARE



**68%** THINK THERE ARE MORE MALE LEADERS BECAUSE WOMEN HAVE TO TAKE CARE OF THE FAMILY

THINK THERE NEEDS TO BE MORE WOMEN LEADERS IN THE NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS FIELD



ARE AWARE OF THE TERM "HUMAN RIGHTS" THROUGH PUBLIC EDUCATION IN NORTH KOREA



THINK IT IS IMPORTANT THAT NORTH KOREANS TAKE THE LEAD IN TELLING SOUTH KOREANS ABOUT NORTH KOREANS HUMAN RIGHTS



# Recommendations

## Exiled North Korean women should:

- **Seek local allies** in civil society organisations focused on North Korea, broaden personal networks to include national organisations in South Korea that do not currently work in the North Korean human rights ecosystem, and engage global supporters in the women's rights movement.
- **Support and build** collective action among women and men in the diaspora community and with allies and be vocal on the idea of 'nothing about us, without us.'
- **Innovate and be open** to new ways of conceiving human rights work and participation within civil society organisations focused on North Korea by exploring new technologies and new organisational and leadership structures.

## North Korea-focused civil society organisations should:

- **Reconfigure** workplace practices to become more inclusive of the lived-realities of exiled women in the diaspora, including accommodating caregiving responsibilities.
- **Introduce** new systems of recruitment and training that can reach and support exiled women in the process of identifying and applying for roles in civil society organisations focused on North Korea.
- **Consider** how leadership transitions or new approaches to organisational hierarchies can increase the effectiveness of a civil society organisation, given that incumbency can prevent exiled women from assuming leadership positions.

## Grant makers and philanthropic entities should:

- **Consider mentorship** and training for exiled women through special schools, universities, and other social organisations that can facilitate their entry into civil society organisations focused on the human rights of North Koreans.
- **Explore** how new funding and support structures for women-led or women-dominated civil society organisations focused on North Koreans' human rights can increase financial security and lessen the financial barriers that disproportionately impact exiled women.
- **Support and encourage** civil society organisations focused on North Korea to incorporate gender audits, gender-responsive working structures, and gender-fair recruitment practices into their organisational cultures and policies.
- **Encourage** civil society organisations to examine the role of gender and the experiences of North Korean women in funded research and advocacy on human rights in North Korea.

# Methodology

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**To promote an understanding of the barriers to participation and leadership for exiled women in civil society organisations focused on North Korea, the project comprised four areas of research. This report includes statistical data and analyses of qualitative and quantitative findings.**

First, a survey of 100 exiled North Korean women aged 19–34 living in South Korea was conducted in December 2020.

The 99-question survey, which included open-ended questions, multiple choice questions, and questions based on the Likert scale, sought to identify barriers to these women's participation and leadership in civil society organisations focused on North Korea. Questions encompassed several categories and topics, including socio-economic status, level of education, identity-based discrimination, and gender bias. We refer to exiled women who participated in our survey as respondents.

Second, a series of in-person events in special schools across South Korea during March and April 2021 provided space for 41 exiled students to discuss the intersections among gender, the human rights field, and core concepts in human rights and international human rights law. The term special schools refer to private educational institutions, alternative boarding programmes, and educational initiatives for exiled North Korean students in South Korea that are supported by the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Unification, and the Hana Foundation, among others.



Third, a series of online forums in July 2021 brought together 22 exiled women who are established, emerging, and prospective human rights leaders and advocates to explore key findings. Finally, in-person and online interviews were conducted with 30 academics, exiled human rights advocates, and non-North Korean human rights advocates on women's leadership and human rights between December 2020 and August 2021.

Based on our sample size, we acknowledge that our findings may not fully reflect all barriers that all exiled women in the diaspora encounter in South Korea.

Further, we caution against applying the report's findings to barriers encountered by exiled women in the United Kingdom, which is home to the second-largest community of North Korean exiles. We have concealed the identities of the exiled women who participated in this project unless they are public human rights activists. Where necessary, we use pseudonyms to protect family members who remain in North Korea.

We use the term 'exile' throughout the report, instead of the more common term, 'defector,' to refer to North Koreans who have escaped their homeland and now reside in South Korea. Many exiles consider the term 'defector' to be pejorative. We define a North Korea-focused civil society organisation as a non-governmental and non-profit group that is organised on a local or national level to address issues in support of the fundamental human rights of North Koreans.

Leadership is defined as an individual's ability to influence, inspire, and mobilise others to achieve a stated goal, and participation is defined as the act of becoming materially engaged or involved in a sustained activity with others.

The North Korean diaspora exists within a unique cultural and historical context in South Korea and is shaped by competing histories, identities, and narratives. In this context, it is important to acknowledge two factors. First, the intersectionality of the barriers faced by exiled North Korean women in South Korea. Second, that exiled women working in the civil society space may claim differing identities that do not align with a global discourse on women's rights, feminism, and human rights advocacy. This does not diminish their experiences or work but instead creates opportunities for mutual learning between global non-diaspora human rights organisations and diaspora counterparts. We acknowledge that there can be no singular approach to conducting human rights and that the field of human rights is currently undergoing a structural shift in its practices and role within societies.



The Impact of Gender



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Women across the world face barriers that prevent their full participation and leadership in civil society. This is true of South Korea where the largest North Korean diaspora is settled. Women account for 72% of the diaspora, but men occupy over 68% of the leadership roles and display a higher participation rate in civil society organisations focused on North Korea.

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South Korea is an economically powerful liberal democracy that has combined rapid economic growth with an effective governance capacity to guarantee protections for most civil, economic, and political rights.

**Structural and direct discrimination against women does, however, persist across the political, economic, and social spheres.**

Representation of women in elected government is an indicator of any country's commitment to inclusive governance, better economic outcomes, and an equal society.<sup>1</sup> Where politics and human rights intersect, evidence demonstrates that women's leadership in decision-making increases the effectiveness of interventions, including conflict resolution and peacebuilding.<sup>2</sup>

Worldwide, women account for just 25% of parliamentarians and of the 1,451 portfolios held by women government ministers across 190 countries, only 22 human rights portfolios are held by women.<sup>3</sup>

In South Korea, the percentage of women in the National Assembly stands at 19%.<sup>4</sup>

**This figure is below the global average of 25.5% and below the regional average of 20.4%, despite the introduction of an electoral gender quota in 2004.**

Women occupy 27.8% of ministerial positions in South Korea, including Choi Young-ae, who is the first woman chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission,<sup>5</sup> but of the registered candidates that stood for the National Assembly's 243 single-member constituencies in 2020, just 26.92% were women.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond the political sphere, control over economic resources and access to financial resources can empower women to participate in public life and civil society, particularly where low-paid and unpaid voluntary roles are common.

Yet globally, women earn 24% less than men and just 50% of working-age women are actively employed, compared to 75% of working-age men.<sup>7</sup>

Women participating in the labour force suffer from underemployment, part-time employment, informal employment, and unpaid employment—including in the civil society sector—in addition to limited pathways to leadership.

Often expected to balance employment outside the home with familial duties, including housework, childbearing, and childcare, women aged 25–54 are less likely to participate in the work force with each additional child they have under the age of six, which in turn reduces space for women to enter civil society organisations.<sup>8</sup>

**South Korea, which is ranked 108 among 153 countries in the most recent Global Gender Gap Report, has just 60% of women participating in its labour market, translating to a gender gap of 23%.<sup>9</sup>**

**Earning 67.8% of the salaries of men, women occupy 15.4% of the managerial positions in South Korean companies.<sup>10</sup>** Following childbirth, 78.8% of women take parental leave from the workforce, compared to 21.2% of men, while 28.4% of women aged 30–39 will leave their jobs due to childcare commitments and the burden of unpaid domestic labour.<sup>11</sup>



**60% OF WOMEN**

PARTICIPATE IN THE LABOUR MARKET IN SOUTH KOREA

**TRANSLATING TO A GENDER GAP OF 23%**

**Alongside political and financial barriers, women often face cultural barriers that can challenge or undermine their participation in civil society.**

While cultural differences in societies present distinct barriers to women and men alike, a wealth of evidence suggests that it is women who face greater disadvantage from structural discrimination that is informed by gendered social norms.<sup>12</sup>

**In South Korea, cultural norms place social value on women who are modest, obedient to men, and who become homemakers—traditionally pushing women’s issues to the margins of political and civil society.**

In contrast, enduring patriarchal cultural norms encourage men to become breadwinners, protectors, and leaders.

The traditional centrality of men in the workplace and women in the home leads to multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination, including direct discrimination.<sup>13</sup>

Taken as a whole, these norms have created deeply rooted expectations for women with children to choose informal or part-time employment over full-time employment, to take extended career breaks, or to assume childcare and domestic unpaid labour responsibilities that vastly reduce their opportunities to engage in civil society work.

Little research has been conducted on how political, financial, and cultural barriers prevent women from participating in and leading grassroots, small, or medium-sized human rights-focused civil society organisations.<sup>14</sup>

Our findings, which are explored in the following chapter, demonstrate that, at least in the context of South Korea, **the participation and leadership of exiled women in civil society organisations focused on North Korea is impeded by identity and gender-based discrimination, lack of access to employment, and the limited work history and life experience of exiled women in comparison to men.**

**Fundamentally, this report illustrates that the barriers to exiled women’s entry into the North Korea-focused human rights field are shaped by a combination of identities associated with a woman in this population:** her identity as a woman in South Korea, her identity as a woman in the North Korean diaspora, and her identity as an exiled North Korean woman in South Korea.

This does not preclude further identities. These elements of identity are experienced simultaneously, not separately, meaning it is necessary to adopt an intersectional approach to understand and address the barriers faced in the lived experiences of exiled women.

**Our evidence does not suggest that men consciously act as gatekeepers in North Korea-focused civil society. Indeed, our evidence demonstrates that the barriers facing exiled women defy explanation as one singular problem and solution.** In some cases, men in leadership roles were identified as allies to women leaders. Importantly, our report does not suggest that exiled men are not subject to similar or different forms of discrimination that may also hinder their paths into civil society organisations focused on North Korea. That exiled men participate in civil society is to be encouraged and should be augmented with exiled women.

Despite the deeply entrenched and institutionalised barriers highlighted in this report, women’s participation and leadership in civil society organisations focused on North Korea must be the future for the field. Research from other fields suggests there are consequences when few women participate in and lead on human rights.<sup>15</sup>

**For the North Korean human rights movement to thrive, gender equality must become a binding norm and a lived reality.**

Barriers to Participation  
and Leadership

## Identity-Based Discrimination

Exiled North Koreans who have settled in South Korea face unique forms of identity-based discrimination. Grounded in historical prejudices about North Korea as dangerous and communist and North Korean exiles as disloyal, idle, unthankful, or ill-mannered, our survey established that 43% of respondents had experienced at least one form of identity-based discrimination since arriving in South Korea. Across the diaspora, 18% of North Korean women and men experienced discrimination in South Korea in 2020.<sup>16</sup>

**43% HAVE EXPERIENCED DISCRIMINATION**  
 BASED UPON NORTH KOREAN EXILE STATUS



Conspicuous by their dialect and accents, 18% of respondents stated that fears of identity-based discrimination in South Korean society meant they would not consider employment in civil society organisations focused on North Korea. Women even spoke of concealing or suppressing their North Korean identities and consciously distancing themselves from North Korea issues to better assimilate into South Korean society. One respondent stated that she had not even revealed her own North Korean identity to her children, fearing they would suffer discrimination at their local elementary school.

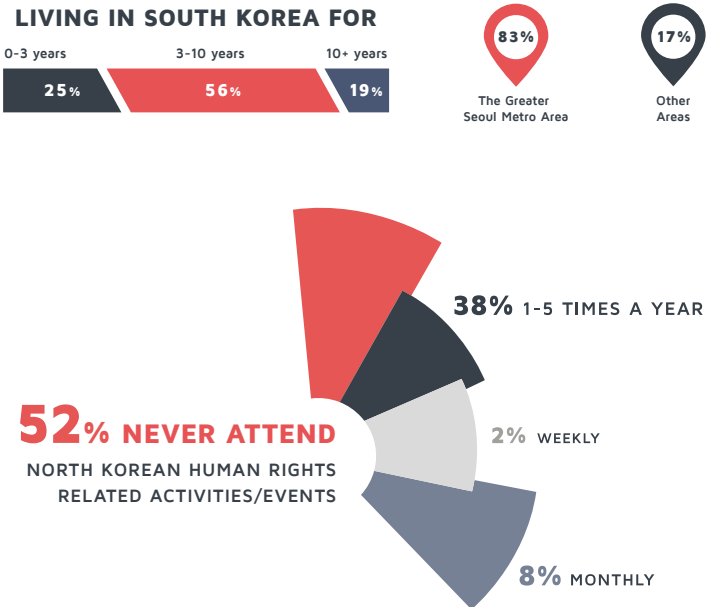
**HAVE NOT CONSIDERED WORKING IN THE  
 NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS FIELD BECAUSE**





Identity-based discrimination affects not only how exiles view civil society organisations focused on North Korea, it also influences their willingness to discuss human rights issues. Among respondents, 22% had chosen not to discuss or read about North Korean human rights since settling in South Korea, and 52% had never attended any North Korea-focused human rights activities or events since settling in South Korea. In South Korea, 454 North Korea-focused civil society organisations are currently registered under the Ministry of Unification.<sup>17</sup> Yet despite 83% of respondents living in Seoul and Gyeonggi Province, 63% were unaware of a civil society organisation focused on North Korea within one hour of travel by public transport from their homes—even though the locations and activities of such organisations are well advertised.

The reluctance of respondents to engage with North Korean human rights issues is all the more significant when we consider that 56% had been settled in South Korea for between 3 and 10 years and 19% for over 10 years. This suggests the barriers erected by identity-based discrimination are lasting. If respondents did enter employment with a civil society organisation focused on North Korea, 25% reported they would not inform their South Korean friends, suggesting an ongoing social taboo concerning their own North Korean identity. Despite living in South Korea for over a decade, one exile noted how many in society still view her as “a poor teenager running away from my homeland due to starvation”.



Quote:

“What has hurt me the most [in exile] is the way that South Koreans react to me when I reveal my identity as a North Korean exile, even though it has been more than 10 years since I resettled in South Korea, which makes me feel as if I am still an alien in South Korean society. South Koreans have an unbending image of me [as a North Korean] in their heads as a poor teenager running away from my homeland due to starvation.”

**CASE STUDY:**

**[S**outh Korean civil society organisations working on women’s rights and civil society organisations focused on North Korea rarely collaborate. Yet 34% of respondents stated they would choose to work alongside South Korean women’s rights advocates over any other community, including North Korean human rights advocates, suggesting both a preference for working with other women across traditional divides and for broadening the scope of what is considered ‘North Korean human rights.’ **]**

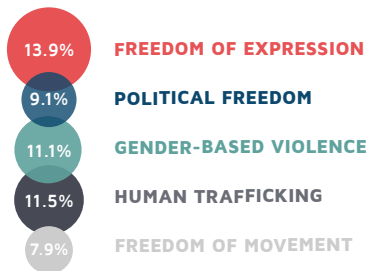
**52% ARE LOOKING FOR OPPORTUNITIES TO BE INVOLVED IN NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISM**

**W**omen account for 72% of the North Korean diaspora in South Korea, meaning that their identities and experiences represent the majority-experience among the exiled community. Despite this, respondents believed their identities, experiences of human rights violations, and opinions on human rights interventions were not well represented in civil society organisations focused on North Korea and that this discouraged exiled women from seeking employment in these organisations. Only a slim majority (52%) of respondents were open to opportunities to become involved in the North Korean human rights movement as it exists today.

A reluctance among respondents to become involved in civil society organisations focused on North Korea was partially based on their disassociation from their North Korean identity and partially on a disconnect with existing research and outputs across the field.

For respondents, the right to freedom of expression and the crimes of human trafficking and gender-based violence were ranked higher than prominent focuses of current research and advocacy across the North Korean human rights field. If the work of civil society organisations were to focus on researching and advocating on issues deemed critical by exiled women, 67% of respondents indicated that they would feel more comfortable engaging with those organisations.

AS A YOUNG NORTH KOREAN WOMAN LIVING IN SOUTH KOREA  
THE 5 MOST IMPORTANT NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES ARE



This section has highlighted areas where direct and indirect identity-based discrimination combine to present significant barriers to exiled women's participation in civil society. Many respondents' negative perceptions of their own North Korean identities in public life have shaped how they perceive the North Korean human rights movement.

It is important to remember that identity-based discrimination affects both exiled women and men, but that exiled women's North Korean identities intersected with different forms of discrimination to present further barriers. It will likely take a significant social and normative shift to bring about a reconsideration of North Korean identity in South Korea. Without this re-examination, persistent norms that create impediments to exiled women's access to civil society organisations focused on North Korea will make it less likely for women to enter the human rights field.

## Gender-Based Discrimination

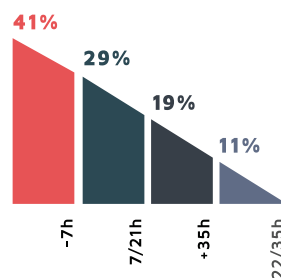
Gender-based discrimination intersects with identity-based discrimination to strengthen existing barriers to exiled women's active participation in civil society organisations focused on North Korea. Discriminatory cultural norms in South Korea that marginalise women from leadership roles are also present in the North Korean diaspora. Over 25% of respondents attributed the limited participation of exiled women in civil society chiefly to the diaspora's normative preference for women to be "passive".

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## CASE STUDY:

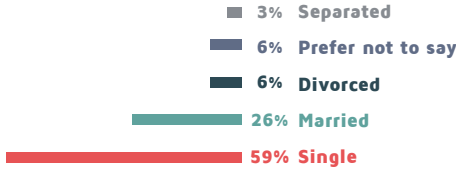
**D**ominant gender norms have travelled with the diaspora from North Korea to South Korea. Based on a social order where men are expected to assume state-employment and military roles, women are primarily expected to become dutiful mothers and have historically been discouraged from involvement in many areas of public life. Beyond its normative violence, these gender norms have practical implications. The value of knowledge is also gendered. North Koreans who arrive in South Korea can be financially rewarded for bringing information or materials into South Korea, a process that is determined on a sliding scale of importance but which prioritises the experiences and knowledge of men over women owing to the greater likelihood that exiled men will have worked in state institutions and the military. North Korean women, on the other hand, often arrive in South Korea with little or no experience that is 'valued' in such terms and an absence of formal work experience or readily transferable skills due to the patriarchal nature of work in North Korea. Chae Hyun Lee, a non-North Korean human rights advocate, noted that many North Korean women she had engaged had professed a desire not to seek employment in favour of conforming to their expected roles as caregivers to partners and children. ]

## WEEKLY TIME ON UNPAID DOMESTIC WORK

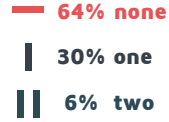


Cultural norms in both South Korean society and the diaspora concerning family and parental duties are disabling for women seeking to enter civil society. Among respondents, 68% of exiled women felt pressured by gender norms to relinquish employment and assume familial and childcare duties, and nearly 30% were spending between 22 and over 35 hours per week on unpaid domestic labour for their families. This is markedly higher than the average for employed South Korean women, who spend 2.5 hours per day on unpaid domestic labour, and unemployed South Korean women, who spend 4 hours per day.<sup>18</sup>

### RELATIONSHIP STATUS



### CHILDREN



### THINK THERE NEEDS TO BE MORE WOMEN LEADERS IN THE NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS FIELD



### ARE AWARE OF NORTH KOREAN WOMEN LEADERS IN NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANISATIONS



**G**ender inequality and patriarchal cultural norms in the diaspora have led to material consequences for North Korea-focused civil society. Nearly 90% of respondents were unaware of women leaders in civil society organisations focused on North Korea, and as a consequence, one respondent stated that she could not hope to become a leader because she believed the role to be entirely inaccessible. Most exiled women were aware of the social and cultural structures that were generating gender inequality and the resulting need for women in leadership roles to help close the gender gap. Among respondents, 83% believed there needed to be more women in leadership roles and 58% expressed a strong interest in assuming a leadership role. Significantly, 31% of respondents did not identify gender equality within the workplace as a priority.



### ARE MORE COMFORTABLE ABOUT ENGAGING WITH NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS IF THERE WERE MORE WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP ROLES

**CASE STUDY:**

**A** forum was held by Korea Future that created space for exiled women who were established leaders in civil society organisations focused on North Korea, emerging exiled women leaders, and exiled women seeking to participate in civil society. Participants identified a number of barriers to their entry into civil society organisations focused on North Korea, in particular the gendered and social normative burdens placed on exiled women with children. During discussions, a number of participants recommended the formation of a civil society organisation focused on North Korea that was mindful of existing realities for exiled women, offered flexible working conditions, and was supportive of women with school-aged children. Following discussions about the wider barriers to entry, and potential solutions, 80.95% of emerging exiled women leaders and exiled women seeking to participate in civil society signalled they would work toward leadership positions. ]

This section has highlighted areas where gender-based barriers combine to prevent women's entry into civil society organisations focused on North Korea. Gradual social change will likely be needed to bring about a gender balance in the workplace and the home. Without this balance, North Korea-focused civil society must maximise the ability of women to bypass normative barriers and participate in and lead the field.

## Unequal Opportunities for Employment

A significant number of exiled North Korean women who have settled in South Korea are unemployed. South Korea's national unemployment rate stands at 4%.<sup>19</sup>

In the diaspora, 11.4% of exiled women are unemployed.<sup>20</sup> Our findings demonstrate that while direct discrimination based on identity and gender creates barriers for women, the consequences of indirect discrimination—namely the hidden barriers to gender equality—are just as critical in preventing exiled women from entering civil society organisations focused on North Korea.



In civil society organisations focused on North Korea, men occupy 68.3% of leadership roles and display a 13% higher active participation rate, which is defined as membership and volunteer work, than exiled women.<sup>21</sup> This gender gap is significant given that exiled women account for 72% of the diaspora. Citing a perception of women being relegated to part-time, low-paid, or unpaid voluntary positions, 18% of respondents said they would not consider a role in a North Korea-focused civil society organisation. However, 70% of respondents stated they would consider a role if more leaders in these organisations were exiled women, a sign that the income gap between the genders may be narrowing.

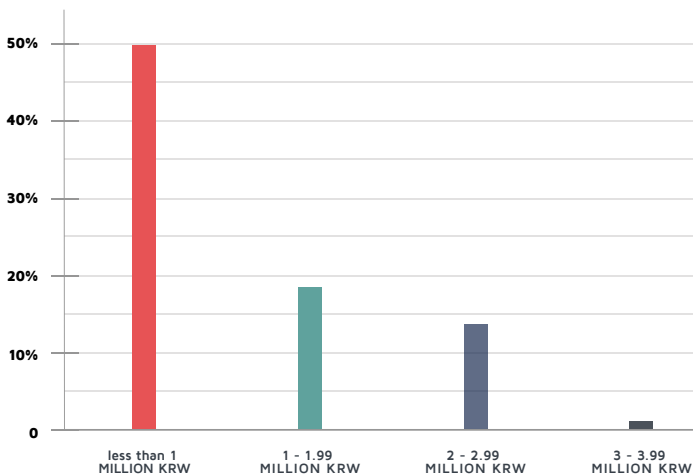
A belief that exiled women are most often assigned to work part-time contracts and assume low-paid roles in civil society organisations focused on North Korea intersects with the financial precarity of many women in the diaspora. Although exiled North Koreans who have settled in South Korea are eligible for livelihood benefits, 50% of respondents lived in households whose monthly gross income was less than one-million South Korean Won (\$865 United States Dollars).

## HOUSEHOLD MONTHLY INCOME IN KRW\*

\*1 KRW=0,00090 USD

SOUTH KOREA'S MINIMUM WAGE = KRW 8,720 (APPROX. \$7.83 USD)

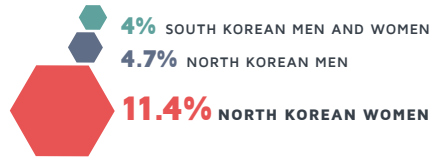
**17%** PREFER NOT TO SAY



**CASE STUDY:**

**[M** yeong Wha Ham, an academic and exiled human rights advocate, observed how a funding environment that was characterised by short-term grants for many civil society organisations focused on North Korea, in addition to the financial insecurity of exiles staffing these organisations, created a lasting insecurity for exiled women and men. In cases where funding was paused, delayed, or discontinued, the civil society organisations' dependence on short-term grants had left exiles in more precarious situations than South Korean staff. ]

**UNEMPLOYMENT IN SOUTH KOREA**



**68%** THINK THERE ARE MORE MALE LEADERS BECAUSE WOMEN HAVE TO TAKE CARE OF THE FAMILY

**A**longside exiled women's perceptions that they are unable to achieve leadership positions and that civil society organisations focused on North Korea could be financially insecure places of work, recruitment was itself identified as a key barrier. Among respondents, 75% had been unable to access information about careers in civil society organisations focused on North Korea and 32% professed they had no understanding of how they would apply for any job, including how to write a CV or prepare for an interview. Lack of personal networks that increase opportunities for exiles to learn about and apply for jobs was identified as another barrier to women's entry into civil society organisations, with 60% of respondents not possessing the networks or personal connections to learn about employment opportunities.



**UNABLE TO FIND INFORMATION**

NEEDED TO APPLY FOR JOBS IN NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANISATIONS



**DO NOT UNDERSTAND HOW TO APPLY FOR A JOB**

(writing CV, interviews, etc.)

The effects of trauma among exiled women constitute another persistent but little-discussed barrier to entry into civil society organisations focused on North Korea. North Korean women are exposed to specific gender-based threats and crimes in North Korea as well as during their escape through China and southeast Asia to South Korea, including human trafficking, forced marriage, and rape and other forms of sexual violence. According to findings published by the Korea Hana Foundation in 2016, 51.3% of unemployed exiled women over the age of 30 had been discouraged from seeking employment due to health conditions, and 62.5% of exiled women over the age of 40 had resigned for the same reason.

### Our study revealed that

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**63%**

of respondents found talking about or reading about North Korean human rights issues to be **traumatic**

**45%**

of respondents who had experienced human rights violations in North Korea were **cognisant of the harm**

### **[CASE STUDY:**

**S**eon Young Ji, an exiled woman and university student in South Korea, revealed that she must work three part-time jobs in order to meet daily living expenses for her and her mother, to send remittances to her relatives who remain in North Korea, and to set aside enough money to facilitate her sister's escape from North Korea. While Seon Young's circumstance is unique, it is not uncommon and is reflective of the financial burdens that fall upon women who constitute a majority in the diaspora. Hence, the unlikelihood of steady or fair compensation or opportunity for career advancement in civil society organisations focused on North Korea deters her from seeking work in these organisations, as such employment would do little to relieve her continued financial insecurity. ]

**CASE STUDY:**

**[** **Y**oung Shin Lim, an exiled human rights advocate, noted how exiled women often arrive in South Korea owing large amounts of money to the brokers who arranged their escape from North Korea. For these women, a significant portion of their settlement subsidy, which is provided by the South Korean government, is used to pay the brokers. For exiled women who were sold into forced marriage in China and gave birth to children, a further share of the government subsidy may also be used by these women to bring their children from China to South Korea. In these cases, Young Shin Lim saw how these issues created financial burdens specific to women and in turn led to financial insecurity that hindered exiled women's entry into civil society organisations focused on North Korea. **]**

This section has highlighted how multiple forms of indirect discrimination, such as financial precarity, recruitment, and the role of trauma, pose significant barriers to exiled women's participation in civil society and public life. Targeted recruitment, which refers to advertising pointed at social groups who have traditionally been underrepresented in employment to ensure their representation in applicant pools—and which can take the form of advertising in specific publications or platforms, engaging community-based organisations that serve under-engaged social groups, or even incentivising job roles—should be instituted by civil society organisations alongside practices that address mental health and how to balance work with family responsibilities.

## Perceived Inadequacy in Professional Training and Experience

Many respondents felt they lacked the necessary education and experience to lead civil society organisations focused on North Korea. Although there are no required qualifications or professional experience for becoming a human rights advocate or leader, one common belief among exiled North Korean women was that their work history and level of education should match those of men in the field. In this, the expectations assumed by women were gender-biased and reflective of the education and experiences of men.

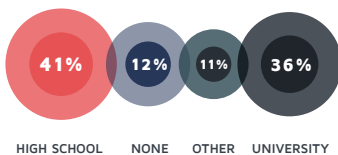
Certain knowledge or experience may be required for specialised roles in North Korea-focused civil society organisations, such as expertise in geographic information system analysis. However, for the most part, civil society organisations are responsible for setting the job specifications and supporting employees with technical training, leading one exiled woman to claim, “It seemed that the roles for exiled North Korean women [in civil society organisations focused on North Korea] had been predetermined by discrimination in the recruitment process.”

Yet exiled women in South Korea do possess standards of education that would enable them to apply for many roles in civil society organisations focused on North Korea. Over 40% of respondents had completed their studies at high schools in South Korea and 36% at South Korean universities. Moreover, almost every respondent had direct lived experience of human rights violations in North Korea and the majority escaped North Korea due to infringements of their fundamental human rights. Although 72% had not received an education in human rights in any setting in North Korea and 55% had received irregular or no education in human rights since their arrival in South Korea, 70% stated they understood the concept of ‘human rights’ and accessed information on human rights through online news platforms (42%) and social media (21%).

Quote:

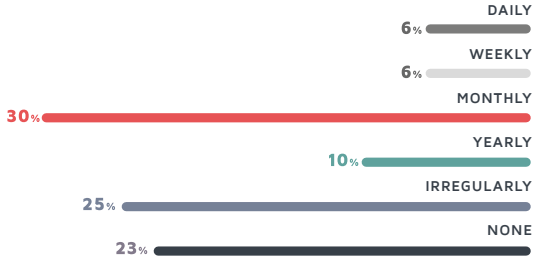
“I used to blame my background whenever I faced hardship [in South Korea]. I would question myself, saying: ‘Is this too difficult because I was not properly educated in North Korea?’”

## EDUCATION



Relative to exiled men, 53% of respondents believed they were more likely to actively seek information on human rights in North Korea than their male peers, and 52% of respondents believed they had a greater knowledge of human rights issues than exiled men in South Korea. Respondents also distributed information they received widely. Over 50% frequently discussed human rights issues in North Korea with their exiled friends, 17% with family members, and 17% with South Korean friends—and 35% even aimed to establish their own human rights organisation.

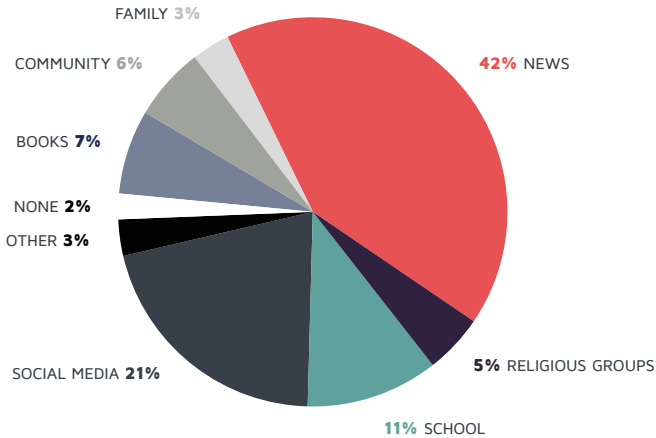
### RECEIVED EDUCATION IN HUMAN RIGHTS IN FORMAL EDUCATION SETTINGS IN SOUTH KOREA (INCLUDING HANAWON AND HANA CENTERS)



### WAS MADE AWARE OF THE TERM "HUMAN RIGHTS" THROUGH PUBLIC EDUCATION IN NORTH KOREA



### GETS THE MAJORITY OF INFORMATION ABOUT NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS FROM



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Quote:

“Men are not necessarily leaders because they are better than women, but because they experienced formal employment back in North Korea. When these men are exiled, they can continue working in South Korea. I would study and participate in civil society organisations focused on North Korea if I did not have my children to care for.”

Rather than an unequal or inadequate education, it is a lack of experience and involvement in group-based settings and leadership roles that can prevent exiled women from capitalising on their knowledge in civil society organisations focused on North Korea. An exiled human rights leader recalled that it took her a long time to become familiar with the notion of a ‘leader’ once she had settled in South Korea, explaining that few women in North Korea would aspire to become a leader owing to the country’s strong patriarchal system and women’s exclusion from many areas in the workplace and public life.

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**35%** INTEND TO START THEIR OWN  
HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANISATION

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This section has highlighted how the unequal representation of exiled women in leadership roles and participation in civil society organisations focused on North Korea amplifies perceptions among these women that they are unable to achieve leadership positions. Exiled women are, in fact, sufficiently qualified to participate in civil society and do not generally require specific educational or professional knowledge and experience. Civil society organisations focused on North Korea must re-evaluate how exiled women can be supported to enter their organisations.



# Conclusion

**This report has identified just some of the barriers facing exiled women who seek employment in civil society organisations focused on North Korea. It shows that although there are many gender-driven obstacles that women must navigate, exiled women want to and can become key actors and leaders who can reshape the way that civil society addresses North Korean human rights. We expect that steps to redress the imbalance favouring men will lead to better representation and better outcomes for civil society organisations and their supporters.**

Exiled women who have settled in South Korea face many intersectional barriers in public life and the workplace: social discrimination, high levels of unemployment, mental health issues, glass ceilings, and entrenched social norms that pressure women to sacrifice their careers and financial autonomy for familial duties. These factors combine to create overlapping and complex barriers that disadvantage exiled women and preclude their employment in many sectors, including civil society organisations focused on North Korea.

Nonetheless, it is important to reaffirm that many exiled women would consider a role in civil society organisations focused on North Korea if the barriers identified in this report were dismantled and more women assumed leadership roles. This is not a radical proposition. It does, however, require a cross-sectoral conversation that prioritises the voices of exiled women and creates buy-in from civil society organisations and grant makers and philanthropic entities.

**This report highlights the unique challenges facing exiled women in the North Korea human rights field. It shows that the structural barriers of identity-based and gender-based discrimination dampen the aspirations and downplay the abilities of exiled women.**

Moreover, this report has uncovered the ways in which indirect discrimination in the forms of limited employment opportunities and inequality of lived experience creates hidden barriers and glass ceilings for exiled women. It also points to the potential for exiled women's equal participation and leadership in civil society organisations focused on North Korea and the benefits that equality in such participation would bring to a movement dedicated to improving the human rights of every North Korean, regardless of gender.

# Endnotes

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<sup>5</sup> UN Women. (2021). *Women in Politics: 2021* [Infographic]. IPU.org.

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<sup>8</sup> United Nations DESA Statistics. (2020). *World's Women 2020: Women and Men in the Labour Force*.

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<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Gender Equality and Family. (2020, December). *2020 Gukga Sungpyongdeung Bogoseo* [2020 National Gender Equality Report].

<sup>11</sup> Statistics Korea. (n.d.). *Jiyeokbyul Goyong Chosa* [Regional Employment Survey].

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- <sup>12</sup> ILO. (2018, March). *The Gender Gap in Employment: What's holding women back?* [InfoStories]. <https://www.ilo.org/infostories/en-GB/Stories/Employment/barriers-women#global-gap>
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