

LEAVING My STORY

North Korea

Editor's note: What follows is a lightly edited version of a North Korean defector's true story, which was originally a presentation at the AAS Committee on Teaching about Asia workshop for educators at George Washington University in March 2018. The author requested that her name not be published.

I am a North Korean defector currently working as a research intern at the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, located in Washington, DC. Before I begin talking about my personal story on how I defected, let me start by asking everyone a question: Did you come to this event because you wanted to? Or did you have to come to this event because your organization threatened you with punishment if you didn't go?

I am guessing you all are here at this event because you are curious about the story of a North Korean defector. When we become adults, we have the freedom to make choices. However, there are only a few choices individuals have in North Korea.

Anyone can leave the room if my story is boring, right? No one is forced to stay here. In that sense, you are all free.

Let me give you another example.

There is a great diversity of hairstyles, makeup, and fashion in this room, and you are all very stylish. Even the way you guys are sitting is very relaxed. However, in North Korea, the regime controls everything from fashion to the way that you sit. Blue jeans, hair dye, and short skirts are all prohibited in North Korea.

All students must wear uniforms and badges with portraits of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il every day, from the beginning of elementary school to the end of university. Officers are everywhere in cities to monitor every North Korean, making sure that they are all wearing their badges, not wearing blue jeans, and not dyeing their hair.

When I was in school, I had to wear a school uniform that had to be immaculately clean. Each class had roughly thirty-five students, and of those, around five students became leaders in the class according to their *songbun*, a social classification ranking.¹ Beginning in elementary school, students are classified according to their *songbun*. Since my parents' *songbun* was very good, I was able to become one of the leaders, and I was entitled to become a "chairman of the ideology commission."

Most of my childhood was spent during what is called the March of the Suffering, or the Great Famine, in North Korea. Some of us lacked food, and many of my classmates could not come to school.

There were a lot of heartbreaking stories. Some of my friends had to climb mountains to dig up grass to eat. Some had accidents while jumping onto the food train from Russia. Some lost their parents and became beggars, and some literally worked themselves to death along with their parents. And if you walked around the streets, you could easily find dead bodies—those who died of hunger. Security officers would then come to move those dead bodies.

Thanks to my father, who was a businessman, and my mother, who was an accountant, I did not experience starvation, even though I was born during the Great Famine. But the happy years did not last long. My father's whole business was confiscated after an investigation from Pyongyang. When individuals own more than a certain amount of wealth, they have their entire property confiscated or are executed by a firing squad.

My father was able to save his life with help from a *bowibu* (North Korean secret police) officer, whom my father had bribed in the past. However, my mother became ill from a heart disease due to the shock of the incident. After that, her heart disease advanced into other health complications such as diabetes and cataract disease. She died of cancer when I

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was eighteen. My life completely changed after my mother's death. I felt no more attachment to my country and did not want to waste my future in a country that had no freedom.

I decided to leave North Korea.

I was very well aware of the outside world. I used to read Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* under the candlelight and even watched James Bond movies with no Korean subtitles. The Western people with big eyes and noses in the movies and South Koreans in South Korean TV shows were all good-looking. They were completely different from what I had learned in school about starving South Koreans. Through movies, TV shows, novels, and other foreign products, I learned that what I was taught in school was all lies.

I left my hometown and said goodbye to my father and younger brother for the last time. My brother—fourteen at the time—thought I was going to a relative's house. I have not seen my family for ten years. I followed a broker paid for by my father. I walked across the Tumen River and arrived on Chinese soil, where I met another broker with a car. We then drove to a street in the city of Yanji, where a friend of my father's lived.

While we were driving, the broker suggested that we should change our clothes since they were all wet. I trusted him and went into a house where the broker's wife gave me a change of clothing. With no change of expression, the broker's wife casually told me that I had been sold at a high price to a wealthy Chinese man and that I would be getting married in a week. She told me that I was lucky.

At that moment, my mind went blank and I didn't know what to do. I screamed and tried to escape from the house, but the door was locked and all the wires to the phones were cut. They also confiscated my notebook with all my contacts so that I could not escape.

Watching me get angry, the broker's wife smiled and told me that this was China, not North Korea. They had tricked me and my father. For two days, I was locked in the house. I cried and I prayed to my mother. I begged and begged for my freedom. After crying for a good while, I saw a big window in the corner of my eye. I thought this could be a way to escape. I jumped from the second floor of the house. As soon as I landed, I ran to the street, took a cab, and safely arrived at my father's friend's home. I was injured from the jump, and my whole body ached for weeks.

I was in China for ten months. With the help of my father's friend, I was able to reach an American missionary, and I decided to go to the US. He sent a female broker, and for two days the broker and I shifted between buses and trains to arrive at the South Korean Embassy in Việt Nam, only to realize that the embassy was surrounded and guarded by armed police officers. The plan to enter the embassy was not going to succeed.

After that, we took a bus from Việt Nam that was heading to Laos. The bus turned out to be full of tourists with a local tour guide. By chance, we met a young South Korean man who spoke English. We asked him to translate and asked the tour guide if he could help us pass the border to Laos safely because I did not have a passport. I hid under the chair on the bus in silence. I heard a siren and the bus suddenly stopped. I heard dogs barking outside. Unfortunately, I was caught by the Vietnamese border guards.

Seeing me held by the guards, the broker ran away. I cried and cried because I was scared. I was

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in despair, thinking that there was no one else to help me now. In the middle of all this, someone called out my name. It was the young South Korean man. He sensed something was wrong and had not crossed into Laos. Instead, he stayed at the border of Việt Nam and helped me get away from the guards.

We then went to the local tour guide's house. He kindly let me stay at his home for a few days, and we arranged a route to a different border. One day, the local tour guide took me to a fancy restaurant and showed me around the seaside. After dinner, he gave me a necklace as a gift, but I refused. I soon realized why the tour guide was so kind to me: he wanted me to marry and live with him in Việt Nam. At the time, I was a nineteen-year-old girl, and he was in his mid-thirties with a child.

To me, that proposal was scarier than the time I was caught at the border, but I simply couldn't be hostile to him. He was the only Vietnamese local who could help me. The young South Korean and I persuaded him to help me find a different route to Laos. And there, I was caught again while trying to cross the border.

The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK)



HRNK staff and interns with Ji Seong-ho (fourth person from left), a North Korean defector, prior to his appearance at the 2018 State of the Union speech.

The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK) was founded in 2001 by a distinguished group of foreign policy and human rights specialists. Based in Washington, DC, HRNK is a nonpartisan human rights organization whose principal objective is to raise international awareness of North Korea's human rights situation through the publication of well-documented reports and by undertaking outreach activities in support of the recommendations in those reports. HRNK has seven guiding objectives regarding North Korea, including closing the gulags, feeding the hungry, and opening North Korea's borders.

The committee's research and publication activities focus on how the North Korean totalitarian regime abuses the rights of its citizens, its vast system of political prisons and labor camps, the regime's denial of equal access to food and goods, and the plight of refugees fleeing to China.

Their well-documented studies have established their reputation and leading role in the growing international network of human rights, humanitarian assistance, and policy organizations committed to opening up and revealing North Korea to the rest of the world.

Forbes, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post* have given HRNK accolades for its stellar work.

For more detailed information about HRNK, visit <https://www.hrnk.org/>.

Visit their Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/CommitteeHRNK/>.

In North Korea, the idea of women's rights doesn't exist. I hope that one day all North Korean women understand that they, too, are valuable human beings like the rest of us.

At the age of nineteen, I was arrested by the Vietnamese border guards, and I was detained in jail for three weeks with two other foreigners. After being investigated by security guards, I was told that I would be sent back to North Korea. As soon as I heard the decision, I lost control and cried. It was not because I was going to die. It was the thought of my family and close relatives I loved dearly who were going to be either sentenced to a prison camp or shot to death that terrified me the most.

I didn't know what to do and I was scared. But the South Korean man convinced the border guards to deport me to China instead of sending me back to the North Korean Embassy. Thankfully, my life was saved for the time being, and my family was safe.

Yet I felt disgusted by the sexual harassment from the Vietnamese border guards while I was being investigated by them. Even when I was crying during the investigation, the guards were touching my thighs. To me, they were not humans. If it weren't for the young South Korean man, I could have experienced much worse.

I had taken a long journey all the way to Việt Nam, but I had to turn back and take the same route to China. I was deported, sent back to China, and then abandoned.

However, as soon as I reached China, the South Korean man called me on a phone he had slipped into my backpack. He had followed me in a taxi right behind the car to where I was abandoned. After reuniting with him, we quickly left for Ho Chi Minh City.

We both tried to escape by crossing the Cambodian border this time. However, we were caught. I then tried to run away through the back door of the bathroom, but the guards caught me once again. After multiple at-

tempts to escape, I finally reached Cambodia with the help of the South Korean man. I crossed the Mekong River—where alligators lived—bare-foot. The water came up to my neck, but all I could think of while crossing the river was making sure that the photo of my beloved brother did not get wet.

As soon as I reached the soil, I walked about six more hours on the street all night. The pain in my bloody feet was getting worse and I couldn't bear it, so I laid down in the middle of the street in hopes to stop any car. Luckily, a driver stopped his car and gave me a ride to the Cambodian Embassy. Under the guidance of the embassy, I went to a house managed by a pastor.

When I arrived at the house, there were about 200 defectors already standing by to go to Korea. Eighty percent of them were women. I thought I was safe . . . until the pastor tried to sexually harass me. I threatened to sue the pastor as soon as I got to Korea. He then backed off. I finally made it to South Korea after waiting for five months.

The journey from North Korea to South Korea took me a total of one year and a half. Many women, including myself, are beaten up, sexually harassed, and assaulted during their journeys to defect, simply because they are women and because they were born in an authoritarian regime.

In North Korea, the idea of women's rights doesn't exist. I hope that one day all North Korean women understand that they, too, are valuable human beings like the rest of us.

I would like to say one more message before I conclude. If there is anyone who would like to support human rights in North Korea, please visit HRNK's Go Fund Me page (<https://tinyurl.com/hrnkgofundme>). Thank you for listening to my story of searching for freedom, and I would like to thank the AAS Committee on Teaching about Asia (CTA)-sponsored panel for giving me this great opportunity to speak. ■

NOTES

1. Songbun is the system of ascribed status used in North Korea. Based on the political, social, and economic background of one's direct ancestors, as well as the behavior of their relatives, songbun is used to determine whether an individual is trusted with responsibilities, is given opportunities within North Korea, or even receives adequate food.

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