

Written Testimony of Deborah Choi

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Subcommittee on East Asia and the Pacific

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Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Deborah Choi. I was born and raised in North Korea. I escaped North Korea in 2004 and traveled through China, Laos, and Thailand before arriving in the United States in May 2006 as one of the first groups of North Korean refugees legally admitted under the North Korean Human Rights Act.

Today, I am a United States citizen and the mother of two children. I am also involved in efforts in Washington, D.C. to raise awareness about North Korean human rights and to support North Korean defectors. I am a member of NKFC and a supporter of FNKR.

This year marks 20 years since I came to the United States.

But even after 20 years, North Korea has never left my heart.

I appear before you today as someone who lived inside the North Korean system, escaped from it, lived in China under the constant fear of forced repatriation, became a victim of human trafficking, and eventually came to the United States, where I experienced something I had never truly understood before: freedom.

I want to share not only what happened to me, but what those experiences taught me about the nature of repression in North Korea, the danger North Korean escapees face in China, and why human rights must remain central to United States policy toward North Korea.

Life Under the North Korean Regime

Growing up in North Korea, we were taught that the outside capitalist world, especially the United States, was our sworn enemy.

We were told that North Korea was the strongest country in the world and that no one dared challenge us because of the greatness of the Kim family. We were taught to regard the Kim family as almost sacred and to give them our absolute loyalty.

We were expected to give everything for the leadership, even our lives if necessary.

The government controlled what information we could receive, what we could see, what we could say, and even what we were expected to believe.

We did not know that freedom of speech was a basic human right.

We could not openly practice religion.

The ideas that a person could criticize the government, choose political leaders, travel freely, or search for information without fear were completely foreign to us.

Fear becomes a normal part of life in a society like that.

People learn very quickly what can be said and what must never be said.

You learn that one wrong statement or one wrong action may not affect only you. It may put your entire family at risk.

One of my earliest memories comes from when I was about five years old.

I was playing with a book that contained a photograph of Kim Il Sung. I accidentally scribbled on the picture and tore part of the page.

When my father saw what I had done, his face changed completely.

He became frightened and angry. He beat me and punished me.

He told me, "Because of this one small thing you did, our entire family could be finished."

At that age, I did not understand why he was so afraid.

I only remember being hurt and angry at my father.

But I have never forgotten the fear in his eyes.

That is how deeply the regime taught us to fear and worship the Kim family.

Another memory has stayed with me all these years.

One day, while returning home from work, police blocked the roads and forced people to walk in one direction.

Eventually we arrived at a large riverbank.

Hundreds of people were gathered there, including children.

Across the river were several wooden posts. People who were about to be executed were tied to them.

Their bodies were bound tightly. Their mouths were covered with cloth.

Later, I heard that sometimes gravel or stones were placed in a prisoner's mouth before the cloth was tied, so that even in the final moments the person could not shout something to the crowd.

A police official came forward and read the names and charges of those who were about to die.

The charges I remember included robbery and murder, betraying the nation, killing a cow, and believing in or spreading what the regime called "superstition."

What was especially cruel was that family members were placed in the front row so they would have to watch their loved ones die.

When the final sentence was announced, gunshots rang out.

I saw blood coming from the bodies tied to the posts.

I covered my eyes because I was terrified, but I still remember looking through the spaces between my fingers.

Children were watching too.

That experience taught me something about how the North Korean regime controls people.

A public execution does not punish only the person who is killed.

It sends a message to every person watching.

I remember thinking:

"I will never do anything the Kim family or the country tells me not to do."

"At least I will never die like that in front of my family."

That is how fear becomes obedience.

People become afraid even to think differently.

The Information That Changed My Life

For many North Koreans, leaving the country does not begin with a clear political understanding of freedom.

Many people escape simply because they want to survive.

Some want food.

Some want the chance to live with basic human dignity.

Some cross the border without even understanding what freedom really means.

For me, the turning point came from something very unexpected: a South Korean drama.

It was Lunar New Year in 2004.

A friend from my neighborhood told me to come to his house because he had “something really good.”

When I arrived, the door was locked from the outside.

He eventually appeared through a window, let me inside, locked the door again, and climbed back into the house.

The windows were covered with thick blankets.

The room was dark.

About ten young people were gathered around a small television.

At first, I thought they were watching a foreign movie.

The volume was very low because we were afraid someone outside might hear.

My friends told me it was a Hong Kong movie.

But after listening more carefully, I began to recognize the language.

It was a South Korean drama.

I became completely absorbed in what I saw.

The people on the screen were young, like us, but they lived completely different lives.

They dressed freely. They expressed their opinions. They fell in love freely. They traveled freely.

They seemed to live with comfort, freedom, and opportunity that we could barely imagine.

At first I thought it had to be fake.

I wondered if South Korea had created it as propaganda to deceive us.

But after watching episode after episode, I began to think differently.

Even if the actors were performing, the everyday life around them could not all be fake.

Because it was a holiday, we had more electricity than usual, but the power still went out every few hours.

Whenever the electricity returned, we turned the drama back on.

For almost three days we stayed there, eating, sleeping, and watching whenever the power was available.

Those three days changed my life.

After that, I could not look at my own life in the same way.

When I ate, when I worked, when I went to sleep, I kept thinking about the life I had seen on that small screen.

I thought, “If a world like that really exists, I want to experience it at least once before I die.”

Within about three months, I crossed the border.

I knew I might die. I knew I might be captured.

I knew I could face punishment, perhaps even execution.

But the desire to see that other world became stronger than my fear.

At the end of March 2004, I crossed the Tumen River into China.

I did not yet understand that another form of danger was waiting for me.

North Korean Escapees in China

North Korean escapees in China are in an extremely vulnerable position.

They are not protected as refugees.

If they are discovered by the authorities, they can be detained and sent back to North Korea.

For a North Korean escapee, forced repatriation is not simply deportation.

It can mean interrogation, imprisonment, violence, and severe punishment.

Because North Koreans in China live without real legal protection, traffickers and abusers know that they can exploit them.

Women are especially vulnerable.

Many North Korean women are bought and sold as if they were property.

Some are forced into marriages. Some are sexually exploited.

I was one of those women.

I was in my early twenties. I knew very little about men or relationships.

Human traffickers captured me and threatened to kill me if I tried to escape.

I was taken to Beijing and sold for a high price to a Chinese man I had never met.

I could not speak his language.

Even today, remembering the moment when I had to give my body to a man I did not know and could not communicate with is deeply painful.

At that moment, I hated being born a woman.

I hated being born in North Korea. I felt completely powerless.

I was kept under the control of the man who purchased me and lived confined there for approximately a year and a half.

Another North Korean woman crossed the Tumen River with me.

She was already married and had a child.

She was very thin because she had not had enough food in North Korea.

The traffickers did not think she would bring them much money.

They told her that they might send her back to North Korea.

She became terrified. She cried and begged them:

“Sell me anywhere. I do not care where. Just please do not send me back to North Korea.”

That night, the traffickers took turns sexually assaulting her.

The next day, they put both of us into a car.

After driving for about five hours, we arrived at a rural farm.

They told her to get out. They said she had been sold there.

I still remember watching her stand alone as the car left.

She was in a foreign country. She did not speak the language.

She had no family. She did not know what would happen to her.

I never saw her again. I do not know where she is today.

I can only hope that she survived and that somewhere she is safe.

Her story and my story are not unusual.

Many North Korean women have experienced trafficking, forced marriage, sexual exploitation, and abuse simply because they were North Korean and had no meaningful legal protection.

If they resisted, traffickers could threaten to report them to the authorities.

And because arrest could mean repatriation to North Korea, many women endured terrible abuse because they believed they had no other choice.

One of the most painful truths about my time in China is that many North Korean escapees, including me, sometimes said that even this life was better than living in North Korea.

At least there was food. At least there was electricity. At least we could watch television.

At least we did not have to attend weekly self-criticism sessions where we were required to criticize ourselves and others.

Think about what that means.

We could be trafficked, exploited, and abused and still feel that we had escaped something worse.

What America Gave Me

After many hardships in China, I was eventually given the opportunity to come to the United States.

In May 2006, by what I believe was God's miracle and grace, I entered the United States as a North Korean refugee under the North Korean Human Rights Act.

I had been taught all my life that America was our enemy.

So when I arrived, I came with both hope and fear.

I spoke almost no English.

I went to community college, learned English, worked, and slowly learned how to live in a society completely different from the one in which I had grown up.

It was not easy.

But after surviving North Korea and China alone, I knew I could survive the challenges of starting over.

America gave me something I had never known before.

Freedom and opportunity.

I saw people treated with dignity.

I saw a society that valued and protected women and children.

I worked hard. I became a small business owner.

I built a family. For the first time, I was able to own a home in my own name.

I learned to dream again.

How I See North Korea Today

Today, when I watch news or videos coming out of North Korea, I do not see them as simply news footage.

I know that environment.

I understand the language.

I understand the education and propaganda people receive.

Sometimes, I believe I can recognize the fear behind people's expressions and actions.

I still watch North Korea closely because I want to see whether anything has changed since I left more than 20 years ago.

Even a small change would give me hope that one day North Korea might open and I might again see the family and friends I left behind.

But the more I watch, the heavier my heart becomes.

I see people still crying for the leadership, cheering, and expressing absolute loyalty to the Kim family.

I cannot simply blame them.

I was once one of them.

I understand what happens when people grow up in a system where fear, propaganda, and punishment shape every part of life.

My Requests to Congress

I respectfully ask Congress and the United States Government to continue making human rights a central part of policy toward North Korea.

Millions of human beings who cannot freely speak for themselves.

First, please continue protecting North Korean refugees and supporting pathways that allow them to begin new lives in safe countries.

Twenty years ago, that opportunity changed my life.

Second, please continue raising the issue of forced repatriation of North Korean escapees from China.

For a North Korean escapee, forced repatriation is not simply an immigration matter.

It can be a matter of life, safety, and human dignity.

Third, please continue supporting the flow of independent outside information into North Korea.

I personally know what information can do.

A South Korean drama shown on a small television behind locked doors and covered windows changed the way I saw the world.

Information can help someone in a closed society understand that another way of life exists.

And finally, please continue listening to North Korean defectors.

Those who lived inside the system can explain realities that cannot always be understood from government reports and statistics alone.

I hope there will come a day when North Koreans no longer have to risk their lives crossing a border simply to find freedom.

I hope there will be a day when people do not have to lock their doors and cover their windows with blankets just to watch a foreign movie.

I hope there will be a day when people can express their thoughts without fearing that their entire family may be punished.

I hope there will be a day when children learn about dreams and hope instead of learning fear and obedience by watching public executions.

And I hope there will be a day when North Korean women who cross the border searching for freedom are no longer bought, sold, abused, and stripped of their dignity.

Until that day comes, I ask the United States to continue standing with the people of North Korea.

Twenty years ago, America gave a young woman who had escaped North Korea an opportunity to begin a new life.

And today, she is able to speak freely before the United States Congress about people who still cannot speak freely for themselves.

I sincerely hope that one day the freedom and opportunity that America gave me will also be available to ordinary people in North Korea.

Thank you for listening to my story.

I pray that God will bless the people of North Korea.

And may God bless the United States of America.

Thank you.