

Hello, my name is Esther Choe, and I am currently living as a new American citizen, which I consider to be a great honor.

Through the grace of God, whom I believe in, and also through the help of a Korean-American missionary named Phillip Buck, I was able to be resettled in the United States via the UNHCR.

As the airplane I was in was flying into America, I saw the land below me brightly lit up with electricity, as if sparkling jewels were splashed about, and I remember thinking to myself that if I had this kind of electricity and lights, I would have never left behind my child and my hometown and escaped from North Korea.

I woke up every morning at 5am and worked until 11pm at night, working and doing needlework under an oil lamp.

Since there was no electricity, I had to use my legs to turn the sewing machine, and used briquettes to heat the iron needed to iron clothes, and I was also in great pain because I was working all day with my head bent down. During the wintertime, I also had to endure the bitter cold.

Because the sewing work that I did to try to feed my family was not enough, I decided to go to China to earn extra income.

Just like many North Korean citizens hear about the outside world from North Korean defectors, I too found out information about China, from a woman from my hometown who had been repatriated from China. I sought her out and heard many great stories about China.

What I heard from her surprised me immensely.

In China, just by working for a family at a house as a babysitter, one could earn about 1,500 Chinese Yuan, and converting this to North Korean Won would be about 1,200,000 Won.

Since I could earn in one month, what would take me months of hard work in North Korea, I made a decision to go to China.

In North Korea, the trains do not run regularly, so if a person wanted to go visit a relative or go somewhere else to work or sell goods, it would take up to two months of travel, and I thought that if I went to China and came back, I would not arouse suspicion or be detected, and through contacts introduced to me by the North Korean defector woman who had been arrested and repatriated to North Korea, I crossed into China via the Tumen River.

That evening when I arrived in China, I changed clothes and got into a car and rode for 14 hours.

I naturally thought that I was being taken to a place where the contacts would introduce me to a new job, but once we arrived at our destination, I realized that I was getting involved in a human trafficking situation, and I started to cry and plead with the people who had taken me in.

I begged and pleaded with them that I was a married woman with a child and a husband, and that I needed to go back to my home, but they were cold and detached in their response.

The human traffickers said that they invested money and 14 hours of their own time to bring me to my destination, so they needed to at least break even financially, and though they could not help me right at the moment, after I was sold, depending on the situation they would try to send me back home.

The place where I was sold to, in tears, for 16,000 Yuan was to a Chinese man in his 50s who was still not married because he was so poor and had no money, and this man was living with his 80 year old mother, in a very poor and destitute situation.

Because they were afraid I would run away, I was followed everywhere, even to the bathroom, to the stream near the house – wherever I went; when they needed to leave the house, I was locked inside the house and could not leave.

For two months I spent the time just crying, thinking about my child and my husband and how to get back to them, and looking for the right moment to escape, and when I did barely escape, I went to look for and sought out the broker who had sold me.

I cried and begged with the broker again to send me back home to my family, but this broker, who had no humanity in him, instead of showing compassion and kindness, looked at me as a way to make a profit, and instead sold me to another old, unmarried farmer in the countryside.

I really had no hope to continue living, and wanted to die, but I thought of my child back home and just barely survived, and succeeded in escaping again, and knowing that I had a distant relative who lived in China, I made inquiries in looking for my aunt and found her.

Other North Korean defector women have been caught trying to escape from the trafficking, and have been beaten mercilessly, and some women are locked up for months and mistreated and some are even forced to become pregnant so they cannot escape; there are countless stories like these, but I believe that God protected me and I was able to escape successfully.

The last place I escaped from, there were four other North Korean refugee women who had been sold and were trafficked into that location; among the four, the most pitiful one was a 15 year old girl who was intentionally, falsely announced as 19 years old, and then sold.

She was sold to a 35 year old single man, and one day escaped successfully and she too sought out her broker who had sold her in order to try to go back home, but I heard that she too was sold again to another human trafficking situation.

I was sold twice by human traffickers, and in that time, I found God, and also found my relative, and through this relative's help, was able to meet Pastor Buck, and then was able to find help from the UNHCR; I truly believe myself to be a woman who found great fortune and luck in finding help.

Even now, there are so many North Korean refugee women who are going through extreme difficulties and hardships and being sold in these human trafficking situations. My experience is nothing compared to what North Korean refugee women are still going through right now.

There are countless North Korean refugee women who are sold into Internet, on-line sex sites and into karaoke bars, and because they want to keep their chastity and virginity, some try to commit suicide. If caught, they are beaten and abused until literally bones break, and then handed over to Chinese police who then repatriate them. In North Korea, at the hands of the bo-wi-bu (National Security Agency) agents, these women are then tortured and beaten as dirty women and prostitutes who sold their bodies, and many die silent deaths like this. Some women are forced to have babies with the men they are sold to, and when they are arrested and forcibly separated by the Chinese police, the North Korean refugee mother will cry out in broken Chinese, 'I will come back for my baby'... There are countless women like these.

I really did not want to come here and testify today.

Because, I too want to live a happy life, and because I also fear that harm may come to my husband and child whom I am separated for life, because I cannot return now to North Korea.

However, I am here today because I want to tell the world about what is going on, and appeal to the world, and be a voice for the countless North Korean women, and the mothers of the North Korean children, who died and were killed in trying to keep their honor.

Right now Kim Jong Un and the regime is testing nuclear weapons and threatening the world and claiming that they are strong.

They must feel shame and embarrassed that their own citizens have become targets of derision and ridicule in the world, and that their own people are being sold like animals and mistreated in another country; and when the people were tearfully trying to survive and eat, the regime took the aid and food that the international community sent and instead used that to make weapons to threaten the world that only desires peace – they must feel shame that they are the leaders of such a brazen-faced nation.

I also sincerely pray that God and the whole world will judge the regime that does not even care for or plan anything for its own people, and I earnestly plead that the world will help the weak and helpless North Korean refugee women who are dying today from hardships that are far worse than what I endured.

I close my testimony by asking for God's blessings – the blessings that he has bestowed on me – to be with all of you here today in this place, and with all the people who have a heart and compassion for the people of North Korea and who will help the North Korean defectors.

Thank you.