Women's Rights Under the Division System in Korea

Women Cross DMZ | March 2025

MOBILIZING WOMEN
FOR PEACE IN KOREA
WOMENCROSSDMZ

An international delegation of women peace activists and North Korean women gathered at a peace symposium in Pyongyang, North Korea, in 2015. Photo by David Guttenfelder

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Front cover: Grandmothers protest the U.S. military base expansion at Pyeongtaek. The banner behind them reads, "This land is our lifeline. We will protect it until the end."

Credit: PEACE WIND (평화바람)

Women Cross DMZ, a leading organization in the global movement for lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula, produced this report to shed light on the urgent and often overlooked impact of Korea's division on women. The report highlights the historical and ongoing consequences of Korea's division system, focusing on the lives of women who have been directly affected by the division and the militarization of the peninsula, including the separation of families. It draws attention to the interconnected issues of human rights violations, including the lasting trauma caused by the Korean War, the presence of U.S. military bases, and the challenges women face in the context of persistent geopolitical tensions.

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Executive Summary

The ongoing security crisis on the Korean Peninsula, set against the backdrop of the intensifying U.S.–China rivalry, has led to the increasing militarization of the region and the deepening of inter-Korean tensions. These dynamics are shaping a broader "new Cold War" in East Asia, further complicating efforts toward peace and reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula.

Human rights play a pivotal role in addressing these concerns. With competing definitions of human rights and how best to address their violations, the international community is divided on how to balance and prioritize different sets of rights on the Korean Peninsula. Women Cross DMZ produced this report to call for a more pragmatic and inclusive approach to human rights, especially in regard to women's rights, that focuses on the needs of the Korean people and addresses the broader structural conditions that undermine human rights — namely the division system on the Korean Peninsula.

Among the key findings:

» Human rights issues are exacerbated by the 80-year division of the Korean Peninsula. Landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) remnants in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) continue to cause significant harm to civilians, particularly women, who are often responsible for agricultural labor in the affected areas. Despite the terms of both domestic laws and international conventions, women victims of landmines remain underserved, and gender-responsive measures are lacking in demining operations. The report advocates for the inclusion of women in peace and security efforts, specifically in mine clearance, in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

» The ongoing U.S. military presence in South Korea and the expansion of military bases have significant human rights implications, particularly for women living in military camptowns, where they experience systemic sexual violence and exploitation. The legacy of the "comfort women" system and its modern-day manifestations continue to harm women in these areas, despite legal reforms. Furthermore, the expansion of U.S. military bases, particularly the massive Camp Humphreys base in Pyongtaek, has displaced local farming communities, further exacerbating the plight of women farmers.

» Another tragic legacy of ongoing division is the separation of families, with millions of Koreans still unable to reunite with family members divided by the Korean War. Efforts to facilitate family reunions have been limited, and the window of opportunity is rapidly closing as the remaining separated family members die of old age. While some progress was made in the early 2000s through state-sponsored reunions, these efforts have stalled, leaving families with little recourse but to rely on private brokers or limited government programs to locate their loved ones.

This report concludes that the Korean Peninsula's unresolved division system has a profound impact on human rights, especially for women, who are dispro-

portionately affected by both the geopolitical tensions and the enduring legacies of war. The international community must adopt a more comprehensive approach to human rights that transcends geopolitical divides and prioritizes the needs and agency of the Korean people. In particular, the inclusion of women in peace and security initiatives, especially in relation to landmine clearance and military base issues, is crucial for achieving lasting peace and human security on the Peninsula.

Introduction

Since the failed 2019 Hanoi Summit between U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, tensions on the Korean Peninsula have continued to deepen. The ongoing crisis has taken place against the backdrop of growing geopolitical competition between the United States and China, as well as Russia, to the point that the Korean Peninsula has become a key site of contention within the so-called new Cold War.[1] In response to China's expanding influence, the United States has sought to build an anti-China alliance by fortifying the strategic partnership between Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington. At the same time, North Korea, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has further strengthened its relations with Russia, becoming a key ally of the Russian military.

As these broader tensions reinforce former Cold War alliances in East Asia, relations between the two Koreas have also continued to deteriorate. Pyongyang, in response to what it calls the "hostile policy" of the United States and South Korea, has effectively abandoned its long-standing position of "peaceful reunification" with the South. It symbolically dismantled the Arch of Reunification, which had marked the beginning of the highway from Pyongyang to Kaesong, a city close to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that separates the two Koreas. In short, these developments suggest the growing entrenchment of what South Korean scholar Paik Nak-Chung has referred to as the "division system," in which all states with stakes in the region — including China, Japan, Russia, the United States, and the two Koreas — have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo of a divided peninsula.[2]

A key concern and point of contention in the emerging "new Cold War" has been the issue of human rights. On the one hand, a narrow definition of human rights has been weaponized in the Korean conflict to justify and enforce the policy of what Trump referred to as "maximum pressure" against the North, a strategy that continued in all but name under the Biden administration and is likely to persist under Trump's second term. In this context, human rights have become polarized, exacerbating geopolitical competition in ways that reinforce the very structures that undermine the rights of peoples on the peninsula and in the broader region. In fact, conflict on the Korean Peninsula would be disastrous for human rights and democracy.

What's at stake here, then, are competing definitions of human rights and differing conceptions on how to address violations of those rights. The preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) begins with the "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family" as "the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world." In the subsequent 30 articles, the UDHR enumerates the rights and freedoms of all human persons without distinction. Despite the proclaimed indivisibility and interdependence of all human rights, the UN human rights mechanisms also reflect the historical development of the global human rights regime according to dominant geopolitical forces and priorities placed on certain rights over others. The UDHR was not immune from the Cold War emerging at the time of its declaration in 1948. The first 21 of the 30 articles are devoted to individual civil and political rights, such as rights to life, liberty, security, privacy, and property; the freedom of marriage, movement, thought, religion, expression, and peaceful assembly and association; and freedom from slavery, torture, and arbitrary detention with legal protections without discrimination. By contrast, only six — articles 22 through 27 — address economic, social, and cultural rights, such as rights to social security, education, employment, paid holidays, and adequate living standards.

The UN codified these sets of rights in 1966 through two separate international covenants — the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) — representing the different emphases by the opposing sides of the Cold War. For the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea), a focus on the country's civil and political rights underscores problems of state violence such as conditions in detention centers and public executions, leading to calls for regime change and facilitating out-migration that may lead to regime collapse. By contrast, a focus on the DPRK's economic, social, and cultural rights highlights the right to food and basic needs, leading to calls for the lifting of economic sanctions

Barbed-wire fencing surrounds the Korean Demilitarized Zone. Growing geopolitical tensions between the United States and China have exacerbated the "division system" on the Korean Peninsula, in which all states have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

for their detrimental impact on human rights. While both sets of rights ultimately hold the North Korean state accountable, external factors such as diplomatic engagement, technical cooperation, and development and humanitarian assistance may be required (indeed, demanded) to address the latter set of rights. With changes in UN membership since the 1960s through the admission of newly independent countries, the so-called third generation of human rights to development, security, and peace emerged as additional concerns.[3] This third generation of rights may require additional steps, such as debt relief and reparations for past colonial exploitation.

The DPRK became a signatory to some of the most prominent international human rights mechanisms even before it became a member state of the UN in 1991. In 1981, it signed onto the ICCPR and the ICESCR. In 1990, it ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and in 2001, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Most recently, in 2016, it signed onto the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and invited the Special Rapporteur to visit the country in 2017. Under the requirements of these instruments, it has submitted reports, revised its penal code, loosened the ban on the freedom of movement, and reduced the number of crimes punishable by death, addressing recommendations made under these mechanisms.[4]

Despite these gains, progress was limited due to the continued geopolitical stalemate, and the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) produced a Commission of Inquiry (COI) report in 2013, charging the DPRK with crimes against humanity for deliberately withholding food from the most vulnerable groups. However, security and sanctions experts noted that the report relied almost exclusively on other self-referenced UNHRC resolutions and documents, with only one reference to another agency among the thousands of reports generated by UN organizations with hands-on experience in North Korea over the past two decades, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, World Food Programme (WFP), United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). None of these agencies have ever identified food and health

problems in North Korea as deliberately manipulated by the state.[5] In fact, the one 2011 Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)/WFP/UNICEF report that was referenced in the 2013 COI report "explicitly argued that food security in North Korea was not entirely the fault of the government": the report provided several reasons for food insecurity, such as damage to crops by climate change and a drop in imports due to rising fuel and food prices, reduced export earnings, and the devaluation of the currency.[6]

The issue of North Korean human rights is a prime example of polarization that paradoxically pits human rights against human security, in the most cynical cases advocating for war to "liberate" North Korea despite an estimated death toll in the millions. Indeed, the division system has given rise to national security apparatuses and restrictions on individual freedoms in both Koreas, with dissent automatically maligned as aiding the other side. Despite South Korea's turn to procedural democracy since the late 1980s, President Yoon Suk Yeol attempted to bypass all such democratic institutions by declaring martial law in December 2024. This was justified under the pretext of "North Korean threats," with the political opposition labeled as "pro-North Korean forces."[7] Such allegations of North Korean sympathy have long been used to suppress political views, as demonstrated by the excessive application of the National Security Act in past years.[8]

South Korean experts of human rights have therefore called for more pragmatic approaches to human rights in North Korea, recognizing that the conditions in the two Koreas are linked and centering the North Korean people as rights-holders and the North Korean government as the primary duty-bearer.[9] Rather than viewing the North Korean people as helpless and passive victims in need of rescue, as is common in conventional human rights discourse that assumes to know what they need, the Korean people — as rights-holders — must determine their own needs and priorities. This includes issues beyond traditional human rights concerns, such as progress in inter-Korean relations and securing more stable geopolitical conditions.

The UN Charter, the UDHR, and international covenants all emphasize the necessary conditions of international order, justice, and respect through which rights and freedoms can be guaranteed. Adopting this "human rights condition-forming" framework, this report provides examples of adverse impacts on human rights, particularly women's rights, caused by the Korean division system and the lack of geopolitical conditions needed to guarantee human rights on the Korean Peninsula. Given the current stalemate in inter-Korean and U.S.–DPRK relations, this report regrettably was unable to include additional details on the impact of the division system on women in North Korea.[10]

Landmines and Unexploded Ordnance

One of the most violent legacies of the unended Korean War are the victims of landmines and unexploded ordnance. During the war, all parties to the conflict laid landmines along the front lines in the area that is now the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) separating the two Koreas. According to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, the DMZ has the highest concentration of landmines in the world, with an estimated 2 million mines buried there.[11] Planned minefields are those intentionally created by the military, with records and information on the number, location, and type of mines in the area. But unidentified minefields lack such information and records. More than half of the minefields, or 58 percent, are located less than a mile from residential areas, and about one-third are located within a mile of rivers, at risk of moving during heavy rains or landslides and difficult to detect.

In addition, unexploded ordnance, including bombs, bullets, shells, and grenades, are often found around military bases, posing a risk of detonation. To date, 6,428 people have been victims of landmines and unexploded ordnance in South Korea, 63 percent of whom are children.[12] In North Korea, authorities report that more than 16,215 people have been victims of explosive remnants since the end of the Korean War.[13] Women are disproportionately affected by landmines and unexploded ordnance in both Koreas because they are often responsible for small-scale farming, which takes them into areas where such devices are commonly buried.

South Korea passed legislation in 2014 mandating compensation for landmine victims through the Special Act on the Support for Mine Victims, but the compensation amount was based on the low wages earned by the victim at the time of the accident.[14]

There are a few local ordinances based on the Act. One rare example is the Ordinance on the Conservation, Use, and Management of Wetlands in Goyang City, which requires the mayor to establish a detailed plan for safety management, including military demining activities in wetlands.

UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which recognizes the crucial role of women in conflict prevention,

management, and resolution, emphasizes the importance of addressing the special needs of women and girls in mine clearance and mine awareness programs. The International Mine Action Standards (IMAS), developed by the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), promotes the inclusion of gender and diversity considerations in all mine action activities. While IMAS does not mandate a specific percentage of women's participation, it advocates for gender-balanced teams.

Countries such as Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos, which benefit from UNMAS support, adhere to these gender mainstreaming guidelines, with many women not only participating in demining teams but also holding middle management roles. This growing global trend is also seen in places like Ukraine, where women make up 30 percent of demining teams, and Angola, where nearly 40 percent of the workforce in the Mine Action Group are women.[15]

Despite this progress, field estimates and observations indicate that mine action remains male dominated, both at technical and policy levels. A 2023 survey of 11 non-governmental organizations involved in land release and landmine clearance revealed that men make up approximately 70 percent of the workforce, with women representing 30 percent. This marks a significant improvement from 2019, when women accounted for only 20 percent of personnel. However, women are still severely underrepresented in technical roles, such as explosive ordnance disposal.[16]

The employment of women in various roles within mine action, including operational and management positions, has a transformative impact. It can contribute to women's economic empowerment and increase their decision-making power. Gender-responsive mine action also challenges negative stereotypes and promotes greater gender equality. Women deminers can serve as role models, fostering a more gender-equal workforce. Studies from Afghanistan, Iraq, Laos, and Sri Lanka show that employing women in demining activities improves their access to resources and services and helps shift gender norms beyond the mine action sector.[17]

THE HUMAN IMPACT OF LANDMINES AND UNEXPLODED ORDNANCE: THE STORY OF MS. KIM

"I had a very difficult adolescence; I made two suicide attempts. My toes, blown off 55 years ago, are still painful. My balance has long since been compromised by leaning on prosthetic limbs, and spinal stenosis is no joke; it's a total mess. And yet, I survived."

Ms. Kim (pseudonym) lives in Yeoncheon County, Gyeonggi Province, located near the DMZ. When she was 12 years old, she was injured by unexploded ordnance and has lived with pain ever since.

Due to poverty, her family was forced to live near a military base. She would often pick up shell casings after school to earn money. One day, her neighbor picked up ammunition that exploded, injuring her and her mother and killing her brother instantly. She and her mother were given first aid at the army medical unit and then rushed to the hospital for treatment. However, her father was left mentally traumatized and lived in shock until his death. After the accident, no one paid for Ms. Kim and her mother's treatment. At the hospital, doctors arbitrarily amputated her leg, which she later learned was done to shorten the treatment period. The shrapnel that pierced her abdomen could have been fatal, but she was discharged after receiving minimal care.

Her dream was to become a teacher, but going to school with an amputated leg was unthinkable, so she dropped out. During her adolescence, she attempted suicide twice out of desperation. She had to rely on crutches to do farm work.

Eventually, she got married and had three children: two boys and a girl. But when her daughter developed a fever, no help arrived as Yeoncheon was in a restricted area near the DMZ, and the child died. Like Ms. Kim, her remaining children picked up shell casings after firing drills from a nearby military unit. In 1989, her elder son, then 13, and his 11-year-old brother picked up an unexploded piece of ordnance that detonated, leaving them with disabilities as well. The remnants of war engulfed the family for generations: from her father, who lost his sanity, to her mother, who was similarly affected, to herself and her sons. The unended war continues to leave scars that are still felt today under the division system.

South Korean soldiers prepare and lay an antitank mine somewhere in Korea during the Korean War, July 22, 1950. Millions of landmines are believed to remain in the DMZ. Credit: Library of Congress

In South Korea, a comprehensive law on mine action, including landmine removal, was enacted and took effect in February 2025. This legislation provides a legal framework for mine action, covering a full-scale survey, a basic mine action plan, the establishment of a mine action committee, and standards for mine clearance activities. However, despite South Korea highlighting gender inclusion during the drafting of its National Action Plan for UN Security Council Resolution 1325, the law lacks a comprehensive gender perspective and has not incorporated women into demining efforts, particularly in the DMZ. Given the international precedent and demonstrated success of women's participation in mine action, integrating women into demining initiatives seems both logical and necessary. Significant challenges remain, especially the need to amend domestic laws to fully guarantee victim assistance, compensation, and the inclusion of women in demining initiatives.[18]

Such demining initiatives are aligned with the goals of Korean women as agreed to during the International Women's Peace Convening for Peace and Reunification of the Korean Peninsula hosted by Women Cross DMZ in February 2016 in Bali, Indonesia, where participants agreed to "carry out work toward the achievement of lasting peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula … includ[ing] the removal of various political and physical hindrances to peace … [toward] the eventual denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the entire world."[19]

U.S. Military Bases

Two months after the Korean War Armistice was signed on July 27, 1953, the United States and South Korea agreed on a Mutual Defense Treaty, establishing the legal basis for U.S. military presence in South Korea.[20] The division system, sustained by the ongo-

ing state of war, has created a heavily militarized environment where U.S. troops have committed crimes against Korean civilians with impunity. While anyone is at risk of harm by militarized violence, women have been particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence due to the proliferation of U.S. military bases.[21]

During the Korean War, military camptowns called *kijichon* were established around U.S. military bases in South Korea that included clubs, bars, and dance halls providing various forms of sexual services to U.S. soldiers. Since then, the U.S. military and South Korean government exploited women's bodies to facilitate the U.S.–Republic of Korea alliance under the pretext of national security, and the system became a domestic source of foreign revenue through sex tourism. To support these arrangements, the South Korean government and the U.S. military instituted draconian policies that strictly controlled women's bodies to prevent U.S. soldiers from contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), which could impair their fighting capabilities.[22]

United States Forces Korea (USFK), wary of directly controlling the "comfort women" who were beyond its jurisdiction, chose to relegate the responsibility for rounding up, examining, and treating the women in forced confinement to the South Korean government. Starting in the 1960s, however, with high rates of STDs among U.S. servicemen, the USFK pressed the South Korean government to take proactive measures. The South Korean government then established STD Detention Centers to forcibly quarantine and treat infected "comfort women," a practice that intensified with the "Kijichon Clean-up Campaign" in the 1970s. While the USFK thus imposed severe and extreme regulations, discipline, and punishment on South Korean women, it imposed few such controls on the sexual behavior of its own servicemen. Women were required to take STD tests twice a week at a designated public health center and carry health cards with confirmed negative test results, which they had to present to both Korean and U.S. officials. Failure to show their card resulted in forced detention and quarantine for days of mandatory treatment.[23]

U.S. military camptown in South Korea, 1965. Military camptowns, called *kijichon,* were established during the Korean War to provide entertainment and sexual services to U.S. soldiers, exposing women to violence and exploitation in the name of national security. Photo by Kuwabara Shisei

A woman protesting the expansion of Camp Humphreys and forced expropriation of her village's farmland crouches next to a sign that reads, "Dear Daechu-ri, I pray for our health and the health of our descendants. – Yi Soon Gum." Credit: PEACE WIND (평화바람)

NEW U.S. MILITARY BASES AND THE IMPACT ON WOMEN FARMERS

The proliferation and expansion of U.S. military bases have not only impacted the lives of camptown women but also those of women farmers. In 2004, South Korea and the United States agreed to restructure several U.S. military bases, including tripling the size of U.S. Army Base Camp Humphreys in Pyongtaek to nearly 3,500 acres, making it the largest military base in the world. To accommodate the expansion, the South Korean government forcibly expropriated 2,300 acres of adjoining land from rice farmers in the villages of Daechu-ri and Dodu-ri.[29]

THE HUMAN IMPACT OF U.S. MILITARY BASES: THE STORY OF PARK YOUNG-JA

From 1971 to 1995, Park Young-ja lived as a "comfort woman" near U.S. military bases in Dongducheon and Uijeongbu. When she was 15, she went to a human resources agency to find a job but was placed at a coffee shop in Yeoncheon County and sold for 15,000 Won. After being subjected to sexual abuse, she tried to escape, only to be sold again to bars in the military camptowns of Dongducheon and later Uijeongbu. She became trapped in this trafficking system due to an endless cycle of debt. Park was forcibly subjected to mandatory STD testing twice a week at the local public health center, a measure primarily intended to protect U.S. servicemen, with no regard for her own health. She was required to carry her health card at all times, and when she tested positive, she was forcibly detained for treatment in medical detention centers, euphemistically called the "monkey house." If she was caught without her card, or if her test was not up to date during random inspections by the authorities, she was also detained and forcibly treated without further testing.[24]

Park later connected with Durebang, a non-governmental organization founded in 1986 to support women in camptowns, where she participated in programs to heal from her traumatic experiences. There, she realized that the South Korean government and the U.S. military had cooperated in creating this system of violence against women. According to a survey conducted by the Gyeonggi Province Women and Family Foundation, an average of 10,000 women in the military camptowns of Gyeonggi Province were registered and managed by the government for STDs in the 1960s and 1970s.[25]

In June 2014, with the support of women's organizations and lawyers, 122 women who had worked in the military camptowns filed a lawsuit to hold the state accountable. Park Young-ja, one of the plaintiffs, courageously testified in court about the difficult life she had endured:

"We were abandoned in this country where we were born. In the *kijichons*, we were only subjected to violence and extortion. Nobody cared about us. The state turned a blind eye to all the job agencies and pimps that forced us into the *kijichons*. The money we made there would be more than we could imagine…. Who made all those dollars? The ladies earned it all, but even if we died in pain, we couldn't afford a doctor's visit and could only do a STD check-up. This was for the U.S. soldiers at the request of the U.S. military, not for us. Due to the indifference of our country, our bodies were sick, unable to make a living, and only used. That's why the country should take responsibility."[26]

In September 2022, the Supreme Court of the Republic of Korea ruled that it was illegal for the South Korean government to coordinate, manage, and operate military camptowns for the U.S. military, actively facilitating prostitution and thereby violating women's human rights.[27] Women's groups now argue that the government must offer an official apology, gather data, and provide systematic support for the surviving women. Furthermore, they argue that the U.S. military and the U.S. government should also be held accountable for the violation of women's rights.[28]

THE HUMAN IMPACT OF U.S. MILITARY BASE EXPANSION: THE STORY OF CHO SEON-RYE

The U.S. military base expansion in Pyongtaek had a profound impact on the daily lives of many women, including Cho Seon-rye, an elderly rice farmer and grandmother from Daechu-ri. For nearly 1,000 days, Cho and hundreds of other residents from Daechu-ri and Dodu-ri held daily protests and candlelight vigils against the expansion. However, by the end of 2005, the South Korean government had forcibly expropriated their land.

Born in 1918, Cho moved to Daechu-ri in the 1930s, where her husband's family lived. In 1945, shortly after Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule, her husband died, leaving her to raise their three young sons as a rice farmer. During the Korean War, in late autumn of 1952, rumors circulated that the U.S. military would build its runway through her village of Daechu-ri. One day, approximately ten U.S. bulldozers appeared and destroyed her home. She and other villagers suddenly lost their homes and village; they were forced to spend the harsh winter in makeshift huts. Cho recalled that many young children and elderly people died that winter. The following spring, they set out to rebuild Daechu-ri along the fence line of the nearby U.S. military base. On the other side of Daechu-ri was the West Sea. Along with other displaced villagers, Cho and the residents built up the bank to block seawater and prepare rice paddies for cultivation. For generations after, Daechu-ri became known as one of the most fertile areas in the region.

Cho lived in Daechu-ri for 73 years, where she farmed and raised her three sons. Despite the villagers' efforts to save their land, village, and way of life, the South Korean Ministry of National Defense notified them in 2004 that their village and farmland would be expropriated and given to the U.S. military to expand Camp Humphreys. Twice in her lifetime, Cho was forced to leave her home and village, which were destroyed to accommodate the U.S. military.

On May 4, 2006, the South Korean government mobilized thousands of troops and police to erect barbed wire around the rice fields of Daechu-ri, blocking access to the residents. In defiance of the government's ban on planting, the villagers, under the banner "Let's farm again this year," proceeded with their annual planting on the paddies they had cultivated for generations. "We sowed rice seeds but I'm not sure if the buds will sprout through the barbed wire," Cho recalled.[30] In 2007, Cho, along with other displaced residents, was forced to move as bulldozers destroyed every home and building in Daechu-ri to clear the way for the expansion of Camp Humphreys. Two years later, Cho died after her health rapidly deteriorated once she was no longer able to enjoy her pastoral life among her rice paddies. Camp Humphreys is now the largest U.S. overseas military base.[31]

Separated Families

One of the tragic consequences of the division system is the inability of millions of people to learn the fates of their family members on the other side, following countless unexpected and unintended separations before, during, and after the Korean War. When the 1953 Armistice was signed, approximately 1.7 million Koreans were estimated to have been separated from their regions of origin.[32] Without a mechanism to track missing persons, families were left without any means to contact or learn the fates of loved ones — let alone reunite. This separation has persisted for over 70 years, affecting all generations but with particular impacts on women.

In South Korea, women have borne the brunt of the emotional, social, and economic burdens of separation. They have shouldered the emotional toll of losing contact with parents, children, and siblings, while also becoming sole caregivers for remaining children, elderly relatives, and orphaned family members. Women who lost their husbands to death or involuntary separation were less likely to remarry than men who lost their spouses, and many women, especially those who had neither wealth nor family support, were forced to enter the labor market to provide financial support for

> "Women have borne the brunt of the emotional, social, and economic burdens of separation."

their families.[33] The social stigma attached to widowed and single mothers further marginalized their status in society.

The involuntary separation from family members also left millions of Koreans with enduring psychological trauma. While this trauma was not specific to women, women had to cope with the grief and uncertainty of not knowing the fate of their loved ones while cultural norms placed expectations on them to maintain family cohesion. The legacy of separation continues to affect many to this day through intergenerational trauma.[34]

Among the generation that remembers the Korean War as a living memory, precious little time remains for separated family members to locate their kin on the other side of the divide. Thousands pass away each year without having realized their hope to locate or meet their family members lost to involuntary separation. After decades of negotiations between North and South Korea, a program to reunite separated families was held in Seoul and Pyongyang in 1985, but no further such gatherings took place until 2000. At the outset of the new millennium, breakthroughs in inter-Korean reconciliation enabled recurring rounds of family reunions to be sustained. In total, 21 rounds of state-sponsored reunions have allowed more than 44,000 members of separated families living in North and South Korea to meet their relatives. These reunions were largely held between 2000 and 2007 during the administrations of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, with occasional resumption of reunions continuing until 2018.

In all cases, however, these meetings proved to be temporary, after which families were returned to a state of indefinite separation. Meanwhile, of the more than 133,650 people who have applied for the lottery to participate in inter-Korean family reunions since 2000, less than 32 percent are still alive.[35] According to South Korea's Ministry of Unification, as of 2022, the average age of separated family members is 83.2 years. By 2025, it is projected that fewer than 30 percent of these individuals will still be alive.[36]

Elderly Koreans, long separated by the Korean War, say goodbye to their relatives — likely for the last time — during a family reunion held at the Mount Kumgang resort in North Korea in 2018. The reunion took place following the historic inter-Korean summit earlier that year, in which the leaders of the two Koreas declared, "there will be no more war on the Korean Peninsula."

THE HUMAN IMPACT OF SEPARATED FAMILIES: THE STORY OF PARK KYUNG SOON

A young teenager from Kaesong at the time of the 1953 Armistice, Park Kyung Soon never expected to permanently leave behind her mother and siblings. However, alarm over the newly drawn Military Demarcation Line prompted her mother to urge her to flee south to what seemed like a safer place. Park left hurriedly, thinking it would only be a temporary departure. "I left at 5 p.m. and walked until the next morning. I couldn't think straight. I panicked. It took me a week to realize that I had left my mother," Park said. "Things quieted down, so I thought I just have to wait a little longer to go back. Then, suddenly it hit me like a ton of bricks: I had parted ways with my family, and now I am all alone."[37] Park's pained recollections offer a glimpse into the agonizing circumstances faced by those torn from their families by Korea's division and forced to endure the long aftermath of involuntary separation.

To Park's family, she became a missing person; the same was true for countless others whose whereabouts became unknown and untraceable with the sealing of the division. While it's estimated that roughly five million people lost family members — parents, siblings, and others — during the Korean War, it remains impossible to determine how many of these losses were due to war deaths and how many were due to people going missing.[38] Unable to find out whether their loved ones survived the war's devastation, Koreans were denied the crucial reckoning of knowing who had died and who had survived but remained missing — a fundamental post-conflict process that was thwarted by national division.[39]

Whenever tensions escalate on the Korean Peninsula, it is important to remember that the movement for family reunifications has its roots in the broader movement for Korean reconciliation and reunification. Since the 1953 Armistice, both Koreas have debated the terms for achieving peaceful reunification. In South Korea, however, this discussion was heavily suppressed as subversive until democratization in the 1980s.

In 1985, inter-Korean Red Cross talks led to the first-ever reunion of war-separated family members across the Korean divide. Delegations from each side visited one another in September. However, rather than fostering reconciliation, the 1985 reunions reflected the prevailing Cold War tensions, with ideological grandstanding on both sides. Despite plans to continue the program, efforts were halted when negotiations failed to resolve differences over South Korea's ongoing participation in annual joint "Team Spirit" military exercises with the United States. As a result, the 1985 reunion became the only official exchange of families between the two Koreas in the 20th century.

Although official exchanges did not resume for another 15 years, changes in both Koreas since 1990 opened up new possibilities for private, unofficial reunions of separated families, both in third countries and within North Korea. During this period, the South Korean government also began allowing its citizens to make informal contact with their North Korean relatives. Faced with an impasse at the state level in arranging more official meetings, this approach represented a shift in strategy, enabling more private reunions to take place among individual families.

By 1990, the South Korean Ministry of Unification established a legal framework allowing South Koreans to meet with North Koreans without fear of punishment. Prior to this, such meetings had been forbidden under the National Security Act, which prohibited any form of contact, including in-person meetings or written correspondence. Some separated families, mostly former war refugees, managed to exchange letters or meet their North Korean relatives through private brokers or mediators, often diasporic ethnic Koreans residing in the United States, Canada, China, or Japan. Since the 1980s, North Korea had begun encouraging visits from diasporic Koreans in Japan and other countries. After the normalization of diplomatic relations between South Korea and China in 1992, China became the primary point of contact for arranging reunions with North Korean relatives in third countries. In 1998, North Korea established an information center to gather contact information for facilitating the search for separated family members. By 2002, ethnic Koreans in China arranged 90 percent of private meetings as brokers. However, this process remained uncertain and risky, often involving cash transactions, the potential exploitation of vulnerable clients, and a lack of protective measures or accountability.[40]

While South Korea's Ministry of Unification administers a program to aid those working with private brokers to arrange family reunions in third

Photos of Koreans who fled their hometowns in present-day North Korea to the south during the Korean War and have been unable to return ever since. Photo by Hannah Yoon

countries such as China, this support is only available to South Korean citizens. To facilitate communication and support within the Korean diaspora, a network has been established through organizations of first-generation divided family members based in South Korea, including the Committee for the Five Northern Korean Provinces, the Association for Reuniting the Ten Million Divided Families, and the National Unification Advisory Council. These organizations have overseas chapters in the United States and other countries.[41]

The South Korean Red Cross, in coordination with the Ministry of Unification, continues to administer the inter-Korean exchange program. In the absence of ongoing reunions, the program also offers individuals the opportunity to submit video messages to family members in North Korea or request information about the status of their relatives. However, despite the recording of 22,000 video messages by the Ministry of Unification, only about 40 are reported to have reached their intended recipients through transmission via the North Korean government.

While South Korean and North Korean governments have facilitated 21 in-person reunions and seven video reunions and letter exchanges, Korean Americans have been excluded from these opportunities.[42] An estimated 100,000 Korean Americans have family members in North Korea, whom they have neither seen nor heard from in decades.[43] Since President Trump instituted a travel ban in 2017, the United States has prohibited all U.S. passport holders from traveling freely to North Korea, further complicating reunion efforts.[44] In 2023, Julie Turner, the U.S. Special Envoy for North Korean human rights issues, called family reunions "a matter of utmost urgency," given that many divided family members in the United States are now in their 80s and 90s, with time running out for potential reunions.[45]

Recommendations

In 2014, the South Korean government established a National Action Plan (NAP) to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS). The NAP — which was adopted for the third time for the period of 2021–23 — has incorporated proposals and demands from women's civil society groups.[46] Forty-five organizations, including Korean Women's Associations United and Women Making Peace, formed the 1325 Network to advocate for the creation of the NAP and worked with lawmakers to pass a National Assembly resolution to establish it.[47] These efforts were driven by the expectation that the NAP would provide a legal and institutional framework for women's meaningful participation in the peace process, aiming to overcome the division system on the Korean Peninsula.

Over the past decade, women's civil society initiatives have evolved into a collaborative intergovernmental NAP that involves 11 governmental departments across five areas: participation, prevention, protection, relief and recovery, and monitoring. However, the system for monitoring and evaluation remains insufficient, and financial support continues to be limited.

One key effort to address these challenges has been the localization of the WPS agenda. Women's civil society groups have reframed the WPS agenda as directly relevant to local women's lives, safety, and peace. As a result, women in Gyeonggi Province along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) have been at the forefront of localizing the WPS agenda. They have connected peace and security issues to women's everyday experiences, conducting a gendered assessment of Gyeonggi Province's peace policy and developing a 1325 Local Code of Conduct for the province.[48]

This localization of the WPS agenda has highlighted the impact of landmines and unexploded ordnance on women's lives along the DMZ, the violation of women's rights and livelihoods due to U.S. military bases, and the ongoing tragedy of separated families caused by the division system. Below are a series of recommendations aimed at protecting women's rights, an essential step toward overcoming the division system.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING WOMEN'S RIGHTS UNDER THE DIVISION SYSTEM ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA

Given the complex geopolitical situation on the Korean Peninsula and its implications for human rights, particularly women's rights, several recommendations can be made to improve the human security and rights of women in both Koreas. These recommendations aim to integrate gender considerations into policies; address the ongoing consequences of landmines, unexploded ordnance, and militarized violence; and ensure that women's voices are included in peacebuilding efforts.

1 A Comprehensive and Pragmatic Approach to Human Rights

Recommendation: UN human rights mechanisms — including the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) — must adopt a comprehensive approach to human rights that prioritizes genuine human security. The UNHRC must adopt a pragmatic and inclusive approach to human rights in Korea, centering the Korean people as rights-holders and the Korean governments as primary duty-bearers. It must proactively support inter-Korean reconciliation and foster international geopolitical conditions toward that end, with steps toward global denuclearization, including on the Korean Peninsula, paving the path for sustainable peace. The UNHRC should also consider the impact of militarization and national security apparatuses in both Koreas.

Recommendation: The UNHRC must consider prioritizing UN organizations with hands-on experience in North Korea and, based on their reporting, make recom-

A delegation of international women gathered with thousands of South Korean women at the DMZ in 2015 to call for an official end to the Korean War, the reunion of separated families, and women's participation in the peace process. Photo by David Guttenfelder

mendations that advance genuine human security and promote the rights of Koreans and the needs of women living on the Korean Peninsula who bear the brunt of lasting legacies of the ongoing Korean War.

2 Legislation that Addresses the Gendered Impact of Landmines

Recommendation: The North and South Korean governments should adopt the recommendations made by UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which recognizes the crucial role of women in conflict prevention, management, and resolution, and emphasizes the need for mine clearance and mine awareness programs to consider the special needs of women and girls. Additionally, the North and South Korean governments must: (1) ensure that legislation also sufficiently provides for landmine victim assistance and compensation; (2) address the human rights issues exacerbated by the 80-year division of the Korean Peninsula, including the landmines and unexploded ordnance remnants in the Demilitarized Zone; (3) implement domestic laws and international conventions to compensate and protect the women victims of landmines and adopt gender-responsive measures in demining operations; and (4) include women in peace and security efforts, specifically in mine clearance, in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

3 Accountability Processes for Survivors of Militarized Violence

Recommendation: The South Korean and U.S. militaries and governments must be held accountable for the system of sexual exploitation and violence instituted in the military camptowns surrounding U.S. military bases, as well as the expropriation of land due to military base movement and expansion. The South Korean and U.S.

governments must offer an official apology, gather data, and provide systematic support for the surviving women who experienced sexual violence from the military camptowns. In addition, women and the impacted communities should be consulted in all processes related to the movement and expansion of military bases.

4 Reunions of Separated Families and Lifting of Travel Restrictions

Recommendation: With the understanding that family separations impose a particular impact on women, the two Korean governments must urgently renew efforts to reunite separated families. The North and South Korean governments must improve relations and diplomacy between the two states in order to establish conditions that make repeated and sustained family reunions possible, including citizen-to-citizen reunions without mandatory government facilitation. Both governments must also bolster protections for individuals to meet and reunite freely without fear of state punishment, including by prosecution under the National Security Act or other comparable legislation. All governments must also create conditions to enable Koreans in the diaspora to reunite with family members in North Korea, including through non-state channels. Toward that end, the U.S. government must lift the travel restrictions on U.S. passport holders traveling to North Korea.

Conclusion

Addressing the human rights situation on the Korean Peninsula requires a comprehensive approach that integrates women's voices and experiences into all aspects of policy, particularly in the realms of demining, human security, and reconciliation. By adopting these recommendations, both Koreas, along with the international community, can work toward ensuring the protection of women's rights and peace-building on the peninsula.

South Koreans protest a new naval command center in front of the Jeju Naval Base in South Korea on February 2, 2025. Officials said the purpose of the command center, which includes ten destroyers and four support ships, is to defend against North Korean missile threats, but protesters see it as part of the broader U.S. effort to contain China. Photo by Park Han-sol

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