

# Religious Women as Beacons of Resistance in North Korea

Briefing report

DECEMBER 2021

# Summary

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The right to freedom of religion or belief and the right of women to be free from discrimination based on their gender are universal, indivisible, and overlapping human rights. Both reaffirm the fundamentality and equality of human rights, the dignity and worth of the human person, and the legal obligations of the state to prevent discrimination on the grounds of gender, religion, or belief.

## 2

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The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child all protect the right to freedom of religion or belief.<sup>1</sup> Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights asserts, "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching."<sup>2</sup>

## 3

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The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women guarantees all women the right to be free of "Any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on the basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field."<sup>3</sup>



## 4

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Despite their shared normative basis, at times the right to freedom of religion or belief and the right of women to be free from discrimination have been viewed as conflicting freedoms. In turn, the intersections between women's rights and the right of women to freedom of religion or belief have been overlooked.

## 5

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Fundamentally, the right to freedom of religion or belief does not protect or privilege any religious or belief system, including those that threaten gender equality through discrimination or patriarchy. Nor does it defend violations of women's rights in the name of a religious or belief culture. Under international law, the right to freedom of religion or belief protects the woman and grants her the freedom to adopt, change, or leave a religion or belief, or not to have a religion or belief. It establishes her right to manifest and practice a religion or belief, alone or in community with others, and to be free from discrimination on the grounds of her religion or belief. In tandem, the right to be free from discrimination based on one's gender enjoys equal protection. In turn, these dual rights protect and empower the woman, rather than any religious or belief systems.

## 6

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North Korea's constitution nominally extends the right to freedom of religion or belief to all citizens, yet this right is qualified as one to be "granted" by the state, rather than a freedom that is inherent to all persons, as it is understood in international law. According to the constitution, this right is granted through the construction of state-run religious buildings and the holding of religious ceremonies, rather than the broader fundamental principles that constitute the *forum internum* and *forum externum*.



## 7

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North Korea's constitution provides that women "shall enjoy equal rights in all spheres of State and public activities" and that "women shall be accorded equal social status and rights with men."<sup>4</sup> Responding to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 2017, North Korea qualified that "Equal civil rights are ensured to all citizens without any distinction as to gender [or] religious belief," that no incidents of sexual harassment in the workplace nor domestic violence had ever been reported, that the "sexual exploitation of women is in no way a social problem in [North Korea]," and that there were "no legal or institutional impediments to the exercising by women of their socio-political rights."<sup>5</sup>

## 8

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A 2014 United Nations Commission of Inquiry found that "Entrenched traditional patriarchal attitudes and violence against women in [North Korea] persist. The state has imposed blatantly discriminatory restrictions on women in an attempt to maintain the gender stereotype of the pure and innocent Korean woman. Sexual and gender-based violence against women is prevalent throughout all areas of society. Victims are not afforded protection from the state, support services or recourse to justice."<sup>6</sup> Evidence documented by Korea Future between 2017-2021 supports these conclusions and finds that further forms of gender-based and sexual violence are commonplace throughout society and North Korea's penal system.<sup>7</sup>

## 9

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Religious women experience discrimination twofold based on their gender and their religious or belief identities. Women are denied equality with men in their human rights and fundamental freedoms across the political, economic, social, cultural, and civil realms. Established patterns of conduct endanger women and contribute to their brutalisation and harassment in the penal system, their trafficking and prostitution across North Korea and China, their marginalisation in economic life, and their denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief.



## 10

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Korea Future has documented 331 cases of religious women experiencing egregious violations of their human rights in North Korea, including arbitrary deprivation of liberty; torture or cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment; forced labour; the denial of fair trial rights; the denial of right to life; refoulement; and sexual violence.<sup>8</sup> These violations were based on acts protected under international law, such as religious practice, attending a place of worship, possessing religious items, and being in contact with religious persons.

## 11

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The North Korean government has neither addressed the persecution of religious persons nor taken steps toward ensuring justice for victims. It has failed to fully engage with relevant treaty bodies, in particular the Human Rights Committee monitoring implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and has rejected the findings of the 2014 United Nations Commission of Inquiry. It has even stated that its “workers and young people do not believe in any religion, because they deeply understand the profound truth of the Juche ideology.”<sup>9</sup>

## 12

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In this context, it is remarkable that religious women have emerged as agents of change in North Korea. Confronted by entrenched patriarchal attitudes in society, violence against women in public and private life, and a government that has actively discriminated against women through policy and practice and persecuted religious adherents, religious women have begun to deploy their gender and religious identities as platforms for personal and local change beyond the limits of the state. These actions come at great risk. We have documented the executions of women and girls who exercised their right to freedom of religion or belief.

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# Recommendations

## On the basis that

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**The North Korean government** has a legal obligation to prevent gender-based discrimination and persecution on the grounds of religion or belief.

**Religious women in North Korea** have been subject to arbitrary deprivation of liberty; torture or cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment; forced labour; the denial of fair trial rights; the denial of the right to life; refoulement; and sexual violence on the grounds of their religion or belief.

**The aforementioned violations of human rights** were primarily conducted by public officials of the Ministry of People's Security, Ministry of State Security, among other North Korean state organisations.

**The People's Republic of China** has a legal obligation to not refoul North Korean citizens who enter its territory, and, in particular, those North Korean citizens who have religious or belief identities, owing to substantial evidence that those persons will be subject to torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment in North Korea on the grounds of their religious or belief identities.

**The North Korean government** has denied the findings of a 2014 United Nations Commission of Inquiry report that found crimes against humanity, arising from "policies established at the highest level of State," have been committed and continue to take place in North Korea.

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**The international community of states,  
international organisations, and national  
and international justice actors should**

- **Impose** targeted sanctions on individual perpetrators and state organisations responsible for violations of human rights and international crimes that have targeted persons on the grounds of their religion or belief. Human rights sanctions specifically and exclusively targeted at persons who are proven to be involved in these egregious violations are feasible means to provide accountability for, and deter, activities that amount to serious violations of international human rights and criminal law. This may take place under existing United States, United Kingdom, Canadian, and European Union sanctions regimes.
- **Prioritise** the gathering and preservation of linkage evidence to a criminal law standard that can lay the legal groundwork for a range of future efforts to hold perpetrators of torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment to account. The preservation of linkage evidence can support the creation of prosecution-ready dossiers of high-ranking perpetrators, indictments, and legal briefs that can support domestic, national, hybrid, and international justice mechanisms. This is critical for North Korea where the responsibility of individual perpetrators can be established but not yet their biographical and identifying details. This may provide potential for both short-term (e.g., domestic civil or criminal cases) and long-term (e.g., an ad-hoc international tribunal or hybrid court) accountability. This model would go beyond most current forms of human rights documentation and focus on laying the groundwork for a range of future legal efforts that will hold perpetrators to account for crimes against humanity and other human rights violations and abuses.
- **Integrate** religious women's experiences into the investigation and documentation of violations of women's rights and assess how violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief affect women.

# Background

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**The North Korean government has persecuted the followers and institutions of Korean Buddhism, Catholicism, Cheondogyo, North Korean Shamanism, and Protestantism over a period of 73 years.**

A 'Period of Eradicating Superstition,' discriminatory legislation, and the state's appropriation of land and capital in the late-1940s first eroded the abilities of religious persons and communities to worship. During the Korean War (1950-1953), religious persons were explicitly targeted, detained, and killed by North Korean forces. Many adherents from institutionalised religions, such as Catholicism and Buddhism, fled to South Korea further weakening religious minorities. Since the late-1950s, the formation of the *songbun* class system, whereby religious persons are classified as hostile to the state and subject to absolute discrimination and persecution, and the expansion of a political prison camp system, which detains up to three generations of families associated with religion for life, has embedded religion and belief as a *de facto* crime in the political and social consciousness of North Korea.

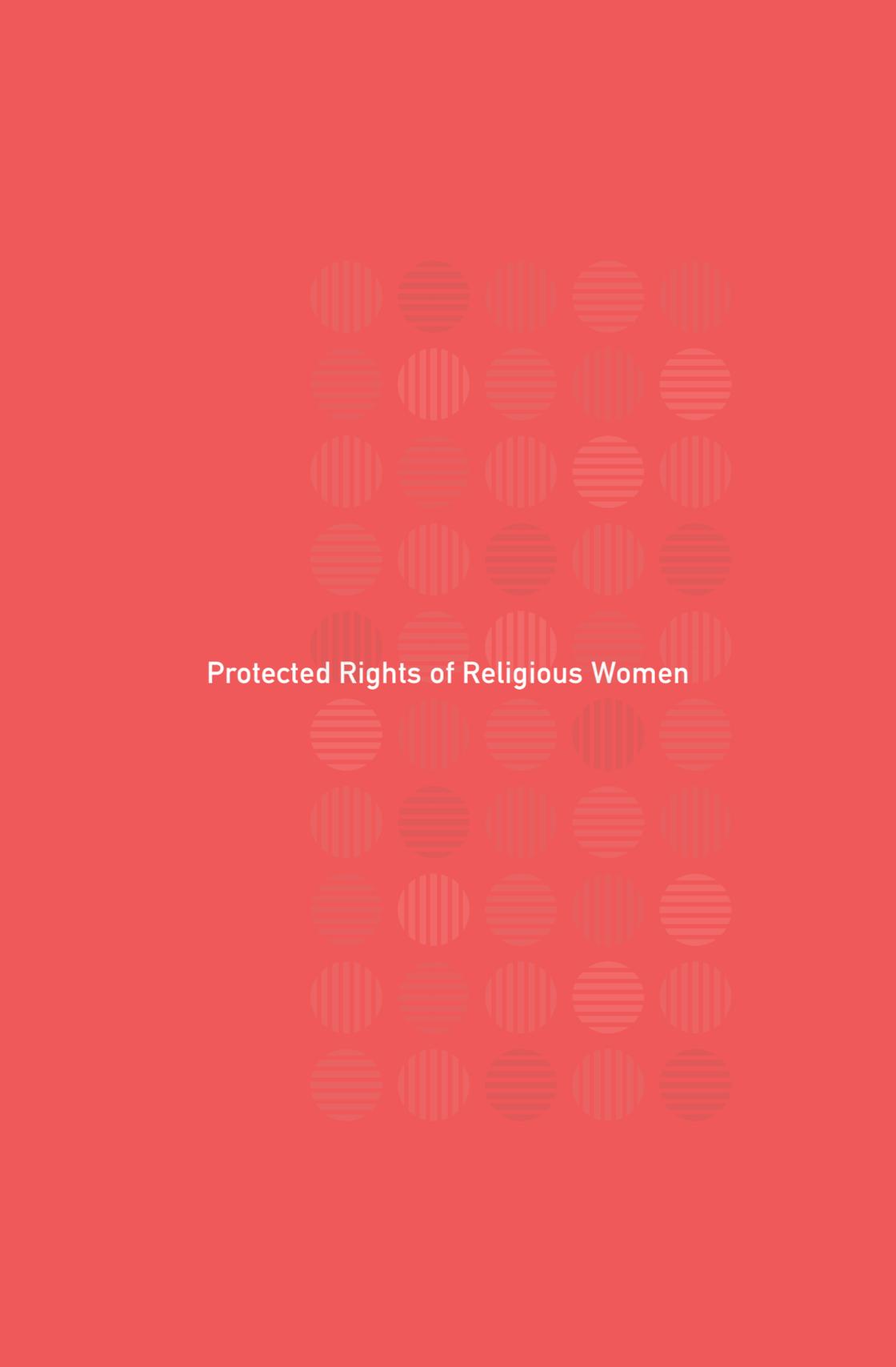


Based on 237 interviews of survivors, witnesses, and perpetrators of violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief, we have identified only small communities and isolated adherents of two religions: North Korean Shamanism and Christianity. We have not documented cases of remaining adherents of Korean Buddhism or Catholicism and only one adherent of Cheondogyo.

According to our documentation, Shamanism is the most widespread religious practice in North Korea and claims adherents from every level of society. Predating institutionalised religion on the Korean peninsula, Shamanism became an essential component of North Korea's religious landscape following the collapse of its economy in the 1990s. Manifestation of Shamanic beliefs mainly takes the shape of divination rituals and methods of divination vary among shamans but diverge into numerology, card reading, or physiognomy.

Christianity claims fewer adherents, yet it is the most severely persecuted religious tradition within North Korea.

Aside from the very few North Korean Christians who inherit their faith from family members who practiced Christianity prior to the founding of the current regime in 1948, most were inducted into the religion by Christian missionaries during periods when adherents had illicitly crossed into China to find food or earn money. North Korean Christians commonly practice their faith through private prayers, proselytisation to immediate family members, and attendance at religious ceremonies in China after the adherents illegally cross the border. Underground churches consisting of small congregations exist in North Korea, but are rare and subject to extreme levels of persecution.



## Protected Rights of Religious Women

**International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights**

**Article 18 (3)**

Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

**Convention on the Elimination of  
All Forms of Discrimination against Women**

**Article 2 (d)**

States Parties condemn discrimination against women in all its forms, agree to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women and, to this end, undertake [...] To refrain from engaging in any act or practice of discrimination against women and to ensure that public authorities and institutions shall act in conformity with this obligation [...].

**Declaration on the Elimination  
of All Forms of Intolerance and of  
Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief**

**Article 8**

Nothing in the present Declaration shall be construed as restricting or derogating from any right defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenants on Human Rights.

**Human Rights Council Resolution 6/37:  
Elimination of all forms of intolerance and of  
discrimination based on religion or belief**

**Article 9 (c)**

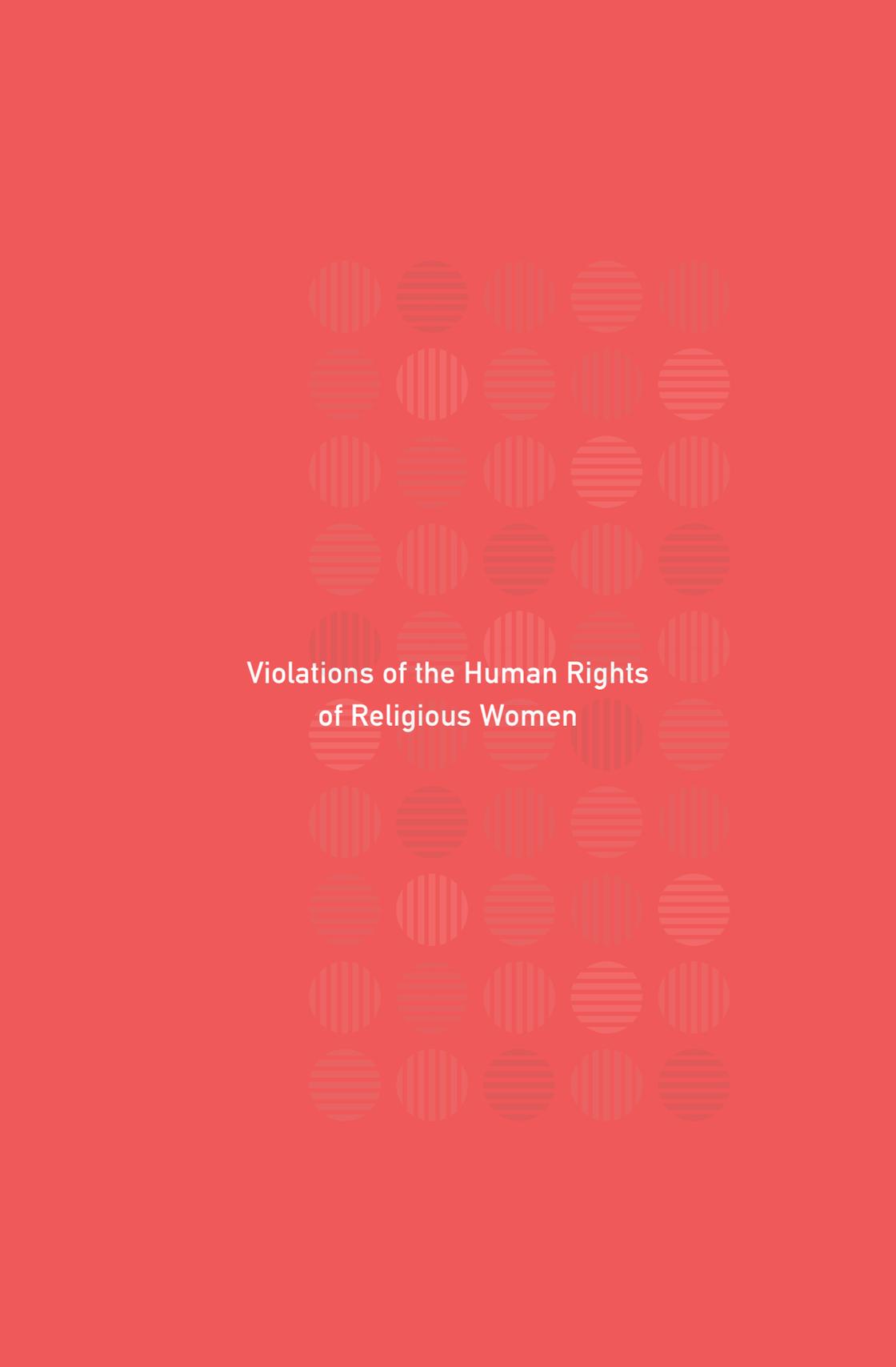
Urges States [...] to ensure that appropriate measures are taken in order to adequately and effectively guarantee the freedom of religion or belief of women.

**Human Rights Committee General Comment 28**

**Paragraph 21**

States parties must take measures to ensure that freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and the freedom to adopt the religion or belief of one's choice—including the freedom to change religion or belief and to express one's religion or belief—will be guaranteed and protected in law and in practice for both men and women, on the same terms and without discrimination.

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Violations of the Human Rights  
of Religious Women

## VIOLATIONS EXPERIENCED BY CHRISTIAN WOMEN



**140** ARBITRARY DEPRIVATION OF LIBERTY



**5** FORCED LABOUR



**33** TORTURE & CRUEL, INHUMAN  
OR DEGRADING TREATMENT



**1** SEXUAL VIOLENCE INCLUDING RAPE



**11** REFOULEMENT

WITHHELD: 2

SAMPLE SIZE **151**

## VIOLATIONS EXPERIENCED BY SHAMANIC WOMEN



**157** ARBITRARY DEPRIVATION OF LIBERTY



**53** FORCED LABOUR



**26** TORTURE & CRUEL, INHUMAN  
OR DEGRADING TREATMENT



**1** SEXUAL VIOLENCE INCLUDING RAPE

WITHHELD: 5

SAMPLE SIZE **180**

## PERPETRATORS OF VIOLATIONS AGAINST RELIGIOUS WOMEN



## CAUSES OF VIOLATIONS EXPERIENCED BY RELIGIOUS WOMEN AGED 40-60



WITHHELD: 5



**Religious Women  
as Beacons of Resistance**

In a culture where gender-based violence is normalised, religious persecution is institutionalised, and women are politically, socially, and economically marginalised, the lives of religious women are undoubtedly perilous. As North Korean women have turned to religion or belief, they have assumed even greater risks as the state seeks to use their bodies as tools to control and prevent the spread of religion.

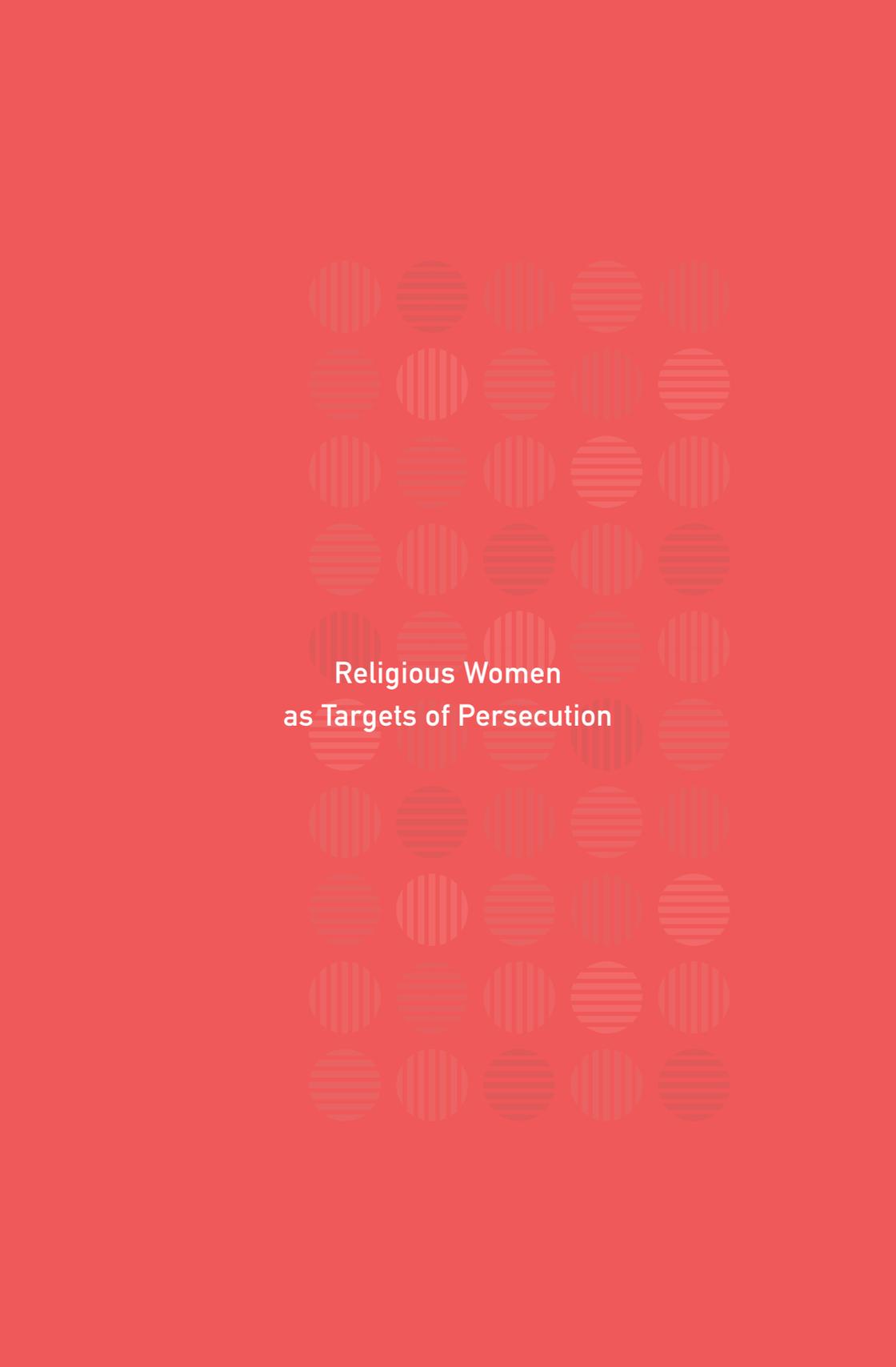
Religious women in North Korea are not, however, solely the victims of the state. They are also agents of resistance. In many documented cases, the social, economic, and political marginalisation of women in North Korea forced women into environments where they were, for the first time, able to access information on religion or belief. For those women who adopted religious identities, these new identities enabled women who practice Shamanism to earn money and support their families and for women who practice Christianity to become local leaders, albeit in secret, and to challenge the authority of the state's control over women's bodies and minds and empower other religious women to become agents of resistance.

In North Korea, we see how discrimination against women has sparked new forms of agency and a particular synergy involving gender, religion, and socio-economic status. Women of faith are exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief by balancing religious teachings and practice with the local context and its considerable risks. In the course of their resistance, these religious women can be seen as agents of resistance in their local contexts.

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Quote:

"The underground church members in North Korea were believers who had converted in China. They already knew about Christianity, including hymns and the Bible. Most members were women who had been trafficked and sold into forced marriages with Chinese men [and later escaped]."



Religious Women  
as Targets of Persecution

Religious women in North Korea experience overlapping forms of discrimination that work together to diminish the ability of women to fulfil the right to freedom of religion or belief. Religious women must contend with normative socio-economic and political gender-based discrimination and gender-based violence in the forms of physical, verbal, and sexual intimate partner violence. In a context where, for example, the rape of wives by husbands is normalised and the physical beating of women was described by one interviewee as “not problematic,” opportunities for religious women to manifest their religion or belief, either alone or as part of a community, are limited and exist only in exceptional situations.

In primary education, girls are instilled with a belief in male dominance, not least in teachings concerning the male lineage of the ruling Kim family, and are denied a religious and moral education. Instead, they are taught of the dominance of North Korea’s men over women and what are termed ‘superstitious acts.’ One interviewee for this report recalled, “when my middle school admitted students, there were seven girls out of thirty students. Teachers told us that the girls’ brains were ill suited to understanding high-end science and that admitting more boys was beneficial.” Another interviewee recalled that at school “they do not teach you about religion. They enlighten you about not having a religion [...] When I was learning these ideas, I thought of how lucky I was to be studying in such enlightened schools thanks to our father, the Supreme Leader Kim Il Sung. At the time, I thought that I could have been religious and I should study hard to protect our nation from religion. These thoughts were not just mine. They were shared by every other student.”

Quote:

"I used to think of Kim Il Sung's teachings in the same way that South Koreans think of the Bible. I was taught about a Christian missionary when I was in school. In the textbook, it said there was a child who ate an apple because they were hungry. The apple tree belonged to a missionary, and the missionary carved the word 'thief' into the child's forehead with acid [...] I was taught this during elementary or middle school. I remember hearing the word 'religion' [...] but I didn't know what religion was."

In adulthood, women experience public discrimination and exclusion from state employment and often earn money through the informal or quasi-legal economy where they are at risk of exploitation and other serious violations of their human rights. In the private sphere, women are expected to marry, to remain at home, and to obey their husbands. Women who are not married, are not employed at a state-assigned workplace, and are aged between 31 and 60 are required to become members of the Women's Union, a state organisation that controls the ideological alignment of non-party members, further embeds harmful gender norms, and delivers anti-religious education on a frequent basis. At home, women must also contend with normative gender-based violence, including physical, verbal, economic, and sexual intimate partner violence.

Quote:

"Social custom prevented me from leaving my home at New Year due to a belief that if a man were to see me, a woman, I would bring them bad luck. In North Korea, I could even feel myself beginning to hate women, even though I am a woman."

Against this backdrop, religious women are more likely, relative to religious men, to experience multiple and mutually reinforcing forms of discrimination and persecution based on the intersection of their gender and religious or belief identities.

For religious women who adhere to Shamanism, these overlapping forms of discrimination and persecution are particularly evident. Unable to access state employment owing to gender-based discrimination by the state, many Shamanic religious women are forced to earn money in the informal economy. Typically, these women, who may become known as shamans, practice their beliefs secretly, performing divination through numerology or card reading in return for financial compensation or other forms of bartered payments.

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Quote:

"I never spoke about religion at home. I kept it a secret and would visit a shaman alone [...] Whether it is your family member or not, you do not talk about religion. You cannot even trust your husband. Words may slip from anyone's tongue."

Quote:

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"In North Korea, when people say "that person", they are referring to a man. Women are called "that woman."

While religious manifestations have emerged as a means for religious women to earn money and support their families, one interviewee recalled that "there are no shamans living a fortunate life. They wander around the country [...] they do not earn a lot of money." This practice is also not without significant risk to religious women. North Korea's criminal code dictates that persons engaged in 'superstitious activities,' which encompasses religious and belief practices, and commonly refers to Shamanism, shall be punished by forced labour for up to three years. We documented 140 cases where Shamanic religious women had been arrested and detained on the grounds of their religious practice between 1987 and 2019. This suggests that religious women have little choice but to accept considerable risk in order to survive.

Christian women, as unordained clergy, are unable to earn an income through baptisms, marriages, or funerals in North Korea. Christianity is considered a political crime, a threat to the Workers' Party of Korea and to national ideological unity—in particular, the Ten Principles for Establishing a Monolithic Leadership System, which serves as the *de facto* constitution. The Ten Principles has as its purpose to align each North Korean citizen's thoughts with the principles of deification, absolutism, and unquestioning and unconditional obedience to Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, and Kim Jong Un. It does not tolerate any competing orthodoxy or deity.

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Quote:

"Most North Koreans who engage in religious activities are women. Women are in charge of 90–100% percent of the economic activities of a household. Women are the breadwinners [through the informal economy]. Also, when there are issues with the family, it is women who visit shamans. My mother raised me alone and often went to see a shaman."

The absolute denial of the right to religious freedom to women who practice Christianity forces many across the border and into China. Engaging in illicit trade or employment, these women can receive support from ethnic-Korean churches or underground missionaries who provide religious literature, symbols, and other forms of information about the religion. Upon their voluntary return or refoulement to North Korea, women who are suspected of adhering to Christianity fall under the surveillance of North Korea's intelligence agency, the Ministry of State Security, which proactively gathers information on religious women, including those who cross into China, through a network of informants. The ministry also maintains its own penal facilities, including political prison camps, and its own prosecution department and court system that tries suspects *in camera*.

Christian women who are discovered and arrested experience more egregious and existential violations of their human rights than Shamanic women. Prevailing customary forms of gender-based violence, including torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, such as physical beating and verbal abuse, are magnified for women in detention due to their religious identity.

# Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> United Nations. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." Accessed November 22, 2021. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>; United Nations. "International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights." Accessed November 22, 2021. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx>; United Nations. "Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief." Accessed November 22, 2021. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/ReligionOrBelief.aspx>; United Nations. "Convention on the Rights of the Child." Accessed November 22, 2021. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> United Nations. "International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights." Accessed November 22, 2021. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> United Nations. "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women." Accessed November 22, 2021. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> National Intelligence Service (South Korea). "Collection of Current Acts and Regulations of North Korea." Accessed November 20, 2021. [https://www.nis.go.kr:4016/resources/down/2020\\_north\\_law\\_01.pdf](https://www.nis.go.kr:4016/resources/down/2020_north_law_01.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> United Nations. "Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women examines the reports of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea." Accessed November 20, 2021. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22373>; United Nations. "CEDAW/C/PRK/2-4". Accessed November 20, 2021. <https://undocs.org/en/CEDAW/C/PRK/2-4>

<sup>6</sup> United Nations. "Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea." Accessed November 22, 2021. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIDPRK/Pages/CommissionInquiryonHRinDPRK.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> Korea Future. "Persecuting Faith: Documenting religious freedom violations in North Korea (Volume 2)." Accessed November 10, 2021. <https://www.koreafuture.org/nkrfd>

<sup>8</sup> Korea Future. "North Korean Religious Freedom Database." Accessed November 15, 2021. <https://nkrf.io/>

<sup>9</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. "Organized Persecution: Documenting Religious Freedom Violations in North Korea." Accessed November 15, 2021. <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-08/2021%20Organized%20Persecution%20-%20Documenting%20Religious%20Freedom%20Violations%20in%20North%20Korea.pdf>



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## *Religious Women as Beacons of Resistance in North Korea*

*Korea Future would like to acknowledge Stefanus Alliance International for generously funding and supporting this work. The contents of this report are the sole responsibility of Korea Future and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of Stefanus Alliance International.*

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