



Women, Dictators, and Foreign Policy  
Exploring the Role of Finland and Sweden in North  
Korea's Struggle for Women's Rights

Thesis for Master's Programme in Global Governance Law

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**Abstract:**

This thesis studies Finland's and Sweden's current and potential future engagement methods with the DPRK by focussing on women's rights and gender equality. Interviews held with Finnish and Swedish foreign ministry representatives, NGO workers, and experts on North Korea reveal how the two countries engage with North Korea and how women's rights and gender equality are being addressed in the Northeast Asian context. It will first outline how this research was conducted before introducing some of the most pertinent problems relating to gender equality and women's right in the DPRK. Next, the histories between North Korea and the two Nordic states is outlined, after which theoretical considerations concerning feminist foreign policy, human-rights based, middlepowermanship, and soft power are discussed. Research findings are then examined and analysed before concluding with further broader examination of Finnish and Swedish engagement with North Korea and the importance of advancing gender equality and women's rights globally.

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**Tiedekunta:** Oikeustieteellinen tiedekunta

**Koulutusohjelma:** Globaalia hallintoa koskevan oikeuden maisterikoulutus

**Opintosuunta:** kansainvälinen oikeus, kansainvälinen politiikka

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**Ohjaaja tai ohjaajat:** Päivi Leino-Sandberg

**Tiivistelmä:**

Tämä lopputyö tutkii Suomen ja Ruotsin tämänhetkisiä ja mahdollisia tulevaisuuden yhteistyötapoja Pohjois-Korean kanssa keskittyen naisten oikeuksiin ja sukupuolten tasa-arvoon. Suomen ja Ruotsin ulkoministeriön edustajien, kansalaisjärjestööntekijöiden ja Pohjois-Korean asiantuntijoiden haastattelut paljastavat, miten maat ovat tekemisissä Pohjois-Korean kanssa ja miten naisten oikeuksia ja sukupuolten tasa-arvoa käsitellään tässä kontekstissa. Ensin työssä katsotaan naisten oikeuksien tilannetta Pohjois-Koreassa. Seuraavaksi hahmotellaan Pohjois-Korean ja Pohjoismaiden välistä historiaa, jonka jälkeen käsitellään teoreettisia pohdintoja feminististä ulkopoliittikkaa, ihmisoikeusperustaisuutta, keskivoimaa ja pehmeää voimaa. Tämän jälkeen tutkimustuloksia tarkastellaan ja analysoidaan ennen kuin päätetään laajemmin Suomen ja Ruotsin sitoutumisesta Pohjois-Koreaan sekä sukupuolten tasa-arvon ja naisten oikeuksien maailmanlaajuisen edistämisen tärkeydestä.

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Figure 1 – Word cloud formed from interview transcripts.

## Abbreviations

ASEM – Asia Europe Meeting

CEDAW – Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

CFFP – Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy

CFSP – Common Foreign and Security Policy

CoI – Commission of Inquiry

CRC – Committee on the Rights of the Child

DMZ – Demilitarised Zone

DPRK – Democratic People’s Republic of Korea

ECHO – European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Organisation

EEAS – European External Action Service

EU – European Union

FFP – Feminist Foreign Policy

ICC – International Criminal Court

ICCPR – International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

ICESCR – International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR),

IFRC – International Federation of Red Cross

IR – International Relations

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KEDO - Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organisation  
KWP – Korean Workers’ Party  
LSE – London School of Economics and Political Science  
MEP – Member of Parliament (UK)  
NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organisation  
NGO – Non-governmental organisation  
NPT – Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty  
OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development  
OHCHR - Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights  
PDS – Public Distributions System  
ROK – Republic of Korea  
SIDA – Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency  
SRC – Swedish Red Cross  
UN – United Nations  
UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
UNSC – United Nations Security Council  
US – United States  
WMD – Weapons of mass destruction

## Chapter One – Introduction

Human rights and nuclear non-proliferation seem to be the top priorities for the international community when it comes to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea). The United States has thus far been seen in the West as the forefront in engaging with the DPRK, where Cold War tensions still play out. However, the US has largely played into the hands of the DPRK leadership in their nuclear brinkmanship and diplomatic blackmail.<sup>1</sup> The last three decades have shown that hard-line, soft-line, and 'strategic patience' do not achieve desired results.<sup>2</sup> Political and academic consensus also rules out a military solution as it would result in the death of masses of South and North Korean civilians and maybe even trigger regional armed conflicts.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike the West, the Republic of Korea (ROK, South Korea) has had tremendous success with easing tensions with the North during times of crises, particularly through cultural diplomacy. Their difficult situation and the historical and contemporary political and economic ties and geopolitical location make this process extremely delicate. The South Korean leaders are wary of addressing the rampant human rights abuses for example, instead preferring to focus on nuclear issues.<sup>4</sup> The US has had little to no meaningful effect on improving the lives of the Korean people, enforcing the NPT, aiding North-South reconciliation, or addressing human rights issues.<sup>5</sup> There are good reasons for this, not least of which is that the DPRK regards the US as their primary enemy and is opposed to their activities. Other powers in the East Asia region have little ability to do anything either: China wants to maintain a dominant economic and political position in the region and to prevent a humanitarian crisis on its borders, Japan has a complicated imperial history with the Korean peninsula and is furious over its abducted citizens, Russia does not want US influence in the region and has few reasons to engage with the DPRK.<sup>6</sup> The so-called Six Party Talks have stalled and despite continuing speculations by North Korea watchers

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<sup>1</sup> Andrei Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia, Revised and Updated* (OUP 2015); Niv Farago, 'Washington's Failure to Resolve the North Korean Nuclear Conundrum: Examining Two Decades of US Policy' (2016) 92 *International Affairs* 1127; Gregory Moore, 'America's Failed North Korea Nuclear Policy: A New Approach' (2008) 32 *Asian Perspective* 9

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Lankov (n 1)

<sup>4</sup> Mario Esteban, 'The EU's Role in Stabilising the Korean Peninsula' (2019) Working Paper 01/2019, Real Instituto Elcano and the Korea Foundation

<sup>5</sup> Tatsujiro Suzuki, 'On Recent Development on the Korean Peninsula' (2019) 2 *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 370

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Cheng 'China's Regional Strategy and Challenges in East Asia' (2013) 2 *French Centre for Research on Contemporary China* 53; Esteban (n 4); Lankov (n 1)

that the regime is bound to collapse any day now, its continued existence makes the current author (and many others) sceptical of such claims. There is seemingly no power which has the ability to engage with the DPRK about human rights with meaningful results.

What about the European Union? The EU's interests in the region are two-fold: enforcement and return to the NPT and advancement of human rights.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the DPRK's 75-year existence, however, little to no real progress has been made on these fronts by the international community. This is largely due to the vested and contradictory interests of all parties involved in the region. EU member states have played an important role in the past, but engagement has recently declined. Despite the EU's "critical engagement" policy, there has been virtually no contact between the two parties largely resulting from international sanctions. If the EU wants to see its North Korea objectives fulfilled to any extent, it needs to change its policy and engage with the leadership of the DPRK in any way.

Two Nordic EU member-states, Sweden and Finland, have the best chance of meaningful engagement with the DPRK. This is because of their relatively long history with North Korea, existing avenues of engagement, and international reputations. Moreover, the two are world leaders in gender equality and human rights and have often been called to mediate international disputes. Finland is currently on the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council 2022-2024 which gives it the opportunity to bring up North Korean human rights issues on the world stage. The DPRK also has a decade long debt owed to Finland as well as historical ties to the country which give Finland a way in to enter negotiations. Sweden has one of the largest embassies in the DPRK which also operates as a consulate for other countries like the US and Australia. Its history of neutrality and mediation additionally equip Sweden with ways to engage the DPRK. Its pioneering feminist foreign policy began in 2014 and has had tremendous success internationally in advancing women's rights, including in North Korea. Finland's human rights-based foreign policy has also been successful internationally but its current lack of interest in the DPRK means Finland is not reaching its potential in this region.

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<sup>7</sup> Esteban (n 4)



This thesis studies Finland's and Sweden's current and potential future engagement methods with the DPRK by focussing on women's rights and gender equality. Interviews held with Finnish and Swedish foreign ministry representatives, NGO workers, and experts on North Korea reveal how the two countries engage with North Korea and how women's rights and gender equality are being addressed in the Northeast Asian context. It will first outline how this research was conducted before introducing some of the most pertinent problems relating to gender equality and women's right in the DPRK. Next, the histories between North Korea and the two Nordic states is outlined, after which theoretical considerations concerning feminist foreign policy, human-rights based, middlepowermanship, and soft power are discussed. Research findings are then examined and analysed before concluding with further broader examination of Finnish and Swedish engagement with North Korea and the importance of advancing gender equality and women's rights globally.

## Chapter Two – Research Design

### 1. Research Questions and Aims

This research project explores and attempts to answer the following questions:

- a. *How are Sweden and Finland improving women's rights and gender equality in NK?*
- b. *Can feminist foreign policy advance women's rights in totalitarian states?*
- c. *How does a FFP framework differ from a non-FFP human rights centred approach when engaging a totalitarian state?*

The purpose of such inquiry is to evaluate the benefits and disadvantages of FFP practices and understand the experiences of experts in the field. The aim is to (1) help scholars, policy-makers, and IR practitioners to better understand FFP both as a philosophical framework and as a practice of public diplomacy, (2) to conceptualise FFP in the context of authoritarian and totalitarian states, and (3) add to the slowly growing public interest and academic scholarship on FFP in IR as well as North Korean studies. Considering the international community's seeming inability to meaningfully engage with the Hermit Kingdom outside of sanctions, it is worthwhile to study this new feminist approach to foreign policy and international relations and what it may be able to contribute.

### 2. Research Method: Expert Interviews

#### a. The Interview Method

My interview questions are semi-structured. This method of interviewing allows me to ask all interviewees the same major questions but also lets me alter the sequence, probe for more information, and edit the questions to make them more appropriate depending on the interviewee and context of the interview.<sup>8</sup> As opposed to standardised interviews, where all questions and their sequence is the same regardless of the interviewee or context, semi-structured questions dodge problems associated with losing potential research data or misunderstanding interviewees' replies by allowing for further questioning and discussion. Moreover, the method encourages personalisation of interview questions as well as indirect questions, which are valuable tools for

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<sup>8</sup> Nigel Fielding and Hilary Thomas, 'Qualitative Interviewing' in Nigel Gilbert (ed), *Researching Social Life* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed, Sage 2008)

sensitive research topics and for a sample population who requires contextual considerations, in this case the widely varying work of interviewees. This approach is particularly valuable when the subject matter is complex or sensitive. The flexibility of this approach is therefore helpful for interviewees who may need to carefully consider their words or what information they are able to divulge.

### **b. Interview Questions**

The interview questions are designed to inquire the interviewee about whether and how FFP is seen in their work. As such, the aims of FFP and the aims of each organisation or institution whose representative I will interview are laid out and cross-analysed to form appropriate interview questions. Questions will be added or removed based on the organisation and person under interview. All questions are carefully prepared, using previous interviews, media sources, and public documents as models and guides. Questions are designed based on what information is needed and what is feasible for respondents to answer. Because the interview is semi-structured in nature, during the interview other points of discussion may arise which I did not anticipate, and those will then be noted separately. After each interview, the questions will be reviewed e.g. in terms of wording, question ordering, or relevance for the next interviewee.

For highly sensitive research topics or vulnerable interview populations, it is extremely important to maintain interviewee confidentiality. All respondents will be asked if they wish to remain anonymous prior to the interview. All names and other identifying information will not be included. Interview recordings and notes are password protected and kept on my personal computer, to which no one else has access until the end of this project, after which they are destroyed. These considerations reflect the fact that experts may worry about the sensitive features of their work and may not wish to disclose information without such protections to their personal information. They may also be wary of leaving a paper trail for future archival researchers, as international politics is a fast paced and high stakes arena, and information may be misconstrued on purpose for political reasons. Information and personal safety is thus of highest priority and multiple guides are consulted to maintain the highest level of research

ethics.<sup>9</sup>

#### **d. Interviewees**

The interviewee sample includes members of the foreign ministries of Sweden and Finland, academics, and NGO workers currently working or previously having worked in/with North Korea. Foreign ministry personnel in particular are the conventional practitioners of international relations, Sweden has a feminist foreign policy, and Finland has a human rights centred foreign policy with a strong focus on women's rights making interviewees from these agencies essential for a comparison of FFP and non-FFP approaches to women's rights in totalitarian regimes and for an analysis of the work Finland and Sweden do in/with North Korea. Academics specialised in North Korean studies and/or women's rights are experts in their fields and will likely have worked with other relevant actors, concepts, and practices, so their knowledge and experiences are extremely valuable. NGO employees/volunteers work directly inside and/or with North Koreans and therefore have unique and invaluable experiences and perspectives on how policy can be practiced in daily life on the frontlines. To this end, organisations such as the Red Cross and Finn Church Aid (Kirkon ulkomaanapu) are notable. CFFP and the LSE Centre for Women, Peace, and Security are also extremely valuable sources as they are the leading organisation advocating for FFP. Unfortunately, none of these organisations responded to my requests or follow-ups for interviews.

My initial aim was to hold a minimum of six interviews, two from each of the three categories of identified sampling populations (foreign ministry personnel, NGO members, academics). More interviews would of course increase the accuracy and generalisability of the findings and was therefore highly desirable. In the end, the minimum of six interviews materialised although not quite in these strict division, as addressed below. Eight institutions/organisations were contacted with general email enquiries either asking for a specific person whom to interview or asking whether they had a representative with whom I could speak. Seven individuals were contacted directly, of whom four either did not respond or refused an interview. If

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<sup>9</sup> These guides are: Benjamin Saunders, Jenny Kitzinger, and Celia Kitzinger, 'Anonymising interview data: challenges and compromise in practice' (2015) 15 *Qualitative Research* 616; and most importantly, Economic and Social Research Council, 'Research ethics guidance' < [www.ukri.org/councils/esrc/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics-guidance](http://www.ukri.org/councils/esrc/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics-guidance) > accessed 19 April 2022. The first and last points of ethical guidance of course come from the University of Helsinki's website on 'Research Ethics' < [www.helsinki.fi/en/research/research-integrity/research-ethics](http://www.helsinki.fi/en/research/research-integrity/research-ethics) > accessed 19 April 2022

organisations/institutions are counted as one contacted entity on par with individuals, the rate of response is 38% with a refusal or non-response rate of 63%.

Total Interviewed	Organisations/ institutions contacted	Individuals contacted	Total contacted	Rate of response	Rate of refusal/non- response
6	8	7	16	38%	63%

Table 1 - Contacted interviewee data with rate of response and rate of refusal/non-response.

All participants wished to remain anonymous to varying degrees. North Korea related data is extremely sensitive, so this phenomenon is unsurprising. NGOs may be asked to halt their operations by the North Korean state if their work is publicised outside of internal reporting, as one participant pointed out, and foreign ministries tend to prefer to keep their work with/in North Korea secret for the same reason, in addition to potential security issues. For these reasons participants will be referred to in the following manner as requested by the interviewees themselves:

Code	Category & Explanation
<b>Participant A</b>	<b>Foreign ministry staff (Sweden)</b> <i>Anonymous employee at the Swedish Foreign Ministry working on North Korea related matters</i>
<b>Participant B</b>	<b>Foreign ministry staff (Sweden)</b> <i>Anonymous employee at the Swedish Foreign Ministry working on North Korea related matters</i>
<b>Participant C</b>	<b>Foreign ministry staff (Finland)</b> <i>Anonymous employee at the Finnish Foreign Ministry working on East Asian and Oceanic matters</i>
<b>Participant D</b>	<b>NGO (Finland)</b> <i>Anonymous expert at a Finnish international development organisation</i>
<b>Participant E</b>	<b>Academic</b> <i>Anonymous scholar and expert on North Korea</i>
<b>Participant F</b>	<b>Academic</b> <i>Anonymous scholar and expert on North Korea</i>

Table 2 - Participants

#### e. Audience

Much of the audience of this research is its sample population. In studying the possibilities of FFP, I seek to interview those currently working with either the DPRK, North Koreans, human rights, or FFP. As such, the findings will (of course) be disseminated with the interviewees, but

one hope is that they will also adopt FFP practices in their approaches to human rights in North Korea and/or other totalitarian or authoritarian states. For example, if FFP is found to have concrete potentials for diplomatic personnel working with DPRK officials, perhaps such findings can guide their future diplomatic practices or programmes, for example by gender mainstreaming. On the flipside, if organisations or diplomats seem reluctant to adopt such practices, this research could inform these same respondents of why this is and perhaps persuade them to adopt other similar policy orientations to help the women of North Korea and to uphold the international women's rights regime.

An audience exists outside the sampled population too. Though more elusive, they could involve other governments or organisations considering FFP approaches or seeking to advance international women's rights, engage with the DPRK, or protect the integrity of international human rights and global women's rights regimes. Dissemination to such a broad and ill-defined audience is not a simple task, but there is the possibility that the first group described above, most notably diplomats and academics, could use the findings of this research when discussing women's rights with representatives of other governments and policy experts. Similarly, the NGO representatives interviewed could, informed by this research paper, emphasise women's rights in their work with North Koreans on the ground. The open access nature of this publication will also aid in this endeavour.

## Chapter Three – Women’s Rights in North Korea

North Korea is a traditional and deeply patriarchal society that places family at the centre of economic and social activity: “the man takes care of all business outside the home and the woman takes care of all business inside the home.”<sup>10</sup> North Korean women are expected to do most, if not all, of the housework, birth and bring up children, work for the state where they are paid less than their male counterparts, bring in the majority of household income through informal (and illegal) means, and suffer extreme forms of sexual harassment and subjugation without access to justice. According one author, North Korean “women are still seen [as] *ttukong unjeongsu*, which literally translates as 'cooking pot lid drivers' and means that they should 'stay in the kitchen where they belong.’”<sup>11</sup>

### 1. International and Domestic Legal Measures for Women’s Rights

#### a. Gender Equality and Women’s Rights in International Law

North Korea has signed and ratified many international treaties relating to women’s rights, usually as part of other human rights treaties. Needless to say, most of their provisions have not been actualised.

The most significant women’s rights document North Korea signed and ratified (with reservations, which were withdrawn 2015) is the UN’s Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), in accordance of which North Korea reports on its developments regarding gender equality measures. However, these reports typically claim that “all the policies, law, and sector-specific action programmes of the DPRK accord women equal rights with men on the principle of zero tolerance of discrimination against them in all their forms and any affront to their dignity.”<sup>12</sup> North Korea was nonetheless open and willing to cooperation with the CEDAW Committee as well as the Convention on the Rights of

<sup>10</sup> Darcie Draudt, ‘Co-opting the Narrative: How Changing Women’s Roles Provide Legitimacy to Kim Jong Un’ *38 North* (Washington, 30 July 2020) < [www.38north.org/2020/07/ddraudt073020](http://www.38north.org/2020/07/ddraudt073020) > accessed 27 January 2022

<sup>11</sup> Juliette Morillot and Dorian Malovic, *La corée du nord en 100 questions* (Tallandier 2016) quoted in Megha Mohan, ‘Rape and no periods in North Korea’s army’ BBC (London, 21 November 2017) < [www.bbc.com/news/stories-41778470](http://www.bbc.com/news/stories-41778470) > accessed 26 January 2022

<sup>12</sup> UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, ‘Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention Combined second, third and fourth periodic reports of States parties due in 2014 Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’ (16 April 2014) CEDAW/C/PRK/2-4, 3

the Child (CRC) Committee (signed and ratified 1990) before 2016, although its reporting is typically late and lacking.

The UN Commission of Inquiry's (CoI) 2014 famous report was the cause of North Korea's noncompliance with several international human rights measures over the subsequent few years. The CoI report drew international attention for its extensive evidence of human rights abuses faced by North Koreans, told in horrific detail.<sup>13</sup> The DPRK of course dismissed and denied this evidence and denounced the report. Subsequently, North Korean delegates were indignant at human rights fora and refused to answer to questions or showed shocking ignorance on the rights of women, not understanding the phrase 'marital rape' and citing 'women's physical characteristics' as justification for workplace gender segregation.<sup>14</sup> The impact of international treaties seems to be minimal to North Korean women's rights.

Other important international and multilateral agreements the DPRK is party to and that address women's rights are the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide ('Genocide Convention'). The first of the three the DPRK acceded in 1981 and attempted to withdraw (no withdrawal options are available in the treaty and a resolution annulment is impossible) in 1997 following heavy scrutiny on its late reporting and gross human rights record.<sup>15</sup> This has become a trend: following criticism or scrutiny, the DPRK is quick to attempt to withdraw or not comply with monitoring mechanisms. What international human rights instruments the DPRK joins in is selective and based on political rather than altruistic purposes.

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<sup>13</sup> OHCHR Commission of Inquiry, 'Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea' (7 February 2014) A/HRC/25/63

< [www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/coidprk/pages/reportofthecommissionofinquirydprk.aspx](http://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/coidprk/pages/reportofthecommissionofinquirydprk.aspx) > accessed 21 January 2022

<sup>14</sup> Heather Barr, 'Don't Be Fooled by North Korea's Denials on Women's Rights' Human Rights Watch (21 November 2017) < [www.hrw.org/news/2017/11/21/dont-be-fooled-north-koreas-denials-womens-rights](http://www.hrw.org/news/2017/11/21/dont-be-fooled-north-koreas-denials-womens-rights) > accessed 31 January 2022

<sup>15</sup> Ben Willis, 'Scrutinising North Korea's Record on Civil and Political Rights: the New ICCPR Reporting Cycle' *38 North* (2 September 2021) < [www.38north.org/2021/09/scrutinizing-north-koreas-record-on-civil-and-political-rights-the-new-iccpr-reporting-cycle](http://www.38north.org/2021/09/scrutinizing-north-koreas-record-on-civil-and-political-rights-the-new-iccpr-reporting-cycle) > accessed 31 January 2022



### **b. Gender Equality and Women's Rights in Domestic Law**

One reason why international treaties are so easily dismissed by North Korean delegates is their government's insistence that its citizens enjoy full gender equality in all aspects of society. In reality, many first-hand and witnesses testify that women endure many forms of discrimination from lack of representation in decision-making to rampant sexual violence. The DPRK states that its domestic legislation provides a solid basis for gender equality.

Even before the DPRK was born, the Provisional People's Committee for North Korea ended "the traditional hierarchical patrilineal registration system for households in 1945" and introduced the Gender Equality Law which gave women newfound rights in areas such as inheritance, divorce, and child custody and abolished prostitution and concubinage, among other developments. The 1946 Law on Sex Equality enshrined gender equality in matters of "state, economic, cultural, social and political life."<sup>16</sup> The 1946 Statute on the Labour of Manual and Clerical Workers brought women and men equal wages.<sup>17</sup>

The 1948 Constitution established the socialist democratic nature of the future state and outlined the rights and duties of its citizens. Gender equality is stipulated in Article 11 – "All citizens of the D.P.R.K., irrespective of sex, nationality, religious belief, specialty, property status or education, have equal rights in all spheres of government, political, economic, social and cultural activity" – and Article 22 – "Women in the D.P.R.K. are accorded equal rights with men in all spheres of government, political, economic, social and cultural activity. The state protects especially mothers and children."<sup>18</sup> The 1958 Cabinet Decision 84, the 1978 Socialist Labour Law, and the 1976 Infant Education Law reiterated women's equality and prescribed additional rights regarding women's access to education and various professions, established childcare and child healthcare facilities and services, and expanded upon childcare and maternity rights respectively.

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<sup>16</sup> Sea Young Kim and Leif-Eric Easley, 'The Neglected North Korean Crisis: Women's Rights' (2021) 35 Ethics & International Affairs 19, 19-20

<sup>17</sup> Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, 'Gender in Transition: The Case of North Korea' (2012) Peterson Institute for International Economics Working Paper 12-11, 3

<sup>18</sup> Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, 8 September 1948, Articles 11 & 22

The 1972 Constitution reflected Kim Il Sung's Marxist ideology and Engles' theory on liberation through labour and thus sought to incorporate more women into the formal workforce and help mothers with childcare and domestic duties:

“Women are accorded equal social status and rights with men. The State shall afford special protection to mothers and children by providing maternity leave, reduced working hours for mothers with several children, a wide network of maternity hospitals, creches and kindergartens, and other measures. The State shall provide all conditions for women to play their full roles in society.”<sup>19</sup>

Article 77

Nonetheless, throughout the 1980s, childcare facilities and institutions were cut for budgetary reasons and women continued to work in low paying jobs. Yet, by the mid-1990s, women's portion in the formal workforce had increased from roughly twenty percent to up to fifty percent.<sup>20</sup> Women continued to do the vast majority of domestic work and were the sole providers of childcare while occupying a lower social and economic status to men.

As gender equality continued to be “increasingly illusionary,” the 1998 Constitution maintained the 1972 Constitution's Article 77 but did nothing further to address women's rights.<sup>21</sup> For the next decade, domestic law has not mentioned women's rights or gender equality in any meaningful way, except to limit some women's rights like the 2007 which prohibited younger women from working at the informal markets (jangmadang) in order to increase the state workforce.<sup>22</sup> The 2009 Constitutional revision, out of international pressure, inserted a short clause that “the state shall respect and protect human rights” although took no action to this end.<sup>23</sup> The clause remained through the constitutional revision of 2012. The 2009 Family Law gave women the right to choose their partner in marriage and to divorce an unfaithful husband. The Law on Socialist Labour Rights 2010 amended its 1978 predecessor by extending the length of maternity leave.

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<sup>19</sup> Socialist Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, 27 December 1972, Article 77

<sup>20</sup> Kim and Easley (n 16) 20

<sup>21</sup> Haggard and Noland (n 17) 4

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Dae-Kyu Yoon, 'Constitutional Change in North Korea' in Albert Chen (ed), *Constitutionalism in Asia in the Early Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge University Press 2014) 101, 115

Also in 2010, North Korea adopted the Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Women.<sup>24</sup> This law gives any international treaty to which the DPRK is party regarding gender equality and women's rights the same effect as domestic law. It also affords equal rights to education and healthcare among other basic rights North Korean women already formally enjoyed under previous domestic law. The 2010 Law prohibits violence against women including sexual and domestic violence, although it does not specify the ramifications for perpetrators. The Criminal Law of 2012 sought to remedy this by introducing prison sentences for rapists. Other forms of sexual violence or harassment, however, are notably absent, marital rape is not properly incorporated, and definitions for rape are not present. Although the Criminal Law has been amended numerous times, none address these defects. The Criminal Procedure Act of 2014 sought to entitle women to seek reparations and bring complaints to state institutions regarding discrimination or physical harm.

However, all the rights, protections, and freedoms these documents gave women have never materialised because “the nature of North Korea’s authoritarian and patriarchal society has meant that gender equality law lack implementation at the grassroots level.”<sup>25</sup> Women continue to be treated as second-class citizens in all spheres of North Korean society and the state does little to guarantee women’s rights or improve conditions, as will be seen throughout this chapter. Moreover, the rule of law does not exist in North Korea and instead, laws, especially the constitution, exist to protect the state, maintain the Kim family’s reign, and reproduce state ideology and justify its mechanisms for repression – consequently, “the mere existence of a provision for a fundamental right does not guarantee that right.”<sup>26</sup>

## 2. Women’s Economic Roles

In the early days of the DPRK, Soviet influences were abundant and easily observable. In the early days of communist movements, women were thought of as economically equal to men, but at the time of the DPRK’s creation in 1948, “Stalin’s Russia discovered the political usefulness of the traditional family and values associated with it.”<sup>27</sup> The DPRK thus adopted promoted the

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<sup>24</sup> Jina Yang, ‘Women’s Rights in the DPRK: Discrepancies Between International and Domestic Legal Instruments in Promoting Women’s Rights and the Reality Reflected by North Korean Defectors’ (2018) 51 Cornell International Law Journal 220

<sup>25</sup> Kim and Ealsey (n 16) 20

<sup>26</sup> Yoon (n 23) 117-118

<sup>27</sup> Lankov (n 1)

nuclear family model based on both Soviet policies and Confucian values.<sup>28</sup> This meant that all able-bodied men would be employed by the state and women would be occupied by domestic labour and childrearing. Although women's legal and political rights were rising, and some women were able to partake in formal employment, Kim Il Sung transformed Friedrich Engels' foundational theory arguing that women's emancipation comes from their labour participation, into the 'Socialist Theory of the Great Family' in the 1980s.<sup>29</sup> This shifted policy to return those few in the public sphere to and re-emphasise women's positions in the domestic sphere where they would achieve liberation not through labour but through their loyalty to the family and nation.<sup>30</sup> This policy followed failed attempts to socialise domestic labour and childcare duties, which would have increased women's capabilities to enter the formal labour force.<sup>31</sup>

This gender paradigm changed dramatically in the 1990s as a result of the Great Famine and government responses to it. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and subsequent loss of trade and aid, unusually harsh climate catastrophes, multiple failed harvests, and inefficient transport and agricultural planning and policy lead to the Great Famine, known in North Korea as the Arduous March, of 1994-1998. The centralised food distribution system (Public Distributions System, PDS) broke down and between 250,000 and 3.5 million perished from nationwide starvation.<sup>32</sup> Since 1957, the PDS had been the major source, and for some the only source, of food but was now unable to provide and has since never fully recovered.<sup>33</sup> Collective farms, factories, schools, hospitals, and many other workplaces could no longer function fully as Soviet imports suddenly halted. However, the government still expected all men to clock in even if they were unable to do any productive work or receive wages or rations for their labour.<sup>34</sup> This meant that households were both starving and lost their source of income. Women had to remedy the situation.

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<sup>28</sup> On Confucianism in North Korea, see e.g. Jin Woong Kang, 'Political Uses of Confucianism in North Korea' (2011) 16 *Journal of Korean Studies* 63

<sup>29</sup> Byung-Yeon Kim, *Unveiling the North Korean Economy: Collapse and Transition* (CUP 2017)

<sup>30</sup> Ibid; Kyung Ae Park, 'Women and Social Change in South and North Korea: Marxist and Liberal Perspectives' (1992) *Women and International Development*, Working Paper no. 231, Michigan State University < <https://gencen.isp.msu.edu/files/4814/5202/7066/WP231.pdf> > accessed 25 January 2022

<sup>31</sup> Park (n 30)

<sup>32</sup> Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform* (Peterson Institute for International Economics 2007); Sandra Fahy, *Marching Through Suffering: Loss and Survival in North Korea* (Columbia University Press 2015); Benjamin Katzefz Silberstein, "Between the markets and the state: North Korea's fragile agriculture and food supply" in Adrian Buzo (ed), *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary North Korea* (Taylor & Francis Group 2020)

<sup>33</sup> Fahy (n 23); Silberstein (n 32)

<sup>34</sup> Lankov (n 1)

Farmer families started growing their own food in small hidden fields (sotoji) in the mountains. Because private production was illegal, only those living away from “major administrative and political centres” could expect to run such a field.<sup>35</sup> Urban populations, on the other hand, stumbled into private commerce, some call ‘grassroot capitalism.’<sup>36</sup> Starting as simple bartering of household items, soon private trade sprawled into large scale markets where women market vendors at the so-called jangmadang would produce, sell, and buy anything they could, for example street foods or sweets. Those with relatives abroad could smuggle in goods and thus become wholesale businesswomen, eventually becoming rich enough to expand investments into the restaurant business, transportation companies, or storage facilities. Although on paper all these ventures are either illegal or state-owned, in reality private business ownership became and to a large extent remains normal in the socialist state.

The irony in these developments is that those undermined, discriminated against, or denied opportunities under the old regime benefitted from their status and not only survived but thrived in the immediate aftermath of the famine. Women, absent from formal state-enforced labour, were able to find other ways to produce income. Men, on the other hand, faced prison time for absence from work, even if they did could not actually do any work when there, or had to monetarily pay for their absence. Because women were less valued in this strict patriarchy, their political misdoings were perceived as doing lesser harm or being a lesser threat. Similarly, those considered ‘hostile’ to the state, those with relatives abroad or other foreign backgrounds, had ties to the outside world, especially China, were able to utilise their connections to get business advice, create joint ventures, smuggle in goods, trade, and directly get capital. It is estimated that around 50,000 border crossings to China are made annually and that around 100,000 North Koreans live in China – business and smuggling networks are vast!<sup>37</sup> Additionally, many women seek to cross the border to China in search of short-term employment in restaurants or textile factories, either illegally or with work permits.<sup>38</sup> Other times they do so as contracted labourers by the North Korean state, in which case they are heavily surveyed and often withheld wages.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid 85

<sup>36</sup> Ibid

<sup>37</sup> Maximilian Ernst and Roman Jurowetzki, ‘Satellite Data, Women Defectors and Black Markets in North Korea: A Quantitative Study of the North Korean Informal Sector Using Night-Time Lights Satellite Imagery’ (2016) 12 *North Korean Review* 64

<sup>38</sup> Kim and Easley (n 16)

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

However, due to Covid-19 related border closures and tightened “draconian restrictions on the movement of female economic actors” including heightened border control and punishments, supply chain disruptions have occurred and female entrepreneurs are struggling to keep their businesses afloat.<sup>40</sup>

It was society’s least valued members, women and the ‘hostile’ class members, who pulled North Korea out of the famine and became some of its most economically valuable members. Still today, women are the de facto breadwinners of the North Korean households while men are expected to be formally employed for minimal wages. More than seventy percent of household income is generated by women working at *jangmadang*.<sup>41</sup> Hundreds of markets now exist all over the country and are almost exclusively run by women.

### 3. Sexual & Reproductive Violations

In order to run these markets, however, businesswomen must pay smuggling agents and state officers bribes to operate their businesses, which some defectors claim can be paid either by cash or by sexual favours.<sup>42</sup> In fact, sexual harassment and violence by state officials are rampant in these marketplaces and throughout North Korean society generally:

“Perpetrators of abuses against women traders include high-ranking party officials, managers at state-owned enterprises, and gate-keeper officials at the markets and on roads and check-points, such as police, *bowiseong* [secret police] agents, prosecutors, soldiers, and railroad inspectors on trains.”<sup>43</sup>

Women who refuse such advances may face violent beatings, detention, loss of business, or social stigma. It is easy to see that “pursuing income in public exposed [women] to violence.”<sup>44</sup>

Another source of sexual violence women face come from the home. As women run both the household and are family breadwinners, their power has increased significantly, leaving some

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<sup>40</sup> Kim and Easley (n 16)

<sup>41</sup> Kim (29) 92

<sup>42</sup> Human Rights Watch, “You Cry at Night but Don’t Know Why” - Sexual Violence against Women in North Korea’ (1 November 2018) < [www.hrw.org/report/2018/11/01/you-cry-night-dont-know-why/sexual-violence-against-women-north-korea](http://www.hrw.org/report/2018/11/01/you-cry-night-dont-know-why/sexual-violence-against-women-north-korea) > accessed 26 January 2022

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

men to feel insecure and experience a loss of identity which had historically been solidified through their formal labour. Wives face violence and rape in the home due to their husband's built-up insecurity and aggression because "emasculatation within their own households is now a fact of life."<sup>45</sup> Many scholars and researchers believe that domestic violence is a normal part of daily life in North Korea and that basically everyone is directly affected.<sup>46</sup> Further exacerbating the problem is the fact that there exists little to no legal protection for the victim or repercussions for the perpetrator – even "reporting domestic violence to the police is preposterous"<sup>47</sup> for most North Koreans. Women are both unable and ashamed to seek help, as North Korean patriarchal culture have led "North Koreans [to] believe that women deserve to be beaten by their husband."<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, there are no medical protocols for treating victims of domestic abuse or sexual assault. Medical staff have no training for such events and defectors who worked in the medical field in North Korea have purportedly never seen or heard of victims of rape receive medical treatment.<sup>49</sup> Women also lack the power and access to report abuses due to the lack of rule of law in North Korea, which does not seek to provide justice or help to victims but to implement the words of Kim Jong Un. The North Korean population lacks trust in authorities, and women even more so as they are often the objects of violence at the hands of authorities. Moreover, police (who are mostly men) do not consider sexual violence as a serious crime and therefore even if a woman were to report an incident to the police, repercussions would be non-existent.<sup>50</sup> The rampant and wide-spread sexual violence can in part also be attributed to the lack of sex education – due to which sexually transmitted diseases and infections are passed around without medical treatment and that "the first sexual experience for approximately a third of North Korean girls is forced."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Louisa Lim 'Out of Desperation, North Korean Women Become Breadwinners' *NPR* (28 December 2012)

<sup>46</sup> CoI (n 13); Andrei Lankov and Seok Hyang Kim, 'Useless Men, Entrepreneurial Women, and North Korea's Post-Socialism: Transformation of Gender Roles Since the Early 1990s' (2014) 20 *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 68; Sang Hee Bang, 'The Battered Wheel of the Revolution: Briefing Report of the Situation of Violence Against North Korean Women' (2011) NKHR Research Report 6; Jeong-ah Cho, Ji Sun Yee, Hee Young Yi, 'Daily Lives of North Korean Women and Gender Politics' (2020) Korean Institute for National Unification Study Series 20-03; Yang (n 24)

<sup>47</sup> Bang (n 46) 23

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>49</sup> HRW (n 42)

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>51</sup> Kim and Easley (n 16) 21

Conditions are even worse in detention centres, prisons, and labour camps. Although typically men and women live in separate facilities, guards overseeing female detainees are almost exclusively male.<sup>52</sup> There are no protections for women in these circumstances as sexual violence is a common strategy used by police, guards, secret police, state officials, or other authorities to invoke social control, gain confessions, or inflict punishments on inmates.<sup>53</sup> Many repatriated defectors and other prisoners having become pregnant either forcibly or by choice have been found to be subjected to forced abortions by North Korean authorities. These women often undergo such procedures without anaesthesia and do not receive proper medical care afterward, thus frequently suffering bleeding and infections among other complications from these procedures.<sup>54</sup> In some cases, abortions are induced through beatings or hard labour.<sup>55</sup> If the baby survives these attempts, the child is killed.<sup>56</sup> Women give birth in detention centres without medical assistance and are put to hard labour almost immediately after giving birth, many of whom die consequently.

Forced abortions and infanticide not only go against international law, such as CEDAW, the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, or International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, all of which the DPRK has signed and ratified, but also violate the DPRK's domestic law, specifically the Law on the Protection of the Rights of Women (2010). The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) see these actions as constituting blatant arbitrary deprivations of life, and as torture and other cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment among a slew of other human rights violations detailed in these documents.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, they are clear acts of discrimination against women and forms of gender-based violence.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid

<sup>53</sup> Ibid; CoI (n 13); Chol-Hwan Kang and Pierre Rigolout, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag* (Perseus Press 2000)

<sup>54</sup> Ibid; Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 'White Paper on North Korean Human Rights 2020' (Seoul 2021) <<https://en.nkdb.org/publication/?q=YToxOntzOjEyOjRZX13b3JkX3R5cGUiO3M6MzoiYWxsJit9&bmode=view&idx=7450369&t=board>> accessed 26 January 2022

<sup>55</sup> OHCHR, 'Human rights violations against women detained in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea' (July 2020) <[www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/KP/HR\\_Violations\\_against\\_Women\\_DPRK\\_EN.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/KP/HR_Violations_against_Women_DPRK_EN.pdf)> accessed 26 January 2022; Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, Submission to the CEDAW Committee for its 68th Session, <[https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/PRK/INT\\_CEDAW\\_NGO\\_PRK\\_29168\\_E.pdf](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/PRK/INT_CEDAW_NGO_PRK_29168_E.pdf)> accessed 26 January 2022

<sup>56</sup> Ibid

<sup>57</sup> Ibid



North Korean women who attempt to escape these conditions often do so with the help of brokers and human traffickers, which introduces them to other forms of abuse and discrimination.<sup>58</sup> Brokers and traffickers often take advantage of women trying to flee North Korea by coercion or as a form of payment for services. Because defections are illegal and China does not recognise North Korean as asylum seekers, if reported to either Chinese or North Korean forces, women face gruelling punishments or death, and their families will likely also be punished for their attempt to escape.<sup>59</sup> Women may not have a choice but to comply. When brought to China by brokers/traffickers, North Korean women are often sold as brides to Chinese men, where the one-child policy has left a millions of men unable to find wives due to large-scale female infanticide relating to favouritism over boys.<sup>60</sup> Some may be unwillingly forced into these marriages while others make deals with brokers to get married upon arrival. In these marriages, North Korean women are once again highly vulnerable to abuse and social stigma.<sup>61</sup> Other times, the unions can be mutually beneficial and joyful: the Chinese man get a wife and the North Korean woman gets security and a standard of living previously unachievable for her.<sup>62</sup> North Korean women, upon arrival to China, may, however, be forced into prostitution or other sex work, domestic servitude, forced agricultural labour, or into work in nightclubs or karaoke bars.<sup>63</sup>

One last peculiar form of gender-based violence and discrimination of note here is the infamous Pleasure Squad (kippumjo), a group of young women hand-picked by the leadership to serve as personal entertainers, servants, and sex slaves for Kim Jong Un and his closest comrades. Picked up by officials or recommended by teachers or parents, young virgin girls, typically between thirteen and sixteen years of age, are chosen based on their looks to train vigorously for years in singing, dancing, massaging, and manners among other activities associated with their future employment.<sup>64</sup> Being selected can be great opportunity for women to advance to higher status

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<sup>58</sup> HRW (n 42); CoI (n 16)

<sup>59</sup> For biographical recollection of such incidents, see Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 'Lives for Sale: Personal Accounts of Women Fleeing North Korea to China' (2009) 28-50 < [www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Lives\\_for\\_Sale.pdf](http://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Lives_for_Sale.pdf) > accessed 26 January 2022; or any number of defector autobiographies, such as Yeonmi Park and Maryanne Vollers, *In Order to Live* (Penguin 2015), or Hyonseo Lee and David John, *The Girl With Seven Names* (William Collins 2016).

<sup>60</sup> See Mei Fong, *One Child: The Story of China's Most Radical Experiment* (Mariner Books 2016)

<sup>61</sup> Kathleen Davis, 'Brides, Bruises, and the Border: the Trafficking of North Korean Women into China' (2006) 26 SAIS Review of International Affairs 1; HRNK (n 59); Melanie Kirkpatrick, *Escape from North Korea: the Untold Story of Asia's Underground Railroad* (Encounter Books 2012)

<sup>62</sup> Kirkpatrick (n 61)

<sup>63</sup> U.S. Department of State, '2021 Trafficking in Persons Report' (June 2021) < [www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report](http://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report) > accessed 26 January 2022

<sup>64</sup> Jin-Sung Jang, *Dear Leader: Poet, Spy, Escapee – a Look Inside North Korea* (37Ink 2014)

and earn a considerable income.<sup>65</sup> After the end of their employment in their mid-20s, these women often go on to marry government higher-ups or other important North Korean figures.<sup>66</sup> However, services the leadership is no easy task and is in violation of all the women's rights documents previously mentioned: humiliation, sexual harassment, rape, forced labour, physical punishments, no right to privacy, and immediate execution should one attempt to escape, among many other crimes are inflicted onto the women serving in the kippumjo.<sup>67</sup>

#### 4. Women in the Military

Since early 2015, women have had mandatory military service of between three and six years, while men have had to serve ten years. Previously women's enlistment has been voluntary but following low birth rates and a loss of 200,000-3.5 million people during the 90s' famine, the government sought to increase numbers in its "million man army,"<sup>68</sup> which now totals at nearly 1.3 million active personnel, i.e. roughly five per cent of the total North Korean population.<sup>69</sup> Military personnel, like most other North Koreans, face subpar living conditions including poor nutrition, lacking medical services, and subjugation to cruel and unusual punishments. Women serving in the military, however, face even more challenges based on their gender. For one, in addition to physical training, though slightly shorter than men's, military women must also cook and clean alongside other daily chores which men are exempt from.<sup>70</sup>

However, the two most alarming forms of gender-based discrimination military women face are sexual and reproductive violence and harassment, and poor sanitary conditions. A former soldier and current defector estimated that up to seventy percent of women in the military face some sort

<sup>65</sup> Bradley Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty* (St. Martin's Griffin 2006)

<sup>66</sup> Ibid

<sup>67</sup> Ibid; Jang (n 64); Kenji Fujimoto, 'I was Kim Jong Il's Cook: True Story from the Dear Leader's onetime chef' *The Atlantic* (Washington D.C, January/February 2004) < [www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2004/01/i-was-kim-jong-ils-cook/308837](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2004/01/i-was-kim-jong-ils-cook/308837) > accessed 27 January 2022; Sunny Lee, 'Pleasure squad' defector sheds light on life of Kim Jong Il' *The National* (Abu Dhabi, 28 January 2010) < [www.thenationalnews.com/world/asia/pleasure-squad-defector-sheds-light-on-life-of-kim-jong-il-1.481988/#full](http://www.thenationalnews.com/world/asia/pleasure-squad-defector-sheds-light-on-life-of-kim-jong-il-1.481988/#full) > accessed 27 January 2022; Voice of North Korea by Yeonmi Park, 'I was selected to the Pleasure Squad in North Korea, but I chose to escape to freedom' [video interview with Cherie Yang] (20 April 2021) < [www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qZLJ8\\_jOyw&t=61s&ab\\_channel=VoiceofNorthKoreabyYeonmiPark](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qZLJ8_jOyw&t=61s&ab_channel=VoiceofNorthKoreabyYeonmiPark) > accessed 27 January 2022; Dimple, 'I was a member of 'the Pleasure Squad' in North Korea' [video interview with Han Seo Hui] (5 March 2021) < [www.youtube.com/watch?v=N2ZdzVf10YE&ab\\_channel=DIMPLE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N2ZdzVf10YE&ab_channel=DIMPLE) > accessed 27 January 2022

<sup>68</sup> Choi Song Min, 'North Korea introduces 'mandatory military service for women', *The Guardian* (New York, 31 January 2015) < [www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/31/north-korea-mandatory-military-service-women](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/31/north-korea-mandatory-military-service-women) > accessed 26 January 2022

<sup>69</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, 'North Korea's Military Capabilities' (22 December 2021)

< [www.cfr.org/backgrounder/north-korea-nuclear-weapons-missile-tests-military-capabilities](http://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/north-korea-nuclear-weapons-missile-tests-military-capabilities) > accessed 26 January 2022

<sup>70</sup> Mohan (n 11)

of sexual misconduct acted upon them.<sup>71</sup> This may come from officials or other authority figures who threaten to discharge a female soldier if she did not comply, an act which is regarded as highly shameful in North Korean society and one which could easily bar her from many employment and marriage opportunities. The defector also detailed accounts of forced abortions resulting from rape performed with anaesthesia. As seen in the above discussion, sexual violence is prolific throughout North Korean society and it does not end with conscription.

Access to sanitary products, however, may be even more difficult in the military, where women are provided with one sanitary pad year made from gauze which must be washed and reused. Desperate women have come up with creative solutions to this problem, such as using footwraps as sanitary pads. Maintaining good hygiene is next to impossible in the military, as washing up is done with an outdoor hose. Another defector, however, notes that “after six months to a year of service, we wouldn't menstruate anymore because of malnutrition and the stressful environment,”<sup>72</sup> so the need for sanitary products may lessen for some. In addition to all the other difficulties women face in North Korean society, they must also endure hard conditions in state-mandated military service.

## 5. Women in Politics

The extreme patriarchy noted throughout this chapter of course also translates into the political arena where women have rarely been seen a part of any decision-making or governance activities. Some historically notable exceptions to this, however, being members of the Kim family and their closest associates. Two notable “revolutionary immortal[s]” and communist figures subject to periodic celebrations include the mother of Kim Il Sung, Kang Ban Sok, known as the Mother of Choson, and his wife, Kim Jong-suk, ‘Mother of the Revolution’, who is recorded as providing leadership to North Koreans by e.g. giving on the spot guidance and public campaigns on women’s rights.<sup>73</sup> Kim Il Sung’s second wife, Kim Song Ae, also held political

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<sup>71</sup> The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, ‘The Shocking Life of a North Korean Female Soldier: the Reality of North Korea’ [video interview with Jennifer Kim] (29 November 2021) < [www.youtube.com/watch?v=MCsbikKfWL](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MCsbikKfWL) > accessed 26 January 2022

<sup>72</sup> Mohan (n 11)

<sup>73</sup> Paul French, *North Korea: State of Paranoia* (Zed Books 2014) 97; Kyung Ae Park, ‘Women and Revolution in North Korea’ (1992-1993) 65 *Pacific Affairs* 527, 531; Won-hong Kim, *Women of North Korea: a Closer Look at Everyday Life* (Ministry of Unification, 2014)

power by her appointment as the Chairman of the Democratic Women's Union, and "held meetings for foreign female delegates."<sup>74</sup>

Women's political position in the early years of the DPRK was a result of the Soviet inspired ideas on women during and immediately following the North Korean revolution (1945-1950) and Korean War (1950-1953). During this time, women gained rights previously denied to them by Japanese imperial forces including the right to education, to own property, and to political participation, thus incorporating women into the public sphere.<sup>75</sup> The Democratic Women's Union of North Korea (hereto forth 'Women's Union'), as it is known today, was also created under the Korean Worker's Party (KWP) in 1945 with the aim to incorporate women into nation-building, as well as to promote and implement women's rights policies.<sup>76</sup> Although "it was a common assumption in the Kim Il Sung era that North Korean women should not aspire to have careers in politics or administration," thanks to these developments, by 1972, more than twenty percent of seats at the Supreme People's Assembly was occupied by women and a third of all deputies at lower levels of government by 1976.<sup>77</sup> The highest positions continued to be dominated by men, however. From the late 1970s through to the 2000s, these strives for women's equality and women's political incorporation halted. Kang Ban Sok and Kim Jong-suk began to be propagandised not only as radical revolutionary fighters but as devoted mothers and wives to Kim Il Sung in an attempt to solidify "reverence for the [Kim] family."<sup>78</sup> Women were encouraged to return solely to the domestic parameters of the household.

Since Kim Jong Un's rise to power in 2011, more and more women are being seen promoted to powerful positions. The two women in the highest positions in North Korean government, however, continue to be members of the Kim family – Kim Jong Un's sister, the Deputy Department Director of the Publicity and Information Department Kim Yo-jong, and his wife, the First Lady Ri Sol-ju. In a major departure from his father, Kim Jong Un sought to incorporate his wife into the public political arena, first by formally introducing her to the nation (which his

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<sup>74</sup> Darcie Draudt, 'The Rise of Women Leaders in North Korea' *38North* (Washington, 25 September 2020) < [https://www.38north.org/2020/09/ddraudt092520/#\\_ftn5](https://www.38north.org/2020/09/ddraudt092520/#_ftn5) > accessed 25 January 2022

<sup>75</sup> Park (n 73)

<sup>76</sup> Ibid; Kim (n 73)

<sup>77</sup> Park (n 73) 18

<sup>78</sup> Kim (n 73) 9

father had never done) and then by appointing her to a diplomatic position in 2018.<sup>79</sup> Ri Sol-ju has accompanied her husband in meetings with world leaders, partook in inter-Korea summits (the first time a First Lady of North Korea has done so), has met with high-level US and other foreign diplomats, and has attended numerous diplomatic events since.<sup>80</sup>

Other women have also been taking up important positions in the higher echelons of North Korean government recently. Choe Son Hui for example has been the First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs since 2018 and was notably a part of the Six Party Talks.<sup>81</sup> Kim Song Hye works as the head of the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of Korea and is often seen in public events.<sup>82</sup> Hyon Song Wol, the leader of the Moranbong Band and member of the Samjiyon Orchestra, is currently the Vice Director of the Propaganda and often partakes in inter-Korean events.<sup>83</sup> Her superior, is none other than Kim Yo-jong, who has vast delegated responsibilities in the Politburo and regarding US and ROK relations – and during Kim Jong Un’s public absence in spring of 2021, she was suspected of becoming his de facto heir, an event which demonstrates her central role to North Korean governance and politics.<sup>84</sup>

Despite a handful of women occupying such high government positions, currently only up to 18% Parliament seats are held by women and women’s participation in politics continues to be limited.<sup>85</sup> The few examples given above, in fact, are exceptions. For a woman to be considered for a high position, she must possess the correct social status: the right *songbun*<sup>86</sup> and family ties to the leadership or other elites. Even then, one must have high credentials and be handpicked by the leader.

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<sup>79</sup> Dasl Yoon and Timothy Martin, ‘Ri Sol Ju: What We Know Ab out Kim Jong Un’s Wife’ *The Wall Street Journal* (New York, 17 February 2021) < [www.wsj.com/articles/kim-jong-un-wife-ri-sol-ju-11613570645](https://www.wsj.com/articles/kim-jong-un-wife-ri-sol-ju-11613570645) > accessed 25 January 2022

<sup>80</sup> Ibid

<sup>81</sup> Draudt (n 74)

<sup>82</sup> Ibid

<sup>83</sup> Ibid

<sup>84</sup> Jake Kwon and Helen Regan, ‘Kim Yo Jong, sister of North Korean leader, promoted to nation’s top ruling body’ *CNN* (Atlanta, 30 September 2021) < <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/30/asia/kim-yo-jong-promoted-leadership-intl-hnk/index.html> > accessed 25 January 2022; BBC, ‘Kim Yo-jong: North Korea’s most powerful woman and heir apparent?’ *BBC* (London, 16 June 202) < [www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-36210695](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-36210695) > accessed 25 January 2022

<sup>85</sup> Council of Foreign Relations, Women’s Power Index 2021 < [www.cfr.org/article/womens-power-index](https://www.cfr.org/article/womens-power-index) > accessed 26 January 2022

<sup>86</sup> *Songbun* is a North Korean social classification system which places all citizens into three basic categories (with subcategories) based on their family’s perceived loyalty to the Kim family. The *songbun* system determines one’s life opportunities such as the place of residence, how much food is received by the state, or whom one can marry. The system intersects with gender-based discrimination and has been complicated by marketisation. For more on the functions and impacts of *songbun*, see Robert Collins, *Marked for Life: Songbun, North Korea’s Social Classification System* (Committee for Human Rights in North Korea 2012)

Women who are unable to participate in leadership positions can, however, enter lower politics as *inminban* officials.<sup>87</sup> These are exclusively women, usually middle-aged, who serve the KWP as neighbourhood managers and watchdogs and are thus an important part of the regime's security apparatus especially in terms of social control and surveillance. They monitor and report on activities within their sector, typically a small neighbourhood or an apartment building, regarding political misbehaviour or criminal activities. *Inminban* officials also, however, take care of lower forms of government functions such as waste removal, recording visitors, and household and electronic checks (to make sure there is no foreign media present). They report to an assigned 'resident police officer' to whom all suspicious activities are disclosed. With these activities, women can participate in important ways to state functions even if outside higher decision-making capabilities.

## Conclusion

It is clear that women's rights are near non-existent in North Korea. Despite women's equal rights being enshrined in the DPRK Constitution, a rather progressive move at the time, and numerous other domestic laws outlining women's rights, the domestic legal system of the DPRK cannot guarantee them or access to legal measures for justice. International treaties and agreements regarding women's rights or human rights generally are not adhered to and have had little real effect. The totalitarian state and patriarchal society do not value women as independent and equal economic, political, or social actors, seeing women solely either as mothers or wives through their sexual and reproductive roles. Discrimination against women is used as a tool by the government for political means to prevent dissidence.<sup>88</sup> It is also a social tool to maintain the status quo which benefits men. Yet, North Korean women occupy essential positions in contemporary North Korean society as breadwinners, military staff, actors in governance, among many others.

Some international NGOs regularly attempt to improve conditions inside North Korea but are limited by issues of funding, sanctions restrictions, and politics. Moreover, the violence

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<sup>87</sup> Andrei Lankov, "North Koreans Turned on but Tuned Out" (2006) 1 *Asia Policy* 95; Andrei Lankov, *North of the DMZ: Essays on Daily Life in North Korea* (McFarland 2014); Lankov (n 17)

<sup>88</sup> CoI (n 16) 15

experienced by a third of all North Korean women, perhaps more, is morally abhorrent and should in and of itself be enough to push international powers to step in. To their credit, agreements such as CEDAW have been pushed on North Korea but their implementation is severely lacking. There is a gap between international law and the reality of women's rights. New strategies are needed to help the women of North Korea escape the prolific gender-based discrimination and violence they endure.

## Chapter Four – Nordic-DPRK Relations

The Nordics (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden) have a special relationship with the DPRK. Jointly agreeing to recognise the DPRK in 1973, the Nordics were the first non-Eastern European countries to do so, with Sweden taking the lead. Although the Soviet satellites and other communist Eastern European nations have had the strongest ties to North Korea resulting from their socialist alliances and a strong dependence on Soviet resources. However, due to the Nordics' leftist movements in the late 20th century, their relationships with socialist states and international socialist movements grew. This has resulted in a relatively long political and economic history between the DPRK and the Nordics'. Even after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Nordics have invested in the DPRK through aid and development programmes. The Nordics' humanitarian aid are the largest in the EU, their NGOs have the longest history in North Korea, and the Swedish embassy is one of largest and longest running ones in Pyongyang. This chapter will first present a brief history of Finnish and Swedish relations with the DPRK and then provide a brief overview of EU-DPRK relations in order to provide a historical context for current relations and future possibilities for Nordic engagement with the DPRK.

### 4.1 Finland

#### a. Political and economic relations

Finland recognised the DPRK and ROK simultaneously 13 April 1973 and established diplomatic relations with the former 1 June 1973, thus becoming the second non-Eastern European country to establish relations with the DPRK. Relations started warmly and with economic emphasis by the establishment of a trade bureau in Helsinki the same year.<sup>89</sup> Most significantly, in 1974, the DPRK bought a paper factory worth 105 million marks (roughly €106 million in today's currency without interest).<sup>90</sup> To date, the DPRK has not yet paid for the factory, although made efforts in the beginning to pay the interest. This left a permanent stain on the two's relations from the get-go. Finland had lost trust in the DPRK's ability to pay back their debts and thus would refuse any future major economic dealings without upfront payment, for

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<sup>89</sup> Cable from Dutch Embassy in Warsaw to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'North Korea' (9 March 1973) retrieved from the Wilson Centre Digital Archive < <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/cable-dutch-embassy-warsaw-ministry-foreign-affairs-north-korea> > accessed 4.1.2023

<sup>90</sup> YLE, 'North Korea owes Finland million in decades-old debt' (Helsinki, 29 April 2017) < [https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/north\\_korea\\_owes\\_finland\\_millions\\_in\\_decades-old\\_debt/9588973](https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/north_korea_owes_finland_millions_in_decades-old_debt/9588973) > accessed 4.1.2023



example, the North Korean request for Finnish engineers to help construct a pulp factory in 1978 was agreed to on the basis that the engineers' salaries be paid in advance.<sup>91</sup>

In 1976, the Norwegian police uncovered a network of North Korean illicit drug and alcohol smuggling activities in the Nordics. In Finland, over 5,000 bottles of various liquors, wines, and beer had been reportedly sold to the DPRK embassy, most of which was suspected to have been sold on the black market.<sup>92</sup> The high alcohol and tobacco taxes in the Nordics made such black market sales profitable and these profits were then brought back into the DPRK.<sup>93</sup> Although diplomatic staff and other North Korean officials vehemently denied that the DPRK central government was in any way involved, it is suspected that these activities were (and still are) coordinated by the government – even Chinese diplomats at the time expressed their scepticism of this explanation.<sup>94</sup> In Finland, this smuggling crisis culminated in a major police operation and the expulsion of four North Korean diplomats and the chargé d'affaires in Helsinki in October 1976.<sup>95</sup> Although relations were soured, and the DPRK's reputation plummeting, this did not hinder the appointment of the first North Korean ambassador to Finland in 1978, Han Jo-Jung.<sup>96</sup> However, Finnish diplomats began to refuse to work at the trade bureau in North Korea (opened 1975), which made running diplomatic activities through Pyongyang difficult.<sup>97</sup>

The DPRK embassy in Helsinki was one of North Korea's priority embassies as it was through the Helsinki embassy that the DPRK ran much of its relations with the rest of Europe and the EU. Kim Il Sung considered Finland's role in bringing up and defending Korean issues at the

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<sup>91</sup> Telegram to the Minister of Foreign Affairs from the Ambassador in Finland, "Report on Dialogue with Vainiomaki, Ex-Commercial Attaché in Pyongyang" (Helsinki, 28 June 1978) retrieved from the Wilson Centre Digital Archive < <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/telegram-minister-foreign-affairs-ambassador-finland-report-dialogue-vainiomaki-ex> > accessed 4.1.2023

<sup>92</sup> "Memorandum from Oy Alko Ab to Detective Inspector Veijalainen" (Helsinki, 21 October 1976) retrieved from the Wilson Centre Digital Archive < <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/memorandum-oy-alko-ab-detective-inspector-veijalainen> > accessed 4.1.2023

<sup>93</sup> Lankov (n 1)

<sup>94</sup> Jaakko Kaurinkoski, "Diplomatic meetings: Beijing, Wednesday" (Helsinki, 27 October 1976) retrieved from the Wilson Centre Digital Archive < <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/jaakko-kaurinkoski-diplomaticmeetings-beijing-wednesday> > accessed 4.1.2023.

<sup>95</sup> Helsingin Sanomat, "UPI: North Korea appointed ambassador to Finland" (Helsinki, 17 March 1978) retrieved from the Wilson Centre Digital Archive < <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/press-clippings-helsingin-sanomat-and-iltasanomat-concerning-north-korean-ambassador> > accessed 4.1.2023; Annex 1 to 'The Embassy of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in Helsinki; Measures in Connection with Activities of Embassy Personnel' (Helsinki, 21 October 1976) retrieved from the Wilson Centre Digital Archive < <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/annex-1-embassy-democratic-peoples-republic-korea-helsinki-measures-connection-activities> > accessed 4.1.2023

<sup>96</sup> Helsingin Sanomat *ibid*

<sup>97</sup> Report on Dialogue with Vainiomaki, Ex-Commercial Attaché in Pyongyang (n 91)

UN as Kim Il Sung exchanged personal correspondence with President Kekkonen. DPRK representatives met numerous times with Finnish officials and delegates in Pyongyang and Helsinki, starting in 1972 when the first Finnish Parliamentary visit to North Korea took place. However, the papermill debt and North Korea's increasingly omnipresent cult of personality of Kim Il Sung strained relations. The debt had come to define the relationship between Finland and the DPRK: an attempt at friendship and economic mutual benefit turned into a stalemate with the Finns losing trust and expressing disdain for the DPRK, who in turn desperately tried to maintain an air of friendship.

Kim Il Sung himself expressed his satisfaction with the papermill during a 1984 Finnish visit to Pyongyang. He had even "requested that this message be conveyed to the Finnish president, parliament, and the people of Finland," recalled the delegate representative, Erkki Pystynen.<sup>98</sup> Kim Il Sung had also conducted interviews with Finnish media outlets and was even the recipient of the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Parliamentary Medal of Finland in 1981. Finnish delegates were also known to attend Kim Il Sung's birthday celebrations and give gifts more expensive than their other Nordic peers.<sup>99</sup> In 1983, however, the North Korean ambassador to Finland attempted to bribe the Finnish prime minister at the time, resulting in a change of ambassador to Kim Pyong-Il, Kim Il Sung's son, in a show of good faith and signal that North Korea considered relations with Finland important.<sup>100</sup> Throughout the 1980s, Finnish and North Korean diplomats, officials, and businesspeople visited each other's countries semi-regularly and small scale business deals were made.

In 1989, the 13<sup>th</sup> World Festival of Youth and Students was held in Pyongyang with over 15,000 participants attending from 180 countries, including Finland. However, Finnish and Danish students decided to hold banners advocating for human rights in protest of North Korea's refusal to let Amnesty International attend the event and for supporting the Tiananmen Square massacre.<sup>101</sup> North Korean police confiscated the banners, which resulted in the Finnish

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<sup>98</sup> Suomi-Korea Seura ry, 'Presidentti Kim Il Sung ja suomalaiset' (Helsinki, n.d.) < [www.suomikorea.net/102](http://www.suomikorea.net/102) > accessed 16.10.2021

<sup>99</sup> Ibid

<sup>100</sup> Unto Hämäläinen, 'Pohjois-Korean johtaja lähetti poikansa lähettilääksi Suomeen Kim Pyong Il jättää valtuuskirjansa Ahtisaarelle' *YLE* (Helsinki, 13 March 1994) < [www.hs.fi/kotimaa/art-2000003316077.html](http://www.hs.fi/kotimaa/art-2000003316077.html) > accessed 16.10.2021

<sup>101</sup> Jim Abrams, "European Protest Treatment at North Korean Festival" *AP News* (New York, 2 July 1989) < <https://apnews.com/article/dda60f75aaa1d048b56d08028c5d12bb> > accessed 5.1.2023

delegation to withdraw from the week-long festival altogether. In a surprising development, North Korea issued an apology and let two Amnesty representatives attend, which led to the reversal of Finland's earlier decision. This incident showcases the importance North Korea placed on its relations with Nordic countries and was willing to compromise, although to a small extent, to continue these friendships.

Finland and the DPRK continued their odd relationship throughout the 1990s, with occasional visits. The death of Kim Il Sung in 1994 was marked by Finnish delegates shows of respect at the DPRK embassy in Helsinki. Economic cooperation around this time dwindled as North Korea began to experience a devastating famine. Their representatives asked for food aid from the international community and expressed their dire situation to Finnish counterparts, stating that the food aid already received is not enough. Due to the economic situation, the DPRK embassy in Helsinki closed down in 1998 and it maintained representation through the embassy in Stockholm. Relations diminished significantly. Finnish-DPRK interactions took place primarily through humanitarian aid which was run through NGOs like Fida International and the Red Cross (see below).

North Korea's nuclear programme and missile testing began in the early 1990s and escalated in the early 2000s. They caught the attention of the international community who responded by economic sanctions on North Korea, decreasing what and how much could be exported to North Korea. The first sanctions mostly focused on luxury goods and travel restrictions on a few individuals but increased little by little throughout the years to include more travel bans and restrictions on any materials that could be used by the North Koreans to develop their weapons and nuclear programmes. This effectively also decreased and eventually halted practically all Finnish-DPRK economic engagement; Trade between the two "dwindled to practically nothing in the 2000s" totalling less than €10,000 annually, with dental equipment being the main export.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Mika Mäkeläinen, "North Korea owes Finland millions in decades-old debt" *YLE* (Helsinki, 29 April 2017) < <https://yle.fi/a/3-9588973> > accessed 6.1.2023

In 2007, following an incident at the Finnish border where North Korean diplomats, missing the required diplomatic documentation, were denied entry and upon refusal to cooperate, were teargassed by Finnish forces.<sup>103</sup> North Korea issued a diplomatic note of dissatisfaction, accusing Finland of human rights violations.<sup>104</sup> It led to no action on either part, however, but the incident deteriorated DPRK-Finnish relations. Nonetheless, most recently in 2018 Finland hosted US, ROK, and DPRK diplomats for semi-official so-called 1.5-track talks where issues regarding denuclearisation and inter-Korean reconciliation were discussed.<sup>105</sup> Although the talks amounted to nothing, they still reflect Finland's strategic geopolitical role as an in-between for Eastern and Western powers, particularly between Asia and Europe.

Little contact between Finland and the DPRK has occurred as of late and since the DPRK's famine and nuclear programme coming to the attention of the international community, Finland has been slowly retreating from Northeast Asia. Instead, it has largely delegated its international relations to NGOs, UN agencies, and the EU. Additionally, the 1976 smuggling crisis, the unpaid papermill debt, the 1983 bribery attempt, and the 2007 incident have all culminated in a significant lack of trust towards North Korea and have resulted in a general disinterest to engage with North Korea now or in the future unless the regime goes through significant changes.

#### b. Aid and Development

Finland's aid to North Korea primarily occurs through multilateral channels, namely UN agencies and NGOs. It sponsors NGO programmes working in North Korea, the most long-running, Fida International, and perhaps most well-known of which, the Finnish Red Cross, are briefed below.

Fida International, a Finnish Pentecostal charity, was one of Europe's longest-running charities working in North Korea. Since 1998, Fida has worked with healthcare and food security until its retreat in 2019 following tightening sanctions against North Korea. Its main programmes

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<sup>103</sup> Pyry Lapintie, 'Väkivaltaiset korealaiskuriirit poistettiin junasta Kouvolassa' *YLE* (Helsinki, 17 February 2007) < [www.hs.fi/kotimaa/art-2000004462151.html](http://www.hs.fi/kotimaa/art-2000004462151.html) > accessed 16/10/21; Tommi Nieminen, 'Pohjois-Korea jätti Suomelle nootin' *YLE* (Helsinki, 25 February 2007) < [www.hs.fi/kotimaa/art-2000004464085.html](http://www.hs.fi/kotimaa/art-2000004464085.html) > accessed 16.10.2021

<sup>104</sup> Ibid

<sup>105</sup> Yonhap News Agency, 'N.K. diplomat heads to Finland for semiofficial talks with Washington, Seoul' (Seoul, 18 March 2018) < <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20180318001400315> > accessed 16.10.2021

involved agricultural development projects to introduce potatoes to the North Korean diet as a way to alleviate the country's decades' long problem with under- and malnutrition.<sup>106</sup> Fida also ran and supported a range of medical services from cardiology to radiology and trained local medical staff to create better diagnostic strategies. All these, and other, projects were run under the mandate of the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. They were set to continue until 2021 contributing €414,000 annually to food security and healthcare development in the DPRK.<sup>107</sup> US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) issued new sanctions on Chinese shipping companies, effectively blocking humanitarian aid into North Korea despite specifically claiming intentions to not hamper deliveries.<sup>108</sup> The OFAC sanctions, however, made it impossible for Fida to continue its operations as it depended on Chinese deliveries.<sup>109</sup>

Many other organisations with Finnish ties work in or with North Korea. The Finnish Red Cross also has had operations in the DPRK to prevent flooding and drought damage. Its priorities lie in "emergency and community-based health programmes."<sup>110</sup> Until 2017, the Finnish Red Cross led an initiative to enhance capacity building in rural North Korea in response to flooding and droughts, to which the EU contributed €300,000 in 2016.<sup>111</sup> The Finnish branch of the IFRC also contributes monetarily through its disaster funds by e.g. donating €50,000 in the DPRK's train disaster in which an explosion inside a railway station killed 161 persons and injured a further 1300.<sup>112</sup> What role the Finnish branches of such organisations play in North Korean efforts is difficult to ascertain.

The same can be said for other international organisations with branches in Finland, such as World Vision who has a specific North Korea programme focussing on providing food security and access to clean water.<sup>113</sup> Because these international organisations are under an umbrella

<sup>106</sup> Katriina Pajari, 'Pohjois-Korean ainoa suomalais-perhe auttaa paikallisia viljelemään perunaa – tällaista on joen-suulaisten Pitkästen elämä suljetussa diktatuurissa' *Helsingin Sanomat* (Helsinki, 8 May 2017) < [www.hs.fi/ulkomaat/art-2000005200830.html](http://www.hs.fi/ulkomaat/art-2000005200830.html) > accessed 14.10.2021

<sup>107</sup> Ibid

<sup>108</sup> Oliver Hotham, 'Citing pressure from U.S. sanctions, Finnish NGO ends aid work in North Korea' *NK News* (Seoul, 11 June 2019) < [www.nknews.org/2019/06/finnish-ngo-to-end-north-korean-aid-work-over-u-s-sanctions-pressure](http://www.nknews.org/2019/06/finnish-ngo-to-end-north-korean-aid-work-over-u-s-sanctions-pressure) > accessed 14.10.2021

<sup>109</sup> Ibid

<sup>110</sup> International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, *Democratic People's Republic of Korea IFRC Country Office 2021* (2021) < <https://adore.ifrc.org/Download.aspx?FileId=385486> > accessed 10.10.2021, 4

<sup>111</sup> European Commission, 'North Korea' Factsheet, European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (2020) < [https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/asia-and-pacific/north-korea\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/asia-and-pacific/north-korea_en) > accessed 14/10/21

<sup>112</sup> YLE, 'Finnish Red Cross Helps North Korean Victims' (Helsinki, 26 April 2004) < <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-5157084> > accessed 14.10.2021

<sup>113</sup> World Vision, 'Our Work' (n.d.) < [www.wvi.org/north-korea/our-work](http://www.wvi.org/north-korea/our-work) > accessed 10.10.2021

organisation with various missions, it is impossible to determine exactly the contributions of the Nordic branches are. This is not to minimise the work of the Nordic branches or of any NGO with North Korea, on the contrary, Nordic states, with their established commitments to civil society and encouragement of grassroots activism, should increase these commitments explicitly to organisations working with North Korea.

While on the UN Human Rights Council 2022-2024, Finland has the opportunity to do so and to bring up North Korean human rights issues and reinvigorate its aid and development policy towards North Korea. Now is an especially important time to do so as experts predict a forthcoming second North Korean famine and the unreported but assumed devastation Covid-19 has had on the country.<sup>114</sup> Even though the DPRK has refused foreign aid due to fears of contamination, such aid opportunities should be left open and available for the North Koreans to obtain should their humanitarian situation worsen. Its agenda of “a diverse world, universal human rights”<sup>115</sup> emphasise foreign and security policy based on human rights, multilateral cooperation, environmentalism, and pandemic management especially regarding women and children. Under these umbrella objectives, any development aid is welcome and past experiences with Fida for example have shown great potential and impact in these fields. Finland has already granted €70 million this year in humanitarian assistance to various projects and organisations, such as Save The Children, Finnish Red Cross, and World Vision Finland.<sup>116</sup> Some of these organisations aid North Korea, and this line of funding should be continued alongside logistical support.

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<sup>114</sup> BBC, 'Kim Jong Un warns of North Korea crisis similar to deadly 90s famine' (London, 9 April 2021) < [www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56685356](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56685356) > accessed 10.10.2021; Frank Smith, 'Reports of people 'starving' as N Korea struggles to feed itself' Al Jazeera (Doha, 1 July 2021) < [www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/1/humanitarian-disaster-looms-in-north-korea](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/1/humanitarian-disaster-looms-in-north-korea) > accessed 10.10.2021

<sup>115</sup> Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 'Finland in the Human Rights Council in 2022-2024' (n.d.) < <https://um.fi/hrc> > accessed 10.10.2021

<sup>116</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'In the first half of 2021, Finland grants nearly EUR 70 million in humanitarian assistance to strengthen food security, support refugees and promote the rights of vulnerable people' (Helsinki, 26 March 2021) < <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/in-the-first-half-of-2021-finland-grants-nearly-eur-70-million-in-humanitarian-assistance-to-strengthen-food-security-support-refugees-and-promote-the-rights-of-vulnerable-people> > accessed 10.10.2021

## 4.2 Sweden

### a. Political Relations

Sweden took part in the Korean War 1950-1953 through its branch of the Red Cross. IT was also a member state of the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission overseeing the conflict. Ever since the 1953 armistice agreement, Swedish observers have manned the DMZ. Sweden was the first non-Eastern European country to recognise and establish diplomatic relations with the DPRK 7 April 1973 as well as the first European country to establish an embassy in Pyongyang in 1975. Although Sweden temporarily pulled its staff from its Pyongyang embassy in August 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it remains operational by locals.<sup>117</sup> The embassy is one of the largest and also has consular representation for Australian, Canadian, Italian, Spanish, Nordic, and US interests. Sweden has often worked as an intermediary between quarrelling countries, as has been the case for example between the UK and Iran throughout the two's history of tumultuous relations.

Sweden's embassies are often appointed as protecting powers, which was the case when the aforementioned powers entrusted this status on the Swedish embassy in Pyongyang in 1995 upon request by the US government, a status that remains today. This means that in cases involving nationals of these countries in North Korea, the Swedish embassy in Pyongyang works in their interest. This happened for example in the infamous cases regarding North Korea's detainment of Australian student Alek Sigley in 2019,<sup>118</sup> US student Otto Warmbier in 2016,<sup>119</sup> and US journalists Laura Ling and Euna Lee in 2009.<sup>120</sup> Although not responsible for negotiating their release, due to "the limited nature of the protective power role," the Swedish embassy worked as an invaluable life-line to the detained, providing information, medication, and communication with the outside world.<sup>121</sup> As a protecting power, "it is only natural that Sweden seeks to

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<sup>117</sup> Reuters, 'Sweden temporarily pulls its diplomats out of North Korea' (18 August 2020) < [www.reuters.com/article/us-sweden-northkorea-idUSKCN25E1JS](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-sweden-northkorea-idUSKCN25E1JS) > accessed 22.10.2021

<sup>118</sup> BBC News, 'Alek Sigley: Why Sweden helped free Australian student in N Korea' (4 July 2019) < [www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48864807](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48864807) > accessed 22.10.2021

<sup>119</sup> Reuters, 'Swedish diplomat visits U.S. student detained in North Korea' (London, 8 March 2016) < [www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa-student-idUSKCN0W92G7](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa-student-idUSKCN0W92G7) > accessed 22.10.2021

<sup>120</sup> Danny Hajek, 'How 1,000 Volvos Ended Up In North Korea – And Made a Diplomatic Difference' *NPR* (4 December 2017) < [www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/12/04/547390622/how-1-000-volvos-ended-up-in-north-korea-and-made-a-diplomatic-difference](http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/12/04/547390622/how-1-000-volvos-ended-up-in-north-korea-and-made-a-diplomatic-difference) > accessed 22.10.2021

<sup>121</sup> Ibid

mediate”<sup>122</sup> negotiations between the US and North Korea, as it had hoped to do in the 2018 talks.<sup>123</sup> Sweden’s history and foreign policy centre around neutrality in international conflicts, making it ideal as an intermediary, and its history and direct links with North Korea make it uniquely suitable for mediation between North Korea and Western powers.

Furthermore, Sweden’s prime minister at the time, Göran Persson, led the EU delegation to Pyongyang in 2001 to discuss strengthening EU-DPRK relations and support DPRK-ROK reconciliation efforts, thus becoming the first Western head of state to make an official visit to Pyongyang.<sup>124</sup> It was under Persson’s watch during Sweden’s chairing of the EU Council in 2001 that EU-DPRK relations were established.<sup>125</sup> Sweden views itself as having a special role on the Korean peninsula due to its many international relations, Pyongyang embassy, and “contacts in the higher echelons of North Korean government.”<sup>126</sup> At the time, Sweden was the only Western state to have an embassy in Pyongyang and today remains one of the largest.

Though not many European embassies exist in Pyongyang or prefer to operate through the Swedish consulate, North Korean embassies on the other hand can be found all over. Still, Sweden is the only Nordic country to host a DPRK embassy, and one of only nine EU countries and one of twelve European countries to have one.<sup>127</sup> Located in Stockholm, it is notably outside the area where most other embassies in Sweden are. It is through this embassy that the DPRK maintains diplomatic relations with the rest of the Nordics as well as with Latvia and Lithuania.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Katriina Töyrylä, ‘Ruotsilla on jo vuosikymmeniä ollut erityissuhde Pohjois-Koreaan, sanoo tutkija – ja siksi Tukholma on nyt maailman politiikan valokeilassa’ *YLE* (Helsinki, 15 March 2018) < <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-10117826> > accessed 22.10.2021 [translated by author]

<sup>123</sup> Ibid; Radio Sweden, “Sweden offers to mediate between US and North Korea” (Stockholm, 14 August 2017) < <https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/6755887> > accessed 6.1.2023

<sup>124</sup> Ibid; The Irish Times, ‘EU delegation arrives in North Korea today’ (Dublin, 2 May 2001) < [www.irishtimes.com/news/eu-delegation-arrives-in-north-korea-today-1.305638](http://www.irishtimes.com/news/eu-delegation-arrives-in-north-korea-today-1.305638) > accessed 22.10.2021

<sup>125</sup> Magnus Andersson and Jinsun Bae, ‘Sweden’s Engagement with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’ (2015) 11 *North Korea Review* 42

<sup>126</sup> Swedish Prime Minister Margot Wahlström to TT News quoted in Riikka Uosukainen, ‘Ruotsilla on erityisrooli Pohjois-Korean ja lännen neuvotteluissa, mutta maa toppuuttelee liikkoja odotuksia’ *YLE* (Helsinki, 15 March 2018) < <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-10117765> > accessed 22/10/21 [translated by present author]

<sup>127</sup> Other EU countries to host DPRK embassies are Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Poland, Romania, and Spain. Other non-EU European countries to host a DPRK embassy are Belarus, Russia, Switzerland, and the UK.

<sup>128</sup> Embassy Pages, < [www.embassypages.com/koreademocraticrepublic-embassy-stockholm-sweden](http://www.embassypages.com/koreademocraticrepublic-embassy-stockholm-sweden) > accessed 21.10.2021



## b. Economic Relations

Similar to Finland, Sweden had economic ties with North Korea in the 1970s that dwindled towards the millennium and is currently practically non-existent due to international sanctions. Many Swedish companies did business with North Korea in the early days of relations, of which Volvo was perhaps most notable, whose cars still dominate Pyongyang's car market.<sup>129</sup> Volvo reportedly sold 1000 Volvos to Kim Il Sung in 1974, and other industrial companies sold machinery to North Korea for a total of €125 million (€312 million today with interest and inflation accounted for), which North Korea has yet to pay.<sup>130</sup> Sweden still sends reminders to Pyongyang twice a year, though it is it assumes this debt will never be paid. Attempts were made but no payments have been received since 1989.<sup>131</sup> Nonetheless, it provides a direct economic link between the two countries which can be leveraged in future dealings. Furthermore, it is because of the sale of the Volvos that a direct link was initially formed, and which led the Swedish government to consider opening an embassy in the country in the first place, according to the first Swedish ambassador to Pyongyang, Erik Cornell.<sup>132</sup> Almost identical to what happened with the Finnish papermill debt, trust in North Korea as a viable economic partner dropped and strained Swedish-DPRK relations from the very beginning; "The West's trading relations with North Korea thus came to a sudden halt, more or less immediately, and were transformed into debt negotiations, which were as long drawn out as they were fruitless."<sup>133</sup> Similarly to the Finnish papermill debt, which came to define Finnish-DPRK relations, this vehicle debt to Sweden came to "constitute a problem that the Swedish government simply cannot overlook."<sup>134</sup>

The 1976 smuggling crisis, however, further tainted North Korea's international reputation and its relations with the Nordics permanently. The uncovering of black market North Korean drug and alcohol sales in the Nordics received great media coverage in Sweden, where these activities

<sup>129</sup> Lankov (n 1); Erik Cornell, *North Korea Under Communism: Report of an Envoy to Paradise* (Routledge 2002) Transl. Rodney Bradbury

<sup>130</sup> Hajek (n 120); Youngnam Kim, "N. Korean Debt to Sweden Remains Unpaid After Four Decades" *VOA* (Washington D.C., 26 October 2017)

< [www.voanews.com/a/north-korean-debt-sweden-remains-unpaid-after-four-decades/4087799.html](http://www.voanews.com/a/north-korean-debt-sweden-remains-unpaid-after-four-decades/4087799.html) > accessed 6.1.2023

<sup>131</sup> Kim (n 130)

<sup>132</sup> Cornell (n 129)

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid* 6

<sup>134</sup> Ken Shimizu, "Swedish Diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific Region" (2018) 25 *Asia-Pacific Review* 112, 119

were perhaps the most numerous.<sup>135</sup> Because the Nordics at the time had high taxes on alcohol and tobacco products, the North Korean embassy sought to profits from black market sales of alcohol and tobacco by utilising its diplomatic tax exemption, alongside its drug trafficking operations.<sup>136</sup> Former diplomat Erik Cornell recalls that one night Swedish students fixed a sign at the DPRK embassy in Stockholm reading “Wine & Spirits Cooperative”.<sup>137</sup> The smuggling crisis was particularly damaging as it was the Nordic countries at the time who had “accounted for most of the Western countries that allowed the establishment of North Korean embassies in their capitals” and they had made great efforts to develop good relations with North Korea whose only involvement in Europe had been restricted to the Soviet bloc.<sup>138</sup> Subsequently, North Korean diplomats were expelled from all Nordic countries and relations were irreparably damaged alongside North Korea’s reputation in Western Europe. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, contact was few and far between with small scale business being conducted between private partners. Some Swedish companies, alongside other countries like China, Thailand, or Germany, partook in industrial exhibitions that still exist today.<sup>139</sup> Trade, when it does take place, is often “conducted on an account-receivable basis” with the oversight of the Swedish Export Credit Agency who acts as an economic intermediary.<sup>140</sup>

### c. Aid and Development

Sweden, alongside the rest of the Nordic nations, is one of the largest donors of humanitarian aid to North Korea.<sup>141</sup> Its development policy towards the DPRK can roughly be divided into “humanitarian aid and capacity-building programmes” as Andersson and Bae do.<sup>142</sup> It was the Great Famine that ended a long period of inactivity between Sweden and the DPRK and incited Swedish humanitarian aid in ways of food relief of USD10 million.<sup>143</sup> After many other nations halted or decreased aid, Sweden’s donations remained high well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, though mostly and increasingly delivered through multilateral third party channels, like the UN. The Swedish government’s international aid goes through the Swedish International Development

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<sup>135</sup> Lankov (n 1); Robert Semple Jr., ‘Scandinavians Press Investigation of Reported Korean Smuggling’ *New York Times* (New York, 21 October 1976) < [www.nytimes.com/1976/10/21/archives/scandinavians-press-investigation-of-reported-korean-smuggling.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1976/10/21/archives/scandinavians-press-investigation-of-reported-korean-smuggling.html) > accessed 23.10.2021

<sup>136</sup> Cornell (n 129) Lankov (n 1)

<sup>137</sup> Cornell (n 129) 67

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 61

<sup>139</sup> Töyrylä (n 122)

<sup>140</sup> Shimizu (n 134)

<sup>141</sup> Töyrylä (n 122); Uosukainen (n 126)

<sup>142</sup> Andersson and Bae (n 125) 48

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

Cooperation Agency (SIDA). It typically distributes its fund based on global needs with a focus on reducing hunger and poverty, thus the World Food Programme (WFP) and SIDA have a long history of humanitarian agreements. For example, SIDA supported the WFP's 2019-2021 initiatives with a total of SEK 695 million (approx. €62 million) to thirteen countries identified to suffer from or be at risk of acute food shortages, of which North Korea is one.<sup>144</sup>

The Swedish Red Cross (SRC) has been a major NGO and humanitarian player in North Korea over the decades. As previously mentioned, during the Korean War, Sweden oversaw the conflict but it also provided aid. The SRC for example set up field hospitals during the conflict. Throughout the years, the organisation has consistently provided humanitarian aid when and where needed, mostly through its disaster relief fund, work which is still ongoing. In 2019 for example, a record high heat wave saw droughts and water shortages, to which the SRC responded with SEK 2.2 million (approx. €20 million) and water pipes.<sup>145</sup> Access to clean water is a problem in rural North Korea and the SRC estimates that 10 million are without clean water in the country. The extensive water pipes system built in the 1970s has not been maintained and have become unusable, which is why the SRC in 2016 began a programme to repair and replace the pipes and provide training on water system maintenance to local villages.<sup>146</sup> These were just some examples of the humanitarian aid Swedish NGOs provide.

Swedish capacity-building programmes are highly regarded throughout the world and were specifically requested by DPRK officials to provide “knowledge transfer programs aimed at addressing various skill need of North Koreans.”<sup>147</sup> Some of these include: the European Institute of Japanese Studies at the Stockholm School of Economics workshops, the International Council of Swedish Industry's economics seminars; the Institute for Security and Development Policy's academic exchange programme for DPRK researchers from the Institute for Disarmament and Peace; and SIDA's International Training Programmes' managerial skills

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<sup>144</sup> Government of Sweden, “Government, Sida, and World Food Programme present major investment to combat hunger crisis” (21 October 2020) retrieved from < <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/government-sida-and-world-food-programme-present-major-investment-combat-hunger-crisis> > accessed 7.1.2023

<sup>145</sup> Swedish Red Cross, “Matbrist i Nordkorea – så hjälper vi” (16 April 2019) < [www.rodakorset.se/var-varld/har-arbetar-vi/nordkorea/matbrist-i-nordkorea](http://www.rodakorset.se/var-varld/har-arbetar-vi/nordkorea/matbrist-i-nordkorea) > accessed 7.1.2023

<sup>146</sup> Swedish Red Cross, “Hon har äntligen fått rent vatten” (10 August 2016) < [www.rodakorset.se/var-varld/har-arbetar-vi/nordkorea/har-antligen-fatt-rent-vatten-i-nordkorea](http://www.rodakorset.se/var-varld/har-arbetar-vi/nordkorea/har-antligen-fatt-rent-vatten-i-nordkorea) > accessed 7.1.2023

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, 49

courses to which annually roughly twenty North Koreans were participant.<sup>148</sup> Under SIDA's programmes, it has also held courses on human rights for North Korean participants – an incredible achievement which should be continued and North Koreans enticed to participate. Sweden has demonstrated a consistent civil society commitment to aiding North Koreans, although has also come under criticism of possibly aiding the DPRK state. To this, however, I argue that it is at the grassroots where positive social change occurs and that by strengthening the average North Korean's economic capacity and food security will in turn allow for North Koreans to refocus their worries from physical survival to social change.

### 4.3 EU's North Korea Policy

#### a. A Short History of EU-DPRK Relations

The EU has pursued its own foreign policy frameworks towards North Korea in three phases. Starting in 1994, the model of 'active engagement' was employed in order to engage with North Korea and provide a foundational strategy for aid and development strategies, nuclear non-proliferation, and security talks. The first step was to set up the 1994 Asia Strategy *Towards a New Strategy*. Its establishment was a direct consequence of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) which transformed the EU into "strategic as opposed to reactive in its foreign policy. It laid out the EU's principles for its involvement in political, economic, and security matters in the Asian continent."<sup>149</sup> Focusing on non-proliferation and humanitarian aid, the Asia Strategy supported ROK's Kim Dae-Jung's new 'Sunshine Policy' in terms of inter-Korean reconciliation efforts. In 1995, the DPRK appealed to the EU for humanitarian aid as it was in the midst of the Great Famine. Without political, economic, or security conditions attached, the EU obliged and by 2004, it had delivered food aid worth €302 million, of which ECHO, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland were the largest donors, in that order.<sup>150</sup>

A leading scholar of EU-DPRK relations, Ramon Pacheco Pardo argues that this was "a tacit acknowledgment that the EU no longer believed North Korea would collapse."<sup>151</sup> In 1996, with

<sup>148</sup> Ibid, 50-1

<sup>149</sup> Ramon Pacheco Pardo, 'North Korea and the European Union' (2021) 1 Oxford Research Encyclopedia 7

<sup>150</sup> Sangtu Ko, 'Vanguard of European Politics: the Role of Member States in the EU's Foreign Policy toward North Korea' (2008) 15 Journal of International and Area Studies 47, 55-56

<sup>151</sup> Pardo (n 149)

its Asian partners, the EU established the Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) as a dialogue platform for the two regions with the aim to strengthen political, economic, and social cooperation.<sup>152</sup>

Denmark, Finland, and Sweden partake regularly in the bi-annual talks and have hosted ASEM Summits throughout the years. In 1997, the EU became partner to the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organisation (KEDO), which made efforts to shut down North Korea's nuclear programme and prevent the nuclearisation of the Korean peninsula. Although KEDO arguably failed eventually, it was the closest the EU came to being central to the resolution of a security conflict in Asia. [...] It also served to begin to formalise EU–North Korea links.”<sup>153</sup>

Subsequently, the first annual DPRK-EU official talks began with a bilateral agenda regarding security, economic cooperation, and regional security.

Formal diplomatic relations between the EU and the DPRK began in May 2001. At this time, the EU established the Europe and Asia Strategy with six objectives: strengthening peace and security, increase mutual trade and investment, develop further cooperation mechanisms, protect and advance human rights, spread democracy and good governance, and develop “actions raising mutual awareness.”<sup>154</sup> Around the same time, the EU became North Korea's third largest trading partner and was planning major technical assistance programmes, environment and capacity building programmes, and longer-term assistance to boost North Korea's agricultural sector.<sup>155</sup> These plan fell through, however, since in 2002, North Korea revealed its uranium enrichment programme, a clear breach of the US-DPRK Agreed Framework, after which the US stopped its oil shipments and North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003.<sup>156</sup> The EU then decided to suspend its KEDO funds. The Six-Party Talks launched in 2003 as a direct result of the nuclear crisis and the EU was left out, which, according to Pardo, “signalled that the EU was becoming secondary to the main security issue in the Korean Peninsula.”<sup>157</sup> The same year, the EU formed its Security Strategy specifying EU interests in the region and developed strategic partnerships with China, India, Japan, and ROK, who also found themselves on the list of the top ten EU trading partners.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> EEAS, 'EU-Asia Security factsheet' (2013) <[https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/asia/docs/eu\\_in\\_asia\\_factsheet\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/asia/docs/eu_in_asia_factsheet_en.pdf)> accessed 1.10.2021

<sup>153</sup> Pardo (n 149) 9

<sup>154</sup> EEAS (n 152)

<sup>155</sup> Ko (n 150)

<sup>156</sup> Ibid

<sup>157</sup> Pardo (n 149) 10

<sup>158</sup> EEAS (n 152)

From this point on, the EU has officially had a policy of ‘critical engagement’ which incorporated a coercive element to EU’s policy toward North Korea. Although the EU’s role in non-proliferation and denuclearisation efforts was decreasing, it became a leading figure in international human rights protection and expansion. Still in 2003, the EU presented to the UNHCR to urge North Korea to stop punishing defection attempts, to resolve its abduction cases, and ratify its signed anti-torture treaties.<sup>159</sup> The UNHCR approved and for the first time became involved with North Korea. In 2005, the EU presented evidence of human rights violations to the UN General Assembly, which it approved.<sup>160</sup> EU-DPRK relations were deteriorating fast, but the almost-annual bilateral talks continued until 2015. Critical engagement has therefore resulted in very little real action or development of relations. The opposite, in fact holds true: EU-DPRK relations deteriorated, the sanctions regime expanded manifold, yet the human rights and nuclear proliferation status of North Korea have remained. For these reasons, the EU’s goals of aiding in “a lasting diminution of tensions on the Korean peninsula and in the region, to uphold the international non-proliferation regime and to improve the situation of human rights in the DPRK”<sup>161</sup> have not been achieved and “such ambitious aims have not been reflected in a robust policy towards the DPRK nor have they resulted in success on any front.”<sup>162</sup> The EEAS website on North Korea policy has not been updated since 2016, further reflecting a stagnation of EU-DPRK relations.

Critical engagement is still the EU’s official policy towards the DPRK, but scholars have characterised EU’s policy from 2013 onwards as ‘active pressure’.<sup>163</sup> This primarily as a consequence of the EU’s increasingly coercive stance on North Korea, starting with 2013 adoption of tougher sanctions than those they were initially based on (UN Resolution 2087(2013)). In 2014, the famous Commission of Inquiry investigation of human rights violations in North Korea was published, which signalled the final blow to North Korea’s international reputation and finalised the EU’s tough attitude against the DPRK. The report even suggested North Korea be referred to the ICC based on the report. North Korean embassies in the

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<sup>159</sup> Pardo (n 149)

<sup>160</sup> Ko (n 150)

<sup>161</sup> EEAS, ‘DPRK and the EU’ (16 June 2016) < [https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/north-korea/4186/dprk-and-eu\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/north-korea/4186/dprk-and-eu_en) > accessed 4.10.2021

<sup>162</sup> Lisa Buckland, ‘A Critical Look: The EU’s Critical Engagement Policy Towards North Korea’ *IFAIR* (8 May 2020) < <https://ifair.eu/2020/05/08/a-critical-look-the-eus-critical-engagement-policy-towards-north-korea> > accessed 4.10.2021

<sup>163</sup> Ko (n 150); Esteban (n 4)

EU were pressured to reduce in size and Portugal even suspended its North Korea relations.<sup>164</sup> Brussels-Pyongyang talks stopped and the seemingly only foreign relations the EU had with the DPRK regarded sanctions. However, in 2018, it was revealed that the EU had had ongoing secret talks with North Korea 2015-2018 regarding non-proliferation. Led by the British, the European Parliament had been “relentlessly advocating the case for dialogue without preconditions’ to end the increasingly tense nuclear standoff with the North.” Meeting fourteen times in a three-year period is significant as not only does it show the EU believes it has a strong role to play in negotiations, it also shows the DPRK’s willingness to meet with the EU for diplomacy. Moreover, the British MEP leading the secretive EP negotiating group, Nirj Deva accredits the tough EU sanctions regime as a driving force for Pyongyang to agree to such talks with the EU.<sup>165</sup>

Also in 2018, the EU began its Enhanced EU Security Cooperation in and with Asia with the aims to highlight the North Korean nuclear concern, thus signalling that the “EU believes that its security relations with North Korea, to the extent that they exist, should be focused on preventing the country’s nuclear activities, including nuclear proliferation.”<sup>166</sup> In parallel, the EU responded to landslides and flooding in North Korea by donating €100,000 to the IFRC in 2018 to provide shelter, hygiene supplies, and water and food aid.<sup>167</sup> Similar donations had been made 2012-2017, following frequent environmental disasters in North Korea with annual donations going to partner organisations such as the Finnish Red Cross (€300,000 donated in 2016) and FAO (€72,000 donated 2014-2015).<sup>168</sup> The amount of annual donations varies widely and are dependent upon local needs and available funds. Humanitarian aid of this kind continues today.

In 2019, resulting from further sanctions, all EU NGOs were withdrawn from North Korea except those granted special status by the Commission via special projects, this included for example some Red Cross branches and Mission East, discussed further below. The first-ever sanctions resulting from cyber-attacks initiated by the EU were initiated 2020. Since 2013, EU

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<sup>164</sup> Pardo (n 149)

<sup>165</sup> Agence France-Presse, ‘European Parliament in ‘Secret’ Talks With North Korea’ *NDTV* (15 March 2018) < [www.ndtv.com/world-news/european-parliament-in-secret-talks-with-n-korea-1823988](http://www.ndtv.com/world-news/european-parliament-in-secret-talks-with-n-korea-1823988) > accessed 1.10.2021

<sup>166</sup> Ramon Pacheco Pardo, *North Korea and the European Union* (OUP 2021) 10

<sup>167</sup> European Commission, ‘European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations – North Korea (DPRK)’ (18 October 2018) < [reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/north\\_korea\\_dprk\\_2018-10-24.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/north_korea_dprk_2018-10-24.pdf) > accessed 27.10.2021

<sup>168</sup> Ibid

relations have been “increasingly defined by growing security concerns” thereby expanding the EU’s role in East Asia from a focus on denuclearisation to regional and international security.<sup>169</sup>

Still, current EU-DPRK relations are near non-existent outside the sanctions regime. The EU sees US military presence in the ROK as a peace-keeping and stabilising force until reunification or North Korean denuclearisation.<sup>170</sup> Its focus remains on security issues with a focus on DPRK denuclearisation and return to the NPT.<sup>171</sup> In late 2020, the EU adopted the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024 in which the EU maintained its commitment to and status as a global leader in the protection and expansion of human rights and democracy.<sup>172</sup> It also continues some limited food security and social inclusion related projects under the Commission executed by outside partners and continues to have emergency aid available to the DPRK. Some Member States have their own programmes open to DPRK citizens and entities, most related to entrepreneurial and agricultural education, but restrictions apply according to sanctions.<sup>173</sup>

#### b. Sanctions Regime

The prolific EU and UN sanctions regime against the DPRK began in 2006. The EU adopts UN sanctions but may also make its own so-called further autonomous measures to add additional sanctions, a power which it has employed on numerous occasions. In the tables in Annex I, adapted from the website of the Council of the European Union, are gathered all sanctions the EU has implemented against the DPRK. In the tables, the date of adoption, the name of the EU sanction, which UNSC resolution the sanction is transposed from, and some of its main provision(s), and further autonomous measures with its main provision(s).

Most sanctions address travel bans, of which the EU currently has imposed on 57 individuals and 9 entities; bans on exports from and imports to the DPRK, most of which regard natural resources such as coal, gold, iron, and lead; as well as materials related to the North Korean nuclear regime and military capacity, such as arms and vessels. Interestingly, and something this

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<sup>169</sup> Pardo (n 166)

<sup>170</sup> Ibid

<sup>171</sup> Ibid

<sup>172</sup> Council of the European Union, 'EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2021 Council Conclusions' [12848/20] < [www.consilium.europa.eu/media/46838/st12848-en20.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/46838/st12848-en20.pdf) > accessed 2.10.2021

<sup>173</sup> EEAS (n 161)



dissertation will address later, there are also bans on "specialised teaching or training of DPRK nationals" (UNSC Resolution 2321, Council decision 2017/345, Regulation 2017/330), "scientific and technical cooperation" (UNSC Resolution 2321, Council decision 2017/345, Regulation 2017/330), and "restrictions on establishment of branches and subsidiaries of and cooperation with DPRK banks" (UNSC Resolution 2087, Council decision 2013/88, Regulation 296/2013). The aim of the EU sanctions regime is to prevent any activities which could "undermine the global non-proliferation and disarmament regime of which the EU has been a steadfast supporter for decades" and therefore "target the DPRK's weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile-related programmes."<sup>174</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Sweden and Finland have a long history of bilateral cooperation with North Korea, having been among the first countries to recognise and establish relations with the DPRK. Their histories have been fraught with difficulties and since the 1990s has primarily concentrated on providing humanitarian assistance and enacting international and EU sanctions. Sweden has maintained a significantly closer relationship with the DRPK than Finland, having one of the largest embassies in the DPRK. Finland, on the other hand, has since the early 2000s been retreating from the region, preferring to focus their efforts on supporting South Korea and the EU in their relations with the DPRK but maintaining little contact themselves.

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<sup>174</sup> Website of the Council of the European Union, 'EU restrictive measures against North Korea' (n.d.) < [www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/history-north-korea/#](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/history-north-korea/#) > accessed 24.10.2021

## Chapter Five - Nordic Actors in Northeast Asia

In this chapter, I will explore some definitions and debates of the role of Finland and Sweden in Northeast Asia and the role of middle powers in IR theory. I will discuss why middle powers are needed in general and in particular in the Northeast Asian context. Then, I will do similarly to feminist foreign policy: outline definitional debates and address what FFP can contribute to international relations and to human rights. The third and final section of this chapter will examine conceptualisations of hard and soft power strategies with a focus on Joseph Nye's famous and comprehensive definitions. As both FFP and middle power theory align share elements with soft power approaches as well as what Nye calls 'smart power' (i.e. a combination of soft and hard power), these will also be normatively addressed.

### **5.1 Middle Power Theory**

The role of middle powers in the international system is wide and general but invaluable. They often serve as facilitators or mediators in peace processes and are therefore often seen as the stabilisers and maintainers of the global order. Middle powers typically engage in niche behaviours by focussing on a specific issue or field providing their expertise and a diverse range of potential solutions that great powers may not be interested in, such as human rights, debt relief, or environmental management. Therefore, middle powers are central to both human security and the international order.

There is no one generalised theory of middle powers. Rather, theorists tend to adopt a realist or liberal view and derive their theorisations from the traditional foundations of IR. Hobbesian understandings derive from the idea that the international order is anarchic and therefore middle powers base their functioning on power politics, national interests, and high politics. Lockean views are less anarchic and see middle powers combining high and low politics. Lastly, Kantian conceptions are based on an understanding of international relations as anarchic but positively so. Kantian followers see middle powers as emphasising low politics, but not to the exclusion of high politics, and therefore middle powers tend to serve a greater role in world politics in this conceptualisation.

More contemporary theorists, though rarely expressly state it, derive their approaches to middlepowermanship from these traditions – usually the Kantian version. Soon Ok Shin for example sees differences in middle powers through how they are defined, whether through the definitional or realist approach or through the operational or more liberal understanding.<sup>175</sup> Robertson sees middlepowermanship through a demonstration of a state’s foreign policy behaviour, on the one hand, and its capacities, on the other.<sup>176</sup> Andrew Carr famously employed the systematic impact approach through which a middle power can be defined through its ability to “alter or affect specific elements of the international system.”<sup>177</sup> To Carr, a middle power’s key role is to protect one or more core interests and then “lead a change in a specific aspect of the existing international order.”<sup>178</sup> Cooper’s (1997) understanding of middle powers through niche behaviours or as catalysts is especially relevant in terms of human rights: he sees middle powers as managers in specific issues able to generate new ideas and as mitigators easing international tensions.<sup>179</sup> John Ravenhill understands middle powers through a five-point approach: its capacity, concentration, creativity, coalition-building, and credibility.<sup>180</sup>

De Swieland similarly sees five characteristics of middlepowermanship: capacity, self-conception, status, regional impact, and systemic impact.<sup>181</sup> The inclusion of both self-conception and status are important as a country that does not perceive itself as a middle power will not behave as one and, on the other hand, if a country sees itself as a middle power and attempts to behave as such, others will likely recognise it as a middle power. This observation derives from Larson et al.’s understandings of the necessity for middle powers to be robust in their foreign policy and behaviour as well as their need to be perceived as central to whatever issue is at hand, to which the middle power is inserting itself.<sup>182</sup> Additionally, de Swieland notes the importance of middle powers to be “recognisable by their access/relation to great powers, coupled with their expertise and influence on small powers” thus placing their role within a

<sup>175</sup> Soon Ok Shin, ‘South Korea’s Elusive Middlepowermanship: Regional or Global Player?’ (2015) 29 *The Pacific Review*, 1–23

<sup>176</sup> J Robertson, ‘Middle-Power Definitions: Confusion Reigns Supreme’ (2017) 71 *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 355

<sup>177</sup> Andrew Carr, ‘A System Impact Approach’ (2014) 68 *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 70, 79

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid* 79

<sup>179</sup> Andrew Cooper, *Niche Diplomacy: Studies in Diplomacy* (Palgrave Macmillan 1997)

<sup>180</sup> John Ravenhill, ‘Cycles of Middle Power Activism: Constraint and Choice in Australian and Canadian Foreign Policies’ (1998) 52 *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 309

<sup>181</sup> Tanguy Struye De Swielande, ‘Middle Powers: A Comprehensive Definition and Typology’ in Thomas Wilkins, Tanguy Struye de Swielande, David Walton, and Dorothee Vandamme (eds), *Rethinking Middle Powers in the Asian Century: New Theories, New Cases* (Routledge 2018)

<sup>182</sup> T V Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William Wohlforth, ‘Introduction’ in *Status in World Politics* (CUP 2014) 3

hierarchy providing an "indispensable link between the bottom and the top."<sup>183</sup> Cooper, as most IR theorists who have written on middle powers, emphasises this type of multilateral thinking while embracing modern notions of good citizenship and good (global) governance.<sup>184</sup>

Indeed, middle powers (as well as smaller states) tend to focus on such concepts and niche issues which, as stated, large powers may not be able or willing to. In the Northeast Asian context, attention has focussed on the large powers involved although sporadic attempts have been made to include smaller states' attempts to bridge the security gap. Calder and Ye observe the Northeast Asian political environment as formed of informal engagements which thus lead to an organisational gap, i.e. the "absence of multilateral coordination structures needed to address emerging financial and cooperative security challenges."<sup>185</sup> Middle powers can fill this gap in a way that involved great powers cannot resulting from their position at the heart of global and regional security tensions. Great powers' attempts to stabilise the region, moreover, have not been successful thus far and negotiations have stalled, so there is a clear need for a new approach. What approach, then, could a middle power employ in the region?

## 5.2 Swedish Foreign Policy: Feminist Foreign Policy

A new approach to human rights and Northeast Asia could be feminist foreign policy (FFP) which middle powers could utilise for it emphasises low politics and niche behaviours, that are also characteristic of middle powers as seen above. Similar to middle power theory, there is no universal definition of FFP. Generally, however, it is a form of foreign policy based on human rights that places gender equality at the heart of international relations and international development. Some of its main objectives include ending sexual violence/harassment, equal education rights, equal economic opportunities, equal access to healthcare and family services, involving women in decision-making processes at all levels, involving women in peace negotiations and treaty making, sustainable development, climate issues, and reducing poverty.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> De Swielande (n 181) 21

<sup>184</sup> Cooper (n 179)

<sup>185</sup> Kent Calder and Min Ye, 'Regionalism and Critical Junctures: Explaining the 'Organisational Gap' in Northeast Asia' (2014) 4 *Journal of East Asian Studies* 191, 191

<sup>186</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs Sweden, *Handbook on Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy*. Government Offices of Sweden 2019) < [www.government.se/492c36/contentassets/fc115607a4ad4bca913cd8d11c2339dc/handbook---swedens-feminist-foreign-policy---english.pdf](http://www.government.se/492c36/contentassets/fc115607a4ad4bca913cd8d11c2339dc/handbook---swedens-feminist-foreign-policy---english.pdf) > accessed 3.12.2021

Because international relations has been dominated by men and current institutions of global governance, such as the UNSC, have men in majority positions of power, women are often left out of decision-making and women's issues are often overlooked.<sup>187</sup> Crimes against women during conflicts are often ignored, foreign aid "routinely fails to take into account the needs of women and girls," and women are rarely included in peace negotiations and conflict resolution processes.<sup>188</sup> Therefore, FFP aims to include women in international relations. It does so by prioritising gender equality in the processes of all other foreign policy objectives rather than have gender equality as an objective of foreign policy in itself. Margot Wallström, the founding figure of FFP and former Swedish Foreign Minister, aptly stated that "striving toward gender equality is not only a goal in itself but also a precondition for achieving our wider foreign, development, and security-policy objectives."<sup>189</sup>

FFP is also a form of diplomacy which seeks to promote good practices and values relating to human rights, good governance, and environmentalism among others to achieve gender equality. It is most often utilised by targeting specific programmes, especially development aid NGOs. As such, it is clear to see that FFP is focussed on long-term capacity building and cooperation. In general, FFP takes the stand that foreign policy should and can be mutually beneficial for all involved parties for individuals, communities, and societies alike. Among countries who have adopted FFP are Australia, Canada, France, Mexico, and Sweden. The lattermost has the most developed FFP practices and is perhaps the most outspoken on the matter.

Sweden has a comprehensive framework for FFP, which consists of the so-called 'three Rs': rights, representation, and resources.<sup>190</sup> 'Rights' refers to promoting and ensuring "women's and girls' full enjoyment of human rights" globally; 'representation' refers to ensuring women's participation in decision-making processes at all levels; and 'resources' refers to ensuring allocation of resources to promote gender equality.<sup>191</sup> The three R's are both a domestic objectives as well as a foreign policy goal. In its 2021 Statement of Government Policy, Sweden

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<sup>187</sup> Jenny Nordberg, 'Who's Afraid of a Feminist Foreign Policy?' *The New Yorker* (New York, 15 April 2015) < [www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/swedens-feminist-foreign-minister](http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/swedens-feminist-foreign-minister) > accessed 15.12.21

<sup>188</sup> Ibid

<sup>189</sup> Ibid

<sup>190</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs Sweden (186)

<sup>191</sup> Ibid 13

reconfirmed that “the EU is Sweden’s most important foreign and security policy arena.”<sup>192</sup> It is through its positions within the EU, the UN, the OSCE, and numerous other intra- and international organisations that Sweden promotes women’s rights and its FFP objectives most visibly. Through its trade relations and bilateral cooperation in areas such as Covid-19 vaccine distribution and humanitarian aid, Sweden acts within its FFP framework to promote gender equality and gender perspectives in all its areas of work. Of course, these objectives and actions also take place within a broader Swedish foreign and security policy, which is predicated on the rule of law (domestically and transnationally), democracy, European and Nordic solidarity, national security, and peace.

These priorities are essential for the international community and for all societies as the status of women is closely linked to economic prosperity, international peace, national security, social stability, and individual well-being. Prior studies by e.g. the McKinsey Global Institute or Lemmon and Vogelstein have shown that a country’s economic growth and prosperity is linked with the status of women and women’s rights. Lemmon and Vogelstein for example demonstrate that women’s economic rights tend to lead to a country’s “higher macroeconomic growth, more favourable development outcomes, greater economic diversification, and lower levels of income inequality.”<sup>193</sup> Partly for these reasons, the French Foreign Ministry sees women as central actors in “the correct functioning of societies or, for post-crisis countries, for reconstruction.”<sup>194</sup> Similarly, many studies have shown that when women are included in peace negotiations and international treaty-making, an agreement is more likely to be reached, the terms and provisions of such agreements are more likely to be respected and adhered to, and peace treaties last longer.<sup>195</sup> Furthermore, Hudson et al. show that the more violent a state and its citizens are towards women, the more violent that state is likely to be internationally<sup>196</sup> – “in fact, the very best predictor of a state’s peacefulness is not its level of wealth, its level of democracy, or its

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<sup>192</sup> Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Sweden Ann Linde, ‘Statement of Government Policy’ (Stockholm, 24 February 2021) < [www.government.se/4af2b7/contentassets/d338be2ed4564ceabfed57540ce47221/statement-of-government-policy.pdf](http://www.government.se/4af2b7/contentassets/d338be2ed4564ceabfed57540ce47221/statement-of-government-policy.pdf) >

<sup>193</sup> Gayle Tzemach Lemmon and Rachel Vogelstein, *Building Inclusive Economies: How Women’s Economic Advancement Promotes Sustainable Growth* (Council on Foreign Relations 2017) 3

<sup>194</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs France. (2021). “Feminist Diplomacy” Online < [www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/feminist-diplomacy](http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/feminist-diplomacy) > accessed 15.12.21

<sup>195</sup> Marie O’Reilly, Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, and Thania Paffenholz, *Reimagining Peacemaking: Women’s Roles in Peace Processes* (International Peace Institute 2015); Jana Krause, Werner Krause, Piia and Bränsfors, ‘Women’s Participation in Peace Negotiations and the Durability of Peace’ (2018) 44 *International Interactions* 985

<sup>196</sup> Valerie Hudson, Bonnie Ballif-Spanvill, Mary Caprioli, and Chad Emmett, *Sex and World Peace* (Columbia University Press 2012); Valerie Hudson, ‘Feminist Foreign Policy as State-Led Expansion of Human Rights’ in Alison Brysk and Michael Stohl, *Expanding Human Rights: 21st Century Norms and Governance* (Edward Elgar Publishing 2017)

ethno-religious identity; the best predictor of a state's peacefulness is how well its women are treated."<sup>197</sup> Women's rights and status as well as gender equality are therefore essential matters for global peace and security. It is also a matter of justice involving "the emancipation of women around the world" and countries employing FFP can "serve as a model for other countries on how to avoid overlooking the talents and contributions of 50 percent of the population."<sup>198</sup>

As a form of foreign policy aiming at long-term peace building and security, FFP employs many traditional instruments. Creating, signing, and ratifying international agreements (e.g. UN 1967 Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 1995 Beijing Declaration, OHCHR Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women 1979, EU Istanbul Convention 2011, UN Sustainable Development Goals 2015, or UNSC Resolution 1325) is perhaps the most visible way a country can employ FFP. Diplomatic talks, leading by example in domestic practices, and international advocacy are other ways FFP can be employed. During Sweden's membership in the UNSC for example, it consistently insisted on women's participation in debates and increasing civil society representation. Similarly, Canada regularly brings up women's rights issues and violations on the international stage. FFP thus tends to emphasise sharing experiences and two-way communication over exporting ideas, i.e. it is best suited for soft power strategies.

### 5.3 Finnish Foreign Policy: a Human Rights Centred Approach

Finland's foreign policy, in contrast, is not based on a feminist approach. Although it places great importance on human rights and especially women's rights, Finnish foreign and security policy is traditionally centred around "good bilateral and international relations" and "effective multilateral cooperation and credible national defence" in addition to strengthening the EU and its Common Foreign and Security Policy.<sup>199</sup> Since the 1990s, Finland has been increasingly emphasizing building up its international influence and it is the European Union which has received most of this attention. Throughout the years, Finland has, however, expanded its sphere of influence globally and has adopted a human rights centred approach to it.

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<sup>197</sup> Valerie Hudson, 'What Sex Means for World Peace' *Foreign Policy* (Washington D.C., 24 April 2012) < <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/04/24/what-sex-means-for-world-peace> > accessed 16.12.21

<sup>198</sup> Rachel Volgenstein and Alexandra Bro, 'Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy, Long May It Reign' *Foreign Policy* (Washington D.C., 30 March 2019) < <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/30/sweden-feminist-foreignpolicy> > accessed 15.12.21

<sup>199</sup> Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs website < <https://um.fi/foreign-policy-and-security-policy> > accessed 13.12.2022.

Currently, the main goals and priorities of Finnish foreign policy are outlined in its 2020 Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy as follows: promoting foreign and security policy cooperation, strengthening multilateral cooperation, sharing global responsibilities, and peacebuilding. Within these goals, special attention is paid to strengthening the EU's and the UN's capacity to act, deepening cooperation with Sweden and the other Nordic states, developing NATO partnership, maintaining bilateral relations, Arctic cooperation, sustainable development and mitigating climate change, equality and human rights, strengthening mediation competence, and crisis management, among others. Human rights, however, are the very heart of all foreign policy activities, as Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto notes:

“Our goal is a more stable, predictable, and safer world. The universality of human rights, the equality of all population groups and human rights agreements are being increasingly challenged around the world. In this context, it is of great importance that the Finnish foreign policy is based on human rights, which means that the human rights impacts of all actions taken in foreign and security policy are assessed.”<sup>200</sup>

Therefore, “Finland is strongly committed to defending human rights” and holds a seat in the UN Human Rights Council at present (2022-2024) and promises “to defend and promote human rights worldwide.”<sup>201</sup> During its membership in the Council, the Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin emphasised that “Finland will work for women’s full and meaningful participation in all sectors of society.”<sup>202</sup> In a joint statement with the Nordic foreign ministers in September 2022, Finland’s response to the new rise in authoritarianism over the past decade is to support democracy and the rule of law globally by advocating their positive contributions to global peace and security, mitigation of environmental crises, economic and social development, and gender equality. Siting these attributes, the Nordic foreign ministers vowed to “make the case for democracy as a global norm” at international summits and fora, and to “build stronger alliances across regions.”<sup>203</sup> Clearly, promoting gender equality and women’s rights is an important part of

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<sup>200</sup> Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, ‘Government Report of Finnish Foreign and Security Policy 2020 – security and global responsibility sharing go hand in hand’ (29 October 2020) < <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/government-report-on-finnish-foreign-and-security-policy-2020-security-and-global-responsibility-sharing-go-hand-in-hand-1> > accessed 13.12.2022

<sup>201</sup> Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, “Finland in the UN Human Rights Council 2022-2024 – Our Commitment” (n.d.) < <https://um.fi/hrc-our-commitment> > accessed 13.12.2022

<sup>202</sup> Ibid

<sup>203</sup> Jeppe Kofod, Pekka Haavisto, Thórdís Kolbrún Reykfjörð Gylfadóttir, Anniken Huitfeldt, and Ann Linde, ‘Making the case for democracy’ Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (Helsinki, 1 September 2022) < [https://um.fi/current-affairs/-/asset\\_publisher/gc654PySnjTX/content/making-the-case-for-democracy](https://um.fi/current-affairs/-/asset_publisher/gc654PySnjTX/content/making-the-case-for-democracy) > accessed 14.12.2022



Finland's foreign policy objectives, but they are tied into broader security issues and coupled with promoting democracy.

Within these objectives, human rights form the core of Finnish foreign policy. In its 2022 Report on Human Rights Policy, the Finnish government sets forth this human rights based policy and how women fit into it.<sup>204</sup> It also highlights the importance of addressing the new rise in authoritarianism around the world and the dangers this presents to the international human rights regime, democracy, and the rule of law. Authoritarian regimes represent a threat to democracy and human rights – democracies are less likely to wage war, are better prepared for crises, have a higher quality of life for its citizens, and have a strong connection with peace and security. Authoritarian governments tend to repress basic freedoms and rights and often erode the rule of law and the universality of human rights. Therefore, Finland intends to defend democracy, the rule of law, and human rights especially at the EU level and aims to support human rights defenders. It continues to condemn human rights violations around the world, citing China and Russia, in international settings particularly at European fora such as the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. It highlights the significance of EU unity in defending human rights and positively views the new US administration's return to international cooperation and to the UN Human Rights Council. While it has joined several intergovernmental organisations, it views the activities of the UN, of regional organisations, and of international treaty organisations as the primary drivers of social change and defenders of democracy and human rights. It highlights the importance of monitoring mechanisms and sites the UN's Universal Periodic Review as significant in this regard.

Nordic cooperation in the realm of gender equality and the rights of sexual and gender minorities is especially important for Finland. They county “acts to maximise international support to gender equality, the rights of women and girls, the rights of sexual and gender minorities and the realisation of sexual and reproductive health and rights.” Anti-gender movements, which seek to minimise or oppose the promotion of gender equality at large, are a major concern and thus Finland pays particular attention to strengthening EU positions and international treaties on gender equality and women's and gender/sexual minority rights. The Nordic Council of

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<sup>204</sup> Finnish Government, 'Government of Finland Report on Human Rights Policy' (2022) 10 < [https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/163838/VN\\_2022\\_10.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y](https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/163838/VN_2022_10.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y) > accessed 15.12.2022

Ministers and the Nordic countries broadly are at the forefront of gender equality and Finland notes the particular importance of these countries and their cooperation in maintaining, promoting, and advancing gender equality globally. For example, in 2020, Finland provided €19 million to UN Women while chairing its Executive Board “to prevent violence against women and to ensure that the gender perspective is taken into account in decision-making concerning the crisis.”<sup>205</sup> As one of the twelve with a National Committee for UN Women, Finland was also a key advocate for the very establishment of UN Women and the Generation Equality Action Coalition on Technology and Innovation for Gender Equality, which it co-leads.

Finland also participates in and donates to numerous international and inter-governmental organisations to this end and is among one of the largest donors of humanitarian aid in general and to advancing women’s rights and gender equality specifically. For example, under the Action Coalition on Feminist Action for Climate Justice, together with the Nordic Council of Ministers, Finland made a joint commitment to develop a gender-just approach to climate action that takes into account gender issues in decision-making. Finland has always been among the highest OECD donors to gender equality both as a principle objective with explicit gender equality activities and secondary objectives where gender equality was an important element but a secondary objective.<sup>206</sup>

Through these policy lines, donations, and examples, it becomes clear that Finnish foreign policy is feminist in all but name: Finland aims to advance women’s rights and gender equality both nationally and globally by strengthening international cooperation and treaty structures and donating to various initiatives and organisations. Improving women’s and girls’ economic and social positions, including gender perspectives in decision-making processes, improving women’s representation, and preventing rights violation globally are all major components of Finnish human rights based foreign policy. There seems to be little difference between Swedish and Finnish foreign policy in terms of gender equality and women’s rights, except that Sweden places these issues at the very heart of all its activities while Finland places human rights in general at the heart with a special emphasis on women’s rights and gender equality.

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid 53

<sup>206</sup> See OECD, ‘Aid in Support of Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment. Donor Charts’ (June 2022) < [www.oecd.org/development/financing-sustainable-development/Aid-to-gender-equality-donor-charts-2022.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/development/financing-sustainable-development/Aid-to-gender-equality-donor-charts-2022.pdf) > accessed 16.12.2022

#### 5.4 Soft Power Strategies in International Relations

One of the most well-known conceptualisations of soft power comes from famed political scientist Joseph Nye. Power, defined by Nye, is “the ability to affect others to obtain results you want” and generally takes three forms: coercion, inducements, and attraction.<sup>207</sup> Coercion in international relations has another name – hard power. It typically involves military action or threats and economic sanctions or embargos.<sup>208</sup> Inducements in international relations commonly involve policy concessions or economic favours of a quid pro quo nature.<sup>209</sup> Attraction is the ability for a country to entice another to follow its ways based on an admiration of the former’s values or an aspiration to reach its levels of prosperity for example.<sup>210</sup> Nye associates attraction with intangible assets of a country including its culture and political values, which give it moral authority and legitimacy in the eyes of others and the international community as a whole.

In terms of state behaviour, the power to attract is the essence of soft power. To practice soft power, a state relies primarily on three assets, as theorised by Nye: culture, political values, and foreign policy. Culture is a “set of practices that create meaning for a society” according to Nye.<sup>211</sup> For political values to be useful for the practice of soft power, they must be adhered to vigorously both domestically and abroad in order to invoke legitimacy and have the power to attract. Soft power strategies in foreign policy are only useful if the country is seen as legitimate and of moral authority. However, governments can find it difficult to control and employ soft power through culture as it is a set of social practices therefore involving more than just government agencies. Film studios (i.e. private corporations) for example cannot be fully controlled by the government in democratic countries but exporting films is a great way to also

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<sup>207</sup> Joseph Nye, ‘Public Diplomacy and Soft Power’ (2008) 616 *Annals AAPSS* 94, 94

<sup>208</sup> Aigerim Raimzhanova, ‘Power in IR: Hard, Soft, and Smart’ (2015) Doctoral Thesis, Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, University of Bucharest

< [www.culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/content/pdf/participant-papers/2015-12\\_annual/Power-In-Ir-By-Raimzhanova,-A.pdf](http://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/content/pdf/participant-papers/2015-12_annual/Power-In-Ir-By-Raimzhanova,-A.pdf) > accessed 1/12/2021

<sup>209</sup> Miroslav Nincic, ‘Getting What You Want: Positive Inducements in International Relations’ (2010) 35 *Quarterly Journal: International Security* 138

<sup>210</sup> Nye (n 207)

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid* 96

export culture and influence others.<sup>212</sup> For this reason, some argue that international relations has become characterised more by interactions between non-governmental organisations and individuals than by inter-governmental engagements.<sup>213</sup>

The most common way, however, for soft power to materialise as state behaviour is through public diplomacy. Nye helpfully notes that “the resources that produce soft power in international politics arise from the values of organisations or countries expressed in culture, its internal practices, and how it handles relations with others.”<sup>214</sup> The aim of public diplomacy is to attract others to engage through e.g. cultural exports or educational exchanges. But these can only be successful if a country’s culture, values, and practices are attractive and legitimate. Public diplomacy involves building long-lasting relations with other countries that create “an enabling environment for government policies.”<sup>215</sup> In Nye’s conceptualisation, public diplomacy (as a state-led soft power instrument) consists of three dimensions: daily communications, strategic communications, and developing lasting relations. The first denotes common, if not casual, interactions through e.g. media outlets from both countries reporting regularly on each other. The second regards more formal political negotiations. The lattermost, however, involves social engagement of a different kind: education exchanges, conferences, access to media channels, arts exhibitions, and the like, that is to say, a more grassroots approach with culture at its core than perhaps the other two dimensions.

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<sup>212</sup> For example, it is obvious Hollywood films have had major socio-cultural impact all over the world from fashion to language to cuisine. It has even impacted North Korea: defector Kang Chol-Hwan reflected on the importance of American police shows where officers are shown reading suspected criminals their (Miranda) rights. He said that scenes like these help North Koreans to understand the rule of law and “It helps them to realise that in the outside world, even the criminals have rights.” See, Mori Rotham and Karla Murthy, ‘Defectors lift curtain on North Korea’s information blackout’ *PBS* (Crystal City, 18 December 2016) < [www.pbs.org/newshour/show/defectors-lift-curtain-north-koreas-information-blackout](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/defectors-lift-curtain-north-koreas-information-blackout) > accessed 18.12.2022. South Korean films and TV are more popular than American ones in North Korea, however, and their influence on culture and society is vast. South Korean music videos, TV shows, films, and dramas are widely circulated in the North and to which Nam et al. accredit the sudden and dramatic spike in the use of BB creams and hair and bath products among North Koreans. Similarly, South Korean makeup and hairstyles are often mimicked by North Korean women based on what film or show is popular at the time, not unlike how fashion trends elsewhere in the world. See, Sung-wook Nam, Su-an Chae, and Ga-young Lee, *Mysterious Pyongyang: Cosmetics, Beauty Culture and North Korea* (Palgrave Macmillan 2021), especially p. 318-320.

<sup>213</sup> See Mark Leonard, *Public Diplomacy* (Foreign Policy Centre 2002)

<sup>214</sup> Nye (n 207) 95

<sup>215</sup> Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (Public Affairs 2005), 107

## Conclusion

Soft power strategies are in essence focussed on the social and the cultural as means to political and economic dialogue/engagement. They are flexible, adaptable, and long-term approaches in line with FFP and a human rights-based foreign policy in these ways. Both take into account socio-cultural differences and emphasise mutual understanding over exporting ideas – Nye aptly notes that “preaching at foreigners is not the best way to convert them.”<sup>216</sup> A good way to engage diplomatically is therefore through low level engagements with a long-term focus, and emphasis on two-way communication. Finland’s and Sweden’s foreign policy approaches both include these ideas and the countries are thus in ideal positions to become effective middle powers and engage with the North Korean regime to promote and advance women’s rights. In the following chapter, these ideas are presented and discussed in more detail using data obtained from interviews with IR and North Korea experts and practitioners in the field.

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid 109



**Key Finding 1: Any action taken is small in scale.**

The Swedish embassy in Pyongyang is small – it employs two to four Swedes and four to six North Koreans at one time – so the tasks it is able to undertake are limited from purely a logistical and manpower point of view. Likewise, the DPRK embassy in Stockholm is small and similarly limited in capacity. In all their work, Swedish diplomats and other foreign ministry staff employ FFP in all their activities, including in North Korea, though Participant A highlighted that the scale in which it is done in North Korea specifically is much smaller. Swedish FFP became an official policy line in 2014 and in 2020, all diplomats were temporarily removed from the DPRK due to the pandemic. Within this short time scale there were no DPRK specific programmes that were run by the Swedish embassy but rather, the embassy supported humanitarian projects that ran through SIDA, the Swedish development agency, and within this aid, the embassy supported gender perspectives, and indeed, in all humanitarian and other projects run by international or Swedish organisations (e.g. UN or Red Cross projects), the gender perspective was always present.

**Key Finding 2: Interpersonal interactions are most important.**

Women's empowerment and gender equality are matters of daily life and thus require low level action in addition to high politics. Participant A notes that working in a smaller scale, it is easier to discuss and act on women's empowerment for example what she can do "in her home to make her life a little bit more equal or better." Participant A was particularly happy with this kind of interpersonal work they had done even if on a smaller scale. They emphasised the importance of interpersonal interactions between Swedes and North Koreans: Sharing personal stories and experiences from their respective countries was related with excitement as "it's very difficult to achieve concrete changed in Pyongyang in this field but any seed that I was able to plant was a small win."

Participant A related a story which highlights the possibility of small-scale change on an interpersonal level. One "very important part" of Swedish embassy work is to maintain staff cohesion and satisfaction and one way in which this occurred was through Swedish *fika*, i.e. coffee and cake. Staff would take turns baking something to bring to the office and the Swedish

staff would encourage North Korean male staff to bake too. While the men would bring in something that their wives had baked and get playfully scolded for it, by leading by example, the Swedish staff showed that men and women in the household can share responsibilities for simple tasks like baking. Similarly, Participant A recalled a conversation with a North Korean female staff member about sharing household responsibilities, which resulted in the North Korean woman stating that she would tell her husband to cook dinner so she can go shopping. Although unsure of whether she actually did so, the North Korean woman was empowered to “claim a little bit more space, at least in her own family” as a direct result of an interpersonal interaction of a casual conversation.

Sharing personal stories and having ‘low-level’ interactions is a way to “plant seeds,” as Participant A liked to call it, that helps women claim more space and may thus begin to turn the wheels of change at the individual and household level. Similarly to *fika*, small art exhibitions or celebrating holidays together would help to build relationships and trust which could later evolve into sharing stories, empower one-another, and “plant seeds” on a small scale. In this way, the Swedes are employing FFP in practice by leading by example through daily interpersonal activities. Participants A and B viewed the ‘leading by example’ method positively and believed in its ability to materialise into concrete benefits to advancing women’s rights, especially at the lower level.

In academic events Participant F observed, building trust between attendees after the actual event were perhaps the most enlightening parts of the events. Although, “every time we go [to an academic conference with North Korean presenters], you can tell that whatever they share will be nothing new. We’re not going to learn anything new about any new developments in North Korea.” Participant F instead emphasised the importance of post-event proceedings, “whether it’s over drinks or over a cultural event where people sing in Korean.” They noted how these post-event events were sites of “collective mourning of the situation” and where people could “reflect about the current situation we’re all in, and the ridiculousness of how we have to communicate, or the ridiculousness of the lack of trust” between attendees even if all were ethnically Korean or had ethnic Korean backgrounds (Korean Americans/Australians/Japanese/etc.). Participant F noted the “sad” and “heart-wrenching” sense of loss of a common nation or people but that it was not at the official event where these things could be experienced or expressed, but rather it was at the interpersonal level where such intimate emotions could be shared and trust could be built. They reckon “it’s more about what kind of exchanges are possible once there is a level of



trust after the official proceedings.” Building relationships will enable further future collaborations and so little by little interactions can increase and more seeds can be planted.

### **Key Finding 3: Finland prioritises humanitarian aid.**

Participant C emphasised that Finnish foreign policy is not feminist and while women’s rights are an important part of its human rights-based approach, they are not the central focus. Regarding North Korea, food aid takes the lead concern. Participant C states that in their work, advancing gender equality or women’s rights is in practice non-existent. Rather, the focus is on the overall “very concerning” humanitarian situation. They similarly noted that Finnish NGOs, civil society organisations, or other Foreign Ministry units or agencies are not and, in the future, would likely not be focussed on gender equality or women’s rights but prefer to concentrate efforts on food aid. However, Participant C did say that gender equality and women’s rights are “in some ways in the background” of all their work.

Participant D, a Finnish NGO representative, indicated similarly. The NGO worked towards building capacity in agriculture and health before international sanctions halted their activities. In agriculture, they trained local North Korean farmers, cooperative farm leaders, and local government officials in sustainable farming methods and helped build storage infrastructures. In terms of health, the NGO worked to increase justice, human dignity, and peace through children’s rights and educated children and medical professionals on nutrition and provided food aid. The idea was to build and stabilise the infrastructure, know-how, enough production, environmentally friendly methods, and equal access to health care and to food. They even held a few exchanges together with Finnish universities for medical training purposes where North Korean doctors visited Finland and vice versa. The ever-tightening international sanctions on North Korea, however, forced these activities to stop and eventually the NGO had to halt their operations entirely simply due to the fact that medical and agricultural equipment and machinery could no longer legally be imported into the country. Still, Participant D expressed with delight that the programmes were successful in building capacity and is certain that the know-how and training they provided remained in the country – their work “paid off.”<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Quote translated from Finnish to English by the author.

While women's rights and gender equality was not a primary objective or explicit goal of the NGO, these ideas lurked in the background. Participant D mentioned the lengthy negotiations they had with North Korean and Finnish authorities to be able to work in the country and that their work had to strictly concentrate on the agreed upon substance without deviation.

Throughout the programme, however, gender equality was present in, for example, the gender ratio of Finnish staff and that training was provided for men and women equally. In the training courses, it was emphasised that everyone ought to be trained because the NGO's philosophy is based on holistic equality and aiding the most vulnerable: "everyone is a beneficiary"<sup>218</sup>

Participant D exclaimed. Gender equality is thus an "underlying objective,"<sup>219</sup> i.e. gender was taken into account even though it was not an explicit goal. Otherwise NGO encourages women's rights and gender equality in all its work., according to Participant D.

However, Participants C and D highlighted that gender inequality is not a big problem in the DPRK and attributed this to its communist tradition. Both male and female doctors participated in exchanges and training, delegations had more men but were not exclusively male, cooperative farm leadership had women, farmers were divided roughly equally between male and female. Nonetheless, some differences were observed by Participant D, who recalled that men tended to hold more leadership roles than women and in the poorest areas where the NGO worked, no doctors were women. From the discussion with Participant D, it seemed that gender equality and wealth tended to correlate.

Participants C and D concurred that the country has comparatively good gender equality than the rest of developing Asian countries. They believed this is a direct result of communist nation-building, under which both men and women need to be educated equally to be effective workers for the state. An ideological commitment to emancipation through labour forms one of the core theses of socialism, which consequently meant that top-down social and cultural change opened the door for women's rights activism and development. Although androcentric and rooted in deep patriarchal belief systems and hierarchies, under socialist rule throughout the world, women gained a legal standing equal to men. Though such a notion derived from Marxist and Engelsian

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<sup>218</sup> Quote translated from Finnish to English by the author.

<sup>219</sup> Quote translated from Finnish to English by the author.

ideas on the neutrality of men and women as human subjects,<sup>220</sup> and that gender would be irrelevant after the revolution, the idea was not feminism. Rather, to make up for labour shortages resulting from the lives lost during the Korean war and to repair the Korean economy as quickly as possible, the state could not afford to exclude women from the formal labour force. Thus, the North Korean regime, as socialist regimes throughout history have, involved women into the public sphere but did so in a way that reproduced existing gender roles: women were included into the androcentric masculine formal labour force but were expected to simultaneously fulfil its feminine opposite including domestic labour and childrearing duties. This led to more responsibilities for women but also created a relatively gender-neutral economy, where men and women work in equal amounts as doctors, engineers, teachers, etc. as witnessed by Participant D. The state did attempt to ease women's domestic burdens, at various points throughout history as seen in Chapter Three through e.g. state-run day care centres and mandatory public education. Participant D noted that "day care centres were everywhere"<sup>221</sup> which they took to indicate that the majority of women were at work and not in childcare duties.

Indeed, North Korea is not the most unequal country and women are guaranteed legal rights and gender equality in various legal documents. Juche ideology also encourages equality and women's empowerment (through employment). During their time in Pyongyang, Participant A recounted women having access to contraception, abortion, and reproductive medical care, even though it was limited and could certainly be developed. North Korean women thus "have a baseline [...] which puts them in a good starting position to empower women," as Participant A stated. What Sweden, and others, could therefore focus on, is to develop this existing baseline and expand it to be equally accessible to all women throughout the country. While North Korean women enjoy some rights, Korean culture is still deeply patriarchal in its belief systems, hierarchy, and traditions. Women are not on an equal footing with men as discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis. It is these deep-rooted beliefs as well as the lack of robust enough institutions to enforce existing laws, that hinder gender equality. Therefore, the interpersonal interactions and planting seeds on a smaller scale are especially valuable as they focus not on system-level change but on women's individual empowerment.

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<sup>220</sup> See Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (Hottingen-Zürich [1884] 2000) Transl. Alick West (1942)

<sup>221</sup> Quote translated from Finnish to English by the author.

**Key Finding 4: Accessing the DPRK is extremely difficult.**

All Participants noted the difficulty in accessing the DPRK. Primarily the concern regarded the impact of Covid-19 and international sanctions, but many also spoke on the DPRK's restrictions on foreigners accessing all parts of the country.

a) Access to non-elites

Participant F spoke on the reality that travel inside the DPRK is extremely restricted to both foreigners and North Koreans. The international community has limited access to so-called 'ordinary' North Koreans and primarily deal with elites. The foreign ministry representative interviewed only interacted with North Korean diplomats or other officials, aside from Participant A who mentioned discussions with e.g. restaurant staff and drivers (who, in turn, are likely hand-picked and to an extent form members of the elite simply by virtue of residing and working in Pyongyang and around foreigners). The North Koreans involved in academic exchanges Participant E observed were also government officials and other higher-ups. Participant F, having attended conferences and other events alongside North Koreans, perhaps had encounters with 'ordinary' North Koreans but it is unconfirmed and it must be noted that North Koreans who are permitted by the government to travel abroad are likely vetted and monitored, so to an extent are also part of the elite.

It would seem, then, that the only interviewee with real experience of working with non-elite North Koreans is Participant D, whose humanitarian work involved working closely with local doctors, farmers, and low-level local authorities, though this access involved long negotiations. In their humanitarian work, Participant D noted that they went where the authorities directed them, which meant that they could work where they were most needed according to local needs.

Freely traveling within is also heavily restricted, especially for foreigners who cannot go anywhere without North Korean "mindere" who act as translators and guides for foreigners but also make sure they do not go to restricted areas and do not see anything they are not supposed to see. Accessing the DPRK is difficult on its own, as discussed below, but accessing the entirety of the country and its people is nearly impossible, which limits the kinds of interactions the international community can have with North Korea and its people.

### b) Covid-19

Most foreign embassies were temporarily closed and Swedish diplomats returned home 27 May 2020. This situation continues to the present but “the overall relationship remains pretty solid” and “our relationship per se lives on, at least in spirit” Participant A said. Although the physical interactions and interpersonal relations have become minimal, both countries maintain regular contact through phone calls and interactions have become more centred in the DPRK embassy in Stockholm, which remains open and operational. Participant B looks forward to DPRK borders opening again and for relations to normalise.

Participant C noted that prior to Covid-19, Finland had little interaction with Pyongyang anyway and now with the DPRK pandemic-related border closures, contact is basically non-existent. Finnish-DPRK bilateral relations are effectively on hold. The current Finnish Ambassador to North Korea has never visited the DPRK and Finnish diplomats in general visit the country rarely, perhaps once a year were the borders open, Participant C speculated. If/when borders open again, Participant C was suspicious of the country’s Covid-testing capacity, noting that cases are typically reported as the flu or as a simple fever. Even prior to the pandemic, and certainly now, Finland’s DPRK engagement is primarily that of observation through its Seoul embassy: “at the moment, in practice, our work involves monitoring the situation in North Korea as much as public sources allow both in terms of the humanitarian situation and missile testing” Participant C recounted.

### c) Totalitarianism and Social Change

Participant A mentioned the cumbersome bureaucracy of the country. They took for example the process of requesting a meeting with a visitor from Sweden and noted that anything that required approval from an authority would be slow and tricky: “to run things through their hierarchy is very, very difficult.”

This brings up a larger phenomenon within modern societies and social change: change is extremely difficult because national legal, political, and economic systems are designed to be so. In constitutional democracies, the rule of law determines whether, when, and to what extent

founding legislation can be altered. This is typically done to safeguard democracy and human rights even in the face of extreme political change, such as the rise of an autocrat. Legal institutions are set up to be strong enough to withstand political change in order to protect national values. In a totalitarian context, while the purpose may be different, institutions are set up and enforced to maintain the political system. They are designed to withstand socio-cultural changes and protect the politico-economic conditions of the nation.

In this regard, the DPRK (or any other state for that matter) will be resistant to any change coming from the outside, simply because they do not see it as contextually relevant to their way of life, values, socio-cultural or politico-economic conditions, or legal and institutional landscape. In fact, they view any outside influence as actively hostile in line with their ideological commitment to self-sufficiency and anti-imperialism. Participant A recalled that they found that North Koreans are open and willing to listen to others and to learn how things are done in other parts of the world, and may even view these differences positively, but ultimately conclude that that way is not for them – “why change something that they think is already good?” Participant A said while speculating on the North Korean mindset on social change.

Officially this is the State position. The social and political elite, all of whom reside in Pyongyang or other major cities with limited access to other parts of the country, are likely unable or unwilling to take a stand for change. One problem is the above-mentioned cumbersome hierarchy and bureaucratic system – “it’s not a system that encourages creative ideas” Participant A says. Another element is that if someone has achieved a certain position in society where they enjoy a high standard of living and high social/political status, they may not want change. Add to this a fear for one’s or one’s family’s life, and it will become nearly impossible to find someone willing to stand up against a system that has not only rewarded them for their loyalty but can severely punish them for any semblance of disloyalty. It is not uncommon for totalitarian leaders to purge even their closest confidants or family members out of suspicion of disloyalty (e.g. Kim Jong Un was infamously suspected of having his half-brother assassinated in Kuala Lumpur in 2017). It is therefore unwise for a North Korean to express ideas or desires for any kind of change.

Participant E further elaborated on the nature of the “complicated political reality” of any state but especially in North Korea where some “extremely conservative [groups] will not accept any change, irrespective of the costs of not accepting change.” Political change in totalitarian states

can be viewed as a cycle in Participant E's description: "when things are really, really bad, then those who want change, get the upper hand, and they can introduce reforms. But when the situation stabilises, if these reforms [...] work out, then the paradoxical and perverse situation occurs, where the conservatives become stronger again" and the reforms can be rolled back – "So successful reforms lead to a step back to the initial starting point." Participant E gives the example of the North Korean agricultural reforms of 2004-2006 when North Korea managed to boost their agricultural production impressively<sup>222</sup> and become nearly self-sufficient. When this happened, according to Participant E, the conservatives reintroduced for example price controls and subsidy systems which they had had in place prior to the reforms. Consequently, "things started crumbling again." This is "the very strange reality of these extreme countries."

For Participant F, the "global project" of engaging with North Korea and improving human rights, is really a question about "people who are in proximity to political power, [...] what can they do to improve or to change the existing patterns of who benefit and who never get to benefit?" For Participant F, the answer lies in "the idea of the subaltern – those people who are cut off from social mobility because of the existing predominant culture." In this case, it is the North Korean women who are cut off and whose issues of inequality are often ignored by the dominant culture. This is obvious, as discussed in Chapter Three, in that although women's rights exist in law, they are not realised in practice due to cultural beliefs (e.g. that marital rape does not exist, a belief which at its core denotes a belief that women do not have the right to consent or that consent is implied in marriage because women's bodies belong to their husbands). So feminism is at its core about addressing "issues of inequality and self-improvement", i.e. how to empower women and how to improve self-determination. Giving the example of North Korean female defectors, Participant F described how women must act certain roles in order to survive: they may need to act as wives for Chinese men or as innocent and virtuous victims for Church groups, that is according to existing norms of what is deemed worthy and appropriate behaviour, which does not give room to self-realisation – North Korean women "don't actually get to decide, you know, who they want to be, because they have to survive." For Participant F, then, "women's empowerment and women's rights are about that." They add, "there are only so many ways in which the legal and institutional mechanisms can

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<sup>222</sup> See Haggard and Noland (n 32). For a more concise overview of North Korean agricultural developments throughout history, see e.g. Randall Ireson, 'Why North Korea Could Feed Itself' *38North* (Washington, 2 May 2010) < [www.38north.org/2010/05/why-north-korea-could-feed-itself](http://www.38north.org/2010/05/why-north-korea-could-feed-itself) > accessed 21.12.2022

enable that, but you do have to create an environment for those things to be possible, because that's the only way in which we can address the issue of the subaltern. It is about self-creation.”

If women’s rights are at their core about self-determination and cultural norms, can they be addressed at the international level? On the one hand, no. Because North Korea claims to have rid itself of feudalistic and imperialistic influences in their constitution and through their Juche philosophy, there is nothing else that needs to be addressed. According to Participant F:

“Their concept of juche philosophy already incorporates and addresses whatever issues that the system that was imposed on them created. [...] Everything that was imposed on them, was purged through juche concept or philosophy and everything that is attached to the authentic Korean, the politicised Korean culture, and that the modern culture that they instituted with this constitution isn't up for critique.”

Therefore,

“even imagery of patriarchy [or] the ways in which women are portrayed in North Korean novels or state culture [...] are not up for critique under gender equality because these are not oppressive, because we're all equal in the project of modernisation and liberation. We're all equal in the revolutionary DPRK.”

(Participant F)

Equality, according the DPRK official stance, was achieved in the revolution is not an issue. This is problematic for Participant F because it partly means that gender equality or women’s rights cannot be addressed through international treaties or agreements “because they’re so cultural.” Men and women all play important roles in society, and in the DPRK they are all educated and have equal work opportunities under the system. It is these that international treaties try to address (equal employment opportunities, right to health care, etc.) that are already in place in the DPRK. “So that is not really the issue. I think the issue would be around cultural norms about what is considered gender normative dogma,” said Participant F. There are disparities in who get to be in top positions and what sorts of domestic roles men and women have resulting from preconceived ideas about gender roles, but according to Participant F, these are “almost a universal problem. It’s an international problem, it’s not just a North Korean problem.” No country has true gender equality, although the Nordics are getting ever closer. But the mindset in North Korea and internationally is not helpful because it is not taken with the



level of urgency it requires, according to Participant F. However, gender equality “is an urgent issue because it’s really about power: who gets to actually determine the structure.”

Changing the structure and power imbalance, however, may not have a transformative impact. Participant F highlights the unchanging nature of the DPRK system, and totalitarian regimes in general. If the international community were to introduce gender quotas or otherwise strongly encourage involving women into diplomatic corps or the UN, the DPRK stance on its foreign policy or any other matter would likely not change because the call is made from up high. The system is rigid yet fragile, so any deviation could impose an existential threat. Taking the example of WMD, which are at the heart of regime survival, were a woman instead of a man to address the UN on the matter would not change the substantive stance of the DPRK regime. Kim Yo Jong, Kim Jong Un’s sister, has been rising in prominence and power for the past few years and recently it was her who addressed the UNSC regarding the DPRK’s most recent ICBM tests.<sup>223</sup> Using strong rhetoric typical for North Korea, her speech was nothing out of the ordinary that can be expected from North Korean leadership. As Participant F remarked:

“Because of its state ideology, the whole DPRK policy is not going to change as a very strong self-reliance principal, they have very strong anti-western position, they have very strong policy - they will not give up their nuclear weapons programme. So I don't think having more women representatives in DPRK will change the DPRK position.”

Participant F then says: “the interesting question is, if there are more women representatives in DPRK that deals with foreign affairs, would that change the attitude and mode of engagement of the international community?” They pose this question because to Participant F, the question of “how do you improve the issue of women's rights in DPRK, is really a question of how do you improve DPRK’s relationship with the world.” In this sense, Participant F believes that the international community needs to accept that the DPRK “is here to stay, rather than trying to change it or unify it with South Korea, or think that if the Kim Dynasty disappears, then somehow it will be a whole different country, or that it would change direction.” The DPRK has shown incredible resilience and even though experts keep predicting its demise, the country will

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<sup>223</sup> See e.g., Jeongmin Kim and Shreyas Reddy, ‘Kim Yo Jong liken US to ‘scared dog’ for pushing criticism of ICBM test at UN’ *NK News* (22 November 2022) < [www.nknews.org/2022/11/kim-yo-jong-likens-us-to-scared-dog-for-pushing-criticism-of-icbm-test-at-un](http://www.nknews.org/2022/11/kim-yo-jong-likens-us-to-scared-dog-for-pushing-criticism-of-icbm-test-at-un) > accessed 22.12.2022

celebrate its 75<sup>th</sup> independence day this year (2023). Even though the international community at large cannot (and should not) condone or stop its condemnation of the human rights violations, nuclear weapons programme, or totalitarian mode of governance, accepting the fact that the country will continue to exist in its current form will allow for new methods and more regular engagement with it, including increasing soft and smart power strategies.

### c) Soft Power Strategies: Cultural and Academic Exchanges

Social change in totalitarian systems “defies the law of gravity: information never flows down in a totalitarian state, it only flows up” as Participant E so elegantly put it. In their experience with academic exchanges<sup>224</sup> with North Koreans, Participant E found out that when picking North Korean participants from top positions, they figured the exchange organisers would be “in direct contact with people close to decision making” and thus they could distribute knowledge most effectively. However, what they found was that the knowledge was not “diffused any further,” not even to other staff members. Participants were largely high-ranking male officials. These exchanges thus began to invite junior staff members, “as young as possible and as female as possible” to participate with the assumption that “everybody above them in the hierarchical structures are going to be extremely interested in what they learned. And they will insist on getting every little piece of information that they got during the training programme.” The North Koreans were not pleased with the request to involve female staff or younger staff, and caused a small amount of continuous tension throughout the programmes. Participant E notes, however, that the tension was likely more to do with the North Koreans wanting “to decide on their own how things should be” rather than an opposition to training female staff.

When asked about the impact of the programmes, Participant E remarked, “it’s really hard to say.” On the one hand, no major changes have occurred and North Korea is still largely a command economy. On the other hand, this was not the objective of the programme. The programmes were, importantly, “not an attempt to promote Korean reform” but were rather “motivated with the need that the North Koreans would understand how people in other countries think about economic issues.” Because the North Korean economy and economic philosophy is so different to anything else in the world, the objective was to teach and show how

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<sup>224</sup> The academic exchanges Participant E talked about were ones that occurred in the 1990s and early 2000s with funding from Swedish partners. The content focussed on market economics.

other economies around the world function. In this respect, the programmes were successful in that, “North Korean now have a dictionary of economic terms” and the training materials and slide which the programme used were spotted being used at North Korean universities during later visits to the country.

Another point of impact, “although never or rarely the impact that was intended, is related to North Korean economic policies.” During the programme, the North Koreans would request certain topics to be explored in more depth, and depending on what the teachers knew and could teach, these requests were heard. For example, some years more detail was given to the promotion of new industries or to exchange rates, Participant E recalls. They then noted that not long after, economic reforms relating to the topics discussed would appear in North Korea. It would seem, then, that new policies or reforms which were being planned in North Korea already would be requested to be the focus of some programme training. Of course, for any such reforms, the North Koreans “put their own independent twists on policies, where they pick something out of the international experiences and the theoretical discussions” that were held during the programme and then “they [would] add or subtract from it so that it sometimes becomes entirely different.” From a policy perspective, the North Korean agricultural reform of the early 2000s apparently followed the discussions and experiences shared during the programmes.

It would seem, then, that North Korea is eager to learn from international experiences. This would certainly appear to be the case on the individual level. Participant E remarked on the real knowledge gap many North Koreans showed. For example, many did not seem to know about the massive South Korean car industry and were proud that “North Korea had surpassed South Korea because North Korea could produce cars.” They also noted that upon arrival to the programme location, many North Korean participants “were vacuuming the place for information [...] most of them spent their evenings searching the internet for information, getting into sites and accessing information that we never ever be able to find in North Korea.” In this way, the programmes not only helped provide the intended economic education but also allow individuals to gain a different world view through personal experience and gain an “understanding of how the rest of the world looks like.”

Participant E point out, however, that North Korean would not say such things out loud and would only go so far as to say something along the lines of “it’s good for us perhaps to

understand some of this so that we understand others” but would rarely say that they are happy “to learn anything for their own use.” This is because, as Participant E said, “it is a great shame for them to learn something from anybody else.” Participant E also notes that only on a few occasions have North Korean leaders made statements about ‘climbing the highest mountain and look out on the world to understand what’s going on and pick the best’ (Participant E paraphrasing Kim Jong Un). In practice, this means that while North Koreans may be looking out into the world for ideas, anything they come across will be translated into something contextually and ideologically appropriate. Participant E noted that when introducing new concepts, such as economic competition, translators were given the South Korean translations, which they would in turn translate into something understandable in the North Korean context. In this way, Western economic and business concepts would be made more relevant and understandable.

Participant E additionally noted that holding such training programmes with and in countries with transition economies or with a communist past would be most helpful as it would allow North Koreans to contextualise the contents of the programme with a command economy and transition economy. Economic training programmes run in the Nordics (or elsewhere), Participant E pointed out, is not ideal because the kinds of economies the Nordic countries have are “so far removed from would be relevant to to understand from a North Korean point of view.” Instead, Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam or Cambodia could provide useful contexts for future training endeavours, and Sweden and Finland could help run them similarly to how Sweden has done in the past. Currently, a famous Singaporean NGO, Choson Exchange, conducts this type of training focusing on economic policy, business, and legal training with the goal to further female entrepreneurship. Choson Exchange reports, similarly to what Participant E remarked, that North Korean women were extremely interested in learning about how to run and grow their businesses.<sup>225</sup> There is thus interest from the North Korean side, even if this interest is not directly expresses, to partake in academic exchanges or training workshops run by foreign partners. Unfortunately, although these schemes have had positive impacts, it is currently impossible to run them via EU partners due to international sanctions.

Cultural exchanges or events, on the other hand, have seen fewer sanctions. All Participants viewed them positively in terms of creating contact. One problem Participant E notes, however,

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<sup>225</sup> Choson Exchange, ‘2013 Annual Report – Women in Business’ (6 February 2013) < <https://choson-exchange.squarespace.com/our-reports> > accessed 2.1.2023

is the difficulty in pulling them off. Siting the example of the Slovenian metal band, Laibach, visiting North Korea in 2015, with the help of a Norwegian director and long-time cultural collaborator with North Korea, Martin Traavik,<sup>226</sup> they observed that in a conservative and closed off country like North Korea, the band “scared the living daylights out of the North Koreans.” Moreover, many artists would likely “absolutely not want to be connected to North Korea anyway” for its reputation as an “international pariah,” Participant E adds. The success of cultural events is thus unpredictable as who would want to participate is limited and thus their reception may not be positive.

Participant F brought up an important point, also echoed by Participant E. Every North Korean taking part in exchanges are government officials because everyone in North Korea is employed by the state. North Korean artists and engineers taking part in the construction of statues across Africa or those involved in building the Panorama Museum in Cambodia are all state actors and members of the political elite and thus bring in money for the North Korean government through their activities. (The only exception would be the doctors who partook in medical training exchanges mentioned by Participant D.) The benefits of these kinds of cultural exchanges are therefore not obvious and even though “more North Koreans got to make connections with other people in the world,” Participant F remarked, “it's art, it's tourism, it's benign opportunities for people to have cultural exchange. [...] I don't know whether that really improves the lives of people in North Korea that are not already connected with power.” Moreover, they note that those participating in these events are all male: “All the artists that got to travel internationally, whether it's Cambodia or North Korea are men.” Perhaps they got some exposure to “strong women in this part of the world and maybe there is some sort of cultural learning” but women are still largely excluded from these events, which thus do not serve any women's rights and gender equality objectives.

Still, cultural or academic exchanges, and other soft power strategies, “keep the corridor of communication open” and “allow for a kind of connection and being part of the world [...] not predetermined by security issues,” as Participant F states. With the securitisation of the entire country, these activities are difficult as they are ultimately tied to global security issues and questions about morality. So Participant F believes that although difficult, “cultural exchanges,

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<sup>226</sup> For more on the visit, see Morten Traavik and Ugis Olte, ‘When Rock Arrived in North Korea: Liberation Day’ *BBC* (Storyville documentary, 2017) < [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09hx3x0](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09hx3x0) >. It has been unavailable via the BBC website for some time but is available for viewing via the Internet Archive < <https://archive.org/details/LaibachLiberationDay> > accessed 21.12.2022

art exhibitions, and these things are all better than nothing.” Unfortunately, events are difficult to organised as for example one academic event was cancelled after the host country denied visas to the North Korean delegates and so, Participant F notes, “this is the government, diplomatic relations, foreign policy getting in the way of even small pockets of possibilities.” Politics and international relations are thus preventing North Korea from participating in these kinds of exchanges or events.

However, Participant F observed that the further away from anything political (though almost impossible in the North Korean case whose very existence is securitised), the more likely an exchange or collaboration is to be successful. For example, European archaeology students have visited the DPRK on numerous occasions. “Very humanities oriented” as opposed to social or political science related activities are easier to pull off because, archaeology for example, is “a matter of technical skill exchange” Participant F exclaims – preserving and excavating tombs “have no policy relevance.” European partners are especially preferred in this way as “Europe is considered safe, in the sense of neutral, less hostile. So I think there are more opportunities for Western European colleagues to do these kind of collaborations,” Participant F surmised.

Although without policy relevance, Participant F sees these kinds of collaborations as relevant for their “human to human level communication” that because they “these are also still ways in which people in North Korea are remaining connected with the outside and the outside remains connected and committed to North Koreans, despite these very strict boundaries.” They are ways to “not remain polarised by our differences” and to “remain invested in each other’s worlds even though they’re so different, antagonistic, and contradictory.” Cultural or academic exchanges are “not going to change the political climate but if there isn't even that, then it's just lack of care. There's absolute lack of interest.”

This is something which came across in my research on Finnish relations with the DPRK. Not only was it difficult to get a response from Finnish agencies, the government representative, Participant C, did not seem hopeful or excited in the way that all other participants did. All of them seemed to be proud and interested in their work and the subject matter, except Participant C. Participant F’s observations on the lack of care in modern international relations is relevant here. They say that in modern politics “even just listening to one another” is often overlooked: “There is this sense of we already know what you are and we already know what you will be. So actually what that means is there's no point of communication.” There is little incentive to interact with each other, especially if no transactions can be conducted due to sanctions or other

reasons – “there's no human connection and there's no investment in one another,” Participant F added. Moreover, international relations are “very transactional, it's about economic mutual benefit. There's a fundamental lack of interest in Korean people or Korean culture or learning Korean language just for learning Korean language,” Participant F notes. There is therefore a desperate need for the international community to care more, to increase the human-to-human element of international relations.

In a similar vein, Participant C viewed exchange programmes positively in the abstract in terms of creating general contact and bringing people together but did not see DPRK-Finnish cultural or academic exchanges realistic, at least in the near future, due to limited contact and pandemic and sanctions related restrictions. Participant A similarly remarked on the difficulty on conducting them for these reasons but also noted that there are currently no such programmes being conducted by Swedish partners. Any such exchanges, moreover, are not run by government agencies but rather through relevant organisations such as universities or NGOs like the Red Cross, Participants A and B highlighted. So far, none have focussed on gender issues or women's rights directly but these matters have been built into the programmes themselves or become incorporated through a general exposure to new ideas. The programmes themselves have tended to focus strictly on technical training or cultural exchanges. It seems there is little to no difference between how the Finnish and Swedish foreign ministry representatives viewed these exchanges: positively but limited, and currently impossible. Participant F also highlighted that the 2018 sanctions included North Korea's largest art production studio, Mansudae Art Studio, effectively preventing any artistic endeavours or interactions with the country. It seems that the international community is pushing North Korea into further isolation.

These activities, however, must remain marginal and, to an extent, secret to have any positive impact and to exist in the first place. Participant E is adamant in that “in the North Korean case, it's very simple: if they were public knowledge, they would not exist.” Although democratic societies value transparency, “in this specific case, [secrecy] has been a prerequisite” to maintaining “this channel of communication.” Within representative democracies like Finland and Sweden, this is not necessary a problem or at odds with their values: “people select their leaders and give them the mandate to carry out various kinds of actions, in the public interest, and it doesn't necessarily call for perfectly open information about, for instance, every negotiation that [a country] has with a foreign power,” Participant E aptly points out. There is “a cost of engagement” in such matters. If news outlets were to publicise or politicians were to make public speeches about the above-discussed economic training programmes, for example,

North Korea would not want to participate as it would view it as shameful and thus relations would sour and activities halt.<sup>227</sup> Moreover, because the programmes are marginal and their costs are minimal and thus do not show in public records, they are not necessary for public knowledge, Participant E adds.

## **Conclusion**

While the Swedish representatives interviewed seemed hopeful and ready to continue and possibly expand their engagements with North Korea, their Finnish counterparts seemed more sceptical. The Swedish foreign ministry representatives saw great benefits to FFP, especially in its focus on leading by example and interpersonal activities. International treaties and other legal instruments, while necessary and important, address formal structures but for a country with gender equality written into its constitution, addressing gender equality and women's rights requires cultural and attitudinal changes rather than legal ones. As Participant F said, "what would be more beneficial would be less structural but more substantive engagement with DPRK."

The Swedish foreign ministry representatives interviewed here seemed to agree and were engaging in exactly this kind of low-level substantive engagement through their small-scale interpersonal activities through their embassies. Similarly, Participant D spoke on the importance their NGO's low-level work of building capacity at different levels in various sectors and working together with locals based on local needs, adapting as needed. The academic interviewees also saw concrete benefits to interpersonal engagement, and both talked about how politics get in the way of these types of engagements. High level politics and large international instrument obstruct even simple human-to-human interactions and perpetuate "a lack of care" towards North Koreans, as Participant F remarked.

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<sup>227</sup> This point has been a major ethical consideration in the writing of this thesis. Should I write about the training programme in my thesis? Could it have an adverse effect on the possibility of future programmes? Because this thesis is an open access source, it would go against what Participant E advises and be available for anyone to read. On the other hand, this is not a major publication, and its readership is likely limited so this thesis will likely not have this kind of impact. Lastly, as mentioned previously, international sanctions have effectively made it impossible to carry out these activities so no such programmes run by either Finland or Sweden exists or is likely to exist in the near future, making these ethical concerns obsolete in practice for the time being.



Participant C did not speak on these matters but emphasised the need for food aid over anything else, which is of course dire. They did not, however, express much interest in deepening connections or increasing contact with Pyongyang and seemed content with the current though “thin” relations. This may have been because of the strict boarder closures due to the pandemic, however, which was mentioned multiple times. They seemed to want to continue Finland’s human rights-based approach towards North Korea and remain at a distance.

## Chapter 7 – Conclusion

Considering the Nordics' reputation internationally, their economic and political stability, strong commitment to human rights and good governance, and history of (relative) neutrality and mediation in international conflicts, the Finland and Sweden countries could provide the ideal channels for engagement with North Korea. The Nordics international reputation extends to North Korea where Participants attested that Finland and Sweden are viewed positively and considered friendly. This reputation is a necessity for engaging with North Korea who seems to view the international community with hostility. With this position, Finland and Sweden can easily use soft power strategies to try to attract North Koreans to aspire to their levels of social cohesion by emphasising and engaging North Korea in the realm of gender equality and women's rights.

One of the biggest problems in discussing women's rights with North Koreans is their perception that because they have guaranteed right in their constitution and international treaties, there is no further need for action on this front, as affirmed by most Participants. Here again is where Swedish and Finnish soft power strategies prove useful. Both countries demonstrate a strong commitment to gender equality and human rights domestically and in their foreign policy, and are reflected in their political practices and cultural values in all walks of life. They are thus viewed internationally as legitimate moral authorities suitable especially for humanitarian action and conflict mediation. With these qualities and abilities then, the two countries are ideally suited to advance human rights and gender equality globally – work which is very much needed in North Korea as demonstrated in Chapter Three.

Sweden is doing what it can in this regard: its foreign ministry's FFP employed in North Korea emphasised low-level interpersonal interactions and bringing gender equality to the forefront of daily activities i.e. soft power strategies in line with FFP.<sup>228</sup> It has also attracted North Koreans

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<sup>228</sup> An unfortunate note must be made here. Sweden revoked its FFP in October 2022 as its new right-wing government declared in a surprising turn. Although the new prime minister claimed that “gender equality is a core value for Sweden” (John Granlund, ‘Tobias Billström skrotar den feministiska utrikespolitiken’ *Aftonbladet* (Stockholm, 18 October 2022) < [www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/eJJOMI/tobias-billstrom-skrotar-ud-s-feministiska-utrikespolitik](http://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/eJJOMI/tobias-billstrom-skrotar-ud-s-feministiska-utrikespolitik) > accessed 9.1.2023) despite this turn, the Human Rights Watch called this development “a step in the wrong direction.” (Hanna Walfridsson, ‘Sweden’s New Government Abandons Feminist Foreign Policy’ *Human Rights Watch* (New York, 31 October 2022) Human Rights Watch < [www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/31/swedens-new-government-abandons-feminist-foreign-policy](http://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/31/swedens-new-government-abandons-feminist-foreign-policy) > accessed 9.1.2023). The new

to engage in cultural activities and especially academic exchanges, the successes of which were expressed by several Participants. Continuing this type of work is therefore extremely important despite their increased difficulty to conduct due to sanctions. Working with and through NGOs and the embassy, however, is possible and even preferred as NGOs have access to local populations diplomatic staff do not but often lack the resources that foreign ministries have. Participants A and B both spoke on the collaboration and support the foreign ministry give to NGOs and the role of SIDA in providing international aid. Indeed, NGOs and private ventures have come to hold increasingly important roles in international relations and have central roles in employing soft power methods as they can demonstrate cultural values in practice to local populations in ways that high politics may not be suitable.<sup>229</sup>

Finland's engagement, on the other hand, is limited to hard power strategies employed through international organisations, i.e. EU and UN sanctions. Its disinterest in engaging North Korea shows a lack of care, a trait incompatible with its human-rights centred foreign policy and international reputation as a herald of gender equality. This type of disinterest is not new and unfortunately characterises the international community's attitude towards North Korea today. Outside of international sanctions, very little contact is had with North Korea in high politics. Public diplomacy, however, is important as daily and strategic communications and developing lasting relations, in Nye's three-fold conceptualisation, allow for soft power to materialise and are ways to express and export national socio-cultural values and practices. For a country infamously characterised as a 'Hermit Kingdom', this kind of exposure to alternative ways of life is essential, particularly when that kingdom is simultaneously notorious for its human rights atrocities.

Women's empowerment is an essential component to this end: it is about improving social, political, and economic autonomy. It is a necessity for the realisation of human rights and for the real implementation of international treaty provisions on human rights and gender equality. Finland is "a pioneer in gender equality," the first country to give women the right to vote, an active member in numerous international gender equality organisations (e.g. UN Women), and

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government claimed that the label of FFP obscures the primacy of Swedish values in its foreign policy. Yet, "feminism signals a promise to reflect women's needs and interests in all policymaking" (Walfridsson 2022) as well as a confrontation with gendered power structures. The country's reputation as the founder of FFP and as a forerunner in gender equality is thus suffering and how this will reflect its international and bilateral relations is yet to be seen.

<sup>229</sup> Leonard (n 213)

among the top countries in the world for gender equality and is thus in one of the best positions in the world to promote women's rights and gender equality.

In conjunction with its long history with North Korea and its relatively positive standing with the DPRK give it ideal conditions to engage the country in gender equality and women's rights. It could even leverage the DPRK debt to Finland in efforts to enter negotiations. Finnish NGOs could be supported to re-enter the country, Participant D remarked that their NGO would "without a doubt continue our work if routes are found," "when borders open,"<sup>230</sup> and if the "standstill" with international sanctions end to allow for NGO operations in the country. However, this potential is not being met as there is little contact between the two – Participant C mentioned once yearly visits to Pyongyang by Finnish delegates and once monthly phone calls with the DPRK embassy in Stockholm. Increasing this contact is essential if any real progress on women's rights is to be made. Yet, Participants C and D seemed content with the current situation and did not believe that gender inequality was that big a problem in the DPRK. Although true in comparison with other developing nations, the situation for North Korean women is bad, as seen in Chapter Three. To not engage with North Korea in this realm therefore demonstrates a real lack of care for fellow human beings.

The international community's reluctance to engage North Korea comes partly from its hostility, disinterest, and illicit activities. The DPRK regime has been described as a "mafia state"<sup>231</sup> for its international narcotics trafficking (recall the 1976 smuggling crisis in the Nordics), the "failed Stalinist utopia"<sup>232</sup> for its crashed Soviet-style political economy, and an "international pariah"<sup>233</sup> for its regular threats of war and nuclear and WMD programmes and testing, among many other names. Unfortunately, these names have also been extended to the average North Korean who has nothing to do with politics, domestic or international. Every North Korean is an employee of the state by default but a very rare few of the 25 million people in North Korea have anything to do with decision-making.

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<sup>230</sup> Quotes translated from Finnish to English by the author.

<sup>231</sup> Stephan Blanke and Peng Wang, "Mafia State: the Evolving Threat of North Korean Narcotics Trafficking" 159 (2014) RUSI 52.

<sup>232</sup> Lankov (n 1)

<sup>233</sup> John McKay, 'North Korea: Failed State or Pariah, or Both...?' in Anthony Ware (ed), *Development in Difficult Sociopolitical Contexts: Fragile, Failed, Pariah* (Springer 2014) 274

The securitisation of the entire country has led to an intense politicisation of anything to do with North Korea, even cultural or academic events as expressed by Participant F – politics gets in the way of even simple human-to-human interaction. A FFP and a human-rights centred foreign policy, however, both seek to disentangle the person from the state, while of course keeping in mind socio-cultural context. By focusing on grassroots development and cooperation, both FFP and a human-rights based foreign policy thus recognise the importance of soft power approaches to international engagement and provide great avenues to de-politicise average North Koreans, recognise the humanity of North Koreans as fellow human beings, and create avenues for interaction. Participant F spoke noted the importance of “less structural but more substantive engagement with DPRK” and the limitations of a purely hard power approach to do so: international treaties cannot address the socio-cultural aspects of gender inequality but focus on legal instruments, which the DPRK has already addressed.

Small scale interpersonal interactions create trust and relationships which in turn create genuine care between individuals and thus influences political approaches and could translate into long-term engagements. Any social or cultural change requires long-term commitment, which transactional realpolitik does not encourage, and thus a FFP or human-rights approach is extremely valuable in this regard.

Based on my research findings, I encourage the government of Finland to increase its interactions with North Korea and to leverage its historical position with the DPRK and utilise its international reputation to engage the DRPK in similar ways to its western neighbour. I encourage the government of Sweden to re-establish its FFP and to continue its valuable work with the DPRK. I recommend the international community find ways to relax sanctions just enough to allow NGOs back into the country and relieve the food shortages to allow the most vulnerable not only to survive but to thrive and find self-empowerment. This combination of NGO development efforts and foreign ministry support in North Korea was found in this study to be impactful and helped women gain autonomy and thus realise the two most fundamental aspects of gender equality and women’s rights: self-determination and empowerment.

## Annex I

### UN and EU Sanctions on the DPRK

<b>Date</b>	<b>UNSC Resolution and EU further measures</b>
20 Nov 2006	Resolution 1718. Arms embargo, travel bans, nuclear and weapons related import/export bans. EU Decision 2006/795/CFSP and Regulation 329/2007 – EU transposition.
27 Jul 2009	Resolution 1874 - Prohibition on financial services and assistance, cargo inspections. EU Common position 2009/573/CFSP and Regulation 1283/2009 – further EU bans on nuclear equipment and weapons.
18 Feb 2012	Resolution 2087 - Amendments of goods imports/exports banned. EU Decision 2013/88/CFSP and Regulation 296/2013 - further EU expansion of travel bans and frozen assets, expansion of goods banned, restrictions on financial cooperation.
22 Apr 2013	UNSC Resolution 2094. Condemnation of DPRK missile tests. EU Decision 2013/183/CFSP and Regulation 696/2013 - further EU expansion of travel bans and frozen assets and of restrictions on financial cooperation.
4 Mar 2016	Resolution 2270. Expansion of travel bans and frozen assets. EU Decision 2016/319/CFSP.
31 Mar 2016	Resolution 2270. Expansion of export/import prohibitions. Further EU updates on travel bans.
8 Dec 2016	Resolution 2321. Expansion of travel bans and frozen assets. EU Decision 2016/2217/CFSP – transposition.
27 Feb 2017	Resolution 2321. Expansion of export/import prohibitions. Restrictions on scientific cooperation. EU Decision 2017/345/CFSP and Regulation 2017/330 – transposition.
8 Jun 2017	Resolution 2356. Expansion of travel bans.
10 Aug 2017	Resolution 2371. Expansion of travel bans.
14 Sep 2017	Resolution 2371. Expansion of export/import prohibitions. Further EU ban on DPRK nationals working in EU territories.
15 Sep 2017	Resolution 2375. Expansion of travel bans and export/import prohibitions.
10 Oct 2017	Resolution 2375. Expansion of imports/exports.
18 Oct 2017	Resolution 2375. Expansion of sanctions list. EU Decision 2017/1909 – transposition.
8 Jan 2018	Resolution 2397. Expansion of travel bans.
26 Feb 2018	Resolution 2397. Strengthening export bans, expanding import bans, maritime restrictions, requirement to repatriate all DPRK workers abroad.
6 Apr 2018	Resolution 1718. Expansion of travel bans and frozen assets.

*UNSC Resolutions and EU further measures against the DPRK adapted from*  
 < [www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/history-north-korea/#](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/history-north-korea/#) >

<b>Date</b>	<b>Details</b>
4 Aug 2009	Transposition by the EU of first UN designations. Decision 2009/599/CFSP
22 Dec 2009	First autonomous designation. Ban on dual-use goods and technology. First travel bans and asset freezings effectuated. Decision 2009/1002/CFSP and Regulation 1283/2009
29 Jun 2010	Revised and expanded list of goods bans. Regulation 567/2010
22 Dec 2010	Expansion of travel bans and frozen assets. Decision 2010/800/CFSP
19 Dec 2011	Expansion of travel bans and frozen assets. Decision 2011/860/CFSP
14 Apr 2013	Review of sanctions list. Decision 2014/212/CFSP
8 Oct 2014	Expansion of frozen assets. Decision 2014/700/CFSP
2 Jul 2015	Expansion of travel bans and frozen assets. Decision 2015/1066/CFSP
19 May 2016	Expansion of travel bans. Decision 2016/785/CFSP
27 May 2016	Restrictions on trade, financial services, investment, transportation.
12 Dec 2016	Council conclusions on the DPRK condemn nuclear tests.
6 Apr 2017	Expansion of prohibition on investment and certain financial services, expansion of travel bans.
16 Oct 2017	Total ban on DPRK investment. Expansion of import/exports bans. Lowered remittances.
22 Jan 2018	Expansion of travel bans and frozen assets.
19 Apr 2018	Expansion of travel bans. Expansion of import/exports ban.
15 Jul 2019	Renewed sanctions, updated lists.
30 Jul 2020	Confirmation of travel bans.

*EU Autonomous Measures adapted from*

< [www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/history-north-korea/#](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/history-north-korea/#) >