

Human Rights in North Korea

Wednesday 18 February 2009, by [KEY Seok](#) (Date first published: 17 February 2009).

{So, what do you think Secretary Clinton should tell Kim Jong-il if they ever have a chance to meet?}' ' When I posed this question to a North Korean woman living in Seoul, she gave me an unexpected answer:*I would like her to tell him to allow North Korean women to wear pants and ride bicycles,*"she said. *But aren't there more pressing problems than that?"* I asked. {Yes, but it's a matter of livelihood,}" she replied, adding,*For women to work at markets, they have to travel everyday. Bicycles are usually the only means of transportation. Without them, they can't make a living. And when you ride bicycles long distances, skirts are very inconvenient."*

Indeed, at least in large cities in North Korea, women are not allowed to wear trousers or ride bicycles because the authorities decided that it's not becoming of decent North Korean women to do so.

Although how strictly they enforce this ban seems to depend much on location and individual inspectors, women who dare to violate the ban are subject to heavy fines and even confiscation of their bicycles.

North Korea is notorious for its utter disregard of basic human rights. Bans on women riding bikes and wearing trousers may pale in comparison to routine public executions or the enslavement of hundreds of thousands of people, including young children, in prison camps.

There is still no organized political opposition, independent labor union, free media or civil society. Arbitrary arrests, detention, and lack of due process are the norm.

But the ban on pants and bicycles for women is symptomatic of a range of other, often-overlooked, problems.

Across North Korea's conservative, male-dominated society, there is discrimination against women, a knowing disregard for the consequences of such policies, and an opportunistic manipulation of power by police officers trying to make easy money by preying on an undervalued and underprivileged population.

When North Korea's ration system collapsed during a famine in the mid-1990s, markets sprang up across the country, as desperately-hungry people bartered whatever valuable possessions they owned for food. But gradually, the markets have become places where people buy and sell whatever is available.

In North Korea today, where the vast majority of the population, especially women, almost completely depend on this market system to earn a living and bring food home, a woman losing a day's wages due to a fine or the confiscation of a bicycle may lead to her entire family going hungry.

A woman's ability to earn an income is all the more important because they have become the main breadwinners of many households, as their fathers, husbands, and sons are stuck in state-designated factories and other jobs that pay too little. Many families depend on them to avoid hunger.

Washington resumed food aid to North Korea last year after years of suspension. But food aid is not a long-term solution, and any long-term solution should consider the protection of the basic human rights of North Koreans.

As the North Korean woman told me, restrictions on fundamental rights and freedoms are inhibiting people's ability to survive.

As U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visits Asia to meet officials in Japan, South Korea, China and India this week, she is certain to discuss security on the Korean Peninsula and North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

But Secretary Clinton should also address human rights abuses in North Korea and the plight of North Korean refugees as a central part of the Obama administration's Northeast Asia policy.

The United States, Japan, China, and South Korea should present a united front to make concrete progress on human rights part of any discussions with North Korea.

Whether it's ending gender-based discrimination, public executions, or prison camps, all aspects of North Korea's human rights record need to be seriously challenged. The lives of North Koreans depend on it.

P.S.

Published in The Korea Times