“Periods are a shameful thing in North Korea”

Hyunmin AN, Jina SIM
The State of Menstrual Health of North Korean Women - “Periods are a shameful thing in North Korea”

Published by Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB)

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Preface

“I was most happy when I managed to align two pieces of gauze cloth and stitch the edges. This kind of thing lifted my mood. One good thing about being in South Korea is sanitary pads. As a woman I am really grateful to have that. It is really hard for women in North Korea.”

Having toilet paper in the restroom
Being able to change your sanitary pads whenever you want

We took this for granted,
but now we realize those are things we should be grateful for.
To those who are ashamed without knowing the reason.
To those who hide without knowing why.
To those who cannot express their pain.
To those who wash heir cloth sanitary pads in secret.

To all those women

We want to say:

You do not have to hide anymore
There is nothing to be ashamed of.

November 2018
Hyunmin AN, Jina SIM
State of **Menstrual Health of North Korean Women**

This report contains a comprehensive analysis on North Korean women's menstrual health, awareness of menstruation and public health conditions in relation to menstruation. To collect relevant information, in-depth interviews were conducted with **100 female North Korean defectors** who left North Korea after 2012.

**Interviewees' Age**
*(At the time of escape from North Korea)*

- Teens: 1
- 20s: 40
- 30s: 23
- 40s: 18
- 50s: 1

**Type of Area**

- Urban: 63
- Rural: 33
- Coalmine: 4

**Interviewees' Level of Education**

- Primary School: 1
- Secondary School: 64
- Vocational School: 8
- Professional School: 16
- University: 11

**Estimated Economic Level**

- Very Comfortable: 2
- Comfortable: 17
- Average: 61
- Poor: 9
- Very Poor: 7
- No Answer: 4
State of Menstrual Health of North Korean Women

This report contains a comprehensive analysis on North Korean women’s menstrual health, awareness of menstruation and public health conditions in relation to menstruation. To collect relevant information, in-depth interviews were conducted with 100 female North Korean defectors who left North Korea after 2012.

Place of Residence of Interviewees by Province

- N. Hamgyeong Province: 39
- Jagang Province: 35
- S. Hamgyeong Province: 7
- N. Pyeongan Province: 5
- S. Pyeongan Province: 5
- S. Hwanghae Province: 3
- N. Hwanghae Province: 7
- Gangwon Province: 1
- Yanggang Province: 39
Availability of Education on Menstruation

- Yes: 63
- No: 37

Person who Provided Education on Menstruation (multiple-answer question) (Total: 96)

- Mother: 34
- Teacher: 44
- Friend: 9
- Doctor: 1
- Others: 8

Infographics 11
However,
although education on menstruation is given, insufficient content and incorrect information result in North Korean women’s lack of awareness related to menstruation.

Testimonies describing the lack of menstrual education

"The class when I was in school was so basic I don’t even remember it. It was along the lines of telling us that all women have it."

"It was basic. I remember the teacher's expression, women bleed. Do not act ignorant when it happens. I just remember being told to use gauze cloth."

"I was taught by a female teacher. But most of it was not about menstruation, it was more on sewing, cooking, and embroidery. The class on menstruation was only once or twice. "

The State of Menstrual Health of North Korean Women
Effect of the Lack of Menstrual Education

Perceived as Illness

Related Testimonies

"I got it for the first time during class, I didn't know what it was so I ran back home. I was not taught so I didn't know. It suddenly happened during class so I thought something big happened and ran back home. My mother was not home so I asked my grandmother and she told me that it was an illness women had."

"I got my first period when I was in sixth grade. I learned about it in school, but I did not understand it, so I thought that something like that existed. But then one day I went to the restroom and there was blood. So I thought that I had a deadly disease, and told my mother as I was crying."
Effect of the Lack of Menstrual Education

Negative Perception Towards Menstruation

Related Testimonies

"It was something bothersome. It is something that happens once a month like clockwork for my entire life."

"Periods are just considered something that women have. I took it as an inconvenience that I had once a month as a woman."
Types of Absorbents Used
(multiple-answer question) (Total: 167)

- Cloth Sanitary Pads: 94
- Disposable Sanitary Pads: 64
- Paper: 9

Number of Changes of Cloth Sanitary Pads per Day
(Total: 167)

- Once: 2
- Twice: 6
- Three Times: 12
- More than Three Times: 74
The State of Menstrual Health of North Korean Women

Number of Changes of Disposable Sanitary Pads per Day (Total: 58)

- 45: More than Three Times
- 12: Three Times
- 5: Twice
- 0: Once
- 2: No Answer

It is important to note that because of the financial burden posed by the cost of disposable pads North Korean only used them when they had to be outside their homes for longer periods of time.

Related Testimonies

"Even if I want to buy North Korean ones [sanitary pads], they are so expensive that I cannot afford them. There are many places that sell them, but they are pricey. When women purchase disposable sanitary pads, they try to save them as much as possible."

"I never used disposable sanitary pads all day. I used them only when I was going out and changed to gauze ones when I got home. I would just take 4-5 [pads] when I was going out to work."
Hygiene and Sanitation

State of Menstrual Health of North Korean Women

- Availability of Adequate Sanitary Conditions
  - Yes: 22
  - No: 78

- Menstruation-related Disorders
  (multiple-answer question) (Total: 225)
  - Menstrual cramps: 57
  - Anemia: 31
    - Heavy menstrual bleeding: 27
      - Menstrual depression: 18
        - Irregular flow and duration of the cycle: 19
          - Absent menstruation (amenorrhea): 12
            - Atypical menstrual bleeding: 19
"There are a lot of uncomfortable things when we are on our periods. I have to change my pad but there are not many places where I can do that. In North Korea, there are more outhouses in private houses than public buildings. It was very uncomfortable to ask if you could use other people’s private outhouses, so you wouldn’t ask and that was really inconvenient. You can only change your sanitary pad when you arrive at your destination."

"There are no sinks. The only place you can deal with your sanitary pad is the restroom. However, unlike South Korea where most restroom have sinks you can wash your hands in, in North Korea, with the exception of big cities, there was no such thing. When you are on your period, you have to go to the restroom to change your sanitary pad, wrap it in a plastic bag so no one else finds out and wash it later without anyone knowing. If you get any blood on your hands, you can wash them at a stream. "
Experience of Receiving Medical Treatment for Menstruation-related Disorders (Total: 83)

- Yes: 9
- No: 74

Experience of Receiving Medical Consultation Regarding Menstruation

- Yes: 14
- No: 86
The State of Menstrual Health of North Korean Women

- Use of Menstrual Leave
  - Yes: 19
  - No: 81

- Availability of Space for Resting During Menstruation
  - Yes: 9
  - No: 91
Absence or Presence of Menstruation During the Period of Detention (Total: 34)

- I had menstruation: 12
- I was supposed to have my period but my menstruation stopped or I did not get my period at all: 13
- I was not supposed to have my period / I was in menopause: 9

Related Testimony

It [my period] stopped for two months. Women preferred not having their periods. We did not eat enough, even less than what dogs eat here [in South Korea], so my health quickly deteriorated.
I. Introduction
I. Introduction

1. Women and Menstruation

In many societies all around the world, the cultural stigma associated with menstruation and related topics has led to general silence.\(^1\) Despite the importance of menstruation for childbirth from an obstetrics and gynecological perspective, many developing countries consider menstruation as a minor issue.\(^2\) Such conditions lead to the lack of education regarding menstruation, which in turn strengthens the culture of indifference towards it.

As a result, in countries with a negative attitude towards menstruation, women have limited opportunities to participate equally in the society which, in turn, undermines their overall social status.\(^3\)

Moreover, women in middle or lower income groups of developing countries are highly vulnerable to menstruation-related public health and hygiene issues due to the lack of infrastructure including adequate water supply and sewerage systems.\(^4\) Menstruation is also closely related to environmental issues, particularly access to clean water. Subpar sanitation due to inadequate quality of water is a factor that negatively affects the lives of menstruating women. For instance, women who use gauze\(^5\) sanitary pads experience restrictions in physical mobility because they have limited access to adequate water supply on the road despite their need to wash

\(^2\) Vikas Chothe et al., "Students’ Perceptions And Doubts About Menstruation In Developing Countries", Health Promotion Practice 15, no. 3 (2014): 319-326.
\(^3\) Medium, see supra note 1
\(^5\) Gauze (gaje) is a soft and light hemp/cotton fabric. 'Gauze cloth' (gajecheon) is the North Korean word for gauze (Naver Standard Korean Dictionary). This report uses the words gauze and gauze cloth interchangeably with the same meaning.
the cloth sanitary pads in order to maintain good hygiene.6) Women in developing countries often use gauze cloth to prevent the leaking of menstrual blood, but do not have access to adequate supply of clean water and space to wash and dry their cloth sanitary pads. Moreover, women who do not have the means to even get gauze cloth are even more suppressed mentally, which prevents many from going outside their homes during menstruation.

Through such examples, it can be seen that the perception of menstruation is highly intertwined with social norms and cultural practices, and that unsanitary environments negatively affect the overall quality of life of women including health and employment opportunities.7) Similar circumstances are observed in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (the DPRK or North Korea). Thus, this report seeks to analyze how menstruation is perceived in North Korean society and how menstruation affects the life of women in North Korea.

2. Research Needs

A woman experiences an average of 400 to 500 menstruations in her lifetime, and each menstruation lasts 3 to 5 days. In total, women can be on their periods for as little as four years, and as long as ten years of their life.8) Consequently, the suffering and problems related to menstruation have a great effect on extended periods in the lives of women. To actively engage in solving such problems will result in the improvement of women's rights and quality of life. However, North Korean women still suffer from lack of awareness about menstruation in North Korean society, inadequate supply of sanitary pads and medicine for menstrual disorders, and insufficient infrastructure including but not

7) Medium, see supra note 1
limited to water and sewerage systems and restrooms.

Insufficient knowledge on menstruation in North Korean society is mainly caused by a strong presence of a male dominated patriarchal culture in North Korea, and lack of education on menstruation and sexuality.

Due to the strong male dominated and patriarchal culture that still exists in North Korea, there is little comprehension of the significance of sex education and gender equality programs and as a result these are not implemented.

In such a culture, there is a lack of public awareness on the importance of sex education and gender equality education for women, which leads to the lack of such education for North Korean women. The lack of awareness regarding menstruation in North Korea is caused by the absence of adequate education on sex and menstruation. Such insufficient education and awareness results in North Korean women's lack of knowledge on reproductive health and hygiene\(^9\), social suppression and psychological repression. According to content stressing the importance of education on sex and menstruation including the materials of UNESCO Education Sector, Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) is a process of teaching and learning of the cognitive, emotional, physical, and social aspects of sexuality.\(^{10}\) It aims to teach children and young people knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values which will empower them to protect their own health, happiness, dignity, right to choice, and right to life. Similarly, adequate education on sex and menstruation is necessary to improve the state of public awareness North Korean women have on the subject. To provide adequate menstrual education, it is necessary to carefully investigate the current conditions of North Korean women's menstrual health and their right to sanitation. Through this process, it is essential to develop educational programs tailored for North Korean women to correct any misconceptions about menstruation.\(^{11}\)

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9) Aniebue et al., see supra note 4
11) Chothe et al., see supra note 2
North Korean women also suffer from a lack of basic facilities such as adequate water and sewerage systems and restrooms, which poses difficulties when women have to tend to their hygiene during menstruation. According to the UNOCHA "DPR Korea 2018" report, it is estimated that more than half of the North Korean population does not have access to functional water supply.12) The water supply system malfunctions in most areas due to the lack of electricity (49%), conditions of the pumping equipment (25%), or ageing and leaking pipe networks (20%),13) which negatively affects the quantity and quality of water supply. This is why approximately 23% (5.7 million people) of the North Korean population do not have access to elementary sanitation facilities.14) The report further states that while 82% of the North Korean households are connected to piped water, schools, public health facilities, preschools, and nurseries have a lower connection rate to piped water.15) In other words, it can be inferred that such inadequate water supply systems have a negative effect on North Korean women's hygiene and health during menstruation because they present a hindrance for women to use a restroom to maintain their hygiene during menstruation.

Therefore, this report aims to provide systematic research and analysis of the perception of menstruation in North Korea, use of feminine hygiene products in North Korea, the conditions of menstrual health and hygiene of North Korean women, and to raise awareness on the topic both in North Korea and abroad. Furthermore, NKDB's report also suggests recommendations on support for vulnerable groups based on the research so that the issues of menstruating women in North Korea will be included in the preparation of plans for improved humanitarian support and aid delivered to the DPRK.

14) UNOCHA (2018), see supra note 12, p.22.
3. Research Content and Method

1) Research Content and Scope

The items researched in detail by NKDB include North Korean women's understanding of menstruation and the menstrual education they receive; North Korean society's perception of menstruating women; the types of absorbents used and their effect on women's health; and the state of social welfare in public health and sanitation facilities. The main content of the research is summarized in the following paragraphs.

First, to understand the perception towards menstruation in North Korea, questions were asked about the interviewees' understanding of menstruation, content of menstrual education, and menstruation-related knowledge sharing practices. To better understand the circumstances of menstruating North Korean women, questions were also asked about whether menstrual education and overall sex education was provided in schools and at home, the degree of knowledge family members had about menstruation, and the degree of social awareness of menstruation.

Second, types, prices, management, and difficulty in management of the absorbents used were researched to understand how menstruation was dealt with in North Korea.

Third, in order to survey the state of hygiene, public health, and welfare for menstruating North Korean women interviews were conducted on the overall sanitation conditions women were in, including whether adequate clean water and restrooms were accessible. Moreover, questions were asked about the examination and treatment of menstruation-related disorders, whether menstrual leave was possible, whether there were infirmaries in schools, and about women's space for rest in workplaces.

Fourth, to understand how female detainees and soldiers manage their periods
in detention facilities and the military, further questions were asked about whether they had periods during that time, whether they were given sanitary pads, whether they were given examinations and treatments for the menstruation-related disorders they experienced, and whether they were allowed to rest during their menstruation.

Fifth, based on the aforementioned information, further research was conducted to investigate if there had been menstruation related support, who would be in most need of external support, and what kind of support would be most effective. This was done in order to build effective measures of menstruation-related support for vulnerable groups in North Korea.

This report seeks to bring attention to the harsh realities that affect menstruating North Korean women by shedding light on the inadequate education, awareness, supply of feminine hygiene products, and environment they have experienced. Furthermore, this report aims to bring forth improvement in menstruation awareness in North Korean society and to facilitate more research on supporting vulnerable women in North Korea.

2) Research Method

It is impossible to conduct direct field research about menstruation, public health, and hygiene in North Korea due to the limited access to the country. As such, the interview questionnaire was designed based on various documents including case studies of other developing countries due to the lack of credible research data on North Korean women's menstruation.

Research methods include the KAP (Knowledge & Attitude & Practice) survey, in-depth interviews and additional surveys. A KAP survey is a method with the objective of enhancing knowledge, attitudes and practices on specific topics that is used in many global public health related research.16) KAP surveys are most

16) Anne Sebert Kuhlmann, Kaysha Henry and L. Lewis Wall, "Menstrual Hygiene Management
often used before and after a public health project because they are a useful model to utilize when establishing a baseline for future evaluation, monitoring a project's effectiveness, and suggesting an intervention strategy.\(^{17}\) However, in the case of North Korea, carrying out a public health project related to menstruation is not possible because of limited access to the country. Hence, for the moment, this report's KAP survey results could serve as baseline data for future research. The KAP research results of this report are categorized into general knowledge of menstruation, attitudes or emotions triggered by menstruation, and actual practice when it comes to dealing with menstruation related issues.\(^{18}\) The results of the survey are analyzed in Chapter 2, "Perception and Level of Education Related to Menstruation", and the conclusion of this report.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 100 female North Korean defectors who left North Korea after 2012. Interviewees were selected through NKDB's contact network of North Korean defectors, and 'snowball sampling', a chain referral technique where initial interviewees introduce other interviewees, was utilized. Interviewees were selected based on their last place of residence in order to reflect the situation in as many regions in North Korea as possible, and on their age group to check the changes in menstrual awareness and hygiene standards over time. Data obtained through in-depth interviews were analyzed through the SPSS statistics analysis program.

All in-depth interviews were conducted in Korean by NKDB researchers. Due to the delicate nature of the interviewees, consent to recording the interviews was asked verbally before the actual interview was executed. In-depth interviews


were conducted only in cases in which interviewees gave consent after being informed of the objective and process of the research in the contact and interview execution process. Likewise, in-depth interviews were conducted after the interviewees were informed that they are able to refuse giving an answer to a sensitive subject and could stop the interview at any given moment if they wished to do so. Each in-depth interview took an average of two hours, though in some cases interviews lasted longer.

3) Analysis of the Interviewees

The information on 100 in-depth interview participants for this research is listed below.

(1) Information on Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Number</th>
<th>Year of Leaving North Korea</th>
<th>Age Group in the Year of Final Defection</th>
<th>Main Place of Residence while in North Korea</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>Yanggang Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2016</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>2016</td>
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<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
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19) Only basic personal information relevant to the study is published for the personal protection of the interviewees, many of whom have family members still living in North Korea.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Number</th>
<th>Year of Leaving North Korea</th>
<th>Age Group in the Year of Final Defection</th>
<th>Main Place of Residence while in North Korea</th>
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<td>Yanggang Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>Yanggang Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>Yanggang Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>30s</td>
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<td>2017</td>
<td>50s</td>
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<td>2016</td>
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<td>36</td>
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<td>30s</td>
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<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>Pyongyang</td>
</tr>
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</table>

I. Introduction
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Number</th>
<th>Year of Leaving North Korea</th>
<th>Age Group in the Year of Final Defection</th>
<th>Main Place of Residence while in North Korea</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
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<td>42</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>South Hwanghae Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>South Pyeongan Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>Pyongyang</td>
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<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>40s</td>
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<td>49</td>
<td>2015</td>
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<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
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<td>2012</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>South Hamgyeong Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>North Hwanghae Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>20s</td>
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<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>50s</td>
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<td>57</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>South Pyeongan Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
</tr>
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<td>60</td>
<td>2013</td>
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<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>2016</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>63</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>South Hamgyeong Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>64</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>65</td>
<td>2016</td>
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<td>Yanggang Province</td>
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<td>2017</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>67</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>Yanggang Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>Yanggang Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69</td>
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<td>Yanggang Province</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

34_The State of Menstrual Health of North Korean Women
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Number</th>
<th>Year of Leaving North Korea</th>
<th>Age Group in the Year of Final Defection</th>
<th>Main Place of Residence while in North Korea</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>70</td>
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<td>Yanggang Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>Yanggang Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Yanggang Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>Yanggang Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74</td>
<td>2017</td>
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<td>South Hamgyeong Province</td>
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<td>75</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>76</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>Yanggang Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>77</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
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<td>78</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
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<td>79</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
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<td>80</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>81</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>82</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Pyongyang</td>
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<td>83</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>40s</td>
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<td>84</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>40s</td>
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<td>85</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>South Hwanghae Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>86</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>87</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>South Pyeongan Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>88</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>89</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>90</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>91</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>South Hamgyeong Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2016</td>
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<td>North Hwanghae Province</td>
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<td>94</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>30s</td>
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<td>95</td>
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<td>96</td>
<td>2016</td>
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<td>Yanggang Province</td>
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<td>97</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>50s</td>
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<tr>
<td>98</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>99</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>North Hamgyeong Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>North Hwanghae Province</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(2) Interviewees' Age at the Year of Final Defection

The interviewees' age at the time of defection is as follows. Forty per cent of the interviewees were in their 20s, 23% were in their 40s, 18% were in their 30s, 18% were in their 50s, and 1% were in their teens.

<Table 2> Age of the Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
<th>Share (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teens</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20s</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30s</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40s</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50s</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(3) Interviewees' Province and Area\(^{20}\) of Residence

In order to analyze the significance of the place of residence on women's menstruation, interviewees were categorized by their province and the area where they resided.

The highest share of interviewees were from North Hamgyeong Province (39%), followed by Yanggang Province (35%), South Hamgyeong Province (7%), Pyongyang, South Pyeongan Province, and North Hwanghae Province (5% each), South Hwanghae Province (3%), and Gangwon Province (1%).\(^{21}\)

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\(^{20}\) The different types of areas used by NKDB for categorization are: urban, rural and coal-mine areas.

\(^{21}\) A high share of interviewees whose last place of residence is North Hamgyeong Province and Yanggang Province is observed because the two provinces share a border with China, which means that information is more freely transmitted and that escape to China is relatively easier for people living in these two provinces.
<Table 3> Interviewees' Place of Residence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
<th>Share (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pyongyang</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Hamgyeong Province</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>39.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Hamgyeong Province</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yanggang Province</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Pyeongan Province</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Hwanghae Province</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Hwanghae Province</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gangwon Province</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interviewees' areas of residence were also categorized into three types - urban, rural, and coal-mine. Sixty-three percent of all interviewees came from urban areas, 33% came from rural areas, and 4% - from coal-mines.

<Table 4> Interviewees' Area of Residence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Area</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
<th>Share (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>63.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coal-mine</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(4) Interviewees' Level of Education Obtained in North Korea

The results of the analysis of the interviewees in terms of their level of education obtained in North Korea show that 64% of all participants attended or graduated secondary school, 16% - professional school, 11% - university, 8% - vocational school, and 1% - primary school.\(^{22}\)

\(^{22}\) In 2002 North Korea changed the names it used for primary (from *inminhakkyo* to *sohakkyo*)
(5) Economic Level of the Interviewees

As far as the interviewees' economic level in North Korea is concerned 61% of interviewees described their economic level as average, 17% - as comfortable, 9% - as poor, 7% - as very poor, and 2% - as very comfortable.

<Table 6> Economic Level of the Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
<th>Share (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Comfortable</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>61.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Poor</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and secondary school (from godeoongjumghakkyo to junghakkyo). However, since the interviewees used the previous terms, some testimonies contain the old names for the respective educational institutions.
II. Perception and Level of Education Related to Menstruation
II. Perception and Level of Education Related to Menstruation

1. Concept of Menstruation Perceived in North Korea

Puberty is a key process of human development that entails physical growth into adulthood.\(^{23}\) During this process, young adolescents embrace the changes in their body in the context of sexual identity.\(^{24}\) Women start their menstruations, which is a part of physical maturation from girlhood to womanhood.\(^{25}\) For girls, menarche\(^{26}\) brings with it anxiety about becoming an adult woman as well as various reactions from family members that range from being indifferent to the event to overtly celebrating it.\(^{27}\) During this transition, it is also very important to provide adequate education on menstruation and sex so that they form a healthy perception on these subjects. In most low-income countries, however, general education on menstruation is not provided, which leads to many girls starting their periods with little understanding of the whole process of physical changes and its significance.\(^{28}\)

The interviewees were asked when they had their first period in order to use this information to understand at what age they started having the concept of menstruation. The youngest age at which the interviewees had their first period was 11 years, and the oldest - 20 years. The average age at which the women who participated in NKDB’s study had their period was 15.4 years.

To better understand how menstruation is perceived in North Korea, the interviewees in NKDB’s study were asked about the way they defined

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26) A woman's first menstruation
menstruation in North Korea. NKDB sought to understand what the interviewees' knowledge was on menstruation, and how they perceived their periods.

First, when it comes to the level of their knowledge, interviewees had only partial understanding of what menstruation was. Interviewees seem to have based their knowledge on the information they learned in school and at home. However, the testimonies show that such education was not sufficient. A few interviewees had a detailed understanding and explained menstruation in relation to childbirth because they had been educated on the subject. However, most of the North Korean women seem to have had only fragmentary knowledge on menstruation. When trying to explain the concept of menstruation they often used expressions such as 'what women ought to do', 'what you do when you get older', 'what you do once a month' in their explanation of menstruation. A few were not able to provide even remotely correct information as seen from descriptions such as 'to discharge bad blood'.

> *It is a biological phenomenon. Once a month, the uterine walls fall off. That is what I learned. When new ones form, old ones fall. As a woman I believe that it brings a time when we can start bearing children.*

> *I thought that it [menstruation] was a thing that happens to every woman when the time comes. I did not know why it happened.*

> *Menstruation is what women have once a month.*

---

29) NKDB_90_North Hamgyeong Province
30) In North Korea menstruation is called *wisaeng* (hygiene), *wolgyeong* (menstruation), or *dalgeori* (monthly). This report reflects the interviewees' word choice. In some testimonies, the term *saengni* is used. This is because the female North Korean defectors used the term after realizing that *wisaeng*, *wolgyeong*, or *dalgeori* all mean *saengni* (menstruation) in South Korea.
31) NKDB_18_Yanggang Province
32) NKDB_44_South Hwanghae Province
33) NKDB_81_North Hamgyeong Province

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42_The State of Menstrual Health of North Korean Women
Menstruation is referred to as “hygiene” (wisaeng). It is known as the passing out of bad blood.³⁴)

I just thought that menstruation was the discharge of bad blood from women's bodies. And, that it would stop when they get older.³⁵)

Second, as far as cognition is concerned, interviewees understood menstruation within the limits of their social perceptions and psychological experiences. They explained periods as something that was 'shameful', 'embarrassing', and felt they had 'to hide' it. Those who understood menstruation in this way said that they could not even ask for help and hid the fact that they were menstruating.

I just thought of it as something that was shameful. It began when I was a student, and I hid it and kept it to myself.³⁶)

I was so embarrassed because I was menstruating. I was so embarrassed that I didn't tell my mother, I didn't tell my older sister. I just stole my older sister's sanitary pad and used it.³⁷)

When we have periods, we do not talk about it. We try to hide it a bit. We could not openly say that, we just hid it.³⁸)

I was embarrassed. When I was on my period, I had heavy bleeding, and when I saw [menstrual] blood for the first time it was scary.³⁹)

³⁴) NKDB_15_North_Hwanghae_Province
³⁵) NKDB_30_Yanggang_Province
³⁶) NKDB_2_North_Hamgyeong_Province
³⁷) NKDB_58_South_Pyeongan_Province
³⁸) NKDB_79_North_Hamgyeong_Province
³⁹) NKDB_63_South_Hamgyeong_Province
2. Menstrual Education

1) Availability of Menstrual Education

Based on the accounts of the interview participants, it could be seen that many interviewees did not have a precise understanding of the concept of menstruation. To figure out the reason, a question was asked on what kind of menstruation related education the interviewees had received if any. Sixty-three interviewees answered that they had received an explanation or education about menstruation, while 37 answered that they had not received such explanation or education.

The 63 interviewees that had been informed about menstruation answered that they had been given such information by their teacher (44 people, 45.8%), mother (34 people, 35.4%), friend (9 people, 9.4%), others (8 people, 8.3%) and doctor (1 person, 1.0%). Through this result it can be seen that the primary source of information and education on menstruation is educational facilities or family members. However, most of the 63 interviewees that had received some form of menstrual education at school or at home did not have a precise understanding of the concept, and therefore there is a need to examine how this information was delivered.

<Table 7> Availability of Education on Menstruation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
<th>Share (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>63.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>37.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

40) Please refer to Table 10 for more details.
(1) State of Menstrual Education within North Korean Educational Institutions

Among the 63 interviewees that answered that they had been informed or educated on menstruation, 44 responded that the education had been conducted by their teachers at school. More specifically, when asked about the education they had received on menstruation, most of the interviewees answered that they had been taught about menstruation in a school class called 'practical training for girls', a course offered exclusively for female students when they were in highschool. In 2013, North Korea revised its educational system which merged technical courses including practical training for girls, crafts classes, and computer training under the subject 'information technology', to which a total of 192 hours were allotted. Specifically, North Korean female students are educated about menstruation in a unit called 'Hygiene', which is the last chapter of their 'Practical training for girls' class. However, this unit is often shortened or

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41) Hyo-sook Shin, "North Korean Development Cooperation and Education: A Gender perspective", (Presentation, 10th Asia-Pacific Forum on Development and Gender)
42) Jin-suk Kim, "Changes in the Education System Due to the '12 Year Compulsory Education' Agenda," KDI North Korean Economy Watch, 2016 (6).

II. Perception and Level of Education Related to Menstruation_45
skipped altogether, which portrays how education on sex and menstruation is downgraded in North Korea.43)

<Table 9> Comparison of School Hours Allocated to Selected Secondary School Subjects in South and North Korea44)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>South Korea (Revised curriculum as of 2015)</th>
<th>North Korea (Revised Curriculum According to the Education Code as of 2013)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Minimum Hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>442</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>374</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science/Technology and Home Economics/Information Technology</td>
<td>680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra Curricular Activities</td>
<td>306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is evident that in the share of time allocated, education on sex and menstruation is done in a very short time. The interviewees said that they were not educated only about menstruation, but received more about cooking and housework, which are considered women's work in North Korean society. Testimonies on the textbook used during the 'practical training for girls' describe the book as lightweight with content on periods, knitting, and cooking. The

43) Hyo-sook Shin, see supra note 41
44) Jin-suk Kim, see supra note 42
education on menstruation given during the course seems to have been a simple 
mentioning of the subject or reading of the textbook, not a thorough education on 
women's menstruation and its meaning. As a result, interviewees were able to 
remember that menstruation was also called 'a monthly', but due to the lack of 
explanation and educational content they were not able to clearly understand or 
recall the concept of menstruation. Although the 'practical training for girls' is a 
chance for North Korean women to be educated about menstruation, the 
insufficient educational content fails to promote the understanding of menstruation.

The class when I was in school was so basic I don't even remember it. 
It was along the lines of telling us that all women have it.45)

They would separate the girls and a female teacher would come and 
explain it. She would just read out [a text on it].46)

It was basic. I remember the teacher's expression: "Women bleed." 
Do not act ignorant when it happens. I just remember being told to 
use gauze cloth.47)

I was taught by a female teacher. But most of it was not about 
menstruation, it was more on sewing, cooking, and embroidery. The 
class on menstruation was only once or twice.48)

In some cases, interviewees were given detailed education on menstruation in 
relation to childbirth. One interviewee answered that despite little content on 
menstruation in the textbook, there had been a picture of a uterus and the 
definition of menstruation. Furthermore, a different interviewee testified that she

45) NKDB 40 North Hamgyeong Province 
46) NKDB 53 North Hwanghae Province 
47) NKDB 71 Yanggang Province 
48) NKDB 34 Yanggang Province
had been taught about menstrual cycles, ovulation, etc. while in high school.

There were pictures in the book. A graphic image of a woman's uterus was there too. The definition of menstruation was there too. [...] I learned about the uterus, hymen, and stuff like that in the woman's body back then. I didn't know anything then, so it only makes sense to me now that this was what it was.49)

They teach you about the cycle, ovulation, and things like that in highschool. I learned in highschool about ovulation, menstruation, and the time of ovulation and things like that.50)

It should also be noted that detailed education on menstruation had been given to those interviewees who had studied or worked in the field of medicine or public health related fields. One interviewee answered that she had learned about menstruation and related vocabulary such as ovaries, ovum, ovulation when she was attending medical school. However, she also stated that this was education given due to her major and occupation, and that she had not been taught in such detail on the subject before.

I learned about menstrual cycles and things like that when I was attending college. They do not generally teach these things in highschool. I went to medical school so I learned a bit about that because I learn how a baby is conceived and grows. [...] We could learn it from the professor during our first year human anatomy class, and there is also the human physiology class. Then after that they teach it in obstetrics and gynecology. I had not heard about ovaries before that.51)
I learned about it in the obstetrics and gynecology class. [...] The menstruation cycle is divided into the secretory phase and the proliferative phase. Ovulation happens on the 14th day, exactly the 14th day. If conception does not happen after ovulation, the egg would be shed and the blood vessels that thickened during the proliferative phase would lead to the bleeding that is menstrual bleeding.52)

<Table 10> Level of Knowledge on Menstruation Depending on the Level of Education of the Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Well Informed</th>
<th>Informed</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Not Informed</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
<td>40.6%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>63.6%</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td>59.1%</td>
<td>64.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational School</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional School</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>54.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
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<td>28.0%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NKDB collected several testimonies revealing that some North Korean women received menstrual education in university. Consequently NKDB sought to understand how the interviewees' level of education obtained in North Korea is related to their perception of menstruation. The one interviewee whose highest

52) NKDB_11_North Hamgyeong Province
level of education was primary school was not informed about menstruation. Among the sixty-four interviewees who attended or graduated from secondary school, 26 women (40.6%) were not informed about menstruation, 21 (32.8%) had average knowledge, 14 (21.9%) were informed and 3 (4.7%) were very well informed on the subject. Eight interviewees indicated that they attended or graduated vocational school. Among them 4 (50%) were not informed about menstruation, 3 (37.5%) were informed and one (12.5%) was very well informed. In the case of women who attended professional school, 8 (50%) were not informed about menstruation, 4 (25%) had average knowledge of it, 2 (18.8%) were informed about it and one (6.3%) was well informed on the subject. Among the eleven interviewees who indicated they attended university, 6 (54.5%) were not informed about menstruation, 3 (27.3%) had general knowledge, one (9.1%) was informed and one (9.1%) was well informed on the subject. These numbers show that the level of understanding of menstruation does not differ among women with different level of education obtained in North Korea except for some interviewees who studied medicine in university or attended nursing school. Overall many interviewees responded that they did not receive information about menstruation. Therefore, it is evident that menstrual education in North Korean educational institutions is insufficient.

(2) State of Menstrual Education in North Korean Families

In case studies of developing countries, it can be seen that parents find talking to their children about delicate sexual subjects uncomfortable. In some cases, girls that seek information on menstruation are thought of as 'bad girls', and mothers consider it inappropriate for girls to try to get such information.\textsuperscript{53) Based on the testimonies on menstrual education given by family members, girls are faced with similar situation in North Korea. To better understand menstrual

\textsuperscript{53) UNICEF, see supra note 25, p.30.}
education received in the family, further questions were asked. Approximately 35.4% of the interviewees who had received education on menstruation from their family members answered that they had been taught by their mother.\(^{54}\) The content of such education by mothers, based on testimonies, seem to be focused on the concept of menstruation and how to deal with it after it happens.

Upon further examination of the testimonies on menstrual education received from their mother, mothers provided a variety of explanations on the subject. Some mothers explained menstruation in relation to future childbirth, while others explained it in a negative perspective. One interviewee recalled her mother teaching her that menstruation is a 'shameful thing'.

\[
\text{My mother told me that women have it once a month. In North Korea we don't call it puberty, we call it the maturity. She said that with maturity, women start to have it, and that if I had relations with a man I would get pregnant.}^{55}\]

\[
\text{She told me as she bought it [gauze cloth] for me. She said, this is part of what you do as a woman, and that when I bleed I have to wear this. She told me that other people should not know about this as it was a shameful thing. She told me to come straight home if I bled. The school was close to my house.}^{56}\]

Furthermore, some interviewees were given warnings after menarche, based on the typical gender role in North Korea, which were mainly about being careful when it comes to sexual relations to prevent pregnancy.

\[
\text{When I started having my period, my mother told me 'women need to behave properly and not go about late at night'.}^{57}\]

\(^{54}\) Refer to <Table 10>.  
\(^{55}\) NKDB_26_Yanggang Province  
\(^{56}\) NKDB_14_Yanggang Province
She told me right away to not interact with men. That I was not an immature child anymore and that I was a mature woman. She told me to not only not have sexual relations with men, but to not interact with them at all.58)

I was told to be careful with men. I learned that having an accident means getting pregnant.59)

Second, interviewees were educated on how to deal with their periods, such as using sanitary pads. Many interviewees said that when they were educated on how to use sanitary pads by their mother, they had not been given explanation on why menstruations happen but were just instructed on how to use sanitary pads and how to wash them.

People did not have money back then, so everyone used cloth. She told me that when it comes, when I bleed, I should, wrap the cloth. I was instructed to do that when I had my first period.60)

I didn't know what to do when I had my first period, so I told my mother. She said that when that [period] happens you need to do this [wear sanitary pads]. So I learned that this was what I needed to do. I just took it in. My mother would cut the fabric and make it for me as she explained that "women have periods, and sanitary pads are made from gauze cloth".61)

When I had my period [my mother said that] it was something all women do. We use sanitary pads here as well. She taught me that. To stick it on my underwear. I think it was my mother who taught me that.62)
As can be seen in the testimonies above, interviewees were not given detailed menstrual education by their mothers within the family. The reason behind this situation can be seen through the following testimonies. First, mothers had not gotten detailed menstrual education themselves either and did not have adequate information to pass to their daughters. Secondly, it seems that detailed explanation on menstruation was not given because it was thought of as idle to be interested in menstruation, given that for North Korean women, survival or following the regime's orders was prioritized before the life of the individual.

*My mother didn't know much either. She just knew that if you bleed you have to put on a sanitary pad and change it every few hours.* 63)

*Menstruation was called "a monthly". I just thought that is was something I had as a woman. North Korean people are not that interested in things like that. They are all submissive more to the regime and are not interested in such a thing. They would think of it as idle if you care about such things.* 64)

*After Kim Il-sung died and Kim Jong-il came to power they did not give us food so we couldn't care about such things. [...] We had to work. Who could care about such things when they suddenly stop giving food, and there is nothing to eat, no food.* 65)

Interviewees that had not gotten detailed menstrual education faced difficulties in dealing with their periods due to the lack of information. To find out if they were putting effort into preventing the same problem from repeating when they are educating their own children, 66 interviewees that answered that they had

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62) NKDB_12_Yanggang Province  
63) NKDB_40_North Hamgyeong Province  
64) NKDB_13_Yanggang Province  
65) NKDB_46_Pyongyang Province
children were asked if they gave their children menstrual education. Among the 66 interviewees, 55 people (83.3%) had not given their children education on menstruation, while 11 people (16.7%) had. The interviewees who left North Korea in their teens and 20s also answered that they had not gotten detailed information from their mothers on menstruation. Such testimonies indicate that similar problems in dealing with menstruation due to lack of relevant knowledge are still being repeated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
<th>Share (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>55</td>
<td>83.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>66</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2) Effects of Inadequate Menstrual Education

Interviewees had fragmented information on menstruation and perceived menstruation as something that needed 'to be hidden' and 'to be ashamed of' because of insufficient menstrual education in households and educational institutes. This caused interviewees psychological hardships during their periods because they could not ask questions or share problems they had in relation to menstruation.

Furthermore, superstitions about menstruation, derived from negative perception prevalent in North Korea and exacerbated by the lack of adequate education, also affect women.

(1) Psychological Limitations

There were some interviewees that mistook menstruation for a serious disease
and went through extreme levels of psychological anxiety and suppression because they had their first period without detailed menstrual education. One interviewee answered that she had thought that her first period was an illness that would cease in a little while, and that it took her one year to understand that she was not sick, but had started her menstruation. Another interviewee said that her first period started during class and she went back home because she was so flustered. A different interviewee also got her first period when she was in class. She went back home crying, thinking that she had a serious disease, until she talked to her mother and understood that it was the start of her menstruation. Through such testimonies, it can be seen that interviewees experienced their first period without fully understanding what it was, and the lack of knowledge in how to deal with the situation caused them confusion and anxiety.

*I didn't know what it was first. When I started having periods I looked at my underwear and thought I had a disease. [...] Then my mother told me that it was something that all women do. She said that I would have that for one week at a time, I was told that it is menstruation, and I thought that it was an illness women had. We thought that it was a disease.66)*

*I got it so I cried. My mother told me off. Saying that I should know better as a woman. So I answered how would I know when I have never learned about it? And then she got me sanitary pads.67)*

*I got it for the first time during class, I didn't know what it was so I ran back home. I was not taught so I didn't know. It suddenly happened during class so I thought something big happened and ran back home. My mother was not home so I asked my grandmother and she told me that it was an illness women had.68)*

66) NKDB_22_Yanggang Province
67) NKDB_88_North Hamgyeong Province
When my period started I thought that it would go away after a little while. [...] I was so startled. At first I hid it. I thought that I had to hide it, and it would disappear. So after about a year, I asked other girls. There were quite a few that had it. I learned about it after that. I found out that 'oh this is what women all have'.69)

I got my first period when I was in sixth grade. I learned about it in school, but I did not understand it, so I thought "So this is what it is." But then one day I went to the restroom and there was blood. So I thought that I had a deadly disease, and told my mother as I was crying. I told my mother that there was a lot of blood on my underwear and that I was still bleeding. So my mother took some cotton to an older girl that lived next door because she knew how to use a sewing machine and made some cloth pads for me. I asked her what I should do with it and she told me how to use it. I kept asking her if I was going to die, and if I should go to the hospital, so my mother told me that women all have this. [...] Oddly I was very ashamed and embarrassed about having it.70)

Some interviewees that had not been educated in detail about menstruation still had negative reactions towards menstruation, expressing that periods were 'something bothersome' and 'something cumbersome', which shows the mental burden they had felt.

*It was something bothersome. It is something that happens once a month like clockwork for my entire life.*71)

*Periods are considered as something that is typical for women. In North*
Korea, I took it as an inconvenience that I had once a month as a woman. My period stopped when I was pregnant, it was convenient to not have periods. I found out that pregnancy was related to periods after I got married and pregnant. I didn't know about it before.\textsuperscript{72)}

It is known that having periods means that you are healthy, but North Korean women do not like having it.\textsuperscript{73)}

Furthermore, the negative social perception towards menstruation affects women who are on their periods to mentally shrink back. Interviewees also separated themselves from society and felt suppressed during menstruation due to fear of smelling of blood, getting blood stains, and not having access to a private space to wash their cloth sanitary pads.

Men make fun of girls for stinking like the placenta. As those who bleed a lot smell. We call the restrooms outhouses, girls would go to the outhouse to change it and change it again. The sanitary pads are good in South Korea, but [in North Korea] we used cloth sanitary pads, which had to be washed [and reused]. We had to wrap them tight in plastic bags. We hated putting it in our bags because it might stink. So I would wear a thick one in the morning. A thick one and then change it [at home] during lunch time. After changing it during lunch time, the next would be in the evening [after school]. It is annoying for women.\textsuperscript{74)}

We can't talk about it especially around men. I also noticed that when I was on my period, I tried harder to not go near men. People say that men notice a woman's period blood smell right away as if they smoke cigarettes. So I ran away from men. They say that they can tell if a woman is menstruating, because they can better smell the blood. I guess

\textsuperscript{72)} NKDB\_25\_Yanggang Province
\textsuperscript{73)} NKDB\_27\_Yanggang Province
\textsuperscript{74)} NKDB\_22\_Yanggang Province
the cigarette smoke makes them smell the blood better. So I changed my sanitary pad often, even though it was made from cloth. It was because I was afraid that others would smell the blood. Also, when I was on my period I would not let people close. Whether woman or man. When someone is menstruating and I sit next to them, I can smell the blood. So I wondered myself, 'do I smell of blood like that when I am on my period?'. But I could not ask.75)

The interviewees in this study were asked if they had a person to whom they could talk freely about menstruation given the fact that they could not receive adequate menstrual education. Sixty-seven women answered that they knew such person. The people most interviewees talked to were female friends (48.3%), followed by their mothers (27.5%). These figures may mislead one to think that the respondents could freely converse with people around them about menstruation. However, the content of the testimonies show that such conversations took place only on limited topics when it was absolutely necessary or mostly during their first periods.

<Table 12> Possibility for Having Conversations on Menstruation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
<th>Share (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
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<td>33.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

75) NKDB_24_North Hamgyeong Province
Conversation about menstruation was limited because interviewees themselves perceived menstruation as a negative event, as could be observed in the multiple use of the word 'shameful' in their responses. North Korean women also face realities that are similar to that mentioned in the UNHRC report which says that 'even where such restrictions are not followed, women and girls may continue to harbour internalized stigma and are embarrassed to discuss menstruation.' 76) The arbitrarily formed negative perception about menstruation seems to lie deep in the mentality of the interviewees who felt uncomfortable merely mentioning topics related to periods.

"I was a bit shy to tell my parents. No one in our family would have known I had my period. I had thought of it as something shameful. I didn't talk about it with friends either." 77)

"It is too bad for the women. Firstly, I feel sorry for the women. I had

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77) NKDB_4_Pyongyang
to hide [having a period], and though people here [in South Korea] think of periods as something that is obviously important, as something to be proud of, and worry if it doesn't happen, it is not like that in North Korea. It is thought of as embarrassing. It's so hard for women [in North Korea].

It was thought of as something to hide. I hid it. I even hid it from friends. It was thought of something to be done secretly.

I would know only when someone would wash it [gauze cloth] at the river side with the other laundry. We would not say out right 'I am [on my period]' . [...] I don't think we talked about it before because we were shy.

(2) North Korean Superstitions Associated with Menstruation

Not only is there a negative understanding of menstruation and menstruating women, but also unconfirmed accounts and information amongst North Korean people about women on their periods. When asked if there are superstitions related to menstruation in North Korea, 61 interviewees answered that there were. The most commonly circulated superstition is that if a menstruating woman gets on a car, the tire would go flat or the car would breakdown, which seems to derive from the sexist cultural background. The fact that some interviewees who had been aware of such perceptions refrained from long distance travels, shows that women's right to movement is undermined with the spread of such superstitions.

If the car got a flat tire, they would say some women [among the

78) NKDB_83_Gangwon Province
79) NKDB_84_Yanggang Province
80) NKDB_10_North Hammgyeong Province
passengers] must be on their period. The drivers would say "who is on their period?" They would say it's bad luck and get irritated.81) People all say that if a car gets a flat tire, it is because a menstruating woman was in it. If a tire goes flat, the driver would just yell at all women and say which of you bitches is on your period. [...] The tire did not go flat when I was on a car during my period but I was nervous because I had heard about that.82) They would say that if a menstruating woman gets on a car it would break down. When a car would break down and stop, and then the driver would yell which one of you bitches is on your period! Why would a menstruating bitch get on a car. He would curse saying that it is because of a woman on her period. He would curse saying that the menstruating woman has to get off in order for the car to work.83) The drivers would ask if I was on my period. They would say that if a menstruating woman got on, it [the tire] would always get punctured. I heard that a lot.84) I think I heard that a tiger follows a woman who is on her period around.85)

<Table 14> Awareness of the Existence of Superstitions Related to Menstruation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
<th>Share (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

81) NKDB_8_North Hamgyeong Province  
82) NKDB_18_Yanggang Province  
83) NKDB_25_Yanggang Province  
84) NKDB_35_Yanggang Province  
85) NKDB_84_Yanggang Province
Ⅲ. Sanitary Pads in North Korea
III. Sanitary Pads in North Korea

1. Use of Sanitary Pads

1) Types of Sanitary Pads Used in North Korea

Women in poverty all over the world utilize pieces of cloth, newspapers, or even mud to manage their menstruation because they do not have sanitary pads.\(^{86}\) However, none of these are adequate substitutes, and pose a constant threat of infection or injury to women who use them in place of a sanitary pads.\(^{87}\)

When asked about what types of absorbents they used, interviewees in this study answered that they used cloth sanitary pads, disposable sanitary pads, and paper. Out of the 100 interviewees, 94 answered that they had used sanitary pads, 64 had used disposable sanitary pads, and 9 had used paper. The interviewees that answered that they had used paper as a sanitary pad said they used it in emergency situations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Absorbents Used</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
<th>Share (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cloth Sanitary Pads</td>
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<td>56.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disposable Sanitary Pads</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>38.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paper</td>
<td>9</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>167</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\(^{87}\) Betsy Teutsch, Ibid.
2) Types of Sanitary Pads Used by Area and Place of Residence

(1) Types of Sanitary Pads Used by Region

Table 16\textsuperscript{88} contains information on the types of sanitary pads used by interviewees while residing in North Korea categorized by province. It can be easily seen that cloth sanitary pads are largely used in each region. Thirty-eight out of 39 interviewees from North Hamgyeong Province and 33 out of 35 interviewees from Yanggang Province had used cloth sanitary pads. In the case of disposable sanitary pads, 22 out of 39 interviewees from North Hamgyeong Province, 22 out of 35 interviewees from Yanggang Province, and 4 out of 7 interviewees from South Hamgyeong Province had used them while in North Korea.

\texttt{<Table 16> Types of Absorbents Used by Province (multiple-answer question)}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Number of Interviewees</th>
<th>Cloth Sanitary Pads</th>
<th>Disposable Sanitary Pads</th>
<th>Paper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pyongyang</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Hamgyeong</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Hamgyeong</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yanggang Province</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Pyeongan</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Hwanghae</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Hwanghae</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gangwon Province</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>94</strong></td>
<td><strong>64</strong></td>
<td><strong>9</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{88} There are different numbers of interviewees from each province, which means that it cannot be inferred that certain provinces show a tendency of using certain sanitary pads.

66 The State of Menstrual Health of North Korean Women
The analysis of interviewees' testimonies regarding the rate of use of different types of sanitary pads shows that in most regions, women used cloth sanitary pads and disposable sanitary pads. Furthermore, while cloth sanitary pads were used daily during menstruation, disposable sanitary pads were used only during long distance travels or cases in which restroom use was limited for a long periods of time. This was due to the fact that buying them posed a financial burden for women. Following these observations it can be inferred that disposable sanitary pads are not used often by North Korean women.

Even if I want to buy North Korean ones [sanitary pads], it is so expensive that I can not afford it. There are many places that sell them, but they are pricy. When women buy disposable sanitary pads, they try to save them and use them as long as possible.\(^{89}\)

There are packs with 12 pads in them and packs with 24 pads. In any case, they are expensive, more than about 5,000 KPW. They are probably close to about 10,000 KPW. [...] That would be the same as 1kg of rice. Rice cost about 5,000 KPW. It was expensive for me. Even if I bought sanitary pads for 5,000 KPW they would only last me a day. The next day I would have to give another 5,000 KPW. That is why I couldn't use it. I usually used cloth pads and used them [disposable pads] when I was going out or traveling.\(^{90}\)

I can't remember that well, but [the disposable sanitary pads I used] were Daedonggang sanitary pads that came from Pyongyang. I used them sparingly. I would use one if I was traveling somewhere and I would use cloth pads the rest of the time. It was because I couldn't wash them.\(^{91}\)

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89) NKDB_7_Yanggang Province
90) NKDB_11_North Hamgyeong Province
91) NKDB_46_Pyongyang
(2) Types of Sanitary Pads by Area\textsuperscript{92}

The interviewees' residences were categorized into urban, rural, and coal-mine areas. The types of absorbents used by the interviewees categorized by type of area are presented in Table 17. Among the total number of 100 interviewees, 63 answered that they lived in an urban area in North Korea. Out of the 63 urban residents, 57 answered that they had used cloth sanitary pads, and 49 disposable sanitary pads. All 33 of the rural area residents answered that they had used cloth sanitary pads and 15 of them had also used disposable sanitary pads. The four coal-mine area residents reported that they had only used cloth sanitary pads. These numbers show that rural and coal-mine areas have a limited supply of disposable sanitary pads, leading to a higher share of cloth sanitary pad use. One interviewee said that she did not even know that disposable sanitary pads existed while she was living in a rural area and she only found out about their existence after she started doing trade in urban areas.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Type of Area & Number of Interviewees & Cloth Sanitary Pads & Disposable Sanitary Pads & Paper \\
\hline
Urban & 63 & 57 & 49 & 7 \\
Rural & 33 & 33 & 15 & 2 \\
Coal-mine & 4 & 4 & 0 & 0 \\
\hline
Total & 100 & 94 & 64 & 9 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Types of Absorbents Used by Area (multiple-answer question)}
\end{table}

3) Types of Sanitary Pads Used by Age of the Interviewees

The types of absorbents used categorized by the age of the interviewees are presented in Table 18. Forty of the interviewees were in their 20s when they

\textsuperscript{92} The different types of areas used by NKDB to categorize the use of different types of sanitary pads in North Korea are: urban, rural and coal-mine areas.
left North Korea. Of these 40 women, 37 indicated that they had used cloth sanitary pads, and 34 had used disposable sanitary pads. Eighteen of the interviewees were in their 30s when they left North Korea, and among them, 16 had used cloth sanitary pads and 12 - disposable sanitary pads. Twenty-three of the North Korean women interviewed by NKDB were in their 40s when they left the DPRK Among them, 22 answered that they had used cloth sanitary pads and 11 had used disposable sanitary pads. In the case of the interviewees who left North Korea in their 50s, all of them (18 women) had used cloth sanitary pads, and 6 had used disposable sanitary pads. These results show that interviewees of all age groups continuously used cloth sanitary pads. However with the influx of disposable sanitary pads smuggled into North Korea from China in the 2000s and the emergency of disposable sanitary pads produces in North Korean factories, it can be seen that in the more recent years a higher ratio share of younger interviewees had access to this type of absorbent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (At the time of escape from North Korea)</th>
<th>Number of Interviewees</th>
<th>Cloth Sanitary Pads</th>
<th>Disposable Sanitary Pads</th>
<th>Paper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teens</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20s</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30s</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40s</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50s</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>94</strong></td>
<td><strong>64</strong></td>
<td><strong>9</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<Table 18> Types of Absorbents Used by Age of the Interviewees
4) Sanitary Pad Use by Economic Level of the Interviewees

There are differences in the type of absorbent used among interviewees from different economic levels in the North Korean society. Two interviewees indicated that they were economically 'very comfortable' when they lived in North Korea. One of them had experience using cloth sanitary pads, and both of them had used disposable sanitary pads. Among the seventeen economically 'comfortable' interviewees, 15 had used cloth sanitary pads and 15 had used disposables ones. Sixty-one interviewees indicated that their economic level in North Korea was 'average'. Among them 59 women had used cloth sanitary pads, and 35 had used disposable sanitary pads. All of the North Korean women interviewed in NKDB's study, who described their lives in North Korea as 'poor', had used cloth sanitary pads, and 7 had used disposable pads. The seven interviewees who described their economic level in North Korea as 'very poor', all had used cloth sanitary pads, and three of them had used disposable sanitary pads. These numbers show that while cloth sanitary pads are widely used by North Korean women regardless of their economic level, disposable sanitary pads were used by a higher share of interviewees of 'very comfortable' and 'comfortable' economic level compared to interviewees of 'average', 'poor', or 'very poor' economic levels. Therefore it is obvious that disposable sanitary pads are used more often by North Korean women of higher economic standing.
<Table 19> Types of Absorbents Used by Economic Level of the Interviewees
(multiple-answer question)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparative Economic Status</th>
<th>Number of Interviewees</th>
<th>Cloth Sanitary Pads</th>
<th>Disposable Sanitary Pads</th>
<th>Paper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Comfortable</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Poor</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of the 16 interviewees belonging to 'poor' or 'very poor' economic levels in the North Korean society, ten women said that they had used disposable sanitary pads, but did not use it them often for financial reasons.

*I would use them [disposable sanitary pads] when I was going out. They were expensive, that's why. You only use disposable pads once and throw them away. So I think I used them like that [sparingly] because of the cost. It was a burden. Other people around me also normally used [disposable pads] when they were going out, and there were many people that did not use them at all.*

Disposable sanitary pads may seem cheap, but for North Korean people this is a lot [of money]. They would rather buy 1kg of rice or 0.5kg of rice than one pack of those [disposable sanitary pads]. Poor people do not think of using them. They can't even think about it.*

93) NKDB_30_Yanggang Province  
94) NKDB_20_Yanggang Province
Interviewees who shared that they had used paper as an absorbent during their menstruation belong to the 'average' and 'poor' economic levels. These interviewees answered that they had used paper or toilet paper in urgent situations during their period.

*I ripped out notebook paper to use when I had nothing else to use.*

*I used toilet paper when I had nothing else. It wasn't the thin kind, but the better quality one.*

2. Use of Cloth Sanitary Pads

1) Types of Cloth Sanitary Pads

The interviewees in NKDB's study used most often cloth sanitary pads that could be reused after washing in order to reduce costs. When asked about what types of cloth the sanitary pads they used were made of, 89 interviewees (76.7%) answered gauze, and 27 (23.3%) - old cloth, from which it can be inferred that most North Korean women use sanitary pads made from gauze. The reason why women use old cloth is either because they do not have the means to purchase gauze which led them to cutting bedding or old clothes, or because they bought cloth that was better suited for the purpose than gauze.

95) NKDB_44_South Hwanghae Province
96) NKDB_2_North Hamgyeong Province
Two types of answers were given by interviewees when they were asked how they acquired gauze sanitary pads - making them by oneself and buying ready-made gauze pads at the market.

NKDB's research reveals that North Korean women make their own cloth sanitary pads from gauze. The testimonies of the interviewees, who made their own sanitary pads, reveal that they bought the cloth at the market, and made sanitary pads by learning from family members such as their mothers or older sisters. The gauze sanitary pads were sometimes called 'hygiene mops' or 'menstruation mops'.

I would fold the sides of the gauze. There are loose threads so I folded it in half and sew it. I used a sewing machine.97)

My family had a sewing machine, so my older sister would cut it [the gauze] and sew all four sides. She did it first and then I started doing it. It doesn't take long to make one [pad]. I would usually make 10 [gauze sanitary pads], making 10 took less than an hour. I cut the gauze when my sister told me to, and she did all of the machine sewing. [...] We call them [the pads] 'menstruation mops'.98)

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97) NKDB_5_North Hwanghae Province
98) NKDB_27_Yanggang Province
We buy it [gauze] in the market. It is sold by the meter. I would cut it according to my flow and sew the edges. [Pads] which are already sewn at the edges were also sold [at the market]. I bought those as well.\(^{99}\)

It was 20-30 KPW per meter. Gauze is cheap. I had to make [the pads] thick [...] I made about ten [at a time]. I bought gauze myself and made them.\(^{100}\)

At the market. I bought gauze, it is in rolls. I bought it by the meter. Women buy it then cut it to fit their flow, sew the sides [...] and then use it.\(^{101}\)

I bought gauze cloth by the meter, cut it and sew the sides to make [pads]. I learned how to make [sanitary pads] when I went to my older sister's house and saw how. She said that it had to be sewn along the sides. The width of the gauze was about 80 cm. I bought 5 meters of cloth and cut it to use.\(^{102}\)

North Korean women also buy gauze sanitary pads sold at the market, which are all in a uniform size. Since the 2000s, sanitary pads have been sold at markets in North Korea. The price of each ready-made sanitary pad ranges from 250 KPW to 3,000 KPW depending on the thickness or quality of the product. The average North Korean salary is 3,000 KPW\(^{103}\) per month, and the price of rice varies from with time but is usually about 5,000 KPW per kilogram. This points to the fact that North Korean women use mostly cheap gauze sanitary pads.\(^{104}\)

99) NKDB_38 North Hamgyeong Province
100) NKDB_81 North Hamgyeong Province
101) NKDB_89 North Hamgyeong Province
102) NKDB_94 South Pyeongan Province
104) Dong-hui Moon, "North Korean media "The Arab Spring, an anti-regime unrest by internal traitors of the cause"", DailyNK, Accessed November 1\(^{st}\), 2018, https://www.dailynk.com/%EB%B6%81%ED%95%9C-%EB%A7%8C-%EC%B2%B4-%EC%95%84
Recently there had been an increase in the design and color options of gauze sanitary pads, which are produced and sold at the markets. Furthermore the interviewees in this study shared that they experienced no difficulty purchasing gauze sanitary pads at the markets because the vendors selling them were women. Compared to the past, in the recent years North Korean women seem to have been relieved of the burden of having to make their own cloth sanitary pads, thus being able to use gauze sanitary pads that are with better properties and design.

There are a lot of them in the market. I used the ready-made ones. Their sizes are unified, and they are all overlock stitched. [The pads] are sometimes folded like dishtowels and stacked up, they are sold like that. [...] I bought ready-made ones. The gauze was in three, four layers and the size was a standard one so that [the pads] fit well. [The pads] were sold at the market. The vendors were mostly women. The price was 2,000-3,000 KPW. That would be 2-3 Chinese yuan.\(^{105}\)

There are ones that are already made and sold in the markets. One would be 500 KPW, and there were big ones that are 1,000 KPW. I had a heavy flow so I bought the big ones. They were sold at the market. Usually women sell them.\(^{106}\)

Nowadays they sell ready-made ones. The good quality ones are expensive, and the low quality ones are bad. Low quality ones can't be used for long. I bought my daughter some, ten pads cost 10,000 KPW. One was about 1,000 KPW. Usually ten [pads] are bundled in a pack.\(^{107}\)

---

%EB%9E%8D%EC%9D%98-%EB%B4%84-%EB%82%B4%EB%B6%80-%EB%B6%88%EC%88%9C%EC%84%B8%EB%A0%A5-%EC%9D%98-%ED%95%9C-%EB%B0%80%EC%A0%95%EB%B6%86-%EC%86%8C%EC%9A%94/

\(^{105}\) NKDB_3_North Hamgyeong Province
\(^{106}\) NKDB_6_South Hamgyeong Province
\(^{107}\) NKDB_11_North Hamgyeong Province
I got them at the market. There are ones that are cut and ones that are hand sewn. There are many types. The ones I bought were 3,000 KPW per piece.\textsuperscript{108)}

At first, I got [cloth that was] 1.2 meters wide, which was cut to the length I needed as I wanted to make them [cloth sanitary pads]. [However] since the year that I left North Korea, [pads] were sold already cut, and they were colored so they looked pretty when you washed and hung them [to dry]. The size is similar to the one of a face towel. There were colored line designs as well. In some houses there is no room inside, so when you wash and dry [the pads] you have to hang them outside. So they would make [the pads] this way so they don't look hideous to bypassers. Those types started to show up around 2014.\textsuperscript{109)}

The twenty-seven interviewees who indicated that they had used cloth other than gauze to make sanitary pads, pointed to two main reasons for which they had to resort to other materials. Firstly, the interviewees used other cloths that were available to them for free such as bedding or old clothes because buying gauze was financially burdensome for them.

\textit{You know, the old bedding that you used for a long time. I used all kinds of white cloth that I could find. It is expensive to buy cloth at the market. So, [I got] a used one. I never had new cloth.}\textsuperscript{110)}

\textit{I ripped my clothes to use. I didn't use gauze most of the time because it was expensive.}\textsuperscript{111)}

\textsuperscript{108) NKDB 75 North Hamgyeong Province}
\textsuperscript{109) NKDB 63 South Hamgyeong Province}
\textsuperscript{110) NKDB 83 Gangwon Province}
\textsuperscript{111) NKDB 97 South Hamgyeong Province}
The people who can't afford the ready-made ones would rip up their old clothes and use them to make [cloth sanitary pads]. There are still people who make their own. It is a joy for women who can buy the ready-made ones to dry them outside. Some of the people who make their own [pads] cannot hang them outside and cannot dry them in the sun. It is considered shameful. They would [dry] them secretly at home.112)

The difference between people who use old cloth and those who use gauze is that the latter have money to buy gauze. To be frank, women have a hard time making ends meet. There are a lot of people who think 'Who would spend money on sanitary pads?'. So a lot of people do not buy them and just use old clothes or clothes they cannot use anymore.113)

Secondly, some of the interviewees used other types of cloth because their properties and external appearance were considered better than the ones of gauze. One interviewee shared that she had used blue muslin because it was convenient for her as the pads made from it did not look like sanitary pads when she was drying them after washing.

Recently, there are sanitary pads made of cotton, not muslin, at the market. They are blue. I bought that kind, and it was not shameful to dry the [pads] outside like diapers. In the past people would know that these were a sanitary pads because they were narrow. But now, they are wide so if other men came and saw them drying outside they would think that these were diapers, not sanitary pads. They cost about 2,000 KPW. [...] They were all machine sewn. Women said that they had an easier time using those because they were all machine sewn.114)

112) NKDB_26_Yanggang Province
113) NKDB_96_Yanggang Province
114) NKDB_22_Yanggang Province
2) **Difficulties in the Use of Sanitary Pads**

The participants is NKDB's research in most cases used cloth sanitary pads while living in North Korea for financial reasons, but because of cloth sanitary pads' disadvantages North Korean women suffered various issues. Such difficulties are the thickness of the pads to compensate for the low absorbency of the fabric, the constant worry because of the fact that the cloth dishevels easily, and the inconvenience of washing and drying the pads.

(1) **Storing the Sanitary Pads after Use**

The main reason why many North Korean women use cloth sanitary pads is because they are cost effective as they can be reused after washing. However, this advantage at the same time presents a great difficulty for the North Korean women who have to use cloth sanitary pads when they are traveling or are outside their homes. NKDB's research shows that women were not able to change their sanitary pads often because they were afraid that the pads would smell even if women were to store them in a plastic bag until they can be washed at home.

_Sanitary pads here [South Korea] are good for changing, but I was using cloth ones and had to wash them. I wrapped them in a plastic bag and was not able to put it in my bag because I was afraid that it would smell of blood. I would wear a thick one in the morning. A thick one, and then change it during lunch time. Then I would change it one more time in the evening. It is difficult for women._\(^{115}\)

_I wore thick ones so they last longer. I should have changed them often. I could not throw away the used [cloth] sanitary pads. Sometimes_
I would put one in the morning and keep it on until I got home in the evening. I would wear one [pad] for the entire day. It was very uncomfortable. So annoying.\textsuperscript{116}

(2) Quality of Cloth Sanitary Pads

While still living in North Korea, the women who participated in NKDB's study, used to make sanitary pads from gauze, beddings or old clothes, which are all materials made for different purposes, making them not suitable to absorb menstrual blood. That is why interviewees revealed that they had to always be cautious while wearing cloth sanitary pads because they did not absorb the menstrual blood well and easily leaked.

\textit{The cloth starts leaking quickly, if you are careless. I had to change [my pad] once every three hours. When I had a heavy flow the blood leaked only after an hour. [...] As the blood leaked quickly I had to carry many [pads].}\textsuperscript{117}

\textit{As I was working I bought and used gauze [to make sanitary pads]. [Blood] passes through the gauze, so no matter how thick I made it, the blood would leak through.}\textsuperscript{118}

The North Korean women interviewed in this study revealed that they made their sanitary pads thicker to prevent leakage when they used cloth sanitary pads, but the thickness of the pads caused them discomfort.

\textit{My mother bought them for me. There were [pads] that were ready-made. I used those ones. Their cost is 1,000 KPW per piece}

\textsuperscript{116} NKDB\_83\_Gangwon Province \hfill \textsuperscript{117} NKDB\_40\_North Hamgyeong Province \hfill \textsuperscript{118} NKDB\_82\_Pyongyang
nowadays. They don't leak. They are uncomfortable because they are a little thick.\textsuperscript{119)

When it comes to the quality of sanitary pads made from gauze, their disadvantage is that threads would often get loose. According to the interviewees this was more common with homemade sanitary pads because the finishing was not perfect. As a result they had to constantly worry about the cloth sanitary pads because they had to patch them up or burn the loose threads.

\textit{At that time I got my first period, so I did not know if gauze was good or what else [could be used]. They did not sell sanitary pads then, so I would patch up the loose threads myself with a needle.}\textsuperscript{120)}

I would cut the loose threads [of the pads] with scissors because they looked ragged. I also burned the loose threads with a match or tucked them in with a needle. I would wear [the pad] until it is soaked then change into a different one and wash [the used one].\textsuperscript{121)}

\textit{There is an adequate size. I would hand sew them. I made them the size of a sanitary pad and boiled them to sterilize them. I bought gauze to make [sanitary pads], the threads would get loose so I would hand sew them inwards.}\textsuperscript{122)}

The interviewees revealed that they were afraid their cloth sanitary pads would move and get misplaced since they were not adhesive like disposable sanitary pads. Among those North Korean women some used safety pins to prevent the cloth sanitary pads from moving and menstrual blood seeping through. However, according to one interviewee who got hurt while using a safety pin, one way to

\textsuperscript{119)} NKDB 14_Yanggang Province
\textsuperscript{120)} NKDB_49_North Hamgyeong Province
\textsuperscript{121)} NKDB_77_North Hamgyeong Province
\textsuperscript{122)} NKDB_100_North Hwanghae Province
prevent this was to wear tight underwear. Furthermore North Korean women who could not resort to the use of safety pins or tighter fitting underwear had no other choice but be very careful about the way they move, which ultimately restricted their actions.

*I would stitch the cloth on the parts [of my underwear] that I would bleed on so this was for prevention [of leaking]. I also used a safety pin to hold [the pad] in place so it would not fall off when I was walking. [...] I wore gunnysack-like underwear. [The pad] fell off when I walked.123)

If [the pad] was not held in place, if it was loose, then it would spill out and you cannot be sure whether it wouldn't fall if you are on the move. If you use a pin to hold it in place and the pin gets unclasped, it can pierce your skin. I tried this [method] once because someone suggested that I did, and I never did it again. I wore tight-fitting underwear since then.124)

When the sanitary pad was full, I washed it and put a different one on. I folded a big piece of fabric to the size of a South Korean sanitary pad and as it was folded I kept it in a plastic bag until I used it when I got my period. [...] You just place [the pad] on your underwear. You have to be careful so it does not fall out of place.125)

I made it with inner underwear that I didn't wear and was going to throw away. I ripped up the clothes and cut them into sanitary pad size. I cut up the sleeves of shirts and the legs of pants and secured it with a pin in the front and back of my underwear. In the past, the underwear was worn loosely so it was not possible to fix [the pad]. It

123) NKDB_21_North Hamgyeong Province
124) NKDB_57_North Hamgyeong Province
125) NKDB_77_North Hamgyeong Province
was all like that then.126)

Furthermore, another disadvantage of cloth sanitary pads was that they could not be used for a long period of time because they were made of gauze and other used cloths such as beddings and underwear. The testimonies of the interviewees show that cloth sanitary pads were used for as short as 2 months, to as long as a year before a new one had to be made or bought.

I bought [pads] at the market. There are ones that are made from cut fabric, there are disposables ones, and handsewn ones. There are many different types. The ones I bought were 3,000 KPW per piece. I would buy 15 at a time and they would not last me a year. The gauze cloth would disintegrate.127)

In South Korea I would change the sanitary pads every one to two hours when I am on my period. It is not like that in North Korea. I would use [the pad] until the cloth was soaked through. If I cut up my underwear use [as sanitary pad], it would last two months. [...] Cloth like gauze would wear out and there would be holes in it, so I did not use gauze a lot. [...] When the gauze is boiled, [the fabric] wears down, so there would be holes on it.128)

Gauze is a fabric with many holes in it. The threads of this kind of cloth wear down and don't last long. You could probably use it for about three months and not longer. If you use it for three months, it will wear down and not be able to hold the blood in.129)

126) NKDB_97_South Hamgyeong Province
127) NKDB_75_North Hamgyeong Province
128) NKDB_86_North Hamgyeong Province
129) NKDB_22_Yanggang Province
(3) Washing of Cloth Sanitary Pads

The North Korean women who participated in NKDB's study experienced difficulty washing and drying the cloth sanitary pads as these processes were not easy at all. Among 94 interviewees who indicated that they had used cloth sanitary pads, 74 (76.7%) changed their pads more than three times a day, 12 (12.8%) – three times, 6 (6.4%) – 2 times a day, and 2 (2.1%) – once a day. When the women were asked if they reused their cloth sanitary pads, all 94 interviewees answered that they did. These results show that the interviewees had to wash their cloth sanitary pads very often during their menstruation.

<Table 21> Number of Changes of Cloth Sanitary Pads per Day

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Changes</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
<th>Share (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Once</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twice</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Times</td>
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<td>12.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>More than Three Times</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>78.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<Table 22> Reuse of Cloth Sanitary Pads

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
<th>Share (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The testimonies provided by the interviewees reveal details about the process of washing cloth sanitary pads. Although North Korean women were able to use soap, there was no adequate water and electricity supply. Additionally the negative perception of menstruation in North Korean society made women feel
ashed and contributed to their struggles.

The participants in NKDB's study had electric washing machines but because of the limited water and electricity supply in their homes they had to go to a river or stream to wash their cloth sanitary pads.

*In the summer I washed [my pads] in the running river water. In the countryside, the water is very clean. In the summer there is a shortage of electricity, so even though I had a washing machine I could not use it. The river is really clean and nice in the summer, I would go there to wash [my pads]. In the winter I would wash them by hand at home. I had laundry soap for one-time use. I also had powder detergent, but used laundry soap.*

*I used powder detergents. Of course I hand-washed [my pads]. I used to go out to the stream often. The washing was mostly done at the stream.*

*[Pads] are often washed in the nearby river or the kitchen, and dried on the laundry line in the yard.*

*We had a stream in front [of the house], so we used facial soap to wash them in the running water.*

NKDB's research reveals that North Korean women found it difficult to freely dry their cloth sanitary pads in the sunlight outdoors because of the negative social perception of menstruation. One interviewee only dried her pads during the night when men were asleep, while another dried them only at the times of the day when there were few people passing by. A different interviewee used to

130) NKDB 64 North Hamgyeong Province
131) NKDB 75 North Hamgyeong Province
132) NKDB 77 North Hamgyeong Province
133) NKDB 79 North Hamgyeong Province
put a towel or another cloth on top of the sanitary pads when she dried them in the sunlight so other people would not see them, or she used to take down the washed pads down before they were fully dry, which made it difficult for her to keep the cloth sanitary pads hygienic.

*The drying process was annoying as well. [The cloth sanitary pads] would get stained when I used them during my period. [...] I had to wash [my pads] but my parents found them and scolded me angrily so I hid them in various places. [...] So I dried it [the pads] at night. When every one was asleep. I dried them at night and collected them in the morning. [Period blood] stains. No matter how hard you wash them by hand. If I was even a day late to wash [the pads] they would get stained. So I had to wash them on the spot, and it was so embarrassing for me. That was the hardest part for me.*

I dried [the pads] outside on the laundry line, but people could see them so I hung them with other clothes. I would hang them out to dry when my father was not home, when he was out to work.

*I often washed [the pads] in the nearby river or in the kitchen, and dried them on the laundry line in the yard. It is a little embarrassing to hang them out in open sight so when I dried them I put a wrapping cloth on top. I hid [the pads] with different clothes when I dried them outside because it was regarded as something embarrassing.*

*I washed [the pads] with caustic soda soap, boiled them, and dried them in the sun, but I covered [the pads] with underwear so other people could not see them.*

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134) NKDB 83_Gangwon Province
135) NKDB_32_Yanggang Province
136) NKDB_77_North Hamgyeong Province
137) NKDB_92_North Hamgyeong Province
I washed [the pads] at home when my father and mother were not there home, I was embarrassed. [...] I would go out and washed it them in hot water, and then used something called charcoal soap. I used the facial soap to wash [my pads]. it with. When I was done washing them it I would boil the heat water in the evening, and boil it [the pads] in the water for 20 minutes each one of them. And then I would The next day I spread them [the pads] out the next day to dry them in the sun without anyone knowing and then brough them bring it back when it was they were dry.138)

3. Use of Disposable Sanitary Pads

Women in developing countries show a preference for disposable sanitary pads if the price is not an issue.139) This is due to the fact that disposable sanitary pads are easy to use because they are light, rarely leak and stay secure on the underwear.140) Sixty-four of the interviewees indicated that they had used disposable sanitary pads when they lived in North Korea. The analysis of their testimonies shows that North Korean women preferred disposable pads because of their convenience, but were not able to use them often due to their price.

1) Places for Purchase of Disposable Sanitary Pads

In order to establish whether North Korean women were able to purchase disposable sanitary pads NKDB asked the participants in this study about the places where they used to buy them. Interviewees revealed that they purchased disposable sanitary pads from various places such as markets that they often went to, stalls where individuals sold goods, and stores for daily necessities.

138) NKDB 98 North Hamgyeong Province
140) Tracey Crofts and Julie Fisher. Ibid.
Markets were the primary place where interviewees purchased disposable sanitary pads. 'Private house stalls' sold a variety of goods of daily necessity including sanitary pads, so when women were not able to go to the market, it was possible for them to buy pads from nearby private house stalls. Furthermore, private house stalls do not have a fixed operation time, so this allowed people to go purchase items they need at all times of the day - at dawn, early morning, or late at night. As a result it can be seen that as long as women had a private house stall selling items nearby them, then it was easy for them to purchase disposable sanitary pads.

*I went to the market [to buy pads]. I bought two packs at a time. There were about 30 pads per pack. I would buy one pack at a time.*

*Disposable sanitary pads] are sold at the markets. They are called Daedonggang sanitary pads. They are made and used in North Korea. They became more common after I got married.*

*I used [disposable sanitary pads] for two years after I got my period, from 2010 to 2012. They are sold at all markets.*

*I used disposable sanitary pads. Disposable sanitary pads are sold at all the markets and stores.*

*In the neighborhood, there is a convenience store system similar to the one here [in South Korea], now there's stuff like that. We call them 'stalls'. They also sell medicine and they are attached to people's houses. So if I go there in the middle of the night, they would wake up and sell things to me. It is like a 24-hour [store], people sleep in there so*

141) NKDB_12_Yanggang Province
142) NKDB_14_Yanggang Province
143) NKDB_17_Yanggang Province
144) NKDB_76_Yanggang Province
even if you went late you could still buy things). When I was young, the number of stalls in the village started to increase. If you were walking every minute you would see a new one, more and more started to pop up closer to each other, and now there’s one in practically every house. The houses are closely situated next to each other, one dong is made up of six households, and there are as many as two stalls there. They are more convenience stores than in South Korea. The products sold there are very similar in all stalls.145)

There are a lot of [disposable sanitary pads] in the convenience stores (stalls). They sell them at the markets as well. It was far to go to the market so I bought them in the stall next to my university.146)

I used [disposable sanitary pads] from 2010. [I got them] at the market or the convenience store. There are places like stalls. I would buy them there too.147)

2) Types and Cost of Disposable Sanitary Pads

According to NKDB’s findings the North Korean women who participated in this study usually used disposable sanitary pads produced in China and North Korea. Disposable sanitary pads brands manufactured and distributed in North Korea are 'Daedonggang', 'Milhwaburi', 'Jangmi'. Among those brands 'Daedonggang' appears to be the most widely used product within North Korea. Interviewees remembered the names of the North Korean brands of disposable sanitary pads better and said that they used them more often than the Chinese ones because they preferred the quality and safety of the North Korean products.

145) NKDB_10_North Hamgyeong Province
146) NKDB_23_Yanggang Province
147) NKDB_2_North Hamgyeong Province

88_The State of Menstrual Health of North Korean Women
I used disposable pads since they started to show up. I bought them at the market. I was passing by the market and there were disposable sanitary pads called Daedonggang. I think my friends told me about them, that there were good. So I used those.148)

There were others that were made in North Korea besides Daedonggang. [...] I think I used Daedonggang most often, that is probably why I remember them the most. Well, [disposable ones] are more hygienic because you use them once and then throw them away. I think Daedonggang were the most popular ones because they are from Pyongyang.149)

I used a lot the ones made in North Korea. I did not see South Korean ones. I tried using Chinese ones but they were not good. I think the North Korean ones were good. There was the brand Daedonggang, and there were many others but I cannot remember their names. The ones I used for the first time were Daedonggang and they were okay. [Disposable sanitary pads] got better as North Korea improved. Those [pads] were in a pink packaging, they were pretty, easy to put on, and the material was also good. I can't remember their name. I think it might have been with two syllables.150)

There is a different perception towards Chinese and North Korean sanitary pads. I don't really trust the Chinese ones. People say that they have bacteria in them.151)

There are [pads] which are 2 Chinese yuan packed in clear plastic packaging. But we don't use Chinese ones often. There is a saying that if an apple is sent by China it is injected with tuberculosis germs.152)

148) NKDB_30_Yanggang Province
149) NKDB_56_South Hwanghae Province
150) NKDB_2_North Hamgyeong Province
151) NKDB_7_Yanggang Province
152) NKDB_7_Yanggang Province
The interviewees in this study were asked about the quality and price of North Korean disposable sanitary pads. A summary of their answers is presented in the following paragraphs. The brands 'Milhwaburi' and 'Jangmi' are known to be of good quality. Price-wise, 'Jangmi' was the most expensive and 'Milhwaburi' was the second most expensive one. The price difference prompted interviewees to use the 'Milhwaburi' as much as the 'Daedonggang' disposable sanitary pads. 'Jangmi' appear to be used among people with comparatively good financial standing.

There was a [North Korean] brand that I used which was called 'Milhwaburi', I think I used that more often. 'Milhwaburi' [pads] were a bit more expensive than 'Daedonggang', and they were said to be better. All the young women used that brand before I came [to South Korea]. It cost as much as 1 kg of rice.\(^{153}\)

I used North Korean [pads] that came from Pyongyang. There are many brands including 'Daedonggang' and 'Jangmi'. 'Milhwaburi' is also one of them. I think the best ones were 'Daedonggang' and 'Milhwaburi' because they were big in size. They are this big. I used them. I also used Chinese ones. The Chinese ones were a bit smaller. They were small because they were compressed, so I used Chinese ones and others as well.\(^{154}\)

'Jangmi' were used in Pyongyang, people in the countryside did not use 'Jangmi'. I don't know if they have 'Jangmi' there [North Korea] now, but when I was there I had never seen 'Jangmi [pads]'. 'Milhwaburi' were about 5,000 KPW or 4,000 KPW? The first people to use them after they were first produced were the upper classes, then Pyongyang citizens, and then people in the countryside.\(^{155}\)

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152) NKDB_23_Yanggang Province
153) NKDB_10_North Hamgyeong Province
154) NKDB_18_Yanggang Province
155) NKDB_20_Yanggang Province
The price was 2,000 KPW for one pack of 10 pads. I think the prices are similar. However, 'Milhwaburi' pads were about 200 KPW more expensive.\textsuperscript{156)}

They were made in North Korea. They are called 'Jangmi', they are really good. They were comfy, thick, and easy to use. There were also ones called 'Milhwaburi', but they were a little cheap. 'Daedonggang' were okay too. They were given to the DPRK military. If I were to compare them, I think 'Jangmi' would take the first place. They are comfy and absorbent. They are comfortable to wear as well. [Sanitary pads] can be a bit visible if women wear pants, but these ones didn't show. 'Jangmi' were the most expensive, weren't they?\textsuperscript{157)}

Looking at the routes of distribution of disposable sanitary pads in North Korea, it can be seen that 'Daedonggang' disposable sanitary pads are produced in factories and then supplied to stores selling goods of first necessity or to female soldiers in the North Korean military. 'Daedonggang' pads are sold by traders who obtain them from the military. One set of 'Daedonggang' disposable pads contains ten pads, and female soldiers are supplied one-two sets per month. There were cases in which individual female soldiers sold the sanitary pads supplied to them in order to gain some money. In other cases, higher ranking military officials embezzled disposable sanitary pads and sold them to markets or private house stalls. In this way North Korean women have access to various types of sanitary pads, but on the other hand female soldiers face difficulties due to the lack of feminine hygiene products because they are not able to actually receive the pads that they should have been supplied to them.

\textit{I used North Korean ones, 'Daedonggang'. They were also from Pyongyang. They were quite precious at first because soldiers needed...}
money so they did not use [the sanitary pads] but secretly sold them. They were rare in the beginning. But then suddenly, they pads came to the inner provinces [in North Korea] and were constantly available at the market. Their price also went down. 158)

'Daedonggang' is ok for ordinary people, and 'Daedonggang' is also supplied to the military. 'Daedonggang' is the only brand supplied to female soldiers. Some of the women soldiers would save a lot of pads up and sell them. Some of them just came and sold them. You can think of 'Daedonggang' pads as the most commonly used ones by the public and the military. The number of pads sold by female soldiers who saved up their supplies is very small. Most of the pads [that are sold] come from factories or are stolen by factory workers, and some come directly from the state. The oldest brand is 'Daedonggang'. 159)

They were made in North Korea. There are a lot of places that produce sanitary pads. There are many factories. Very many. 160)

I did not use disposable sanitary pads before going to the military. I found out that they existed after I was supplied with 'Daedonggang' disposable pads in the military. They are manufactured in Pyongyang, and supplied in the military corps. The corps give two packs per month to the female soldiers. The 'Daedonggang' sanitary pads are a bit long. There are ten in a pack so [soldiers get] a total is twenty pads. Women who had a heavy flow used two because one was not enough. Women used them even after they were discharged from the military. I bought them at the market. Other brands started to come out as well. There were two kinds, 'Milhwaburi' and 'Daedonggang'. 161)
The deputy officers did not give us supplies. They sold them. They are supposed to give us sanitary pads, but the female officers that get pads sell them.\textsuperscript{162)}

Based on the answers provided by interviewees on the price of disposable sanitary pads in North Korea, it can be inferred that a set\textsuperscript{163)} of disposable sanitary pads costs between 3,000 and 5,000 KPW. The prices of disposable pads differ greatly depending on their type and quality, the cheapest ones being 500 KPW, and the most expensive ones - 11,000 KPW.

The 'Daedonggang' sanitary pads were 4,000 KPW. There were ten [pads] per pack and they cost 4,000 KPW. I used them when I had to go to work and when my period came unexpectedly. I bought them at the market.\textsuperscript{164)}

There were ten [pads] in a pack, I would buy a lot of them in packs. [...] There were five [pads] in a pack which cost 4.50 Chinese yuan. There were also packs with ten [pads] which cost 8-9 Chinese yuan.\textsuperscript{165)} The prices started at 3,500 KPW. One pack of 10 pads would be worth around 600 g of rice.\textsuperscript{166)}

With ten pads per pack, one pack was enough for me. The price starts at 2,500 KPW. The lowest price is 2,500 KPW. There were various brands including 'Daedonggang', I think I used 'Daedonggang'. The price can keep going up, but I think it would probably be maximum 10,000 KPW.\textsuperscript{167)}

\textsuperscript{162)} NKDB_7_Yanggang Province
\textsuperscript{163)} There are 10 pads in a set, and according to the collected testimonies there are packs with 20 pads as well.
\textsuperscript{164)} NKDB_75_North Hamgyeong Province
\textsuperscript{165)} NKDB_2_North Hamgyeong Province
\textsuperscript{166)} NKDB_100_North Hwanghae Province
\textsuperscript{167)} NKDB_20_Yanggang Province
I am not sure because when I was young, my mother bought them for me. When I bought them myself later on as an adult they were about 2 or 2.50 Chinese yuan. One pack of 10 'Daedonggang' pads is expensive. The difference is more than 0.50 Chinese yuan. The pack of 20 pads is twice more expensive. A ten-pad pack of the Chinese [disposable sanitary pads] would be 2.50 Chinese yuan. The 'Daedonggang' ones are of better quality.168)

The price [ of the pads] would be equal to 1 kg of rice, there were 10 [pads] in a set. They were different sizes - medium, large, small, something like that. I don't think I used the large ones, only the medium ones.169)

As mentioned previously, considering that the monthly salary in North Korea is 3,000 KPW and rice is 5,000 KPW per kilogram, disposable sanitary pads were sold at an average price of 3,000 to 5,000 KPW, which was roughly the price of 1 kg of rice in North Korea. There are multiple testimonies revealing that at this price using disposable pads several times was quite a financial burden for North Korean women. This means that it was difficult for the women to use disposable sanitary pads without hesitation. Despite the fact that they received no food rations or salaries, North Korean men still had to go to work because they might suffer punishment if they were to miss work without permission. As a result many women in North Korea became the breadwinners in their families. In these conditions, many of the women interviewed by NKDB chose to give up disposable sanitary pads and use the money to support their families. Since women belonging to different economic levels tend to choose disposable sanitary pads at different price, interviewees whose economic level in North Korea was 'very comfortable' purchased sanitary pads that cost 4,000-5,000 KPW, while women who did not have such means chose comparatively

168) NKDB_7_Yanggang Province
169) NKDB_9_North Hamgyeong Province
inexpensive sanitary pads that cost about 2,000 KPW or didn't buy disposable sanitary pads at all.

I used the 2,000 KPW [pads]. 'Daedonggang'. Anyone can buy sanitary pads if they have money. It was a burden for me because if I was ill I could not earn money. 

The disposable sanitary pads were 3,000 KPW for pack of ten pads. That would be about 5 kg of corn or 0.8 kg - 1 kg of rice. That is why young women do not use disposable one even though they need them only once a month.

[The pads] were 11,000 KPW. This was expensive. It was so expensive that even when I wanted to buy [the disposable pads], I just couldn't because they were so expensive. 11,000 KPW was the price of 3-4 kg of rice. Two kilograms, a little more than two kilograms. It was expensive. That is why I didn't buy them.

The North Korean women who participated in this study was asked to indicate how many times they changed their disposable sanitary pads per day. According to their answers 70.3% of the interviewees changed their pads more than three times a day, 18.8% - three times a day, and 7.8% - two times a day. Naturally the frequency with which women change their pads depends on the amount of their individual menstrual blood flow. However, in most cases, because price of the disposable sanitary pads was a burden, and disposable pads were not reusable, interviewees used them as sparingly as they could. As a result some interviewees used disposable sanitary pads only when they were going out for long periods of time.

170) NKDB_6_South Hamgyeong Province
171) NKDB_3_North Hamgyeong Province
172) NKDB_24_North Hamgyeong Province
### Table 23: Number of Changes of Disposable Sanitary Pads per Day

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Changes</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
<th>Share (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Once</td>
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<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Three Times</td>
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<td>70.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>64</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I bought [disposable pads] at the market. But I used to think 'What do I do with [the pad] after I use it? Do I wash this one too?' That is what I thought. But I came to understand that after you use [disposable sanitary pads] there was nothing you should do. I thought 'Do I just throw it away?' and as I was discarding it I also thought 'I paid money for this and now I am throwing it away.' It was so regrettable. We washed and reused gauze [sanitary pads], so it was difficult to just throw the disposable ones away. [...] I tried the disposable pads and they were comfortable, but since I had the habit of washing and reusing the pads, it seemed wasteful to throw them out. I thought 'So I just use and discard it? This costs a lot of money. I should not use this.' [...] So I came back to using gauze pads. That phase [using the disposable sanitary pads] didn't last that many months. It was comfortable, but I couldn't use them [constantly]. It felt impractical throwing them away.¹⁷³)

Even if I want to buy North Korean [disposable pads], they are so expensive that I can not afford them often. There are many places that sell them, but they are pricy. When women purchase disposable sanitary pads, they try to save them as much as possible.¹⁷⁴)

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¹⁷³) NKDB_24_North Hamgyeong Province  
¹⁷⁴) NKDB_7_Yanggang Province
It was nice not having to wash them, but I thought 'This is very bad, it is not worth the money I paid.'

I never used [disposable] sanitary pads all day. I used them only when I was going out and changed to gauze ones when I got home. I would just take 4-5 [pads] when I was going out to work.

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175) NKDB_47_North Hamgyeong Province
176) NKDB_93_North Hwanghae Province
IV. Hygiene and Sanitation Associated with Menstruation
IV. Hygiene and Sanitation Associated with Menstruation

1. State of Sanitary Facilities

Inadequate restroom facilities and unhygienic spaces increase the risk of toxic shock syndrome and other menstruation-related disorders.\(^{177}\) Therefore adequate water quality, clean restrooms and sanitary facilities are very important for maintaining women's physical and mental health during their menstruation. When asked about the sanitary conditions such as availability of hygienic restrooms and adequate water quality, 22 people (22%) answered that the sanitary conditions in North Korea were adequate, but 78 people (78%) answered that the conditions were poor.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
<th>Share (%)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>78</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the analysis of specific testimonies of interviewees who responded that the sanitary conditions were poor, it can be seen that North Korean women suffered from the poor sanitary conditions during their menstruation.

Menstruating women in North Korea suffer inconveniences in restroom use due to the lack of private and public restroom facilities. Testimonies show that some households in North Korea have their own restrooms, but in most cases the people in one or several people's units\(^{178}\) share a common restroom. Such

\(^{178}\) People's unit (also called neighborhood unit) is the smallest administrative unit in North
common restrooms are used by multiple people so for the sake of maintenance they are usually locked in order to ensure that the restrooms are only used by the people in the corresponding people's unit(s). As a result women end up not being able to use the restroom whenever they need to while they are on their period. In cases in which the restrooms are used by both men and women, women have trouble taking care of their female hygiene during their period. If a public restroom is not available nearby, women are sometimes forced to ask to use the restroom of other houses close by. It is therefore evident that the number of restrooms and sanitary facilities in North Korea is insufficient and as a result women face a great deal of difficulty during their menstruation. They have to either refrain from traveling as they are not able to change their sanitary pads on time, or have to use the same sanitary pad all day long because they cannot use a restroom while they are travelling.

When you use the outhouse during your period, there is no separate space for men and women. It is humiliating for a woman on her period to use a public outhouse where men and women go to the toilet together. […] There are not that many public outhouses to begin with. The outhouse in one place collapsed so it is gone now. Where I lived [the restroom was] the outhouse of the factory there. The factory is supposed to maintain it, but since there were so few outhouses, [people from] several people’s units would all come to use that one. Saying that it was dirty is a huge understatement.¹⁷⁹)

They put a lock on the restrooms [so] not everyone, [but] just the people that live in that apartment can use them. The surrounding areas are also in dire conditions. It is bad beyond description.¹⁸⁰)

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¹⁷⁹) NKDB_25_Yanggang Province
¹⁸⁰) NKDB_46_Pyongyang
Two people’s units use one restroom. One people’s unit is made up of about 30 families. Our restroom was a big one. I think two people’s units usually used that one. There were four toilets for women, and I am not sure how many there were for men. In the morning or when there are a lot of people you have to wait in line. On weekdays, people go to the market or to work so there weren’t that many people, but when everyone was getting ready for work you would have to wait in line for 5-10 minutes. It was okay at dawn. [...] When you go to the central parts of the city, restrooms there were locked with padlocks. Restrooms were locked because if anyone who passes by could use the restroom, then it would overflow and they would have to take care of it.181)

There is no proper sanitary environment. You cannot [change sanitary pads] at school. At home you can wash [the sanitary pads] and let them dry in the sunlight. [However] if you go somewhere it's difficult to do so. You cannot dispose of the pads on the road. There were no restrooms in between [destinations]. If we were riding in a vehicle, we would have to urinate on the side of the road when the car stopped. Public restrooms could only be found in the central parts of cities. Even there, public restrooms were not common. There were about three to four toilets.182)

Of course it was inconvenient for us. [...] There are a lot of uncomfortable things when we are on our periods. There is no sanitary environment. I have to change my pad but there are not many places where I can do that on the road. Here [in South Korea] you can go [to the restroom] in public places and buildings, but in North Korea there are more outhouses in private houses than public buildings. It was very uncomfortable to ask if you could use other people’s private outhouses, so you wouldn’t ask and that was really inconvenient. You can only change

181) NKDB_15_North Hwanghae Province
182) NKDB_1_Yanggang Province

IV. Hygiene and Sanitation Associated with Menstruation_103
your sanitary pad when you arrive at your destination.\(^{183}\)

While menstruating, North Korean women suffer great difficulty from due to the poor conditions of the facilities inside public restrooms. Based on testimonies describing the interior structure of public restrooms in North Korea, in most cases they are dug deep in the ground and covered with wooden panels or concrete with a 'hole in the center'. In North Korea feces from public restrooms are utilized as fertilizer, so when there is need for fertilizer excrements are dug out from public restrooms. If this is not done feces overflow and release foul odor which makes it difficult for women to take their time when using public restrooms to change their sanitary pads. Furthermore, some testimonies revealed that in regions where there was a lack of timber and firewood, people took the wooden restroom doors to use as firewood. This caused great discomfort for women because in these conditions they had no privacy at all.

[Restrooms] are built from wooden panels and divided into cubicles. You could see the feces. It was grim. [...] I shudder just at the thought of those times. ‘How did I even live like that?’ At that time this was not considered as dirty. Now it disgusts me just to think of the fact that I barely found room to step in [the restroom] to go in and relieve myself. It was revolting to use even the outhouses in the central parts of cities. The toilets were so full that it was not possible to pump them out.\(^{184}\)

There are more restrooms without doors. If someone was in there already, you would get startled. There should be doors [in restrooms] but since people don't have firewood and the doors are made of wood, people ripped them out to use as firewood. Also, to go to the restroom, you have to step inside, but as everything is covered in feces, there is no room to stand [without stepping on excrements]. That is why I did

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183) NKDB_17_Yanggang Province
184) NKDB_13_Yanggang Province

104. The State of Menstrual Health of North Korean Women
not even bother going in and just went to other restrooms further away. That is how bad the conditions are. People relieved themselves outside because the restrooms were already overflowing.\(^{185}\)

In North Korea the restrooms are built of wood. People stood on wooden panel steps [to go to the toilet]. Since in North Korea restrooms cannot be cleaned, it was terrible. It was difficult to find a spot to step on.\(^{186}\)

We had public outhouses. When you go to the restroom you want to take your time, right? When we went to the restroom we came out right away. You could not stay there for a long time. It smelled too bad. If you stayed for too long, people outside would rush you to get out fast because they also had to go. [...] It was awful.\(^{187}\)

Due to the poor water supply facilities, most North Korean public restrooms did not have wash basins (sinks)\(^ {188}\). Testimonies point that women had difficulty not only washing their hands after going to the restroom but also washing their clothes or cloth sanitary pads from menstrual blood. When they needed access to water during their period, North Korean women had to wait until they got home, or they washed their clothes in nearby rivers or streams.

There are no sinks. The only place you can deal with your sanitary pad is the restroom. However, unlike South Korea where most restrooms have sinks you can wash your hands in, in North Korea, with the exception of big cities, there was no such thing. When you are on your period, you have to go to the restroom to change your sanitary pad, wrap it in a plastic bag so no one else finds out [that you are on your

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185) NKDB_24_North Hamgyeong Province
186) NKDB_27_Yanggang Province
187) NKDB_22_Yanggang Province
188) In this report the words "wash basin" and "sink" are used with the same meaning and designate the facility used to wash one's hands in the restroom or the kitchen.
period] and wash it later without anyone knowing. If you get any blood on your hands, you can wash them at a stream.\(^{189}\)

There is no place to wash your hands in the restrooms. If you get [blood] on your hands, you have to find water yourself. [...] Or you wait until you go home [to clean up].\(^{190}\)

We get our drinking water from the river. People who want to keep clean draw water from the river, heat it up and wash themselves [...] There was no place to wash one's hands, so I would wash them at the river after I got off work. If there was no water I could not do this. If there was no water, I just washed my hands when I got home.\(^{191}\)

You could wash in the stream where the water runs. There the water is clean enough so you can wash up, but not in the restrooms. There are no bloodstains [in restrooms] here (South Korea). However, we don't have flush toilets like you do here, just outhouses. So your blood drips all over. You can only wash your hands when there is running water nearby, and if not, you can't wash your hands.\(^{192}\)

In North Korean public restrooms there are no consumable supplies such as toilet paper, which causes discomfort for North Korean women when they have to throw their sanitary pads away or have to clean up after themselves. When the use of toilet paper is concerned, North Korean women who have money buy and carry their own toilet paper, but women who are not so well off have to use pages of books or notebooks, or cloth. There were also cases of women who did not even have access to paper and used soybean leaves or corn husks.

\(^{189}\) NKDB_53_North Hwanghae Province  
\(^{190}\) NKDB_54_North Hamgyeong Province  
\(^{191}\) NKDB_68_Yanggang Province  
\(^{192}\) NKDB_79_North Hamgyeong Province
You need money to use toilet paper. We used paper left from the kids school work. We rub the paper with our hands to soften it and then used it. It is so-so. We use toilet paper at home, and borrow sheets of paper when we are outside. [...] People who use white toilet paper are well off. [Normally] the toilet paper is a dark black color.193)

We would carry our own toilet paper in our bags. Conditions outside one's home are unsanitary, but if you carry your own toilet paper, it is manageable. The quality of the toilet paper was similar to the one in South Korea, but the color was darker, grey or black. It looks like the napkins in coffee shops [in South Korea]. However it is very expensive.194)

These days [only] rich people use toilet paper. Other people can not use things like that. They can not afford it. Instead they use notebook paper. People with a little bit more money use Chinese toilet paper. We bought Chinese toilet paper. People who have money can afford it, but those who did not have money all used notebook paper. Notebooks, the pages of which are all used up by elementary school children. This is used as toilet paper. People always used to do this.195)

Toilet paper was hard to come by. We gathered and used things like soybean leaves and soft corn husks because we did not have toilet paper. It was difficult.196)

Participants in this study were asked about the role and activities of the Ministry of Public Health, which has control over public health, sanitation, and disinfection in North Korea, in relation to the dire sanitary conditions of public restrooms. The answers to this question reveal that although there are cases in which facilities are inspected, this is done only as a formality. Some

193) NKDB_28_Yanggang Province
194) NKDB_35_Yanggang Province
195) NKDB_42_North Hamgyeong Province
196) NKDB_92_North Hamgyeong Province
interviewees responded that although there were instances when representatives from the Ministry of Public Health inspected the sanitary conditions of each facility and attached a "pass" or "fail" label, this was a formality that did not involve detailed inspection and led to no improvement of the conditions of toilet facilities or public restrooms.

_They come for sanitation inspections. So what? They look at the building and stuck a "pass" label on if they think it is okay, if not - they put a "fail" label, and that's it. They do not inspect the restrooms. They did not go into the restrooms. The sanitation inspection is only done to check if the building is clean or not. The restrooms' sanitation level is not inspected at all. They do not check the restrooms' hygiene._\(^{197}\)

_T here are inspections done by the Ministry of Public Health. However, it is not a detailed inspection, just a "pass" or "fail" check up. They just check for dust on the window sills. They stick a "fail" sanitation inspection label if the place does not look clean to the inspectors or if there are too many flies._\(^{198}\)

2. Public Health and Welfare Associated with Menstruation

1) Health Disorders and Medical Treatment Associated with Menstruation

Menstrual cramps, heavy menstrual bleeding, irregular menstrual cycles, irregular flow and duration of the cycle, atypical menstrual bleeding, absent menstruation, anemia, and menstrual depression are some disorders related to menstruation.

When asked about their experience of menstruation-related disorders in North Korea the participants in NKDB's study could give multiple answers. Based on

197) NKDB_24_North Hamgyeong Province
198) NKDB_63_South Hamgyeong Province

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their analysis it can be seen that the highest percentage of people, 57 people (25.3%) had experienced menstrual cramps, followed by irregular menstrual cycles - 42 people (18.7%), anemia - 31 people (13.8%), heavy menstrual bleeding - 27 people (12.0%), absent menstruation and menstrual depression - 19 people each (8.4%), irregular flow and duration of the cycle - 18 people (8.0%), and atypical menstrual bleeding - 12 people (5.3%).

<Table 25> Menstruation-related Disorders (multiple-answer question)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Disorders</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
<th>Share (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Menstrual Cramps</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>25.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heavy Menstrual Bleeding</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irregular Menstrual Cycle</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irregular Flow and Duration of the Cycle</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atypical Menstrual Bleeding</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absent Menstruation (amenorrhea)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anemia</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Menstrual Depression</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>225</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among the 83 interviewees who confirmed that they had experienced menstruation-related disorders, only 9 women (14.5%) answered that they had received medical treatment for these disorders.
The testimonies collected on medical treatment of menstruation-related disorders show that several interviewees received consultation at a clinic or an obstetrician and gynecologist's (ob-gyn) office, but they were not prescribed western medicine drugs, but medicinal herbs or oriental medicine. One interviewee's younger sister was administered a shot with opium components at the clinic for her severe menstrual pain. Furthermore, an interviewee that received a consultation for her irregular cycle and was prescribed western medicine by a gynecologist, clarified that she was only able to do so because she had a close personal relationship with her doctor. The comprehensive analysis of all testimonies related to menstruation-related disorders shows that ordinary North Korean women are not able to receive adequate medical treatment for menstruation-related disorders.

*When my younger sister was on her period, she was in so much pain as if she was in labor. They gave her a sedative because she was in so much pain. They gave her a shot of something like that. [...] The head of the clinic came and gave such instructions. After that if my sister was in too much pain to go herself, I would go to the clinic as they already knew her there. They would come and give her a shot. My younger sister got a shot for her menstrual cramps. Clinic X administered shots which they said contained opium.*

199) NKDB_25_Yanggang Province
You can get a verbal consult when you go to the gynecologist. I don't know the exact medicine, but it is a kind of herbal medicine. You get it from the person who sells medicinal herbs and substances, but I don't know the name of the medicine. It is in the form of powders and pills. A doctor only makes a house visit if you have irregular bleeding, not for anything else.200)

My menopause started early and I had some hormonal treatment. I got a shot every three months and then they followed the progress. I got 2-3 shots per year. [...] This happened at the ob-gyn department. I bought North Korean medicine for the injection. However you can't do this by yourself. The doctors do this illegally. You become friends with the doctors. You become close with your doctor and you have to buy the medicine illegally. I got two shots every day, I think I paid about 1,500 KPW per shot. I saw that the medicine was made in North Korea. [...] It was supposed to be free of charge, but there is nothing for free anymore.201)

Among all the interviewees that had experienced menstrual disorders, 57 had experienced menstrual cramps. When asked if they had been able to get medicine for their menstrual cramps, the North Korean women answered that they were not able to get any. Interviewees revealed that they did not know about the existence of medicine for menstrual cramps, and thought that they have to put up with the pain.

I never heard of medicine for menstrual cramps. I didn't know about it. I never took any medicine. You just have to push through your pain.202)

200) NKDB_43_North Hamgyeong Province
201) NKDB_44_South Hwanghae Province
202) NKDB_86_North Hamgyeong Province
I didn't know that they sold medicine for menstrual cramps. I thought you just had to bear [the pain]. I would lay down on the warm floor.  

Interviewees who responded that they had medicine for menstrual cramps, stated that they knew that their pain would be relieved if they took medicine such as Chinese painkillers containing opium, Chinese medicine and herbs, or aspirin. However, the testimonies of some interviewees who used Chinese painkillers, which have an opium component, show that North Korean women are not able to obtain medicine easily and as a result take strong painkillers even for ordinary period cramps.

Even nowadays women [in North Korea] still have a lot of patience. Based on my experience, nobody says that they can't go to work because they have period cramps. People think of it as embarrassing. You tell your mother and she would get you some painkillers.

Aspirin isn't just for period cramps, but you can get it right away for any pain. It's cheap. It costs about 500 KPW. Chinese pain killers (with opium) are also about 300 KPW.

You can buy medicine for menstrual cramps. It was called Chinese painkiller, you could take that.

I took Chinese painkillers. They contain some opium. I took [this medicine] because once you take it all the pain stops. It worked well on me. But it was illegal.
<Table 27> Experience of Receiving Medical Consultation Regarding Menstruation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
<th>Share (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>86.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked whether regular consultations regarding one's menstruation were possible at a hospital, 14 (14%) North Korean women responded that they were able to receive such consultations, and 86 (86%) answered that they were not. Those who indicated that they were not able to, gave different reasons why this happened. The first reason why women did not think to get a consult was because even if one got prescribed treatment it was difficult to find medicine. Additionally medicine [in North Korea] was not well developed and conditions in hospitals were poor. Moreover the medical environment was poor due to the lack on development in the field.

*There is no such thing [as consultation]. The ob-gyn department only deals with basic childbirth. If you get pregnant here [in South Korea] you go to get checkups every few months and see how the baby is doing, but the medical field is not that developed there [in North Korea].*\(^{208}\)

The second reason why women did not get consultation was because periods were considered a shameful thing by North Korean women. As a result it was unimaginable for them to go to the hospital to receive consultation regarding their period. Particularly in the case of unmarried women, it was difficult for them to receive a consultation from a gynecologist because their very visit to the ob-gyn office was seen in a negative way by other people.

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\(^{208}\) NKDB_53_North Hwanghae Province

IV. Hygiene and Sanitation Associated with Menstruation_113
I had such bad menstrual cramps that I thought about going to the gynecologist. However, it was too weird for me to go to the gynecologist. I was not even married yet, so I thought people would think badly of me if I did. If someone I knew saw me they might have thought that I was pregnant.\textsuperscript{209)

In North Korea people would gossip about women. There are many [women] who do not go [to the ob-gyn office] because they are ashamed.\textsuperscript{210)

Young unmarried women feel ashamed. They can't go to the gynecologist. Young unmarried women cannot even stay in front of the ob-gyn office. My daughter had to wear sanitary pads every day, 365 days [a year]. We also bought antibiotics at the market and she took it but it did not help. There are many young unmarried women that go through something like that.\textsuperscript{211)

NKDB's research shows that North Korean women who are not able to receive adequate treatment or consultations due to the negative perception towards menstruation frequently experience disorders related to menstruation. This is also corroborated by medical records of female North Korean defectors in South Korea. According to a presentation titled "North Korean Development Cooperation and Women's Health" by Lee So Hee, director of the National Medical Center's Reunification Health and Welfare Center\textsuperscript{212)}, among female North Korean defectors who received outpatient and inpatient treatment from 2006 to September 2018, the highest number was the one of

\textsuperscript{209) NKDB_66_North Hamgyeong Province
210) NKDB_74_South Hamgyeong Province
211) NKDB_97_South Hamgyeong Province
patients to the department of obstetrics and gynecology. The two conditions for which most patients received treatment were pregnancy and cervical cancer. North Korean defectors seemed to experience problems because of their lack of understanding of menstruation and its significance and because of their use of unsanitary contraception methods. The reason why North Korean defectors visited most often the ob-gyn office can also be traced back to the lack of education on menstruation, sexuality and women's health issues and the fact that in the DPRK women cannot easily receive treatment and consultation for their gynecological problems.

2) Welfare Associated with Menstruation

It can be seen that North Korean women are not able to get adequate medical treatment or consultations at medical institutions for menstruation-related disorders. In order to verify whether North Korean women were at least able to rest during their period, NKDB asked the participants in this study if it was possible for them to use vacations, to leave work early, to have some rest break, or to be absent from school or work due to menstruation. Nineteen people (19%) indicated that it was possible to do so, and 81 people (81%) responded with a 'no', meaning that it was not possible to take advantage of such practices.

![Table 28> Existence of Menstrual Leave Policy]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
<th>Share (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>81.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Among the interviewees who responded that it was possible to take a menstrual leave, only three women actually did so after they had revealed that they were on their periods. Additionally these women were able to take such leave because more than 60% of the employees at their workplace were women and their supervisors were also women. The remaining interviewees (16 people) reported having seen or heard other women at their workplace or school use vacation days or rest during their menstrual periods because of period cramps.

I heard something like that. That if you have cramps, if you are on your period and you are really in too much pain you can go back home. I never did this, but I did hear about it.213)

I took some time off after saying that I had my period. I said that my period cramps were too strong and was told to rest for a day.214)

Upon analysis of the answers of the interviewees who responded that taking a menstrual leave was not possible, it can be seen that there were cases in which people used other medical conditions to excuse themselves when their health deteriorated because of menstruation-related disorders. It is evident that people could get a leave after submitting a medical certificate to their workplace for the treatment of a disorder other than menstruation.

I would give a different excuse and leave. You can't say out loud that you are on your period. [If you say it] they would let you go, but as it's too shameful you can't say anything.215)

It is not easy. You can get off work. Once a year sometimes, you would go to work, and just push through [the pain]. However, if it hurts too

213) NKDB_29_Yanggang Province
214) NKDB_52_South Hamgyeong Province
215) NKDB_21_North Hamgyeong Province
much before you go to work, you would contact someone. Then if you are sick you need a medical certificate to prove that you are sick. You can get one at the hospital clinic. You cannot say that you have menstrual cramps, but you can say that you have a stomachache and they issue you the certificate. Even if you could not go to work, Your workplace will not question you if you have a medical certificate.216)

You have to go to work even if you are on your period. If it hurts too much, there are cases in which you can go back home after speaking to the unit supervisor. You can't say it is because of your period, it is easier to just say that you are not feeling well. People are convinced that this is something to be ashamed of. My unit supervisor was a man. However, even if that person was a woman, I don't think I would have spoken freely.217)

As for the menstrual leave... My work unit leader was a man. I just got a medical certificate from the hospital saying that I was sick. I got a fake one saying that I had a cold and stayed at home. I did not say that I was not at work because of my period. However, if you miss work every month, men become aware that it is because of your period.218)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
<th>Share (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>91.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

216) NKDB_26_Yanggang Province
217) NKDB_72_Yanggang Province
218) NKDB_80_North Hamgyeong Province

IV. Hygiene and Sanitation Associated with Menstruation

117
As part of NKDB's research interviewees were asked whether at their workplace or school there was a designated space where women could take a rest when they were on their period. Nine people indicated that there was such space for rest, and 91 people answered that there were no such areas. However details in the North Korean women's testimonies show that in most cases when designated resting space existed it was not exclusively for the use of women, but was used by both women and men. Furthermore, the cases in which individual rest (not rest of a whole group of people) were extremely rare and that is why even if there were resting spaces only very few women were able to use them during their period. It becomes clear that North Korean women are not guaranteed even minimal amounts of rest when suffering from menstrual disorders due to the North Korean people's lack of proper awareness of menstruation and lack of adequate facilities.

*There were rooms for rest in all workplaces. Some of these rooms were for both men and women. It was okay for us because there were no men where I worked.*\(^{219}\)

*In big state enterprises, there were rooms for rest for women. They were not commonplace. There were no such facilities in schools. The rooms for rest were a places where women could change their clothes or replace their sanitary pads. There were no amenities there, just a space for people.*\(^{220}\)

*There are no infirmaries in schools. There is one room for rest per workplace. You can go in these rooms to drink water or sit down for a while. One cannot use them freely. People work together and rest together [in these rooms], or they go there to eat with others during meal times.*\(^{221}\)

\(^{219}\) NKDB_9_North Hamgyeong Province  
\(^{220}\) NKDB_77_North Hamgyeong Province  
\(^{221}\) NKDB_76_Yanggang Province
V. Menstrual Health of Women Inside Detention Facilities and the Military
V. Menstrual Health of Women Inside Detention Facilities and the Military

1. Conditions in Detention Facilities Related to Menstruation

In North Korea there are various interrogation and detention facilities, such as 'political prison camps' 'prisons' 'labor training camps', 'police holding camps' and 'detention centers'. Political prison camps are places where people who have been found guilty of committing a political crime are imprisoned and spend their whole lives. Prisons serve a function similar to the one of South Korean correctional facilities and detain criminals who were sentenced at the court. Labor training camps and police holding camps are facilities for the temporary detention of people who committed minor offenses or people without a proper travel pass. Detention centers are the equivalent of holding cells in South Korea and they are used for the detention of people during investigation of a crime.

Regardless of their kinds, all of the interrogation and detention facilities in North Korea are infamous for their inferior treatment of detainees and extremely unhygienic conditions. During their detention, prisoners are provided with only limited amount of food and no hygiene products such as toilet papers, soap, toothpaste and toothbrushes. In the case of female detainees, although they need access to sanitary pads and clean water, these are not provided to them.

In this study there are 34 interviewees who responded that they were in detention facilities in North Korea. Most of them escaped from North Korea to China to avoid starvation during the Arduous March in the 1990s, but were forcibly repatriated back to North Korea and confined in various detention facilities. Based on their testimonies NKDB conducted research on North Korean women's menstrual health in detention, use of sanitary pads in detention facilities as well as conditions of prison life for menstruating women.
1) Causes of Irregular Menstruation in Detention

In order to investigate the conditions of menstrual health of North Korean women in detention facilities, NKDB first analysed the responses of interviewees in order to determine whether they had experiences of detention in North Korea. Out of 100 women, 34 (34%) indicated that they have been in detention facilities such as facilities of the Ministry of State Security (MSS), police holding camps, labour training camps and prisons.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
<th>Share (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I had menstruation</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>35.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was supposed to have my period but my menstruation stopped or I did not get my period at all</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>38.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was not supposed to have my period/I was in menopause</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>34</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among those 34 women who have been in detention facilities, 12 women (35.5%) had their periods, 13 (38.2%) - were supposed to be on their period but did not have menstruation and 9 women responded that they were not supposed to have their period or that they were in menopause.

For those 13 women who did not get their period during detention, this was most probably caused by nutritional imbalance due to the inadequate food as well as the stress they received in detention facilities.

The paragraphs below reveal information about the food supply in...
detention facilities in relation to nutritional imbalance suffered by women and causing their amenorrhea.

In the case of MSS detention centers, corn kernel meals with soup are provided three times a day. The corn kernel meals are prepared by cooking ground corn kernels but they also include the ground ears of corn. The amount of food is not sufficient and it has very low nutritional value. As a result people in the detention centers of the Ministry of State Security easily become undernourished.

In police holding camps the provided food is usually 100-150g of corn porridge or corn kernel meals three times a day served with soup, made of cabbage leaves and little bit of salt. Although in some police holding camps one or two pieces of salted radish are also provided, most of meals consist of corn, which is in small amount and with not enough nutritional value thus making it inevitable for detainees to develop malnutrition.

Labor training camps are not particularly different from detention centers and police holding camps when it comes to provision of food. The meals there consist of about 100-125g of corn kernel meal or five to seven potatoes provided three times a day. Furthermore similarly to detention centers and police holding camps, food in labor training camps contains no side dishes but only salted soup with cabbage leaves in it. In addition to this, detainees in labor training camps are mobilized to perform hard labor such as working at construction sites, which contributes to the high percentage of malnutrition cases.

In the case of prisons the food provided to detainees also includes corn and salted soup. However as a means of controlling detainees, prisons classify the amount of food into seven levels and apply graded distribution with the purpose of punishment and labor exploitation. Usually detainees in prisons are provided meals with level 1 to 3, whereas meals with level 4 to

222) The information in this section related to food supply in detention facilities in North Korea is based on NKDB's report "Prisoners in North Korea Today" (2011).
7 are labeled 'penalty meals', which are of very small amount and are given to prisoners who do not follow the rules or do not work properly. There are cases in which level 7 meals consist of 70-90g. Hence many of the detainees, who are given such small amounts of food and have to perform intensive labor suffer from malnourishment.

One of the women who was in a detention facility, and who experienced amenorrhea due to insufficient nutrition, indicated that her menstruation stopped after 3 to 4 months of being detained. At that time she was provided with 80 to 90 kernels of corn per meal. Another interviewee revealed that her menstruation stopped for four years since her preliminary investigation because of the inadequate food provision. These findings show that female detainees in North Korean detention facilities not only suffer from undernourishment but also from absent menstruation (amenorrhea) due to inadequate food.

*After three months in the detention center my period stopped. [...] It stopped after three months. [...] The food was served on a military plate. They gave us boiled corn kernels, I never counted them, but the others said that there were between 80 to 90 kernels. They gave that to us three times a day. There was nothing else. Nothing at all. I ate that for three months.*

[My period] stopped for two months. Women preferred not having their periods. We did not eat enough, even less than what dogs eat here [in South Korea], so my health quickly deteriorated.

[My period] stopped. My period stopped since the preliminary investigation because of malnutrition. [...] I did not eat enough, I was stressed and on edge, so my period stopped when I was at the XX office of the Ministry of State Security. My period stopped since I was

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223) NKDB_55_Yanggang Province  
224) NKDB_97_South Hamgyeong Province
at XX police holding camp and I did not have my period for four years, until I was released.\textsuperscript{225)}

The participants in this study who spend some time in a detention facility while they lived in North Korea also witnessed other women in detention whose menstruation went absent due to insufficient nutrition. One of the women shared that 6 out of 10 detainees in one cell did not have their periods due to insufficient nutrition. One North Korean woman who was detained in a prison after 2010, revealed that at that time 80 to 90 percent of female detainees experienced amenorrhea. Only a few women continued having their periods but those were rare exceptions in which they were either doing less intensive labor or consistently received food from visitations. The collection of these testimonies demonstrates that many female prisoners in North Korean detention facilities experience absence of menstruation because of inadequate food.

\textit{There were women who had their periods but then they stopped menstruating. Six out of ten women experienced that. It was difficult because we did not get anything from the Ministry of State Security. And we did not eat right. We got a handful of boiled corn kernels, so we were malnourished.}\textsuperscript{226)}

\textit{It was a bit sad. I thought that we were not getting enough nutrition [...] 80-90 percent of the women in the prisons did not have their periods. There were some women who had their periods - the ones that had easier tasks and those who constantly got food from visitations, also the women who spent some time in the detention center.}\textsuperscript{227)}

\textsuperscript{225)} NKDB\_77\_North Hamgyeong Province  
\textsuperscript{226)} NKDB\_6\_South Hamgyeong Province  
\textsuperscript{227)} NKDB\_55\_Yanggang Province
Another reason for amenorrhea among the North Korean women who were sent to detention facilities is the extreme levels of stress which they experienced during imprisonment. One of the interviewees in this study stopped menstruating while she was in the Ministry of State Security office, because not only was it necessary to get a permission to use the restroom and moving freely was prohibited, but she also suffered from extreme stress as she was physically violated during interrogation.

_I naturally stopped having my periods. I was stressed, I think it was because of the stress. [...] There was no time to worry about things like that. I did not worry about that because it was hard enough for me to be interrogated and beaten. I was not able to tell the prison guards that I was having my period. [T]here were numbers on the prison cells. You would say [to the guard], that prisoner No. X in prison cell No. X wants to go to the restroom. Then they would say let you use the restroom. The toilet is inside the cell. You cannot go to the toilet whenever you want. You are a criminal. You cannot use the toilet without approval. You cannot even move._228

_[My menstruation] stopped as soon as I got the office of the Ministry of State Security. I got malnourished because I could not eat. This also happened because of the stress. I became very sensitive because I was stressed. [My period] stopped. I bled a little bit and then it stopped._229

2) Use of Sanitary Pads in Detention Facilities

All 12 of the interviewees who had their mensurations in detention facilities indicated that sanitary pads were not provided to them.

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228) NKDB_6_South Hamgyeong Province
229) NKDB_46_Pyongyang

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According to the interviewees who were not provided with sanitary pads of any sort in detention female prisoners in North Korea have no other choice but to get their own sanitary pads. There are several ways in which female detainees can obtain sanitary pads. The first one is using gauze or disposable sanitary pads obtained from one's family during visitations.

*I used the cloth sanitary pads that my family brought from home.*

*My family brought some [sanitary pads] during visitations so I used that.*

*You have to take care of this by yourself. That was the first time that I saw a sanitary pad that was factory made. There was this one person. [...] I think she was rich. She said that she used those sanitary pads when she went to China, [in detention] I saw that such sanitary pads existed. She got them from outside. I saw that such sanitary pads existed. There was only one person like that. Everyone else used gauze cloth. I was there for a month, and everyone was using cloth. Women used [pads] they got from visitations.*

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230) NKDB_21_North Hamgyeong Province  
231) NKDB_100_North Hwanghae Province  
232) NKDB_84_Yanggang Province
The second way in which female detainees obtain sanitary pads is using their clothes to make their own pads. Women who had no visitations and were thus unable to get sanitary pads from outside, ripped parts of their clothes to make temporary substitutes for sanitary pads.

I had my period when I was in the detention center. I had no gauze cloth, so an older lady that sat next to me gave me one, she gave me gauze cloth. People ripped their clothes, usually the pockets or another part. I did not know [about this] at the time so I did not wear [an extra piece of clothing] when I got into [the detention center].

The Ministry of State Security (MSS) does not care. Even if we said that we were having our periods, [prison officials] would not let us sit a little more comfortably. As we could not ask for sanitary pads we had to make our own, even if we had to tear our clothes in order to do so. They can't understand anyway. There was nothing provided for us there. Women who had their periods there [in detention] all used cut up cloth. They would use any of their own clothing, usually their underwear. They [use and] throw it away because they cannot wash it. There was no soap. There was no soap in the MSS office. They could not wash [the cloth], so they used it once and then threw it away. They used whatever dark cloth or underwear that they could rip out. They used it once, and threw it away. We just threw it away. If it was a good cloth they would wash it with plain water and dry it for later use, but it got stained.

A third method for women to obtain sanitary pads in detention facilities in North Korea is through other prisoners. Women who do not have sanitary pads can borrow some from other detainees and in these cases one sanitary pad is

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233) NKDB_68_Yanggang Province
234) NKDB_49_North Hamgyeong Province

128_The State of Menstrual Health of North Korean Women
used by several women. Several female detainees share one sanitary pads by borrowing from other detainees who have sanitary pads. Moreover, NKDB's research reveals that some of the female detainees don't eat the food provided by the detention facilities and save it so that they can later exchange it for sanitary pads.

*There was nothing [no sanitary pads]. We had to deal with this on our own. That was why women borrowed from others inside the cell. The younger women had their periods. I was there for a month and there were about eight people. There were about eight people per cell, and the young women had their periods. There were also women who had been there for a while. They would borrow [sanitary pads or cloth] from one another. I saw them lend things among themselves, with the people that had been there for a while. The conditions there were awful.*

*There were a lot of people who didn't have sanitary pads and had to starve in order to save their food to later trade it for sanitary pads because they could not get these otherwise. They had to take care of this on their own. Those were women who did not have visitations.*

The fourth way, in which female detainees with no sanitary pads found a substitute, is through the use of toilet paper. In North Korean detention facilities one roll of black toilet paper is provided for 10 to 20 people to use for two days, which is obviously not a sufficient amount. As a result North Korean female detainees suffer from the lack of proper supply of sanitary pads.

*A roll of black paper was provided once every two days. There were more than ten people in a cell. There were seldom less than ten people and more often - more than twenty. The prison guard gave one [roll of
toilet paper] to the prison cell leader every two days. Then the prison cell leader had to regulate the use [of the toilet paper]. Because if there was no toilet paper, you could not use more. They would give me two layers of palm-sized toilet paper. Even this was not enough so people ripped their underwear to use [instead of paper].

They did not give us sanitary pads, but toilet paper. It was not white, but dark paper.

In the prison there was toilet paper. However it was produced in the prison out of tree bark. It was made of wood, so it was not usable. The people who did not have visitations used that. There were holes in it [the paper].

Even though women in detention facilities in North Korea used the abovementioned methods to obtain sanitary pads, they still experienced a lot of restrictions and difficulties in the use of sanitary pads.

The results of NKDB study reveal that although some female detainees manage to obtain sanitary pads, these are still insufficient as women are not allowed to keep all of their pads or often use them to obtain more food. One of the women interviewed by NKDB revealed that the Ministry of State Security officials managed all the sanitary pads brought by female detainees and that female detainees had to report to MSS officials their menstrual period in order to receive and use sanitary pads. Another interviewee reported that female prisoners had to give their own gauze pads or disposable sanitary pads when a female officer from the detention facility asks for some. The interviewee further explained that because of the insufficient provision of food in detention facilities, sanitary pads are often exchanged for nutritional powder and as a result

237) NKDB_55_Yanggang Province
238) NKDB_72_Yanggang Province
239) NKDB_49_North Hamgyeong Province
North Korean female prisoners cannot use as much sanitary pads as they actually need.

In the office of the Ministry of State Security, all sanitary pads are collected [by the staff]. Women had to report that they were on their period in order to be given sanitary pads. When they brought in their own sanitary pads, prison guards collected them and gave them back only after women reported that they are menstruating. Prisoners have to bring their own sanitary pads. There was nothing provided. Prison guards took them and kept them, managed the pads. Let's say [for example] if I am on my period, I have to report this to the prison guards. "Prisoner number XX is having her period, please provide sanitary pads." Then they give you sanitary pads. Women wash the sanitary pads and use them again.241)

There were some women whose families had sent them disposable sanitary pads, but they could not use them. They sell all of the pads. Female guards ask [for pads] too. There are many female guards. If the guards ask me for pads I have to give all of them, even though I wanted to use them I couldn't. I traded my sanitary pad for [nutritional] powder, I exchanged it for 3kg of powder. I ate some of the powder and sold the rest. I used disposable sanitary pads since then. Other prisoners such as the leader of visitations or the leaders of prison cells also used disposable sanitary pads, because they receive such pads as a bribe. Although ordinary prisoners brought in [sanitary pads], they did not use them for themselves, but traded them. These prisoners used cloth pads.242)

Even though women in North Korean detention facilities sometimes managed to obtain sanitary pads, their use was still quite difficult because of issues

240) Corn powder used as a nutritional supplement
241) NKDB_25_Yanggang Province
242) NKDB_49_North Hamgyeong Province
associated with the handling of sanitary pads after their use. The types of sanitary pads used by female detainees in North Korea are gauze sanitary pads, disposable sanitary pads, sanitary pads made of clothing, with gauze pads being the most often used ones. Unlike disposable pads, gauze pads can be reused after washing. Hence, many female detainees use this kind of absorbent since it does not pose a serious financial burden to them. However, the disadvantage of gauze sanitary pads is that it is mandatory to wash them promptly after use to prevent odor and staining. Because of the inferior living conditions as well as the strict regulations in detention facilities, there are no places to wash the gauze sanitary pads, no soap, nor space to dry them. Therefore although women may have gauze sanitary pads, they use them in an unsanitary way as proper washing and drying are virtually impossible inside the detention facilities in North Korea.

Supplies to wash sanitary pads such as soap are not provided by the detention facilities. Such items can only be obtained through visitations. There are cases in which women can wash their sanitary pads at the toilet inside their prison cell by using soap that they got by visiting family members. Additionally, some of the detention facilities prohibit washing of the prisoners’ clothes so women are forced to wash their sanitary pads in secret.

When you are in prison, you cannot wash your clothes. You cannot even wash yourself. You just have to suffer. I ate rice in the prison in China but when I moved to [the detention facility in] North Korea I thought they are giving us pigwash. I really could not eat.\footnote{NKDB_24_North Hamgyeong Province}

When it comes to the process of drying washed sanitary pads, female detainees experienced great difficulties due to the inadequate detention facilities. One interviewee revealed that there were people who put the washed sanitary pads

\footnote{NKDB_24_North Hamgyeong Province}
pads on their stomach to dry, because there was no other place to dry them properly. Another North Korean woman reported that since there was no sunshine in the prison cell the washed sanitary pads did not dry up even after several days so she used them in a humid state, not entirely dried up.

[Sanitary pads] could not dry. There were women who put the thin gauze on their stomachs. Otherwise, women were sitting and shaking the wet cloths. People cannot dry them. There was no where to dry [the pads]. [...] In the cell, there was a partition and the toilet was there. There was a drain on the floor. This is where people washed themselves. They all had soap because they got some from visitations.244)

There was a restroom. In the morning, we had time to wash our faces. It was prohibited to make noise with the water while washing yourself. People tried to wash each other. There was no place to dry. Our cell was dark. There was no electricity. There were metal bars at the front. There was no sunshine. There was just a brick-sized hole from which some sunlight came in and an iron gate. The place that was meant to be the restroom and the washroom had a door sill. There was a small door sill. We put [the washed pads] anywhere that was suitable [for drying]. Then we dried them for several days but they were still squishy.245)

Furthermore, female detainees in North Korea experience inconvenience when drying their sanitary pads not only because of the inadequate facilities but also because of the abuse language and improper treatment by supervisors in the detention facilities. One participant in NKDB’s study revealed that she had no choice but to dry her sanitary pads secretly under a blanket after the supervisor hurled abuse at the female detainees upon seeing their washed sanitary pads being hung in the cell. Another interviewee mentioned an incident in which a

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244) NKDB_49_North Hamgyeong Province  
245) NKDB_86_North Hamgyeong Province
female prisoner was waving her sanitary pad in order to dry it faster but the supervisor saw her and threw her pad in the stove heater. Through the analysis of these cases, it becomes evident that women in North Korean detention facilities suffer a lot of difficulties when trying to follow proper hygienic practices in the handling of sanitary pads.

I used cloth sanitary pads that my family had sent. Each cell had one restroom. There was a drain and there women could wash themselves. Everyone had soap [from home]. We could not hang [the sanitary pads] to dry. Because [the supervisors] cussed when they saw this. So we squeezed the water out and put [the pads] under a blanket. When you put [the pads] under a blanket and sit on it, the blanket soaked up all the water. That's why we did it that way.246)

The young women had their periods, but there was no place to dry [their sanitary pads]. In the prison there were bars but not a single clothesline. Although they had to wash and dry the cloth pads after using them, because there was no other way to dry them the women kept on shaking the wet cloths. If you do that the pads dry out. If we get caught doing that, the prison guards told us to stand up and bring [the sanitary pad]. When we went out [of the cell], [the prison guards] put [the sanitary pads] in the stove heater. They did not burn it everyday, but only on the days when they were in a good mood. Even in the freezing winter, we suffered like hell. So [the guards] put the pads [in the stove heater]. Then the young women cried. They cried because they were so angry. We told [the guards] not to put [their sanitary pads in the fire] but to give them back to those women.247)

Some of the interviewees who were imprisoned in detention facilities in North Korea shared that having their menstruation in detention was bothersome and

246) NKDB_21_North Hamgyeong Province
247) NKDB_25_Yanggang Province
they actually preferred the absence of menstruation because it was difficult to tend to one's hygiene. NKDB's research points to the fact that female prisoners in North Korea show a tendency to prefer not to have their menstruation since they suffered a lot of difficulties associated with it.

It's very annoying to have your period. There were ten women using cloth as sanitary pads. There were also some women whose family had sent disposable sanitary pads, yet they could not use these themselves. Those women sold all of [the sanitary pads] inside the detention facility. Guards asked [for sanitary pads] too. There were many female guards.248)

It [my period] stopped for two months. Women preferred not having their periods.249)

3) Conditions of Prison Life for Menstruating Women

In order to study in detail the living conditions of menstruating women in North Korean detention facilities, NKDB interviewed women about sanitation in detention, their labor task and availability of rest, as well as treatment of menstruation-related disorders. The obtained results are explained in detail in the next paragraphs.

First, according to the responses of interviewees regarding the sanitary conditions in detention facilities, there is a restriction on the use of restroom during women's menstrual period, because it is necessary to receive permission to use the restroom in the prison cell. In addition to this, when allowed to wash themselves, the personal circumstances of detainees are not taken into consideration - they are supposed to wash themselves very quickly or at a predetermined time, and they are supposed to do this together once a week. It is revealed that female detainees are

248) NKDB_49_North Hamgyeong Province
249) NKDB_97_South Hamgyeong Province
not able to wash themselves freely during their menstruation.

There are no such things as taking a shower or using restroom often. You have to ask to go to restroom. Women who are menstruating cannot use the restroom more often. If they ask they can go. Even for people charged with political crimes there were no restrictions if they paid a bribe.250)

They gave us 15 minutes to do exercise. Then you can ask whether you can use a restroom. If you say "I have to wash something," [the guards would reply] "hey bitch get washed quickly." They beat us in order to move and wash quicker.251)

In the prison, there is one day per week when we can wash ourselves together in a group. If my [prison cell] unit has a washing day, we wash in the evening all together. We were about 50 people. Among those there were also women who were menstruating. We were urged to wash ourselves. We had to do it because we did not know when the next bath day would come.252)

Second, interviewees who spent time in detention facilities state that when they were on their period it was not possible to skip labor tasks and they have to perform work of the same intensity as other detainees. It is known that due to their difficult financial situation detention facilities have to secure their own food supply and as a result are imposing intensive forced labor on detainees. NKDB's research reveals that under these circumstances, women in North Korean detention facilities are mobilized to perform forced labor with absolutely no consideration of their menstrual period and even when they experience heavy menstrual flow.

250) NKDB_33_South Hamgyeong Province
251) NKDB_28_Yanggang Province
252) NKDB_49_North Hamgyeong Province
You cannot skip the forced labor. You have to work even though you bleed a lot.²⁵³)

There was nothing [no special treatment] because you were on your period. There are people who have high fever or other symptoms that can be seen. In these cases people are not given work and are sent to the hospital. There was no such mercy for the women who had menstrual cramps or a period-related problem.²⁵⁴)

Women on their period are given the same amount of work. Even when you are on your period you have to [work] together with the other people. When we worked at the vegetable farm field you had to dig with the other people. When we unloaded wood we did it together. We went out and worked the whole day.²⁵⁵)

Women who were on their period were not given special rest time or anything like that. We all worked the same amount.²⁵⁶)

Third, interviewees' testimonies revealed that women in North Korean detention facilities could not receive treatment for health issues related to menstruation such as period cramps and others. Moreover, women's suffering during one's menstruation is considered as natural and if a woman complains about her pain, she has to listen to insults. It can be seen that North Korean female detainees suffer not only physically but also physiologically during their menstrual period.

No. Why would they treat you for back pain caused by your period? They think this [the pain] is something natural.²⁵⁷)

²⁵³) NKDB_77_North Hamgyeong Province
²⁵⁴) NKDB_86_North Hamgyeong Province
²⁵⁵) NKDB_6_South Hamgyeong Province
²⁵⁶) NKDB_37_North Hamgyeong Province
²⁵⁷) NKDB_6_South Hamgyeong Province
There is no treatment [provided] at all. They just cursed at us that we are not able to handle something coming from our bottom. You cannot even dream about having treatment.\textsuperscript{258)}

One of the interviewees in this study reported that if women complained of period pain and were unable to do work they were physically assaulted because the guards thought that they are just trying to find an excuse to skip work. This shows that female prisoners have no other choice but to put up with strong pain and other problems they experience during their menstruation.

\textit{I have not seen anyone being let off [because of their period] We had to do the same as the others. If you complain that you're in pain they'll beat you more. They said that [you are complaining because] you don't want to work. There was no such thing as rest time.}\textsuperscript{259)}

2. Menstrual Health in the North Korean Military

According to the Ministry of National Defense's "2016 Defense White Paper" there are 1.28 million soldiers in the North Korean People's Army (KPA),\textsuperscript{260)} approximately one third of whom are women\textsuperscript{261)}.

In order to investigate the state of menstrual health of North Korean female soldiers NKDB analysed the testimonies of women who have served in the KPA. From the 100 North Korean female defectors interviewed in this study there are 8 women who have served in the military in North Korea.

The eight women, who served in the KPA, were asked if they had their

\textsuperscript{258)} NKDB\_77\_North Hamgyeong Province
\textsuperscript{259)} NKDB\_97\_South Hamgyeong Province
period during their military service. One interviewee indicated that she experienced amenorrhea for a year during her recruit training but her menstruation resumed once she took medicine.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
<th>Share(%)</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>87.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Provided</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>8</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
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</tbody>
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Seven out of 8 interviewees responded that they were provided sanitary pads during their military service. One North Korean woman, who served in the military in the 2000s, stated that she was not provided with sanitary pads because at that time the female deputy officer leaders embezzled the sanitary pads that were designated for female soldiers.

The deputy officer leaders did not give us any supplies. They traded them and took everything for themselves. We were supposed to receive sanitary pads but the female soldiers who got ones sold them all.\(^{262}\)

Upon analysing the testimonies of the interviewees, who indicated that they received sanitary pads during their service in the military, it is evident that women who served in the military in the 1980s were supplied with gauze cloth to use as sanitary pads, whereas those who served in the 2000s were provided every month with 10 to 20 disposable sanitary pads from the brand "Daedonggang".

They gave gauze cloth and made us use it as sanitary pads. They gave us [gauze] two times per year, in April and October, once in the spring

\(^{262}\) NKDB_7_Yanggang Province
and once in the fall. It was enough. You could make about 6 or 10 [sanitary pads] with it.263)

They gave 'Daedonggang' [sanitary pads]. They gave them once a month. We got one pack per person, with 10 sanitary pads in each pack. There was not an instance in which I didn't get [sanitary pads].264)

NKDB collected testimonies revealing that female soldiers in the KPA who need to take a rest during their menstrual period are supposed to notify others by changing the position of the five-pointed star or other insignia placed on their military cap. An attempt was made through this research to determine whether in reality it is possible for North Korean female soldiers to take a rest during trainings and work assignments when they are on their period. Part of the women revealed that if they reported their condition in advance it was possible not to join training and take a rest during menstruation. One former KPA female soldier stated that it was not possible to miss other training, but one could be exempted only from the night marches done for an extended amount of hours.

There was a saying that if you changed the position of the mark on the military cap, it means that you are on your period, but that is just what I heard. I have never done that.265)

In the military when a female soldier has a severe period pain or needs to take a rest, then she adjusts the five-pointed star on her cap. I just heard that women do things like that.266)

If you don't say anything, you are not given [any rest], if you don't say anything and you can participate [in the training]. This is how it is. I

263) NKDB_55_Yanggang Province
264) NKDB_15_North Hwanghae Province
265) NKDB_15_North Hwanghae Province
266) NKDB_64_North Hamgyeong Province

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did not say anything. I knew some female soldiers said that they were on their period and didn't do the training. There are women whose periods are really tough. They are allowed to take a rest. This happens if you say that you are on your period. I was in a company (squadron) consisting of female soldiers. There were no disadvantages for us [because of menstruation]. There was no such thing. They let us rest for a day.267)

There were some women who were in a lot of pain during their period. They could take some rest. The women who were almost dying and bending over from their period pains were told to take a rest. If they had no special [symptoms] they just worked. The women who took a rest were not reprimanded.268)

So there was no exemptions from training, but [menstruating] women did not do the night marches. Because they would not be able to walk. They did not make them do it. They made the women who couldn't run come three steps forward from the line. Then the women who were on their period stood in front of the line. They did not ask them what hurt. Women used sanitary pads and when they walked the pad would move on the side so women could not walk for a long time. We had to walk 10 ri269). We could not skip other training. We did not even think about it.270)

267) NKDB_13_Yanggang Province
268) NKDB_15_North Hwanghae Province
269) Approximately 4 km (1 ri = 0.393 km)
270) NKDB_55_Yanggang Province
VI. Need of Assistance to Vulnerable Groups in North Korea
VI. Need of Assistance to Vulnerable Groups in North Korea

1. Assistance Needed in Relation to Menstruation

The interviewees in NKDB's study indicated that while in North Korea they did not receive any assistance associated with the provision of feminine hygiene products such as sanitary pads and toilet paper, provision of menstrual leave, rest and sanitary facilities, as well as support related to improving their awareness of menstruation.

<Table 33> Receipt of Support Related to Menstruation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
<th>Share (%)</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The North Korean women interviewed in this study indicated disposable sanitary pads as the most necessary item when it comes to support needed for menstruation. In some areas of North Korea, women who are actively involved in trading at the markets and smuggling often use disposable sanitary pads. However in most cases North Korean women use gauze sanitary pads. The participants in the study the answered that the most urgent support needed by women in North Korea are disposable sanitary pads. This is mostly prompted by the fact that the use of gauze sanitary pads causes North Korean women a lot of difficulty in traveling and conducting daily activities since upon changing their sanitary pads women have to carry the used ones with them until they are able to wash and dry them.
We do not need anything else [just disposable sanitary pads]. [...] Women who do not have disposable sanitary pads carry around a plastic bag and cloth sanitary pads. They carry them around and change them in public restrooms, then wrap them in a plastic bag because they can't throw them away after use. That is so inconvenient. It smells, you have to think about it. I think sanitary pads are most important.271)

Having your period is the most inconvenient thing. Especially if you are working. I wish there were disposable sanitary pads like the ones in South Korea. I think that is the most urgent priority. Changing them [the cloth sanitary pads] and then folding them up into my pocket to wash later, it is extremely inconvenient.272)

Many North Korean women interviewed in this study indicated that another area of need is improvement of the restroom facilities. They specifically pointed out to the difficulties caused by the lack of toilet paper and sinks inside the restrooms, which prevented them from properly tending to their hygiene during their menstrual period.

There is no place to wash your hands inside the restroom. Many places don't have toilet paper, either. The toilet paper we use is not the kind of toilet paper we have here [in South Korea], but used notebooks. The notebooks that were all written up by children. Many people use that kind of paper as toilet paper. There are lots of people who do not even have paper like that. [...] They sell used notebooks as scrap paper. People buy that as toilet paper and cut it up with scissors. If the paper is big, they cut it into fourths, and then use it as toilet paper. However at times even that is not available and when they go to public outhouses people use straw or bean leaves to wipe their butts. They

271) NKDB_7_Yanggang Province
272) NKDB_29_Yanggang Province
also use cloth and some people who don't even have that would not have been able to clean up at all. You can't even see toilet paper, there's no such thing. There is no clean toilet paper.273)

The most urgent [thing that needs improving], is probably the hygiene culture. [Restrooms] are always dirty. It would be nice if the public restrooms were clean. Even if there is no toilet paper, you would be able to use the public restroom if it was clean. I mean, there are restrooms without doors, try to imagine it! If you are in a hurry, you would go in even if there was no door. It would also be nice to have toilet paper. I couldn't even image that there is toilet paper [in restrooms in North Korea]. We always used to carry our own toilet paper there [in North Korea]. I am a woman so I used to carry a handkerchief and mirror in the pocket of my pants all the time. I also carried toilet paper, one or two sheets.274)

North Korean women interviewed by NKDB stated that they need the freedom to use adequate leave of absence or rest when they suffer from menstrual cramps or menstruation-related disorders during their periods. Women revealed that they had desperately needed rest and leave of absence during their menstruation since they were not feeling well because of their periods but despite this they could not be absent from work or events.

When I had my period it hurt really bad. I was not in a state in which I could go to work, but if there was an event at my workplace, they do not care [if a person is not well]. Your period cannot be used as an excuse not to go to work or attend an event. Even if you are sick it is treated as an absence. There's no consideration shown for menstruation.275)

273) NKDB_18_Yanggang Province
274) NKDB_24_North Hangyeong Province
275) NKDB_76_Yanggang Province
It would have been nice if I could have menstrual leave. It was hard to even go out because of my period cramps. It is best to be able to rest at home.276) Furthermore the interviewees in NKDB's study insisted that not only North Korean women, but all North Korean citizens need education on menstruation in order to have a better understanding and perception of it. The women, who answered that such education is necessary, elaborated that North Korean women had difficulty in maintaining a social life due to the negative perception towards menstruation. They were ashamed of their periods and tried to hide them. Moreover, some female students do not receive menstruation-related education and are not able to talk freely about menstruation in public, so at the time of their first period they do not have information about menstruation or how to buy or use sanitary pads even. As a result there are cases in which after getting their first period female students assume that they have a health problem or they experience inconveniences because they do not know how to tend to their female hygiene while menstruating.

I got my first period when I was in class and as I did not know what it was I ran home. I was never taught about menstruation so I did not know. I was in class and it happened, so I did not know what it was and just thought that something was wrong, so I ran home. My mother was not home so I asked my grandmother and she told me. She said that it was an illness women had.277)

I had my first period when I was in sixth grade. I learned about it in school but I did not understand it so I just vaguely thought that something like that existed. But then one day I went to the restroom and [my underwear] was stained with blood. I remember that I thought

276) NKDB_8_North Hamgyeong Province
277) NKDB_57_North Hamgyeong Province
I had a deadly disease and told my mother as I was crying. I told her that there was a lot of blood on my underwear, and that I keep on bleeding. Then she got some cotton cloth and went to the woman that lived next door because she knew how to use a sewing machine, and she made me some cloth [sanitary pads]. I asked my mother what to do with it, and she explained to me. I kept asking if I was going to die, and if I should go to the hospital, and she just said that this happens to all women.278)

Of course it would be better to educate people. We think that being on our period is a shameful thing and try to hide it in public and within our homes as well. As a woman I did the same but I think we need to be able to be more open about this and not think of it as shameful but freely talk about it. I don't think we should have to try so hard to hide having periods.279)

I wish they gave that kind of education in North Korea from a young age. Everyone knows about such things here [in South Korea]. Both men and women know about periods. I wish that there is such education [in North Korea].280)

There needs to be improvement in perception. Education is necessary. There are girls that don't even know that you can buy sanitary pads.281)

I think there needs to be respect towards women first. I think that does not exist [in North Korea]. Women are not respected at all and that's not good. I wish things were easier for women. I think that if North Korean society becomes a bit more concerned about women and if women get educated on that subject, they would be able to respect and

278) NKDB_15_North Hwanghae Province
279) NKDB_75_North Hamgyeong Province
280) NKDB_49_North Hamgyeong Province
281) NKDB_82_Pyongyang
take care of their bodies.\textsuperscript{282)}

2. Recipients in Most Need of Support Regarding Menstruation

North Korean women who participated in NKDB's study were asked which groups are most in need of receiving support. They indicated that students and women who have great financial difficulties should be prioritized.

Students need education and support because they suffer difficulties in dealing with their periods due to the lack of information on menstruation and sanitary pads.

\textit{The first [people to get assistance] should be the children having their first periods. They do not have any idea about menstruation, not even the basic concept of it.}\textsuperscript{283)}

\textit{I just wish that [sanitary pads] would be provided monthly to North Korean women. Especially highschool students. Students should be able to stay clean, it is pitiful to see them have to wash and reuse their sanitary pads. It would be nice if things were easier for young people.}\textsuperscript{284)}

\textit{I wish there was support for the students at the schools because it is embarrassing for them when they get their periods while they are in class.}\textsuperscript{285)}

NKDB's research revealed that North Korean women who have financial difficulties do not even have gauze sanitary pads and are forced to cut up old clothes to use as a temporary solution. There are cases in which women don't even wash the old clothes beforehand and just turn them into sanitary pads,

\textsuperscript{282)} NKDB 99_North Hamgyeong Province
\textsuperscript{283)} NKDB_90_North Hamgyeong Province
\textsuperscript{284)} NKDB_72_Yanggang Province
\textsuperscript{285)} NKDB_62_Yanggang Province

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which means that they are not sanitized and as a result are unhygienic. That is why North Korean women experiencing financial hardship need support in the form of sanitary pads in order to maintain their health.

Poor people, who don't have money to buy sanitary pads as they are expensive, use cloth that is not hygienic.\(^{286}\)

I don't know about the people who are well off in North Korea, but the poor rip their clothes to use [as sanitary pads], and they do not wash or dry the clothes before that. I think poor people should get some help. Normally, people with average means buy sanitary pads. But people who do not have money don't even have rice so they eat corn mixed with rice. They rip their clothes to use [them as sanitary pads] and then throw them away which is very unhygienic. There are a lot of pieces of cloth on the streets in North Korea. They are not even clean. There are no sanitary pads, and it is so hard to change your pads. People who can not afford sanitary pads would rip their clothes up and use it. If the clothes were clean it would have been okay, but it was not really like that.\(^{287}\)

3. **Recommendations for Improvement of the State of Menstrual Health of North Korean Women**

1) **Recommendations to the North Korean State**

According to the suggestions that interviewees themselves gave on improvements that need to be made, in order to achieve actual results, genuine efforts must be made by the DPRK state. The North Korean regime stipulates in Article 20 of its Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Women

\(^{286}\) NKDB_8_North Hamgyeong Province  
\(^{287}\) NKDB_22_Yanggang Province
that "educational organs shall provide education that accommodates the physical attributes of female students and facilities for females, and protect and promote the health of female students". However, in reality, the interviewees in NKDB's study did not receive adequate menstrual education nor had access to facilities that were tailored to the needs of women. Therefore the North Korean authorities have to ensure the actual implementation of the Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Women and provide education regarding the physical changes young women go through so that young North Korean women do not experience fear when they have their first periods. Additionally the state should also ensure access to facilities for rest needed by women during their menstruation.

Furthermore, the North Korean Ministry of Public Health, which has control over public health, sanitation, and disinfection in the country, needs to strengthen inspections on relevant facilities so diseases caused by the use of unsanitary facilities can be prevented and proper treatment for menstruation-related diseases can be provided.

2) Recommendations to South Korean and Foreign Humanitarian Aid Agencies

The North Korean women interviewed in this study were asked to indicate what type of support they consider as most necessary when it comes to menstruation. Their answers coupled with the information collected by NKDB of the state of menstrual health of women in North Korea reveal that disposable sanitary pads are the item of assistance most needed by North Korean women. As mentioned in the previous chapters, all 64 interviewees who used disposable sanitary pads were not able to use them everyday for financial reasons. Consequently, when the interviewees went to work or to school they had to use gauze sanitary pads for long hours without being able to change them, which
caused the North Korean women discomfort in everyday life as well as health issues. That is why disposable sanitary pads are urgently needed as part of humanitarian assistance to North Korea.

In addition to this interviewees also experienced a lot of difficulties regarding their menstruation as well as negative effect on their health because of the dire hygiene conditions of the sanitary facilities. This was exacerbated by the inadequate water supply systems, the complete lack or insufficient number of sinks in restrooms. Such conditions made it very difficult for North Korean women to wash their hands or clothes after handling their feminine hygiene products. Also, the absence of toilet paper or soap in the restrooms made it difficult for the women to tend to their hygiene even if there was proper water supply. Providing adequate plumbing is a long-term goal but in the mean time as a simpler temporary solution provision of wet wipes and toilet paper (in addition to disposable sanitary pads) would be a good supplement to the existing humanitarian aid.

North Korean women also experienced difficulties regarding their menstrual period because of anxiety caused by the lack of adequate information and awareness about menstruation. Interviewees who did not know exactly what menstruation was and how to deal with it, started their first menstruation in panic and continued to feel nervous about people finding out that they were on their period. As a result, to inform North Korean women on the significance and meaning of menstruation and to relieve their psychological anxiety, it is necessary to provide them with adequate education on the exact meaning of menstruation, as well as on the methods of maintaining one's personal hygiene during menstruation.

The results of the research show that North Korean women's level of menstrual health is quite inadequate. In order to resolve this issue humanitarian agencies, both in South Korea and abroad, need to design comprehensive plan for support when it comes to aid related to menstruation. Some items that would
be helpful for improving the menstrual health of North Korean women are period kits which contain basic items such as disposable sanitary pads, wet wipes or toilet paper, and informational leaflets on menstruation aiming to increase the North Korean citizens’ awareness. Through such support North Korean women would be better prepared and equipped to take care of their personal hygiene during menstruation and this should help the improvement of their right to physical and mental health.
Ⅶ. Conclusion
VII. Conclusion

The lack of access to menstruation-related hygiene products due to financial constraints is referred to as 'Period Poverty'. Period poverty is a term that is not only limited to insufficient feminine hygiene products, but also lack of access to information on menstruation. This is a phenomenon that is also observed in vulnerable social groups in developed countries, which means that women all around the world experience period poverty. North Korea is not an exception, many women in North Korea suffer from not having access to adequate menstrual education and feminine hygiene products.

According to the analysis of the interviewees' access to menstrual education, provider of the education and educational content it becomes evident that the North Korean women in NKDB's study in general had not been given information or education on menstruation before their first period. Moreover even after their first period, the women did not know how to manage their feminine hygiene due to the lack of menstrual education. Insufficient information and education was the reason why interviewees expressed fear, discomfort, and confusion after they had their first period. The exception of this observation were a few North Korean women who had worked in the fields of public health or medicine and had adequate understanding of the subject because of the menstrual education they received in relation to their major or occupation. As a result, North Korean women do not have adequate knowledge on menstruation, which leads them to having negative attitude that makes them think that periods are something to be ashamed of or something that needs to be hidden.

The participants in this study received explanation or education on menstruation mainly by their teachers or mothers over a short period of time in a brief manner. The reason for this appears to be the reality in which despite

the importance of adequate menstrual education to a woman's physical and mental health, making a living was considered a priority for North Korean women. Some of the interviewees who were ignorant about menstruation because they were too busy making ends meet even called themselves "pitiful women".

In order to get a better understanding of the feminine hygiene products used in North Korea, NKDB asked the interviewees questions about the types of absorbents they used, how often they changed them, and how the women managed their hygiene. The women who used cloth sanitary pads made up 56.3% of all participants, those who used disposable sanitary pads - 38.3% and the ones who use paper - 5.4%. Cloth sanitary pads were used most frequently because they could be reused after washing, making them the most cost-effective choice.

Most of the interviewees used gauze sanitary pads, but some resorted to bedding or old clothes to make their pads due to the financial burden of the cost of gauze. Although cloth sanitary pads were cost-effective because they could be reused, interviewees experienced difficulties when using them because the fabric did not properly absorb menstrual blood, their threads became loose too quickly, and it was difficult to properly wash and dry them.

Sixty-four interviewees who used disposable sanitary pads mainly bought them at the market, private house stalls, and stores for items of first necessity. Furthermore the disposable pads distributed in the country were produced in both China and North Korea. The North Korean brands mainly used by North Korean women were 'Daedonggang', 'Milhwaburi', and 'Jangmi'. The price of disposable sanitary pads ranged from 500 KPW to 11,000 KPW, and most interviewees bought ones that cost on average 3,000 KPW to 5,000 KPW. The majority of the participants in NKDB's study (70.3%) indicated that they changed their pads more than three times a day. However, some interviewees answered that they only used disposable sanitary pads when they were going out for long periods of time because they were too expensive.

Not only feminine hygiene products but also clean sanitary facilities are
important for maintaining of physical and mental stability of women. However, based on the testimonies of the interviewees on the conditions of restrooms and water quality in North Korea, it is seen that women suffered greatly during their menstruation because of the unhygienic environment. The lack of private and public restrooms prevented menstruating women from using such facilities when they needed to. Moreover, the inadequate state of the facilities inside public outhouses was also a factor that made it difficult for women on their period to use the restrooms. North Korean public outhouses are dug deep in the ground and covered with wooden panels or concrete with a 'hole in the center'. The public outhouses give off foul odor, and because the wooden doors are sometimes stolen to be used as firewood, interviewees had difficulty using the restrooms during their menstruation because of the lack of privacy. Furthermore, due to the inadequate water supply in most cases there were no sinks in North Korean restrooms. As a result interviewees were not able to wash their hands after using the toilet or were also not able to wash the menstrual blood on their clothes or cloth sanitary pads.

To understand the public health and welfare conditions in North Korea related to menstruation, interviewees were asked about the menstrual disorders they had experienced. Fifty-seven women experienced menstrual cramps, followed by irregular menstrual cycles - 42 people, anemia - 31 people, heavy menstrual bleeding - 27 people, absent menstruation and menstrual depression - 19 people each, irregular flow and duration of the cycle - 18 people, and atypical menstrual bleeding - 12 people. However, interviewees were not able to receive adequate treatment or consultations at medical facilities for such disorders. Furthermore, when the participants in this study were asked if it was possible for them to use vacation, to leave work early, to have some rest break, or to be absent from school or work due to their menstruation, 81% answered that it was not possible, which indicates that North Korean women are not guaranteed minimal amounts of rest during their period.
NKDB's study revealed that female prisoners in North Korean detention facilities have difficulties during menstruation as well. Among the 34 interviewees that had experienced detention, 13 suffered from amenorrhea while being incarcerated. The main reasons for their amenorrhea were malnutrition due to lack of food provided by detention facilities and extreme levels of stress. Moreover, the women subject of this research, who had their periods during incarceration were not provided with sanitary pads, so they had to get their own pads with the help of family visitations or bartering. Interviewees also had a hard time maintaining their hygiene when they were menstruating in detention facilities because restroom use was limited and they could not freely wash themselves. Furthermore, menstruating female prisoners were subject to the same level of physical labor as the rest of the detainees and received no medical attention for their menstrual disorders. Female detainees could not expect any assistance during their menstrual periods.

According to the testimonies of the eight North Korean women with military experience, generally sanitary pads are provided to female soldiers. However, in some units the sanitary pads that should have been provided to the soldiers were embezzled and eventually not given to the soldiers.

Lastly, when interviewees were asked about menstruation-related assistance needed by women in North Korea, they answered that they needed disposable sanitary pads, improvement in restroom facilities, provision of menstrual leave, and menstrual education. North Korean women need support in the form of disposable sanitary pads because they usually use cloth pads, which are very inconvenient due to the fact that they need to be carried around after use when women are on the road. Improvement of restroom facilities is also important because there is no toilet paper or sinks in North Korean restrooms, which makes it very difficult for menstruating women to tend to their hygiene. Adequate rest and leave for period pain or other menstruation-related disorders is also necessary because interviewees had to go to work or school regardless of
their health condition during menstruation. Furthermore, the most essential support that is necessary is menstrual education for all North Korean citizens. Interviewees were ashamed and had to hide their menstruation because of the negative perception towards periods in North Korea, which caused problems in their social lives. Some women do not know how use or where to buy sanitary pads, and in the case of female students, they mistake their first periods for medical disorders. That is why many interviewees answered that North Korean people need menstrual education so that they can have an adequate understanding and perception towards menstruation.

This report would like to highlight the fact that although the inadequate knowledge and attitude towards menstruation in North Korea psychologically constrict the actual practice and handling of menstruation, North Korean women try very hard to obtain and use sanitary feminine hygiene products. For example, North Korean women do their best, even in not ideal conditions, to keep their sanitary pads hygienic by changing their pads more than three time a day, by washing their cloth sanitary pads in a river or a stream due to the lack of water and electricity supply, and by drying the cloth pads in the sun despite widely-spread negative social perceptions.

This report reveals one more painful aspect of life in North Korea that has remained hidden from people's sight until now. This study was done with the participation of women who were so busy making a living in North Korea only to barely feed themselves that they had to forget about the inconveniences of menstruation, and even were only able to learn the word 'menstrual cramps' for the first time in South Korea. Menstruation is a significant part of women's everyday lives and their health. Many North Korean women still feel anxiety and mental instability because of the lack of menstrual education, and suffer problems that arise from using cloth sanitary pads made of gauze or old clothes since they are not able to afford the use of other products. NKDB hopes that this report will raise awareness on the conditions of North Korean women's
menstrual health and will also increase the interest in the daily lives of North Korean women. Through the findings of this report NKDB would like to strongly urge for more support and active effort aimed at improving the state of menstrual health of North Korean women.
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Trends in Economic Activities of North Korean Defectors (Korean)

2006 북한이탈주민 경제활동 동향 - 취업,실업,소득 엄홍석, 윤여상, 허선행 2007 5,000원

2007 북한이탈주민 경제활동 동향 - 취업,실업,소득 윤여상, 허선행 2008 5,000원

2008 북한이탈주민 경제활동 동향 - 취업,실업,소득 북한인권정보센터 2009 5,000원

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South Koreans' Perception of North Korean Human Rights (Korean)

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윤여상, 임순희 2014 15,000원

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북한 정치범수용소 완전통제구역 세상밖으로 나오다
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The State of Menstrual Health of North Korean Women

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Cahiers d’observations des droits de l’Homme en Corée du Nord

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Yoon Yeo-sang, Lee Seung-ju

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이승주

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The North Korea outside the North Korean State
Yoon Yeo-sang, Lee Seung Ju
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Choi Sun-young, Yang Jina, Lee Na-kyeong, Song Hanna
2017
$20

군복 입은 수감자
북한군 인권 실태
보고서
김인성, 안현민, 송한나
2018
15,000원
**Introducing NKDB**

The Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB) is dedicated to improving the human rights conditions in North Korea and preparing for transitional justice on the Korean Peninsula. Founded in 2003, NKDB works toward the improvement of North Korean human rights through a variety of activities including research, data collection, and analysis on North Korean human rights through its subdivision North Korean Human Rights Archives (NKHRA). Additionally NKDB aims to achieve prevention and relief of North Korean human right violations, and to provide resettlement support and psychological counseling to North Korean victims of human rights violations.

**History**

- May 2003 Establishment of NKDB
- March 2004 Received authorization as a legal entity
- January 2005 Establishment of NK Social Research and NKDB Resettlement Assistance Headquarters
- June 2007 Establishment of North Korean Human Rights Archives (NKHRA)
- August 2007 Publishing of NKDB's first White Paper on North Korean Human Rights
- March 2012 Establishment of a resettlement support center for returned prisoners of war (POWs) and abductees within NKDB's Resettlement Assistance Headquarters
- 2016 Establishment of Education Center for Korean Integration and North Korean Human Rights Watch Functions
- 2004 - Present Establishment and management of NKDB Unified Human Rights Database

**Main Objectives**

Improving North Korean human rights, ensuring the provision of human rights, preparing for transitional justice
• **Main Activities**

North Korean Human Rights Archives: Research and documentation of cases of human rights violations; analysis of cases and entry into the database, research on the North Korean human rights situation and development of policy recommendations; publishing of reports on North Korean human rights; conducting promotional activities; activities related to transitional justice; research on people who have experience living in North Korea, and on the North Korean society as a whole

**NKDB Resettlement Assistance Headquarters:** Social resettlement support for people with experience living in North Korea; provision of support services to victims of torture and long term prisoners suffering from PTSD

**Education Center for Korean Integration:** capacity building for North Korean specialists, Monthly Briefings on North Korean Human Rights in English, North Korean Human Right Academy, Unification Diplomacy Academy, Psychological Counseling Academy, Unification Social Welfare Academy

**Eight Main North Korean Human Rights Watch Functions:** 1) death penalty in North Korea, 2) North Korean narcotic drugs, 3) atomic, biological and chemical (ABC) weapons-related human rights, 4) overseas North Koreans' human rights, 5) religious freedom in North Korea, 6) Universal Periodic Review (UPR) recommendations and implementation, 7) North Korean detention facilities, 8) human rights in the North Korean military
To our Readers,

NKDB is an organization established in 2003 with the objective to improve North Korean human rights and establish facts, investigate and document cases of human rights abuses, prevent human right violations, and support and protect victims of human rights violations.

NKDB had conducted research on the human rights conditions in the DPRK with 1,166 North Korean defectors in 2017, and as a result has accumulated data on 71,473 cases of human rights violations and 42,981 people involved in them.


Your kind support will be a great assistance to NKDB's work and will allow us to keep shedding light on the human rights conditions of North Korean people. By raising international awareness, pressuring the DPRK regime to adhere to international standards and facilitating the efforts of other human rights organizations, NKDB works towards change in North Korea.

We would like to humbly ask for your support. Anyone who is interested in the human rights of the North Korean people can support us in various ways including volunteering, internship work and financial contributions.
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   Account Number: 109-652375-13-101
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   PayPal accepts donations via major international credit cards or via an easy to use online account that can be linked to your bank account.