

CSPS-Korea Hosts Symposium – “Human Security in the Gray Zone: North Korean Defectors and Their Children”

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On May 26, 2021, at the Incheon Global Campus Auditorium, the Center for Security Policy Studies (CSPS)-Korea hosted its annual Spring Symposium entitled, “Human Security in the Gray Zone: North Korean Defectors and Their Children.” Launched in 2019 as a branch institute of the CSPS of George Mason University’s Arlington, Virginia-based Schar School of Policy and Government, CSPS-Korea serves as a collaborative research platform capable of effectively addressing today’s most pressing security challenges, assessing associated policy implications, and offering viable options as potential solutions. CSPS-Korea’s research activities culminate in the annual Spring Symposium which is convened in collaboration with think tanks, international agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGO). This year, CSPS-Korea teamed with The Human Rights in North Korea (THINK), an NGO that advocates for the human rights of North Korean defectors and their children.

This year’s symposium began with opening remarks by Dr. Robert Matz, Campus Dean of George Mason University Korea. Dean Matz underscored the significance of the connection between CSPS-Arlington and CSPS-Korea in recognizing the value and necessity of transnational dialogue on international security. Dean Matz also highlighted CSPS-Korea’s expanded notion of human security as a transnational problem requiring international cooperation since nations alone are incapable of addressing the security of people put at risk by crossing national borders. Immediately following Dean Matz’s remarks, a congratulatory message from Professor Ellen Laipson, Director of CSPS-Arlington was read aloud. Professor Laipson welcomed attendees to the symposium, thanked Professor Soyoung Kwon for her leadership of CSPS-K, and expressed eagerness to share the insights and results of the symposium with the George Mason community back in the United States. Next, Ms. Kelley Chung, George Mason Korea’s Associate Dean of Admissions, provided welcoming remarks. Ms. Chung included a touching account of her father’s description of Koreans, who, regardless of which side of the 38th Parallel they are born, are all *‘han min jok.’*

Following Ms. Chung’s remarks, a video-recorded welcome was provided by National Assemblyman and North Korean defector, Thae Yong-ho. Assemblyman Thae noted the importance of the timing and appropriateness of the symposium’s topic. He also described the range of human security challenges experienced by North Korean defectors, from fear of being repatriated from China and concern over family members remaining in North Korea to social discrimination experienced by defectors and their children in South Korea. Following Assemblyman Thae’s welcoming remarks, Dr. Soyoung Kwon, Director of CSPS-Korea, delivered the Concept Note Speech. Dr. Kwon introduced the topic of the symposium and described the starting point of the event, a documentary entitled, “Crossing the Border to Heaven – Children who Became Phantoms.” Dr. Kwon then discussed two topics: “The Gray Zone,” a blind spot in human security where responsibility for defectors’ security is lacking, and a vicious cycle of

basic human rights violations continues from one generation to another; and “Human Security,” an emerging and multidisciplinary paradigm for understanding security as it pertains to individuals, human dignity, protection, and empowerment of people. Dr. Kwon then defined the myriad problems experienced by defectors and their children who remain in the “gray zone” of human security, marginalized due to their ambiguous identity. In closing, Dr. Kwon explained key questions in contemporary security studies intended to be addressed during the symposium.

The symposium incorporated three diverse sessions that combined to comprehensively address North Korean defector human security in the “gray zone.” Session I, “The Gray Zone,” featured the above-mentioned documentary screening, focusing on the life of female North Korean defectors and their third country-born children. In Session II, a “talk concert” was presented, entitled “The Story,” which centered on the actual experiences of North Korean defector mothers and children, and was hosted by THINK representative, Ms. Moonkyung Son. In Session III, “The Rights for a Better Life,” Dr. Kwon led a panel discussion that sought to uncover solutions to the challenges faced by North Korean defectors caused by blind spots in human security.

After the Session I documentary, which served as the starting point for the symposium, Ms. Moonkyung Son was joined by Session II “talk concert” panelists for a detailed discussion on the actual experiences of North Korean defector mothers and their children. During the discussion, Dr. Seok Yang Kim, Professor of North Korean Studies at Ewha Women’s University, challenged the international community to take a greater interest in North Korean defector human security issues, such as the policy of forced repatriation of defectors from China back to North Korea. Next, Ms. Okjung Han, a representative from the Namirang Bukirang Volunteer Organization, shared the painful memories of having escaped from North Korea into China and experiencing an unwanted marriage, as well as the birth of a child, before defecting to South Korea 18 years ago at the age of 21. After Ms. Han’s comments, Mr. Cheon Guk Lim, a missionary from the Tongilsomang organization, described the abuse suffered by North Korean women defectors throughout the process of their escape and the hardships incurred due to their prolonged separation from other family members. Last, Ms. Sarah Chun, Vice Principal of the Nehemiah Korea Daum School, stressed the importance of educational support to successfully integrate North Korean defector youth into South Korea’s next generation. Ms. Son closed the “talk concert” session by stressing the importance of long term, rather than short-term international support programs to help defectors. In closing, she expressed encouraging words to students in attendance and thanked the panelists.

Dr. Kwon began Session III by expressing the panel discussion’s intent for finding solutions. Particularly, how the U.N. perspective can help shed light on human security blind spots in order to address the human security problem. Joining Dr. Kwon in the panel discussion were Ambassador Joon Oh, former South Korean Ambassador to the United Nations and current Chair of Save the Children Korea, and Mr. Imesh Pokharel, representative of the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Seoul. Ambassador Oh, who delivered a renowned and touching speech at the U.N. Security Council in 2015, described how the issue of North

Korean human rights has become an international issue. According to Ambassador Oh, the most serious human rights violations are committed by states. The U.N. became aware of North Korea's human rights after the testimonies of defectors became known. In addition to attempting human rights dialogue, since 2003, the U.N. has issued North Korean human rights resolutions. North Korea disregarded the resolutions until 2014, when the Human Rights Council Commission of Inquiry (COI) report was released. This, according to Ambassador Oh, was a game-changer, since the report documented what constituted North Korean crimes against humanity. Mr. Pokharel explained how it is through the North Korean escapees that the international community can learn of political, security, and societal issues about North Korea, including human rights. According to Mr. Pokharel, the success for reunification in the future depends on "...how well the escapee community can adjust in the ROK now." Therefore, it is important for South Korea to demonstrate success at the national and local level to show that reunification is possible. Mr. Pokharel also explained that the U.N. has been providing visibility to the international community on the North Korean human rights issue, as well as advocating to North Korea to decriminalize freedom of movement and lobbying to get China to end forced repatriation. After questions and answers, Dr. Kwon thanked the panelists and closed the session.

THINK representative Ms. Moonkyung Son provided closing comments, wrapping up this year's symposium. The symposium comprehensively addressed the challenges and hardships of North Korean defector women and their children. Sessions I and II focused on problem identification through the first-hand accounts of actual defectors, experiences of representatives from NGOs, and the viewpoints of prominent scholars. In addition to problem identification, the symposium also shed light on human security blind spots and offered viable options moving forward. With problems having been identified in previous sessions, Session III brought the issue out onto the global stage for discussion and insights from an international perspective. Together, the sessions fully explored the problem, and then offered several options to consider toward resolving the issue of human security in the "gray zone."