

Investing in the North Korean People: Broadening Access to Information in North Korea

October 8, 2025 | Stimson Center, Washington, DC

Testimony of Gyuri Kang

You were never supposed to know my name, see my face, or hear my story. Because I was one of 26 million lives hidden inside North Korea.

I was born in the capital, Pyongyang, in 2001. The first time the North Korean government decided my future without my consent, I was only a child. My family was exiled to a rural fishing village in South Hamgyong Province. We were being punished because my grandmother believed in religion.

At school, we were taught that “*we live in the most dignified nation in the world,*” but outside those walls, people were collapsing from hunger in the streets. Careless words overheard by a neighbor could turn into a knock at the door in the middle of the night.

This is how the North Korean government maintains control over people. By convincing you that survival depends on submission.

I returned to Pyongyang as an adult. I majored in table tennis at Pyongyang University of Physical Education and imagined myself making a new life, built on talent and hard work. But reality was nothing like what I had dreamed.

I came to understand a deep, painful truth: In the end, everything was determined by how well you obeyed, not how hard you worked. I wanted to help support my mother and aunt, so I moved to the coast to try and build a life of my own. My mother used all of her hard-earned life savings to buy me a small wooden fishing boat so I could start a business harvesting clams.

The boat was more than a way to make a living. It was a daily reminder of her sacrifice, and the depth of their love and trust in me.

But the harder I worked, the more government officials came to me demanding baskets of clams and money. Every night I agonized over how to protect my people and keep my business going, and how I should respond.

To escape my reality, at night I secretly watched South Korean TV shows on a television that was smuggled in from China. This turned my world upside down.

Two people I knew were executed for watching and sharing foreign media. But no matter how much they tried to repress us, frustrated young people like me continued watching forbidden content as a way to forget reality.

Foreign media has quietly found its way into North Korea for decades. Many defectors like me, can remember the exact episode of a TV show, the specific South Korean song, or even the traffic reported that planted the first seeds of doubt.

And it makes you wonder: *if life is so different out there, why does it have to be this way here?*

The thing about information is once you know, you cannot unknow it. Now that I had seen the truth, I could never go back to the person I was before.

Escaping North Korea cannot be explained by the simple word “leaving.” This was especially true for me because I escaped together with my mom and aunt.

On the night we left, we climbed into my boat and pushed off into the dark water. I gripped the rudder and let the current carry us south, carefully navigating around the guard posts and patrol boats who were on the water looking for people like us.

Arrest. Endless investigations. Humiliation. Public trials. Political prison camp.

Suddenly, a patrol ship appeared. Its lights stabbed the water, blinding us, and started coming closer and closer.

It was coming for us.

We had agreed that if capture became inevitable, we would rather take our own lives. But I refused to give in.

Suddenly, the patrol boat stopped and turned back around. We had reached the maritime border. And as the sun rose, we saw the outline of land. A South Korean fisherman steered his boat toward us and said, *“Welcome. You are safe now.”*

It’s been almost two years since we arrived in South Korea. That day, my mother, my aunt and I took turns showering, laughing, and saying to each other, *“So this is what a human life feels like.”*

For the first time in my life, I could choose my studies, my job, my clothes, my hobbies even the way I spoke—for myself.

I have been studying hard and was recently accepted into Ewha University. I have also been active in North Korean human rights activism, and I even started a YouTube channel to show the world what it looks like to start a new life in South Korea.

Hope is dangerous for the North Korean government. But the moment you realize life could be different, hope begins to take root. And once hope exists, change is no longer unimaginable.

My dream is that someday North Korea will be a place where young people choose their own paths, where no one is punished for their words, and where every person lives as the true owner of their life.

While so much of North Korea’s reality is dark, change is already happening. And what sparks that change is information.

That’s why I speak out. If I don’t tell my story, who will tell it for me?

Right now, in North Korea, there is someone just like me—sitting in a dark room, secretly watching a South Korean broadcast, quietly wondering: *Could I also live like that?*

The future of North Korea is not yet written. But every story told, every life rescued, and every piece of information that crosses the border, that future draws closer.

Freedom is not given, but it is something we *can* achieve. With your support, we can write a future where **all** North Korean people are free.

Thank you.