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*Exporting labour, importing risk:
The paradox of the North Korean Overseas Labour
Programme*

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Acronyms

COI – Commission of Inquiry

CSO – Civil Society Organization

DPRK – Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea)

EU – European Union

HRW – Human Rights Watch

ILO – International Labour Organization

NAM – Non-Aligned Movement

NIS – National Intelligence Service (South Korea)

NKDB – Database Center for North Korean Human Rights

OHCHR – Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

UN – United Nations

UNSCR – United Nations Security Council Resolution

US – United States (of America)

USD – United States Dollar

Abstract

North Korea's overseas labour programme exposes a central paradox of totalitarian control: a state that demands absolute obedience at home deliberately sends its citizens abroad, risking ideological exposure in exchange for hard currency. Drawing on ten semi-structured interviews with former North Korean labourers dispatched to Russia between 2007 and 2021, this study investigates how the programme functions simultaneously as coercion, survival strategy, and site of awakening. Chapter One traces Pyongyang's calculated export of labour and loyalty, highlighting recruitment, surveillance, and the diplomatic use of workers as bargaining chips. Chapter Two examines lived experiences abroad, showing how harsh quotas, surveillance, and forced remittances coexist with small acts of resistance, epistemic rupture, and decisions to defect or quietly return transformed. Chapter Three assesses international responses, sanctions, compliance regimes, and advocacy, arguing that interventions risk reinforcing state control even as they seek to dismantle exploitation. The study concludes that North Korea's overseas labour system, while designed as a tool of extraction and control, paradoxically seeds its own ideological erosion.

Key words: North Korea; Overseas Labour; Forced Migration; Totalitarianism; Human Rights; Sanctions; Resistance; Refugee Studies; International Law

Introduction

“The true value of human life lies in upholding the leader’s ideology and will, and in a worthwhile struggle devoted to the Party, the revolutionary homeland, and the people.”
— *Korean Workers’ Party Press (2018)*

There is truly no place like North Korea. Since its formation in 1948, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK; or North Korea) has sought complete control over all aspects of its people's lives. The Workers' Party of Korea (hereafter the party) exerts cradle-to-grave control over its own people. The border is sealed. No one can enter or leave the country without official authorisation, making North Korea one of the most closed-off nations in the world. Movement within the country is also tightly restricted. Numerous checkpoints make unauthorised travel next to impossible (Kim 2022). The coveted capital city of Pyongyang requires a residence permit even to enter, let alone to live (Joo 2021). The flow of information both in and out of the country is systematically blocked, depriving people of any news from the outside world while feeding them only state-run propaganda. People cannot speak freely without risking arbitrary and disproportionate punishment (Parry 2024). What a person can do or become is largely determined by their background, making meaningful social mobility a fantasy. Education teaches little beyond how great the Eternal President is, reinforcing the message that “there is nothing to envy” (Demick 2009). North Korea has survived this long precisely because of its unrelenting grip on its people.

Now, the people of North Korea are facing the prospect of a fourth-generation successor, Kim Ju Ae, on the horizon (Choe 2024; Korea JoongAng Daily 2024). This system of control is sustained by fear and demands absolute obedience, fear of being sent to political prison camps, of bringing harm to one's loved ones. It is estimated that there are 80,000–120,000

people incarcerated in political prison camps at any given time (UN COI 2014, 8), making North Korea one of the largest open-air prisons on earth. As a Seoul-based documentation group geolocated, there are 442 known sites of state-sanctioned executions, 27 of which were under current leader Kim Jong Un, laying bare the nationwide reach of the DPRK's apparatus of terror (Transitional Justice Working Group 2021). Any move you make risks the harshest punishment: execution.

The DPRK's system of control does not merely reflect authoritarian tendencies. It performs many of the classic traits of totalitarian rule. Its governance stretches beyond the political, seeking to shape belief, behaviour, and belonging. Even down to what one says, thinks, and fears. Coercion is not used simply to suppress opposition but to pre-empt independent thought. Information is monopolised and ideology is embedded into the most mundane rhythms of daily life. These features are not unique, but echo what has come to be recognised as totalitarianism: a form of rule that seeks to erase alternative loyalties and re-engineer society in its own image (ThoughtCo 2025). While authoritarian regimes limit political pluralism, they often stop short of total social remoulding. Totalitarianism, by contrast, extends domination into all spheres of life, including ideology as embedded within the cultural zeitgeist, as well as the economy and private life (Linz 2000; Frantz 2020). Nazi Germany (1933–45) and Stalin's Soviet Union remain the clearest historical illustrations, but they are not alone. Hoxha's Albania, Pol Pot's Cambodia, and military regimes across Latin America and Southeast Asia adapted totalising control to their own contexts. North Korea, as arguably the last surviving totalitarian state, evokes these regimes and it exemplifies the very logic that Hannah Arendt described as “a system that strives to transform human nature itself by eradicating spontaneity and freedom, replacing them with total domination (Arendt 1973).”

Yet, the very same state that demands absolute conformity at home operates a programme that appears, at face value, deeply ironic: an overseas labour scheme that sends tens of thousands of its people abroad each year. How many North Koreans are currently out working overseas on behalf of the state vary significantly, from the UN Panel of Experts' estimate of 100,000 (United Nations 2024) to interview-based upper bounds of up to 420,000 (Kim 2025a, unpublished interview). From Russia to Algeria, and from China to Syria, North Koreans are deployed for months or years to earn hard currency (Breuker and van Gardingen 2018). These deployments, widely described as examples of forced labour, have also been argued to constitute broader human rights violations, mainly through the denial of bodily autonomy, freedom of movement, and fair remuneration (Amnesty International 2024; Freedom House 2024; OHCHR 2024). Nonetheless, based on ten interviews I conducted with escapees, what initially appears to be a clear-cut case of abuse reveals itself to be more complex, exposing multiple layered paradoxes.

In this paper, I argue that any attempt to correct what appears to be the obvious wrong of state-facilitated labour migration by Pyongyang must grapple with a central paradox: how to intervene without strengthening the totalitarian state, and without stripping away the few remaining options available to those trapped within it. To illuminate this tension, I adopt a qualitative, interview-based methodology, investigating the paradox embedded in North Korea's overseas labour programme. There are three substantive chapters in this paper. Together, they explore the paradoxes and tension arising from North Korea's state-facilitated overseas labour migration programme.

Chapter 1, Exporting obedience, explores Pyongyang's political and economic motives, tracing the history of overseas labour from its Cold War origins to its post-COVID iterations. It details the systems of recruitment, surveillance, and ideological conditioning that underpin the programme. This chapter argues that North Korea seeks not merely to export labour, but to project a coherent architecture of totalitarian control, one that permits only highly calculated exposure to the outside world, tight attempts to manage risk while limiting the possibility of ideological failure.

Chapter 2, Importing risks, draws on original interview material to examine the everyday experiences of North Korean workers abroad. It analyses motivations for participation, strategies of survival and resistance, the decision-making process around return or defection, and the impact of their work back home. The chapter maps the spaces in which Pyongyang's grip begins to fray and shows how exposure to comparative realities can catalyse and accelerate epistemic awakening.

Chapter 3, The paradox of assistance, shifts focus to external intervention. It defines the ethical and strategic dilemma that arises when efforts to protect human rights risk reinforcing the very state that perpetuates such abuses. This chapter evaluates responses up to date, ranging from UN sanctions to civil society advocacy campaigns and proposes a reflective, conditional framework for future engagement. Rather than one-size-fits-all prescriptions, it foregrounds the tensions that must be navigated by any actor seeking to intervene responsibly.

The Conclusion returns to the central paradoxes at the heart of this study. It reflects on DPRK's ambition and its limits, arguing that the lived experience of workers unsettles the operational logic of totalitarian control. In so doing, this paper invites a broader reflection on how even the most tightly managed systems may contain the seeds of their own contradiction. Taken together, this paper aims to show why Pyongyang's most scripted foreign-currency pipeline and calculated exposure may also be the slow fuse of its ideological erosion, a contradiction any external actor must weigh carefully before engaging.

Methodology

This paper puts ten semi-structured interviews conducted with North Korean former overseas labourers in the centre. Given the vulnerability of participants and the sensitivity of the subject matter, interviews were conducted in accordance with Oxford research ethics standards and was approved by the Central University Research Ethics Committee. All the respondents defected after working in Russia between 2007 to 2021. Respondents were recruited through existing networks of North Korean escapees and civil society organisation (CSO) intermediaries in South Korea. These respondents are now resettled in South Korea and are safe. All were deemed stable by the Seoul based CSO. All interviews were anonymised to R1-R10 to retain confidentiality (Appendix 1).

All participants gave informed consent, were assured of their anonymity, and were free to withdraw at any point. The interview questions were carefully architected to illuminate detailed, first-hand accounts of North Korea's overseas labour programme's recruitment

process, control measures at home and abroad, working conditions, known ramifications of exposure, and ultimately, decision around defection or return (Appendix 2)

Despite limited sample size of ten, skewed gender to male, the deployment point ranges over two to six years and covers a wide range of postings across Russia including Vladivostok, Moscow, Novosibirsk, and Chita in Russia. This retains a breath of geographic and temporal coverage within the constraints of safety and limited access. No identifying data has been disclosed. I interpreted their responses as an insight into a system otherwise difficult to observe, rather than approaching these respondents as representative data points. Particular emphasis was put on how workers interpreted their own experiences in hindsight, what they understood to be voluntary or coercive, dignified or degrading, and politically awakening or disillusioning.

As the principal researcher, I recognise that my own positionality inevitably shapes this project. I am Korean, and I have a long-standing relationship with North Korean communities in the diaspora. These connections enabled access and trust-building, especially given the political sensitivities and traumatic histories involved. At the same time, such proximity may introduce interpretive biases, including the risk of over-identification. Throughout the research process, I have aimed to remain aware of this dual role, both as an insider and an observer, and to approach each narrative with critical attentiveness, humility, and care.

Chapter 1 – Exporting obedience: A calculated exposure

The overseas labour programme is a complex cocktail of Pyongyang's desires. It blends an insatiable craving for hard currency mixed with meticulously architected systems to extract maximum value from its workers, and simultaneous pursuit of diplomatic leverage with host countries. Their intention is to achieve all of this without relinquishing ideological monopoly over its people. A product of desperate attempts to remain afloat and a calculated assertion of state power, the DPRK leverages its workers not only as a source of foreign currency but also as diplomatic bargaining chips.

At the same time, domestically, North Korea uses the overseas labour programme as a reward for those yearning for exposure to the outside world and economic opportunity, selectively granting such access in exchange for regime-promoting behaviour. This approach also reflects Pyongyang's confidence in its ability to manage the consequences of even minimal exposure to external influences. North Korea's deployment of workers abroad, while strictly managing its effects, constitutes a form of 'calculated exposure', a paradoxical strategy and a risk Pyongyang is willing to take.

The current iteration of forced labour dates back to the 1960s, when the DPRK exported pockets of labour to ideologically adjacent states, such as East Germany, Libya and Angola, aiding in their goal of hard currency extraction (Breuker and van Gardingen 2018, 67). These early deployments helped institutionalise a model of managed exposure to the outside world that persists to this day. Workers are physically dispatched to foreign countries but remain isolated from local societies. They are allowed to earn wages but cannot realistically accumulate meaningful wealth; they serve the state's interests abroad, even so are persistently reminded of their ideological obligations. While many states export labour,

Pyongyang attempts to export loyalty and obedience, attempts to turn workers into a machinery of income generation as well as state propaganda.

The mobilised workers: Why Pyongyang sends its people abroad

The economic imperative of sending workers abroad is central. Estimates suggest that North Korea's overseas labour programme generates upwards of USD 500 million annually for North Korea (United Nations Security Council 2024, 13), a critical lifeline for a heavily sanctioned state with extremely limited access to international markets. Potentially far more if one considers IT workers performing illicit cyber-crime at a time stealing as much as USD 1.46 billion annually in crypto assets (Wilson Center 2025, CNN 2025).

North Korea's need for foreign currency is rooted in fundamental vulnerabilities dating back to the 1990s, when the collapse of the Soviet Union severed critical economic lifelines, triggering a catastrophic famine and decades of chronic scarcity of resources. Further exacerbated by mounting international sanctions and a shrinking circle of allies, Pyongyang has turned to overseas labour exports as one of the few viable channels for acquiring the hard currency necessary to stabilise its economy, finance privileges for the Pyongyang elite, and maintain political control. Crucially, this revenue also sustains the DPRK's unrelenting military ambitions. Funding its arms race, fuelling continued development of its nuclear weapons programme (UN Security Council 2024, 12). R5 recalled his time as a person who managed the programme at the party saying "From the top they ordered the money it needed. Then we just must 'conjure' the money from somewhere. The only thing we could realistically do was something like sending people abroad.

With a goal of sending as much hard currency back to the DPRK as possible, Pyongyang imposes rigid monthly quotas (Gukga Gyehoekbun; 국가 계획분) on all overseas work sites. 'Meet the quota, whatever it takes,' North Korea orders its people. Either blacklisting, exile from future deployments, and social disgrace (Jeong 2024), it enforces the quota and imposes a clear disadvantage to those who fail. Moreover, Pyongyang also encourages workers to send whatever they have back as much as possible for the beloved home rather than spend this money at the host countries (NKDB 2016b, 78). Unlike other labour-sending countries such as the Philippines or Bangladesh that only loosely supervise remittances (Bangladesh Bank 2024; Balanon and Orozco 2017; Ratha 2013), Pyongyang is obsessed and micromanages every dollar, rouble or yuan. Internal North Korean documents I obtained dated May 2020, even instructed workers to record the serial numbers of every US dollar bill remitted, and to retain photocopies as a means of monitoring and deterring theft (Kim 2025b, unpublished interview). R1, R4, and R10 recalled that quota seemed unattainable often and became increasingly larger during their time in Russia. North Korea's approach therefore reflects an extension of totalitarian discipline beyond its borders.

Beneath its financial rationale, the structure of the programme reveals broader and more insidious objectives. Domestically, it is also employed as a mechanism of encouraging loyalty to the regime. Among North Koreans these postings are highly coveted as any chance to earn even a modest income in foreign currency is exceedingly rare. It is painted as a "once-in-a-lifetime" opportunity that is more elusive than "catching a star from the sky" (R5). Aware of this, Pyongyang selectively hands out such opportunities to those who demonstrate both

strong loyalty and the likelihood of obedience while abroad, people who have family ties back home are less likely to defect (NKDB 2016a, 48–50). Although most people have some awareness of the realities of overseas work, detailed knowledge is limited as Pyongyang maintains strict control over the flow of information. This lack of transparency fuels an illusion of prestige, allowing the regime to sustain the narrative of privilege. Workers hoping to be redeployed or considered for future assignments are thus further disincentivised from disobedience. The system is thus designed not merely to extract value, but to cultivate performative loyalty. It embodies what Timur Kuran calls preference falsification: the act of misrepresenting one's genuine beliefs or preferences due to perceived social, political, or material pressures, both domestically and abroad (Kuran 1989 & 1995, 45). Most respondents shared behaviour which promoted the state, whether that is obliging to the state even in the face of injustice or giving money or bribing in order to get the slot (R1, R2, R6). In this way, the overseas labour programme functions both as a revenue-generating scheme and a powerful instrument of ideological reinforcement of the state's dominance through a carefully curated economy of privilege and fear.

The overseas deployment programme further operates as an instrument of diplomatic leverage, quid pro quo exchanges. For host countries, North Korean labour is cheap, unlikely to unionise, and willing to endure abhorrent working conditions, unrealistic deadlines with next to no safety standards. These traits have proven attractive to authoritarian or pariah regimes. Pyongyang recognises the value of labour as a bargaining chip and has used it as diplomatic leverage, often securing political or military concessions in exchange. During the 1980s–2000s, Pyongyang deepened military labour partnerships in Russia, Syria, Iran, Libya, and Yemen (Miyamoto 2023). More recently, South Korea's National Intelligence Service attributes North Korea's 2023 Malligyong-1 spy satellite launch partly to Russian technical assistance, reportedly bartered for labourers and munitions (Mesmer and Vitkine 2024).

Leaked deployment orders obtained in Seoul reveal a tightly choreographed four-phase dispatch of North Korean personnel to Russia (NK News 2025a; Yanchik 2025; Zadorozhnyy 2025), with additional military and civilian labour integration. The first phase occurred in August 2023, when a 30-member unit disguised as a 'Taekwondo demonstration team' travelled to Kazakhstan for an event (Fedrigo 2025). This team reportedly included military advisors embedded under civilian cover. Between October 2023 and February 2024, two 'specialist brigades' of combat engineers and medics, each roughly 2,000 strong, were deployed, units previously known in South Korea for subterranean operations. A third wave saw the dispatch of three battalions from the DPRK's Highway and Port Construction Corps, focused on tunnel and trench construction in anticipation of prolonged winter warfare. By summer 2024, missile guidance and drone operation units, including two battalions armed with KN-series missiles and Iskander variants, were sent to the front. These deployments were accompanied by reports of extensive barter arrangements: North Korea is believed to have received satellite launch support, electronic warfare systems, and SA-22 air defence equipment in exchange for its assistance (KBS World Radio News 2025; Korea Times 2025).

Beyond these deployments, Pyongyang has begun integrating civilian labourers into military-affiliated units, reportedly to obscure the nature of its involvement and circumvent international scrutiny (Cancian and Park 2024). As of mid-2024, an estimated 70,000 North Korean workers are believed to have entered Russia under a broader agreement that may

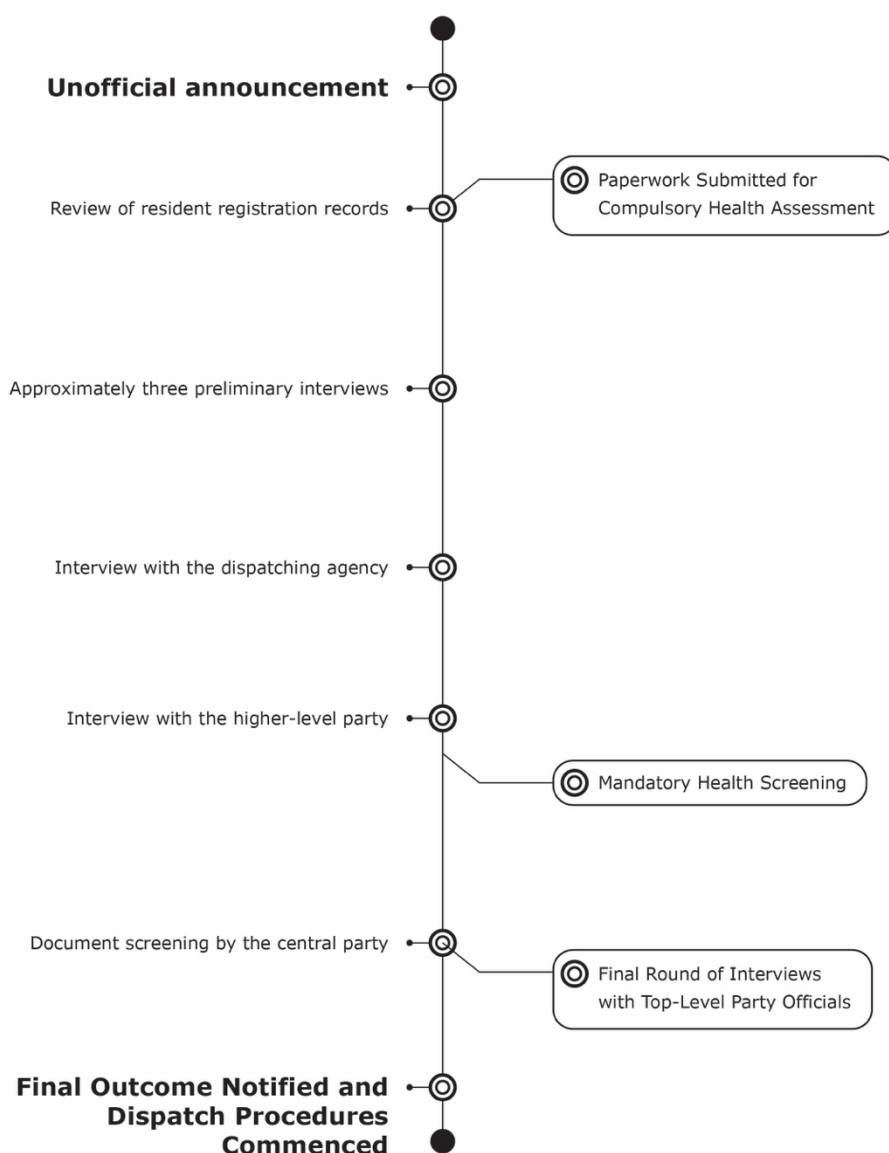
eventually cover a massive influx of personnel, including military engineers, construction crews, and IT specialists (NK News 2025b; The Insider 2025). Despite denials, these developments underscore North Korea's growing military entrenchment in Russia's war effort (Bowen, Manyin, and Nikitin 2025). While initial deployments emphasized construction and non-combat roles, internal directives reportedly prepare units for eventual armament, using casualties from frontline operations as a pretext to justify militarization to the international community. With few allies and limited resources, the DPRK is likely to continue using labour export as a key form of leverage. These cases demonstrate how labour becomes a diplomatic currency meeting each other's needs.

Although this paper focuses on the dispatch to Russia, similar patterns have been witnessed across other host countries including Poland, the Czech Republic, Angola, and Qatar (Asan Institute 2014). Breuker and van Gardingen's multi-country analysis reveals striking parallels of ideological indoctrination, long working hours, work site surveillance, and wage confiscation (Breuker and van Gardingen 2018). However, regional differences in enforcement, visibility, and local complicity suggest that host-country political will plays a decisive role in shaping the lived experience of DPRK labourers.

The dispatch process: How North Korean workers are sent abroad

Recruitment begins with the External Construction Guidance Bureau (Dae-oe Geonseol Jidoguk; 대외건설지도국), which determines how many individuals are to be dispatched, where, and under what terms. This plan is handed to relevant ministries, which in turn pass it down to provincial authorities (Figure 1). At the local level, quotas are transformed into concrete lists, drawing from a pool of workers pre-selected not for skill alone but for political reliability. This cascade of control ensures that the programme remains insulated from public oversight. No vacancies are ever advertised; most workers are unaware of the process unless they are tapped or connected. The process of dispatching North Korean workers abroad is neither random nor ad hoc. It is an industrialised system of labour mobilisation rooted in centralised state planning and totalitarian logics of control.

Figure 1-Dispatch chain from Pyongyang to local labour lists (Adaptation of NKDB 2016a, 53)



This opacity breeds a parallel economy of influence. Behind the tightly controlled facade of overseas labour lies an invisible but entrenched economy of access. Nearly all respondents described negotiating their placement not through formal application but through a murky blend of influence, barter, and personal networks. R2, R9, and R6 paid bribes directly to ‘higher ups’. Others relied on subtler transactions. R10 recalled spending over a year crafting bespoke furniture for a provincial official, trading manual labour for a place on the deployment list. For others, the price was favours or connections, a cousin in logistics, an uncle in the Party, a well-timed gift to a powerful superior.

None of these exchanges guaranteed selection. However, in a system where criteria were murky and opportunities scarce, they dialled up the odds, a whispered endorsement, a name nudged forward at the right meeting with the right people. While on the surface these practices appear as corruption, they are more accurately understood as symptoms of a

deeply embedded patronage economy, where state-controlled mobility becomes a currency of survival. In such a system, desperation doesn't just invite bribery, it normalises it, making access to the outside world contingent not on merit but on the quiet calculus of favours owed and favours traded.

The very selection criteria reflect the regime's need to export obedience without risking defection. Priority is given to married individuals with family remaining in North Korea, especially those with children or elderly parents, as their presence in North Korea acts as collateral. Conversely, applicants with relatives in South Korea or any prior disciplinary issues are typically excluded. Ironically, individuals from excessively privileged or elite families are also filtered out, not because of loyalty concerns but due to fears they might leak sensitive information or cause diplomatic complications if they were to defect. The outcome is a carefully curated cohort: a carefully managed middle-class, ideologically malleable, materially motivated but bound by their obligations.

During training sessions, contact with foreigners is strictly forbidden, with particular warnings issued against interacting with South Koreans and Russians. In some cases, workers were explicitly encouraged to collect information, however minor, military movements, useful technologies, or even seeds (NKDB 2016b, 105). R7 recalled being told to bring back plant seeds deemed beneficial to the Republic, a strikingly literal expression of Pyongyang's extractive mindset. The state's desire to manage perception and prevent ideological contamination is further reflected in the tightly controlled list of prohibited outbound items. Handwritten letters, books, domestic currency, cigarettes, alcohol, military uniforms, and even identification cards were banned from leaving DPRK, suggesting a fear of sensitive information leaking as well as a profound mistrust of the workers themselves. Every detail of movement, material, social, and psychological, is monitored before the journey has even begun.

The movement of workers is managed with military precision. Travel is always conducted in groups rather than individual movements, typically led by several interpreters or political officers. Upon arrival, passports are confiscated and retained by the assigned security official. Workers are issued only photocopies for identification purposes, a symbolic and practical reminder that they remain under the control of the state. R9 recalled, "From the moment we landed in Russia, we moved in strict formation. When we had to show our passports, the interpreter handled everything. They constantly checked that no one had disappeared." Passports were never granted to individuals as symbols of freedom, they were issued just as the necessary paper and a clear property of the states.

While official documentation rarely reveals how workers are physically transported abroad, testimonies paint a picture of slow, controlled, and heavily supervised transit across thousands of kilometres, from Pyongyang to remote corners of Russia. Some travelled by international train from East Pyongyang Station, crossing the Duman River customs post and entering Russia via Khasan, where they spent a night at a state guesthouse before transferring by rail to Vladivostok, and finally flying onward to destinations like Sakhalin (R1).

Others journeyed entirely overland, spending up to 14 to 17 days aboard trains, weaving through Nason, Ussuriysk, Khabarovsk, Chita, Irkutsk, and Novosibirsk, sometimes

transferring to buses due to ongoing rail construction on the North Korean side (R2, R3, R4, R10). Flights were also used. Air Koryo departures from Pyongyang Sunan Airport to Vladivostok were common, especially for deployments post-2010 (R7, R9). Even on flights, security agents or ‘political guidance officers’ accompanied each group, and once in Russia, workers moved in formation, under constant headcounts. Passports were inspected, then collected, never returned (R9). Movement was tightly choreographed, from border crossings to city arrivals, with group leaders tasked with monitoring defection risks through frequent checks. Aware of the risks posed by long-distance rail travel, the DPRK reportedly began using air transport more frequently after 2013 to reduce the likelihood of escape during transit, particularly on the 11-day route from Khasan to St. Petersburg (NKDB 2016b, 104). Such journeys demonstrate more than logistical efficiency, they embody a state-sponsored departure: a transformation from individual to state revenue source, carried out under watchful eyes, along routes that are both literal and symbolic channels of surveillance, separation, and submission.

Maintaining control: How obedience is enforced abroad

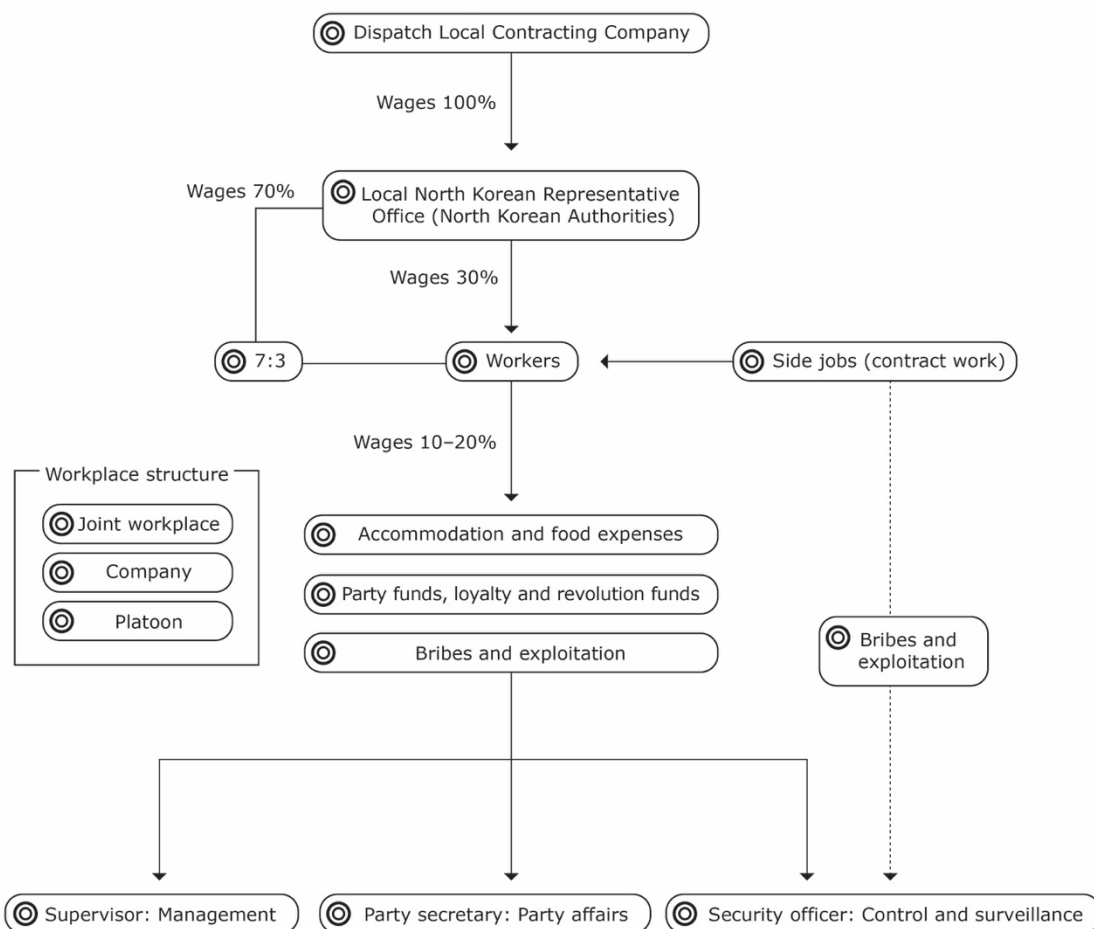
Dawn breaks with the scratchy noise from the loudspeakers, dragging workers from stiff plywood bunks packed inside the unheated shipping containers. Passports are long gone, confiscated on arrival and locked away. Every day begins with ideological drills, where workers recite loyalty slogans and are monitored by a roster everyone assumes contains at least one embedded informer or ‘rat’ (R2, R4, R9). There are no set work hours; it falls under anywhere between twelve to sixteen hours, regardless of weather. One time, the snow was “up to the knees,” but the deadline held firm. Even when numb fingers split under concrete dust (R3, R4). Meals are exactly the same each day of the year: cabbage soup, rice, and canned meat once in a blue moon. Illness is treated with salt water. Workers are just expected to endure all of this.

The structural centre of the entire system is the quota. This is not a voluntary submission or commission for the overseas working position; it is a systemic debt obligation framed as patriotic duty. The Russian client pays the DPRK partner entity in hard currency, but workers receive a fraction, often 500 to 1,000 roubles per month (USD 5 to 11 per month at that time), described by one respondent as ‘cigarette money’ (R4). The rest is absorbed into the quota ledger. Any shortfall is not forgiven but carried forward whether due to underperformance, injury, or withheld contracts. R10 recalled hearing his name shouted across the dorm, ‘There’s no money for you as you still are indebted from last month’. The entire labour site is structured around this target: foremen apply pressure down the line, team leaders conduct headcounts and log output, and workers are constantly reminded that anything short of fulfilment risks repatriation, blacklisting, or public disgrace. Unlike other labour-exporting states, such as the Philippines where remittances are individually managed (Rodriguez 2008), or China where contracts are formalised (Li and Freeman 2013), North Korea’s model is premised on deliberate opacity. There are no contracts, only targets.

This system recalls the concept of a ‘panopticon.’ Workers were not just watched by guards but by each other. “Even your friend could report you,” R5 reflected. All respondents confirmed the presence of planted informants, regulated movement permits, and ideological sessions designed to reinforce state doctrine (R2, R4, R6, R9). Drawing from Foucault’s lens of

individuals internalising the surveillance and subsequently tending to regulate their own behaviour, it is not the presence of guards or fences that ensures compliance but the internalised sense of being watched (Foucault 1979, 201). The compound becomes a feedback loop of control, a miniature reproduction of Pyongyang's surveillance state, exported. The result is a circular political economy that equates labour with loyalty, and money with obedience. Contact with family is virtually impossible without smuggled intermediaries. As R7 put it: "The only person who knew where I was for two years was the state." The result: no protections, only penalties, and no life outside the state's ledger.

Figure 2. Systemic extraction of workers' wages (Adaptation of NKDB 2016a, 53)



Shifting tides: Sanctions, pandemic, and control

Across seven decades, North Korea's overseas labour programmes have demonstrated DPRK's ambition to build a portable architecture of totalitarian control. To close allies such as Russia, North Korea's labour export predates even the formal establishment of the DPRK (NKDB 2016a & 2016b). The so-called 'lumberjack corridor' to Russia's Far East area began in the 1940s, with North Koreans supplying logging labour to the forests of Khabarovsk and Primorsky. This evolved into large-scale deployments throughout the 1960s–1980s, particularly in construction and accommodation sites. North Korea also dispatched workers

to Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) states that wanted to stay independent from both Russia and America. For example, in newly independent states like Algeria, North Korean workers participated in the construction of major infrastructure projects with the aim of raising Pyongyang's standing within the NAM alliance (Ford 2017). These early deployments demonstrated ideological alignment and international recognition more so than major economic return.

By the early 2000s, North Korea had shifted its focus towards the Middle East. Notably, military-based labour units were sent to the United Arab Emirates (Fair Observer 2014; MERIP 1984). In Qatar, North Korean workers engaged in construction work via affiliations with the Arab International Construction Union Company in Doha (Pattisson 2014). These workers, typically employed as general labourers, were assigned to large-scale projects, including hotels and government buildings. In Kuwait, despite limited bilateral ties, the number of North Korean workers remained relatively high, often via companies from other countries or regional organisations such as the Arab League (Associated Press 2017).

The 2017 UNSCR 2397 sanctions and COVID-19 were two major incidents that shifted the way overseas programmes operated. I will delve into more detail on the implications of the UN sanctions and the international community's response in Chapter III. In this section, I focus on the pandemic's effects, especially its intensification of internal control, the suspension of already deployed programmes, and the progressive transformation of labour corridors into militarised export routes.

When COVID-19 hit the world in January 2020, North Korea responded with a complete shutdown of its border. As documented by Human Rights Watch (HRW), North Korea issued "shoot-on-sight" orders while sealing the border and significantly increasing surveillance, effectively making any border crossing or trade between China and North Korea impossible (HRW 2024). Both China and Russia also shut down their borders by March 2020 (NPR 2020; The Independent 2020).

For the North Korean nationals who were already outside of North Korea, both soldiers and civilians, border closures meant being stranded well beyond their scheduled return or discharge dates. Despite their service commitments having long expired, many remained trapped in foreign countries, subjected to harsh quotas and routine exploitation. Rather than recalling its labour force *en masse*, North Korea recalibrated its apparatus. Internal documents and interview testimony reveal that rotations were suspended, re-education intensified, and surveillance structures hardened under the guise of pandemic containment. These workers were forced into prolonged periods of hard labour under surveillance, with limited access to healthcare, poor living conditions, and minimal or no contact with their families. Workers were barred from contact not only with locals but with one another. As R5 noted, "It was like being in quarantine inside quarantine. You were locked down but still watched." Families left behind in North Korea endured years of uncertainty, unable to communicate with their loved ones or receive remittances, while also being subjected to increased surveillance and control (Daily NK 2022).

The pandemic also risked epistemic rupture. Extended extreme isolation created new cognitive dissonance. As workers witnessed their host countries managing crises with transparency, vaccines, and public debate, some began to question North Korea's portrayal of

the outside world (Mok and Kim 2023). Others simply experienced a sense of abandonment: cut off, unpaid, and increasingly disillusioned (Japan News–Yomiuri 2024). In this sense, COVID-19 did not alter the fundamental logic of North Korea’s labour diplomacy. It amplified it. The pandemic offered a global cover under which control could expand without scrutiny. At the same time, it also fractured the performative veneer of mutual loyalty. For some, the virus was not the threat; the silence was. The pandemic thus revealed both the elasticity and fragility of the system. A control architecture capable of flexing to global conditions, but not without producing cracks in the epistemic seal it was designed to maintain. Total control remains an aspiration, never a guarantee.

In the next chapter, we move from systemic design to lived experience. There, through the testimonies of workers themselves, we examine how these structures are internalised, challenged, and sometimes quietly undone. As this chapter charted the architecture of control, the next chapter will explore how workers experience epistemic rupture, which may lead them to acts of disobedience, whether through defection or, paradoxically, by returning to North Korea to contribute differently.

Chapter 2 – Importing risk: Revelation and resistance

“The moment I got off the train, I knew I’ve been told a lie my whole life” – R9

Interviews with ten former workers show how Pyongyang’s attempt to reap the benefits of sending nationals abroad, while risking a form of ‘managed exposure’, can, in practice, be actively negotiated and, at times, quietly subverted from below. Although small in number, these ten individuals – now outside the system – have stood at the crossroads of a single, life-defining question: to go home or not to go home?. They serve as living evidence of what such managed exposure can do to an individual. Thus, the question before us is not whether it is the ‘rouble’ or ‘information’ that first catalyses disillusionment, but rather what long-term effects, often imperceptible from the outside, are being triggered and reflected back home. While exhaustion or fear of punishment may produce outward compliance, beneath the surface brews a more existential question of ‘how to make sense of the epistemic rupture?’ The ramifications of this question reverberate far beyond the individual, affecting those around them in profound and often unpredictable ways.

Most respondents cited two primary motives for going abroad: the aspiration to earn life-altering income and the lure of glimpsing the world beyond the DPRK. This dual motivation is repeatedly evident across testimonies. “I wanted to make money and see the outside world,” R2 stated plainly. R1, R5, R6, and R10 shared more specific motivations such as dreaming of homeownership, securing a future for their children, or simply escaping the suffocation of North Korean stagnation.

Despite Pyongyang’s elaborate efforts to tightly manage its overseas labour programme, by selecting the most conditioned group and monitoring them through a tight surveillance system, the deployed workers inevitably face epistemic rupture as total control and the suffocation of information are simply not viable abroad. This section develops how the main motivations for leaving North Korea are unmet, whether through failing to earn meaningful money or realising there is actually “a lot to envy.” It turns to resistance and could lead to a

willingness to defect or serving as motivation for returnees to act as epistemic couriers, sharing what it's actually like outside back home.

Revelation and disillusionment

Three hard truths confronting North Korean overseas workers once arrived in host countries. The first revelation is the existence of a state-imposed monthly quota and how unrealistically high it can be. Workers may face large monthly targets they are expected to meet; however, the system is not structured to allow them to earn a meaningful income despite their best efforts. This makes saving or remitting money extremely difficult. As R3 put it, "Before I went to Russia, I didn't know what 'quota' meant. It was only after I started working, I realised what it was. Honestly, when I learned that, I regretted coming."

Quotas function as both discipline and deception, arbitrarily defined and erratically enforced. While officially framed as part of fulfilling national economic plans, in practice, these quotas often serve as compulsory remittances extracted from each worker's earnings. The system is set up for failure, as the environment is fundamentally not set up to success and quotas are continuously raised. It doesn't take long for workers to realise that achieving the financial goals that had justified their departure is going to be close to impossible. The dream of a lucrative 36 months quickly erodes under the weight of these imposed targets. R4 lamented that the quota was a "lump on his back," a burden that dictated not only the workday but the emotional texture of daily life. R10 recalled with frustration, "Everything I earned was spent on meeting the quota." R7 put it bluntly, "If the compensation had been fair, I wouldn't have defected."

As I illustrated in the previous chapter, the pressure to meet these quotas on every level is so intense that workers frequently resort to side jobs to supplement their income. R4 said, "The boss told us that if we couldn't meet the quota by the due date, we had to cover it with our own money. "If you only do what you're told, you might go home with just USD 300 to 1,000". This requires immense resourcefulness and bartering simply to find opportunities. Not receiving proper compensation is one thing; having to work even more just to meet a predetermined quota causes an even more heightened sense of disillusionment. R10 recalled, "If I missed two quotas, I would be excluded from the next overseas assignment, so I worked to the bone, even doing side jobs."

The second revelation: all these workers lamented that the labour itself is forced labour. Although working under coercion is nothing new for North Koreans, the harsh and extraordinary nature of this system, on top of the intentional omission of information before and during the dispatch, intensifies workers' sense of betrayal. There's no way around it. I will return to the legal dimensions of this work later. A crime is not constituted simply because those affected feel wronged. Nonetheless, it is often the emotional sense of wrongness, what feels unjust rather than what is legally defined as such, that plants the first seeds of disillusionment and the possibility of state-opposing action. R2 said in frustration, "I was lured by the promise of earning money, but in reality, we were watched constantly, silenced, and forced to work ourselves to death. If this isn't forced labour, what is?" R4 added, "Even in North Korea, I could smoke and drink. In Russia, we had no holidays and worked non-stop. People from Moldova, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan even offered to speak out on our behalf out of

pity.” R9 raised a critical point: “Yes, the whole system in North Korea is unpaid labour, but what we endured in Russia was on the level of the political prison camps and detention centres back home.”

Third, it is revealed that sometimes information can hit harder than lost roubles. Unlike in China, where workers are confined to more controlled factory environments (Kelly 2024), North Korean workers in Russia often labour in relatively open and expansive settings. Despite Pyongyang’s architectural grip on perception, foreign deployments, especially Russian, inevitably create epistemic apertures, gaps through which reality seeps in. Workers recalled how even mundane moments abroad created profound disruptions in their worldview. For R3, the constant supply of electricity was shocking: “In North Korea, we could use electricity maybe once or twice a year, and even then, only for one or two hours. But in Russia, we cooked with electricity, and everything was easier.” For R5, it was about truly learning what capitalism is like: “In North Korea, we were always taught that capitalism was a corrupt and depraved system, but in Russia I saw people speaking freely and workers being compensated fairly for their labour.” R8 was surprised to see that “women were driving cars,” and “Russian soldiers walked around freely using mobile phones.” Such casual liberties were unthinkable back home, where gender roles are rigid and military life is tightly controlled. R2’s shock was demonstrated in one searing observation: “Back home, I had to memorise all our leaders’ birthdays. Russians didn’t even know their president’s birthday.” The contrast was not just factual, it was epistemic.

Other forms of cognitive awakening were more visceral. R5 said, “Looking back now, I realise I always lived with human rights violations in North Korea. On weekends and holidays, when the whole world was resting, I couldn’t rest. I had to work every day, rain or shine. I had no freedom of choice. Coming to Russia made me realise I was living like a slave.” That realisation, he noted, only came through comparison. R3, who had acquired a smartphone through covert work with Uzbekistani co-workers, described watching both South Korean dramas and pornography. The forbidden nature of these acts did not trivialise them, in fact, it magnified their symbolic weight. “I watched Korean movies and news every day,” he said. “It made me realise there was another world out there.”

This gradual dissonance between official truth and empirical observation also produced moral unease. R4, for example, expressed shock when learning that Russian co-workers offered to protest on behalf of North Korean labourers. “No one can grasp North Korea until they have lived it,” he remarked, underscoring both the depth of regime control and the moral jolt that comparative humanity invoked. The realisation that dignity, leisure, and basic protections were possible elsewhere unsettled the ideological foundation that framed suffering as a patriotic necessity. In the end, what begins as cognitive drag frequently accumulates into cognitive break. Not always dramatic. Often quiet. But transformative, nonetheless.

Resistance

Where motivation is unmet and epistemic revelation occurs, peaceful, subtle resistance begins. Of course, the most salient expression of resistance and defiance is defection. However, because most workers initially intend to return home, the arc of resistance builds

quietly. Often, the forms of resistance shown in this context are not overt but embedded within what James C. Scott terms ‘infrapolitics’, the hidden transcripts of resistance, informal sub-legal acts and negotiations that express dissent without open confrontation in everyday life (Scott 1990, 183). These acts reside beneath the surface of official discourse, functioning as quiet strategies of survival and the subversion of dominant power.

Cheongbu and moonlighting

Although the practice of *cheongbu* (a commissioned task; 청부) arises out of necessity, it shows workers' resilience and resistance, their adaptation to the situation, and their will to make the most of it while enduring long working hours. This cultural phenomenon entails earning extra wages through illicit side jobs obtained via bribery or under-the-table private contracts. Some even reappropriate labour. Pyongyang may have designed the overseas work environment to exhaust resistance, but *cheongbu* revealed something more enduring and resistant: the will to carve out agency within the margins. Workers bribed site managers, snuck off for unauthorised errands, or traded labour on the side. These zones of tolerated illegality functioned as pressure valves, spaces that offered brief moments of autonomy without being detached from the larger system.

Several respondents described engaging in private construction jobs, often in collusion with sympathetic Russian foreman or site managers. R1 recounted bribing his boss to take three men out on a private contract, allowing them to earn several times more than the typical 1,000 rouble (around USD 13) wage. R1 and R9 earned significantly more through such arrangements, albeit briefly. R3 described bartering with Uzbek workers to send modest remittances home. These were not incidental acts; they were calculated interventions within a system that monetised exhaustion and criminalised autonomy. Some workers were reported to engage in more complex forms of *cheongbu*. According to the Chosun Ilbo's Northeast Asia Research Institute in 2014, North Korean workers were reportedly organizing illicit liquor operations by using foreign workers from countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan as middlemen, stating, “We had to do this just to survive.” (Park 2014)

Importantly, *cheongbu* was not solely about money. It also affirmed self-recognition, competence, and relational ethics in a system that demanded anonymity and obedience. Those who engaged in side work did so with initiative and skill, negotiating deals, managing labour, and navigating unfamiliar markets. These behaviours complicate portrayals of North Korean workers as passive instruments of state power, revealing instead a degree of micro-agency within a constrained environment. It was a form of survivalist ingenuity operating below the threshold of formal resistance but nonetheless pressing against the limits of totalitarian control.

Procuring and sharing information

Even in tightly monitored settings, workers actively sought out information and procured forbidden information media. Respondents went to great lengths to discover more about the outside world. So determined to access outside media, R10 saved money for months by quitting smoking – unimaginable for him before, to afford a mobile phone that he later used to watch South Korean films and news. R9 watched YouTube for hours and hours cutting sleep on a smuggled phone. He later recalled “a phone was the source of all information,

that's what let me think and act differently".

Information sharing occurred through both overt and covert means. Some workers engaged in whispered conversations within their teams, quietly reinterpreting the contradictions between official doctrine and lived reality. R2 noted, "I quietly told co-workers, 'The outside world is different, we're being deceived'." Some shares obtained access to South Korean media with others.

Crucially, this section highlights how even highly managed forms of contact can induce ideological vulnerability in totalitarian control. The DPRK's wager, that it could extract value while limiting ideological risk, was repeatedly strained by the fact that cognition cannot be as easily policed as movement. As R7 put it, "Had I remained in North Korea, I'd have spent my whole life saluting the state (manse; 만세). Russia allowed me to see a different world." These acts did not dismantle the totalitarian grips, but they punctured its logic. They remind us that even within the architecture of coercion and surveillance, the human impulse to resist complete instrumentalisation endures in subtle, strategic, and deeply embodied ways. In sum, information sharing and cultural contamination represent a second, often invisible, layer of resistance.

However, the dispersal of 'outside' information came at great cost; physical, emotional, and moral. Bribes had to be paid, secrets had to be kept, and even minor risks carried the potential for devastating punishment. Some workers, like R10, lost everything when their phones were confiscated. Others were forced to confess during weekly criticism sessions or faced denunciation by their peers. Surveillance was everywhere, but resistance found its own forms, fleeting, cautious, but quietly transformative. In this sense, workers abroad were not just revenue-generating bodies. They became reluctant insurgents of cognition. Their stories suggest that resistance, even in its simplest forms, begins not with confrontation but with improvisation, with quiet quarrels that begin at the edge of a quota and end in reimagining one's place in the world.

To go home or not to go home

The moment their tipping point arose, its nature varied. Of the ten respondents now living in South Korea, none crossed that invisible line in the same way. For some, it was economic; for others, moral or existential. At times, it emerged gradually, as disappointment thickened into disillusionment; at others, it struck like a crack of thunder. Some acted swiftly, within days of a triggering incident. Others nurtured intent quietly, inching toward it in silence.

For many, economic betrayal was a common tipping point. R6 recalled how months of gruelling labour left him with only 200 roubles (approx. USD 2.50) in hand: "Not even enough for a week's soap." What remained was labour stripped of dignity, exhaustion without reward. R4 remembered that when he was caught speaking to a *Goryeoin* (ethnic Korean), the bribe demanded amounted to his entire life savings. When he lost everything, he thought, "If I keep living like this, I'll end up with nothing," identifying this as the main reason for his decision to defect. Others pointed to the escalating expectations of production quotas as another factor (R1, R8).

Some described deeper ruptures, existential rather than economic. One example was the moment when a fellow worker's ashes were left unclaimed (R2). "A human life worth less than a fly," he said. "From that moment on, I had no thought other than to unconditionally defect and live." R5 recalled a similar realisation: "Even while working, I kept thinking, why must I live like this? I had no control over my life, no proper pay, and I wasn't even treated like a human being." These moments are both intimate and explosive, quietly eroding the ideological edifice of the state from within, one contradiction and one conversation at a time.

Then there were cases where epistemic dissonance sparked defection. R3 was caught watching South Korean films, an act punishable by severe repercussions. As R5 put it: "I realised I absolutely could not go back into that system and continue to live. The desire to live freely, even if it meant dying, became overwhelming." But defection is not a leap of faith, it is a strategic climb which often needs to be plotted over months or even years.

R4 offered a window into that slow calculus: "When I first came out [to Russia], I thought that the bastard [who defected] wasn't even human. But over time, I found myself waiting for my own chance to defect, planning to escape at just the right moment." R4's eventual disobedience was not a rupture but a slow unthreading, months or even years of internal recalibration masked by outward conformity. People conceal private dissent until external conditions shift the cost-benefit equation of revealing their true preferences (Kuran 1989 & 1995).

Fear, therefore, manifests not in open terror but in over-conformity. What was once thinkable in solitude becomes speakable, and eventually, doable. Moreover, the decision to defect affects far more than the individual alone: a single defection risks punishment for many. R10 articulated this clearly: "You can't just run. You have to prepare. You have to know where to go, how to hide, what to say. And still, your family pays the price." A single defection could trigger collective scrutiny, further restricting already-constrained lives. As R6 observed, "We knew that even a whisper could echo all the way back to Pyongyang."

Most respondents reported reaching South Korea after first staying at the UN safe house in Moscow, followed by transit through countries such as Germany, Turkey, the Czech Republic, or Finland. Importantly, defection is not the end of agency, it is its transformation. Initial resettlement proved difficult for many. R1 shared, "What was hardest was crying so often from missing my family, especially during holidays or weekends." R4 reflected, "When I first arrived in South Korea, I felt with every part of my body that I was in a different country. It was great to have the freedom to say what I wanted, and to receive the money I earned directly into my own hands, but a part of me still felt empty. The hardest thing was accepting the reality that I could no longer return to my homeland or see my family. Even as I adjusted day by day, I lived with constant guilt and fear." R9 said, "Suddenly having freedom, it made me think hard about what to do among so many options. That was the most difficult part." R10 lamented, "How wonderful it would be if we could all live here together. If that were possible, I'd have no regrets."

Nevertheless, even amid this hardship, several respondents described how their resistance continued beyond the act of flight. Some began sending money back to North Korea. R2 shared how, after 15 years, he sent money home for the first time and spoke with pride, "The

money sent from the South really helps. Whatever they buy with it, so long as it's something the family needs, that's enough." But with the money, counter-narratives travel too. R9 put it clearly, "You don't just send money. You send stories about what South Korea is like, how people live here, how it's not the evil place we were told it was." These stories, whether wrapped in letters or whispered through phone calls, are seeds of cognitive rupture, small, destabilising truths that challenge the state's narrative monopoly. Many stakeholders such as the UN and its member states recognise the role of North Korean escapees in driving change within North Korea. A 2023 survey by HanVoice found 55.8% of those surveyed recently sent remittances, and 42.2% relayed information to their families (HanVoice 2023, unpublished study). These remittances provide a lifeline for those inside North Korea. These funds are used for essential needs such as food, medicine, housing, and even bribes to ensure safety, making remittances a transformative force for North Koreans inside the country, particularly in challenging the social caste system.

Currency and contagion? What returnees really bring back

Of course, not all who saw the outside world chose to leave everything behind for a new country. In fact, most returned to North Korea. However, some returned physically but not ideologically identical (R1, R3, R4). After their first deployment, many realised that reintegration was no longer emotionally or ideologically viable (R1, R3, R4). The border they crossed upon re-entry into North Korea was not merely geographical, it was epistemic.

Returnees, then, are not loyalists reclaimed. Rather, they are carriers of epistemic rupture. For them, what they saw and experienced abroad is undeniable. R1 who had been dispatched twice recalled how he began instructing his family in quiet subversion: "There's no need to be loyal to the country. Look out for your own lives." But for those who remained in North Korea, between currency and cognitive contagion, which spoke louder? Or was it both? What, ultimately, do returnees bring back from the outside world?

The rouble certainly spoke for itself. R1 proudly shared, "With the money I earned during my first time abroad, I bought an apartment. It wasn't much, but it was money I could never have earned in North Korea." R2 added, "With the money I sent back, my family was able to buy coal for heating for the whole year and food as well. People around us were envious of my experience living abroad." R4 described a similar situation: "I sent back USD 1,500, which allowed my family to repair our heating system so we could stay warm through the winter. We were also able to hire a private tutor for my daughter's vocal training. In places like Pyongyang, where appearances are important, people's attitudes change if they hear you've returned from abroad and bought property or invested in your children's education." R9 explained that her mother was finally able to take time off from work thanks to the USD 1,000 she received. R10's statement was even more striking: "No matter how hard it was overseas, the fact that you return with dollars means that even just rumours of someone buying a new television or refrigerator after coming back change how people look at you and treat you."

Whatever returnees bring back, it adds weight to what people witness. These are not grand declarations of rebellion, but subtle acts of epistemic disobedience, planting seeds of scepticism in the soil of familial trust. Even banal details become insurgent. R10 described sharing what he had seen of Russian life, its freedom, its informality, its contradictions to

everything he had been taught. “No one said much openly,” he reflected, “but deep down, everyone wanted to know.” Curiosity, once awakened, cannot be sent back to sleep. The returnees brought back visible signs of transformation: their children wore shiny new clothes, their homes displayed flat-screen televisions, and their diets shifted from corn porridge to white rice. These changes, mundane elsewhere, resonated loudly in a tightly monitored society.

Pyongyang recognises this risk. In response, it deploys familiar tools: loyalty re-education, ideological reinforcement, surveillance, and reassignment. Some returnees are even presented as ‘model patriots’, narrative decoys used to reassure the population that repatriation is safe and that ideological fidelity can survive foreign exposure. Even so these decoys cannot conceal the deeper erosion underway. For North Korea containment is not control. What begins as an aesthetic difference, better clothes, a new mobile phone, solidifies into moral critique. Why do others live with choice, and we with fear? Why do they rest on weekends, while we toil endlessly? Why is survival contingent on quotas, not merit? These are not merely questions, they are breaches. And once those questions take root, even silence becomes legible. A hesitant chant, a tepid salute, an unwillingness to praise the leader with sufficient fervour, these are all read as signals of ideological drift. In a totalitarian system where compliance is not just monitored but performed, knowing differently is itself a risk. It is both the money and the embedded knowledge gleaned through it that resonate the loudest.

Since COVID-19, defections have almost entirely ceased. It is therefore vital that the DPRK overseas labour escape route remains viable. Pyongyang’s resort to a shoot-on-sight order along the northern border, what HRW describes as “a sense of terror much stronger than a bullet” (HRW 2024), confirms that the regime now fears the contagion of knowledge even more than the flight of currency. Pyongyang exports ideological obedience in pursuit of foreign currency while attempting to retain control, but what it re-imports is epistemic risk. The labourer returns not only with roubles and Russian cigarettes, but with a new comparative framework, one that unravels the regime’s monopoly on meaning. While the defector may make noise through departure, it is the returnee, quietly relaying fragments of experience from one neighbour to the next, who often facilitates the deeper and more lasting transmission of knowledge. In systems built on illusion, knowledge is the most subversive currency, and returnees, knowingly or not, become its couriers.

The next chapter examines the ethical tensions at the heart of any engagement with North Korea’s overseas labour programme. Building on the lived contradictions explored in this chapter, it considers not only whether intervention is warranted, but how it can be undertaken in a manner that acknowledges the ambiguous consequences of ‘assistance’.

Chapter 3 –The paradox of assistance

International intervention of any kind must acknowledge the possibility that their actions may lead to unintended consequences, at times exactly the opposite of the original intention. In 1968, history witnessed that airdrops over besieged Biafra to abate starvation also unwittingly extended the conflict (Kurtz 2009). In 1994, the aid meant to deliver immediate relief in the cholera-stricken Goma refugee camp ended up reinforcing the very force

conducting genocide (Goma Epidemiology Group 1995). In a complex contemporary world, it is a tall order for foreign interventions to avoid getting caught in a crosscurrent of outcomes.

This very paradox too sits uncomfortably at the heart of the North Korean overseas labour programme. Intervention here is anything but straightforward. ‘Rescuing’ a worker could close off one of their few remaining avenues into the world. Standing back, however, risks condoning one of Pyongyang’s most exploitative income revenues. It is so much more complex than a choice between right and wrong; It is a juggling between help and hindrance, between prevention and perseverance.

This chapter builds on these questions: How could one offer help when that help might also harm? How could one act, knowing that every sanction or intervention might echo far beyond its original intent? If, as Tom Scott-Smith reminds us, intervention can limit rather than expand the agency of those it seeks to serve (Scott-Smith 2014, 23-25), then perhaps the task before us is not to escape the paradox of assistance, but to learn how to carry it. With transparency. With humility. And with the understanding that discomfort is part of the work.

Forced labour and forced migration

Before turning to the normative tensions, it is imperative to clarify two threshold questions: Is the work legally forced? And are these deployments best understood as state-sponsored forced migration?

Is the work legally forced?

North Korean law mandates that everyone who’s capable of working should accept a job assigned by the Party (National Unification Institute 1998). This structural involuntariness situates such employment squarely within the parameters of the 1930 ILO Forced Labour Convention (No. 29) (hereafter Forced Labour Convention). Article 2(1) of Forced Labour Convention defines forced labour as “all work or service exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the person has not offered himself voluntarily.” The ILO’s 2005 Global Report further clarifies, the presence of involuntariness and coercion, not low wages or long hours, defines the condition (ILO 2005, 6). When deployed overseas, workers encounter all eleven indicators of forced labour identified by the ILO in 2012 (updated 2018). These include passport confiscation (R5), mandatory remittances to meet debt-like ‘state quotas’ that withhold up to 90 percent of wages (all respondents), and threats of retaliation against family members should a worker attempt to defect (R7).

Some academics including Andrei Lankov argue that these posts are highly coveted and pursued by North Koreans acting with embedded agency (Lankov et al. 2020). However, this claim elides a critical distinction between the constrained decision to seek escape from economic collapse under limited autonomy and the realities of working under systematic coercion once deployed. As R1 succinctly put it, “choosing to go abroad is like choosing the wider prison cell.” While some caution that applying the term ‘forced labour’ could prompt sweeping repatriation measures and risk closing a narrow lifeline for North Korean workers abroad, such concerns should not prevent scholars and policymakers from recognising the coercive nature of the work. Legal classification must be based on objective conditions, not anticipated consequences or political sensitivities. Risk-benefit calculations made by the

workers do not alter the definition. To label this work as ‘forced’ is to acknowledge that agency and coercion can, and often do, coexist; and to provide legal clarity for the accountability. The labour, once abroad, fulfils the legal criteria of forced labour, even if the initial departure carries a trace of volition.

Is It Forced Migration?

North Korean overseas labourers are best understood as state-sponsored forced migrants. True, many apply to leave, but they do so within an environment so tightly scripted that ‘choice’ is, at best, conditional. Applicants seldom grasp the full terms of deployment, and economic hardship at home narrows their options further, what Alexander Betts (2013) frames as survival migration.

However, David Turton (2003) reminds us that even under acute duress, migrants retain some agency, a point echoed by Powell and Zwolinski (2012) and Lankov et al. (2020), who caution against rigid ‘forced or voluntary’ binaries. The reality sits in the overlap: limited agency exercised inside a coercive structure. As I covered in Chapter 1, that structure is stark. Provincial Workers’ Party committees decide how many labourers leave, which country and sector they enter, where they live, and the size of the compulsory ‘donation’ skimmed from their wages. Workers do not choose their destination, and once abroad they cannot leave the worksite freely. Coercion and consent are thus woven together, making these deployments a compelling, if uncomfortable, fit for the category of state-sponsored forced migration.

While much of the international community has focused on abating North Korea’s overseas labour programme through sanctions and diplomatic pressure, less attention has been paid to the legal standing of the workers themselves. As migrant workers under state control, North Koreans working abroad are covered by the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (United Nations General Assembly 1990) and relevant ILO conventions, particularly Convention No. 29 on Forced Labour. These frameworks affirm their right regardless of nationality or contract form. However, in practice, enforcement is weak, and North Korean workers remain structurally excluded from any meaningful access to justice (Breuker and van Gardingen 2018; OHCHR 2024).

To focus solely on coercion risks erasing the tactical calculations that North Koreans themselves make, including the subtle forms of learning, subversion, and awakening that exposure can ignite. The challenge for policymakers and advocates is not to resolve this tension prematurely, but to learn how to hold it.

International response to date

From UN member states to the UN itself, the international response to North Korea’s overseas labour programme has, thus far, pivoted around two dominant strategies: coercive restriction via multilateral sanctions targeting the workers themselves, and corporate due diligence aimed at excising DPRK labour from global supply chains (Council on Foreign Relations 2022). Both approaches seek to interrupt the DPRK’s capacity to generate revenue through forced labour and, by extension, to undercut the financing of its weapons development and authoritarian apparatus. However, their implementation has exposed

strategic inconsistencies and engendered a host of unintended consequences (Meissner and Mello 2022). Moreover, frontline advocates identify the cyclical nature of political positions within both the member states and the UN diplomatic community (Park 2019). These measures should be thought through and implemented with a long-term perspective, but the executors struggle both to stay motivated for a prolonged project of this nature and to convince political leadership and capital when facing changes in power.

Sanctions

Comprehensive sanctions restrict commercial activity with an entire state, while targeted sanctions block transactions with specific individuals or businesses. At the forefront of international measures against the DPRK are targeted sanctions, leveraged not as blunt instruments, but as tools of calibrated disruption. The DPRK's overseas labour programme is unusually traceable, with identifiable command chains and named brokers. The 2024 civil-society dossier (Korea Future 2025) that prompted sanctions against Minister of State Security Ri Chang-dae is a case in point (Council of the European Union 2024).

In 2021, Special Rapporteur Tomas Quintana pointed out that the UN Security Council's response to North Korea's development of nuclear weapons entails "the most comprehensive and prohibitive regime of sanctions ever put in place" (Quintana 2021, 23). However, he also emphasised that these comprehensive sanctions affected the human rights of people in North Korea, highlighting the very tension I focus on. This is backed by the Commission of Inquiry report's recommended targeted sanctions against individuals responsible for crimes against humanity while rejecting broader sanctions against the entire population or economy (UN Human Rights Council 2014; UN Human Rights Council 2017, 65).

The most decisive multilateral intervention on forced labour programme specifically came with United Nations Security Council Resolution 2397 (2017), which explicitly mandated member states the repatriation of all North Korean nationals earning income abroad within 24 months of its adoption. This measure was unanimously adopted amid escalating concerns over the nexus between overseas labour as well as overarching human rights concerns and Pyongyang's nuclear development and was framed as part of a broader sanctions regime targeting the DPRK's illicit international revenue streams. The rationale was twofold: to deprive North Korea of foreign currency and to dismantle networks of state-sponsored forced labour (United States Mission to the United Nations 2017).

Following the adoption of UNSCR 2397, several host countries such as Poland, Mongolia, and select Gulf states, indeed, undertook large scale expulsions or declined to renew work permits (Zwirko 2019). Whilst appearing legally binding in nature, enforcement has been uneven and selectively applied, particularly in states with close ties to Pyongyang. Workers are frequently reclassified as 'students,' 'construction trainees,' or are deployed under the auspices of third-party commercial entities. R10 described deployments continuing well into 2023 and 2024, often through such alternative arrangements. These adaptations have intensified the system's informality and opacity. Formerly visible worksites are now embedded within subcontracting layers, frequently lacking clear oversight or traceable responsibility. The shift to informal deployment channels has heightened worker precarity: contracts are less transparent, monitoring by humanitarian actors is more difficult, and

accountability for abuses is even more diffuse. Surveillance has reportedly increased, as Pyongyang grows more anxious about defections and ideological contamination in the wake of international scrutiny (State Department 2021). R8, R9, and R10 noted that post-sanctions deployments have been accompanied by stricter behavioural codes, greater movement restrictions, and harsher reprisals for perceived insubordination.

Compliance

A newer, and arguably nimbler, front is administrative enforcement. Statutes such as Germany's Supply Chain Act, the U.S. Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, and the EU's upcoming forced-labour import ban enable action without requiring a criminal threshold (CSR-in-Deutschland 2024; White & Case LLP 2024). A detained shipment or a voided contract can achieve in days what diplomacy has failed to accomplish in years. Alongside state-level sanctions, private-sector responses have focused on corporate compliance and ethical auditing. Private sector complicity in perpetuating the DPRK labour system remains under-scrutinised, in spite of these routes to attain accountability. The People for Profit report demonstrates how European and Asian companies, including shipbuilders, agricultural firms, and IT outsourcing platforms, have directly benefited from cheap North Korean labour, often bypassing due diligence obligations (Breuker and van Gardingen 2018). Despite formal bans, many firms fail to monitor or report North Korean links in their supply chains. Thus, corporate actors become inadvertent or wilful enablers of forced labour, turning a blind eye to conditions that would violate even the most basic international labour standards.

In the wake of rising awareness of North Korean forced labour, multinational companies have faced increasing pressure to examine their supply chains. A seminal investigation New Yorker conducted with Outlaw Ocean Project (Urbina 2024) revealed that Chinese seafood processors were using up to 100,000 North-Korean workers in conditions 'akin to captivity.' As a result of this, State government's compliance warning, major South-Korean retailers, including E-mart, Lotte Mart, Coupang, and Market Kurly, pulled the implicated Chinese brands from their shelves within 48 hours, a move that underscores how corporate due-diligence still tends to be reactive media-driven crisis management rather than systematic prevention (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre 2024). While some firms have taken decisive action, others have adopted superficial measures: outsourcing audits to third parties, relying on self-reporting mechanisms, or failing to independently verify their supply chains (HRW 2022).

In this context, both the ethics and efficacy of current international responses remain contested. Sanctions and compliance regimes are undoubtedly critical instruments of accountability, but they must be accompanied by a more nuanced understanding of the programme's dual character: both as a mechanism of totalitarian exploitation and, paradoxically, a fragile conduit of exposure. This contrast between the 'two faces' of the labour program begs for a recalibration of intervention strategy, one that acknowledges workers not only as victims of state repression, but as individuals navigating constrained spaces, whose needs may not necessarily align with the logics of foreign policy or international law.

A central justification for international sanctions against North Korea's overseas labour

programme has been revenue denial. To cut off foreign currency flows to weaken the DPRK's capacity for weapons of mass destruction and internal repression (HanVoice 2025, UN speech). These funds flow into opaque, elite-controlled networks, what defectors term the 'royal economy' underwriting patronage and procurement operations tied to Bureau 39 and other clandestine arms of the state (NKDB 2016b, 145). However, it has been argued in Chapter 1 that the strategic importance of this revenue is often overstated. While the labour programme has generated hundreds of millions annually, it is now eclipsed by cybercrime.

This fact raises a critical question, if digital theft yields more money with less risk, does the labour programme now serve more of a symbolic and diplomatic function than a financial one? It could be viewed through the lens of *quid pro quo*, that in return for imports into the DPRK, the DPRK repays with a reliable, human resource. Sanctions often fail to account for this layered reality. Treating workers purely as revenue nodes can obscure the fragile apertures through which they experience the world beyond state control. In attempting to disrupt state finances, international measures may inadvertently help fulfil DPRK's deeper objective: total enclosure. To be effective, policy must shift focus from state-only calculations to worker-centred strategies. This includes enforceable grievance mechanisms, joint-liability provisions for multinationals, and safe-exit pathways for at-risk workers. Merely depending on third-party audits and surface level disclosures cannot be enough to keep up with this complex and opaque system.

Fundamentally, interventions must embrace nuance. Overstating coercion reduces workers to passive victims; overstating agency romanticises endurance. The point is not to resolve this tension, but to carry it. The core challenge remains: how to dismantle exploitation without extinguishing the narrow spaces where awareness, subversion, and survival persist.

Between coercion and awakening: The strategic value of exposure

Intervention strategies aimed at addressing North Korea's overseas labour programme must navigate a delicate triangulation between three competing and at times irreconcilable imperatives: protecting individual workers, exerting pressure on DPRK, and preserving fragile channels of exposure. Each imperative is grounded in a distinct ethical and strategic logic, still privileging one often comes at the expense of the others. The intervention challenge lies in identifying abuses as well as in managing the trade-offs that any intervention will inevitably face.

The first imperative, protecting the individual, is rooted in international human rights and humanitarian law. From a rights-based perspective, these individuals constitute a vulnerable population urgently in need of safeguards and redress. This framing has led to calls for the abolition of the overseas labour programme, the implementation of repatriation moratoriums, and targeted action by host states, CSOs, and multilateral institutions. Sanctions such as UNSC Resolution 2397 have thus targeted the programme not only as a site of abuse, but as a strategic pressure point. Within this logic, terminating overseas deployments serves both human rights and geopolitical objectives.

This protective impulse to intervene, however, sits in direct tension with the second imperative: pressuring Pyongyang. For over a decade, the international community has

pursued a strategy of isolating the DPRK economically and diplomatically in order to constrain its weapons development and suppress its totalitarian apparatus. The overseas labour programme, which reportedly generated hundreds of millions of dollars annually at its peak, has been viewed as a key source of regime financing.

Moreover, both protection and pressure imperatives often conflict with a third concern: preserving channels of exposure for North Koreans. As documented in previous chapters and confirmed by interview data, the overseas deployment system, while coercive, remains one of the few routes through which North Koreans engage with the outside world. Workers abroad demonstrated they encounter alternative social norms, observe unscripted interactions, access uncensored technologies, and crucially begin to question the ideological narratives they have internalised.

R1, R2, R6, and R10 described their time abroad profoundly transformative while acknowledging an exploitative element. For R4, it was witnessing kindness from strangers that first “cracked” his sense of reality, and further, he recalled watching Uzbek migrants using phones and living freely, “shattered everything we were told”. Shutting down the system, then, risks closing one of the last functioning apertures through which North Koreans perceive life beyond the DPRK. Conversely, tolerating the programme in the name of exposure risks normalising state-sponsored exploitation and legitimising totalitarian workfare under the guise of soft engagement.

This paradox demands not binary choices but a strategic, layered, and conditional approach. First, responses should be context-specific. Even among states with lax enforcement records, such as China and Russia, deployments differ in visibility, regulatory evasion, and the treatment of workers. ‘Naming and shaming’ may be effective in democratic contexts, but quiet diplomacy and behind-the-scenes negotiation may yield more sustainable outcomes elsewhere, such as securing limited protections without triggering mass repatriations. Second, international actors should adopt harm-reduction frameworks. Where abolition is not feasible or might cause greater harm, intermediate measures can still reduce risk and expand agency. These include improving wage transparency, offering anonymous reporting tools, and enabling access to legal assistance through neutral intermediaries. While such tools cannot eliminate structural coercion, they can mitigate its impacts and create moments of negotiation, adaptation, or informed exit. Respondents such as R7 and R10 described hiding surplus wages and covertly wiring remittances through third-country brokers as life-sustaining strategies undertaken at personal risk, acts that would likely vanish under full shutdown.

DPRK’s overseas labour programme is a hybrid system, one that fuses totalitarian control, economic necessity, and unintended exposure. It does not fit neatly into conventional categories of trafficking, migration, or exile. Ultimately, interventions that fail to grapple with this hybridity risk not only ineffectiveness, but unintended harm. Only by embracing the system’s contradictions, and designing within, rather than against, its tensions, can international actors expect engagements that are both ethically credible and strategically viable. The challenge is, then, not merely to act, but to act relationally and reflectively.

The respondents did not speak in unison, but a few common opinions emerged in what they hoped external actors would do. Some, like R2 and R7, called for quiet interventions that

could reduce harm without triggering collective punishment. Others, like R5 and R10, stressed the importance of “keeping the doors open”, not only through cross-border initiatives or foreign media, but also through soft mechanisms that sustain exposure, such as labour site inspections, wage transparency, or access to anonymous helplines. R6 urged the international community to “remember us not just when we defect, but when we are still trying to endure.” These testimonies suggest that the workers themselves understand the stakes of exposure far better than many of the actors intervening on their behalf. Any ethical response must begin from this recognition.

From exposure to endurance: Tracing long-term impact

Taken together, the testimonies and insights gathered in this study suggest that the idea of intervening in North Korea’s exported labour forces must be fundamentally redefined. It risks substituting external prescription for local insight, producing interventions that may satisfy international norms, but fail to resonate with, or benefit, those most affected. This paper instead calls for an approach grounded in epistemic justice: the principle that individuals subject to systemic harm must be recognised as credible narrators, decision-makers, and interpreters of their own experience.

All respondents in this study, across different geographies, generations, and durations of deployment, spoke to the complex calculations they undertook to survive, send remittances, and retain some measure of dignity. A reflective protection framework must therefore recognise the limits of external understanding and adjust to local, temporal, and geopolitical shifts. Further, it requires iterative engagement, grounded in the sustained input of defectors, civil society actors, and regional experts. This requires moving away from static solutions and toward flexible, revisable modes of action.

Indeed, as the geopolitical terrain continues to shift, interventions must be designed to be iterative, reversible, and reflexive. What works in 2025 may produce harm in 2030. Respondents like R10, who completed his deployment only recently, described how tightening surveillance after UNSCR 2397 changed the cost-benefit calculation entirely: “They took more from us, but we also learned more. It was harder, but more revealing.” These observations underscore the need for continuous recalibration, not just of technical strategy, but of ethical framing.

Legal classifications alone, while vital, are insufficient. The ILO’s Forced Labour Convention provides a critical normative anchor, and there is no doubt that North Korean deployments meet its core criteria: document confiscation, surveillance, threats of reprisal. However, the lived reality described by respondents rarely maps cleanly onto a binary of ‘free’ or ‘unfree.’ Their experiences reside in the grey zone between coercion and volition, constraint and calculation. R4, who worked in Novosibirsk for over five years, put it plainly, “No one forced me to go. But everything else was forced after I got there.” The ambiguity is the system. And any serious strategy must engage with it, not resolve it prematurely in the name of moral clarity.

How do we protect without infantilising, act without assuming finality, intervene without foreclosing transformation? This is not a call for passivity. It is a call for attention, for strategy

that begins in uncertainty and refuses the illusion of final solutions. The testimonies gathered in this study offer three interlocking insights: first, that what begins as coercion may end in rupture; second, that endurance under duress can carry epistemic weight; and third, that transformation is not linear, nor externally engineered, it emerges from within.

Intervention, in this context, must not be seen as a 'single fix' or as an immediate, conclusive solution to a geopolitical issue. It must make space for contradiction, ambiguity, and recalibration. It must avoid replicating the totalitarian tendencies it opposes under the banner of humanitarian certainty and international security. And above all, it must honour the knowledge, risk, and resilience of those who navigate these systems every day not as victims alone, but as agents of constrained, quiet, but potentially transformative change.

From Biafra to Goma, from Gaza to Syria, the history of international intervention is also a history of walking on a thin line. Intervention can illuminate, but it can also obscure; it can open doors for the affected, but just as often, it closes them. To intervene is not to resolve the paradox, but to dwell within it. To intervene, nations, international bodies, and private entities must accept that assistance may simultaneously constrain and awaken, exploit and empower.

Conclusion

In this study, I have explored the layered and often conflicting realities of North Korea's overseas labour programme through three interlocking vantage points: the state, the worker, and the international community. Together, these perspectives reveal a system sustained not by clear, coherent policy, but by paradox, one whose internal contradictions simultaneously reinforce and destabilise the very control it seeks to maintain.

First, from the state's perspective, the programme reflects what I describe as totalitarian resilience: a strategy of managed exposure, designed to extract maximum economic and political value while minimising ideological risk. North Korea does not merely export labour; it exports obedience. Through curated deployments, state-imposed quotas, and orchestrated surveillance, Pyongyang attempts to reproduce its domestic architecture of discipline abroad. This is not simply a programme of economic extraction. It is a calculated wager that limited exposure to foreign environments can be monetised without compromising ideological control. At the same time that very wager contains its own undoing. Exposure, by its nature, resists full containment. What is intended as control becomes, over time, a seed of personal autonomy.

Second, from the perspective of the workers themselves, the programme is both a site of exploitation and awakening. The testimonies I gathered paint a vivid picture of relentless labour, withheld wages, surveillance, and fear. And at the same time within that hardship, many described moments of realisation: observing alternative ways of life, feeling a quiet yet growing sense of dissonance. These moments rarely triggered immediate revolt. Instead, they provoked questions. They prompted internal reckonings. And, for some, they became catalysts for defection or for subtle, quiet resistance. What began as a survival strategy often evolved into a reorientation of self. This is the paradox that lies at the heart of exposure: while workers are sent abroad to serve the state, some emerge from that experience fundamentally changed.

Third, and perhaps most difficult to navigate, is the position of the international community. Here, the paradox is intervention itself. Efforts to dismantle or disrupt the programme, through sanctions, repatriations, or corporate compliance regimes, may succeed in curtailing revenue and signalling disapproval. But they also risk severing one of the few remaining pathways through which North Koreans can encounter the outside world. What is framed as protection may, in some cases, functionally assist the state's deeper goal: to keep its people sealed off. This leaves international actors facing a dilemma that has no perfect resolution. I do not argue against action. But I do argue that action must be taken with full awareness of its trade-offs and, crucially, in conversation with the needs and experiences of workers themselves.

However, even this already fraught possibility of intervention is narrowing further. In June 2025, the U.S. State Department announced a complete withdrawal of support from the UN Human Rights Council and the Security Council, alongside deep reductions across the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (Amnesty International 2025; Global Observatory 2025; Radio Free Asia 2025). These changes are not merely administrative. They represent a structural retreat from accountability at precisely the moment it is most needed. For Pyongyang, this signals not just neglect, but permission, a tacit endorsement of a world in which oversight is negotiable, and where transactionalism increasingly eclipses human dignity.

This triadic lens of state, worker, and world has helped me trace the contours of a system that is more than the sum of its abuses. It is coercive and adaptive. Extractive and revealing. It demands from academia, advocates, policymakers, and institutions, a willingness to engage with contradiction rather than retreat from it. To see the worker as neither pure victim nor romanticised agent.

The testimonies that anchor this research reminded me that totalitarian systems are rarely undone through confrontation alone. They are weakened by contradiction, by small acts of endurance, by moments of cognitive rupture that cannot be unseen. The regime's attempt to choreograph obedience abroad is already faltering, not because the outside world stormed its gates, but because a handful of workers saw something they were never meant to see, and began to think differently. That shift, often invisible and at times painful, is perhaps the most powerful form of dissent.

What should be done, then? I do not offer easy answers, but I suggest several orientations. First, responses must be context-specific, recognising that different host states and sectors require different forms of engagement. Second, a harm-reduction approach may sometimes serve workers better than absolute abolition. Measures that enable anonymous reporting, legal assistance, or safe exits do not dismantle the system, but they may widen its cracks. Third, we must centre the worker. Their autonomy, however constrained, should remain the reference point for all action. I do not argue that the system should be tolerated. I argue that dismantling it without care may impose a different kind of harm, one borne disproportionately by those with the least say in the matter. The question is not whether to intervene, but how and with what posture, what risk, and whose voices in mind.

North Korea's overseas labour system is a tool of economic extraction and political repression. Moreover, it is a fragile and one of only remaining avenues, a narrow opening through which, at times, light still finds its way in. DPRK's wager that exposure can be tightly

managed, that workers can be sent out and return ideologically intact is already coming undone. In the silent moment when a worker, far from home, begins to wonder: “what if everything I was told is not true?” That question does not end the system. It unsettles it. Then totalitarian control, however robust in form, is rarely immune to its own contradictions. The reactivation of deployments post-COVID19 signals not a return to stability, but a deepening of risk. What began as a programme of hard currency accumulation has now acquired more overtly militarised contours. Construction units have been rebranded as combat brigades. Workers, in some cases, now accompany weapons. This shift complicates the ethical terrain further. It shows how a system that once relied on enforced productivity can be recalibrated for geopolitical confrontation.

However, the fundamental paradox remains. Even now, Pyongyang needs the very exposure it fears. With few allies and constrained resources, it will likely continue to leverage labour as currency. But every deployment it initiates is also an encounter it cannot fully control. And every worker it sends out remains a potential conduit for the uncontrollable. This is why any credible response must begin not with certainty, but with attentiveness. Attentiveness to the layered nature of harm. To the differences between intention and outcome. To the fact that dismantling a system too bluntly can sometimes leave the most vulnerable worse off than before. The challenge is not whether to intervene. It is how, and with what assumptions, what risks, and whose voices are at the centre. To understand exposure not as inherently emancipatory, but as a site of ambiguity and risk.

Exposure is not liberation. However, neither is neutral. Of discomfort, contradiction, and sometimes, change. That change is rarely linear. But it begins, often, in the most unremarkable of moments. When a worker looks out at an unscripted world and feels, for the first time in his or her life, that the ground beneath their certainty has shifted. That moment does not register on any formal ledger. But it is a significant moment. Because Pyongyang does not fear collapse. It fears doubt.

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Appendix 1

Demographic and Employment Details of Interviewed Overseas

Construction Workers

ID	Gender	Year of Birth	Dispatched Location	Year of First Departure	Duration of Employment Abroad	Position	Interview Date
R1	Male	1969	Russia	Jan 2007	4 yrs + 2 yrs	Construction Worker	1st June 2025
R2	Male	1962	Ufa, Russia	Sept 2009	~22 months	Construction Worker	8th June 2025
R3	Male	1969	Chita, Russia	Jul 2010	~4 yrs	Construction Worker	12th June 2025
R4	Male	1978	Novosibirsk, Russia	Jun 2011	5½ yrs	Construction Worker	1st June 2025
R5	Male	1972	Vladivostok, Russia	Dec 2012	2 yrs	Construction Worker	11th June 2025
R6	Male	1965	St. Petersburg, Russia	Dec 2013	2 yrs 8 months	Construction Worker	8th June 2025
R7	Male	1999	Vladivostok, Russia	Jul 2019	2½ yrs	Construction Worker	8th June 2025
R8	Male	1996	Vladivostok, Russia	Oct 2019	2 yrs	Construction Worker	12th June 2025
R9	Male	1998	Vladivostok, Russia	Oct 2019	Just over 2 yrs	Construction Worker	8th June 2025
R10	Male	1972	Moscow, Russia	May 2021	3 yrs	Construction Worker	1st June 2025

Appendix 2

Interview Questionnaire on North Korean Overseas Workers

북한 해외 노동자 관련 인터뷰 질문지 Interview Questionnaire on North Korean Overseas Workers

이 인터뷰는 옥스퍼드대학교 국제개발학과 난민 및 강제이주학 석사 논문을 위한 기초 자료 수집의 일환입니다. 모든 질문에 답하실 필요는 없으며, 원하실 경우 언제든지 건너뛰거나 중단하실 수 있습니다. 귀하의 신원은 철저히 익명으로 보호됩니다.

This interview is part of a data collection effort for a master's thesis on Refugees and Forced Migration at the University of Oxford's Department of International Development. You are not required to answer all questions, and you may skip or stop at any time. Your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

일반 배경 General Background

1. 성별 ?

What is your gender?

2. 해외로 나오신 시기는 언제인가요?

When were you dispatched abroad?

3. 해외 노동에 직접 자발적으로 지원하신 건가요? 그렇다면 어떤 이유에서였나요?

Did you voluntarily apply to work overseas? If so, what was your reason for doing so?

4. 어느 나라, 어느 도시로 파견되었나요?

Which country and city were you sent to?

5. 그곳에 얼마나 머무르셨나요?

How long did you stay there?

6. 한국에는 언제, 어떤 경로로 오시게 되었나요?

When and how did you come to South Korea?

해외 노동 경험 Overseas work experience

7. 해외에서 어떤 종류의 일을 하셨나요? (예: 건설, 제조업, 서비스업 등)

What kind of work did you do overseas? (e.g., construction, manufacturing, service industry, etc.)

8. 당시의 근무 환경은 어땠나요? (예: 근무 시간, 임금, 감시 체계, 활동의 제약 등)

What were the working conditions like at the time? (e.g., working hours, wages, surveillance system, restrictions on activities, etc.)

9. 작업장을 자유롭게 드나들 수 있었나요? 제한이 있었다면 어떤 방식이었는지 설명해 주실 수 있나요?

Were you able to freely enter and exit the workplace? If there were restrictions, could you explain what they were?

10. 생활 환경은 어떠셨나요? (예: 숙소, 식사, 위생 등)

How was your living environment? (e.g., accommodation, meals, hygiene, etc.)

11. 본인 또는 주변에서 학대나 인권침해를 겪은 사례가 있었나요?

Have you or anyone around you experienced abuse or human rights violations?

12. 노동에 대한 보상은 받으셨나요? 받으셨다면, 그 임금은 어떤 방식으로 지급·관리되었는지 말씀해 주세요. Did you receive compensation for your work? If so, please describe how your wages were paid and managed.

13. 해외에서 하셨던 노동이 ‘강제 노동’이라고 생각하십니까? 이유는?

Do you consider the work you did overseas to be “forced labour”? Why?

이동 과정 및 귀환 (해당되는 경우) Transportation and return (if applicable)

14. 파견국으로 이동할 때 어떤 경로와 교통수단을 이용하셨나요? 이동 중 숙소, 감시, 통제 상황도 함께 말씀해 주실 수 있을까요? What route and means of transportation did you use to travel to the country of assignment? Could you also describe your accommodation, surveillance, and control situation during your trip?

15. 해외에 머무는 동안 북한에 있는 가족과 연락이 가능했나요?

Were you able to contact your family in North Korea while you were abroad?

16. 귀국하거나 도중에 탈출을 시도한 적이 있나요? 있었다면 어떤 결과가 있었는지 이야기해 주실 수 있나요?

Have you ever attempted to return home or escape while abroad? If so, what were the results?

17. 북한으로 돌아간 이후 조사를 받거나 처벌을 받은 경험이 있으신가요?

Have you been investigated or punished after returning to North Korea?

탈북 결정에 미친 영향 Factors influencing the decision to defect

18. 해외 파견 경험이 탈북 결심에 어떤 영향을 미쳤다고 생각하시나요?

How do you think your overseas experience influenced your decision to defect?

19. 북한 밖에서의 생활이 북한이나 외부 세계에 대한 인식을 바꾸는 계기가 되었나요?

Did living outside North Korea change your perception of North Korea or the outside world?

20. 탈북을 결심하게 된 구체적인 계기나 사건이 있었나요?

Was there a specific event or circumstance that led you to decide to defect?

21. 해외에서 얻은 정보나 경험이 북한에 있는 사람들에게 도움이 되었던 적이 있나요?

Has information or experience gained overseas ever been helpful to people in North Korea?

22. 해외에서 번 돈이 북한에 있는 가족이나 지인들의 삶에 실질적으로 도움이 되었나요?

Did the money you earned overseas actually help your family or acquaintances in North Korea?

23. 북한 내에서 해외 파견 경험자에 대해 가장 부러워하는 점은 어떤 부분이라고 생각하시나요?
What do you think is the most envied aspect of overseas experience among those who have been dispatched abroad from North Korea?

남한 정착 이후 After re-settling in South Korea

24. 한국에 정착하신 이후의 전반적인 경험은 어떠셨나요? 정착 과정에서 가장 어려웠던 점은 무엇이었습니까? How has your overall experience been since settling in Korea? What was the most difficult part of the settlement process?

25. 해외 노동 경험이 있는 분들과 그렇지 않은 분들 간에 정착 경험에 차이가 있다고 느끼시나요? Do you feel that there is a difference in the settlement experience between those who have overseas work experience and those who do not?

26. 해외 강제 노동 피해 경험이 있는 분들을 위해 어떤 종류의 지원이 가장 필요하다고 생각하시나요?
What kind of support do you think is most needed for people who have experienced forced labour overseas?

27. 해외 노동자에 대해 남한이나 국제사회가 가장 오해하고 있는 점은 무엇이라고 생각하시나요?
What do you think is the biggest misunderstanding that South Korea and the international community have about the North Korean overseas workers?

28. 남한 정부나 국제사회가 해외 노동 문제에 대해 어떻게 대응해야 한다고 보시나요?
How do you think the South Korean government and the international community should respond to overseas labour issues?

참여해 주셔서 진심으로 감사드립니다.

Thank you very much for participating.