Women in South Korea suffer discrimination in the home, in the workplace and in society at large. While Amnesty International’s main work on South Korea has focused on issues related to civil and political rights, the organization promotes the full range of rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. This summary gives a general background on the situation of women in Korea today. It gives more specific information about prison conditions, political prisoners and police ill-treatment, which are concerns Amnesty International has raised with the South Korean Government.

Amnesty International is limited by its mandate and the resources available to it. Further information about women’s rights can be obtained from human rights and women’s organizations in South Korea.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

While women constitute some 40% of the workforce and are well educated, they are under-represented in the professions and their earnings are reported to be around 60% of male earnings. Only 3.6% of lawmakers are reported to be women and representation in local politics is even lower. Domestic violence, sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace, and rape have for many years been a serious problem.

Positive developments in 1997 included enactment of the Law to Prevent Domestic Violence. An amendment to the Nationality Act entitled the children of a foreign man and a Korean woman to obtain Korean nationality. In May 1998 the government introduced an amendment to the Civil Law abolishing a provision which had prohibited women from remarrying until six months after a divorce. The provision had not applied to men. These developments were largely due to pressure from the women’s movement in South Korea.

President Kim Dae-jung, who took office in February 1998, has committed his government to raising the political representation of women by installing a quota system of 30% representation both at national and local level. He has established a new government advisory committee for women’s affairs but women’s organizations are concerned that this committee does
not have the power or the profile it needs. They have called for the new government’s early commitments to enhancing women’ rights to be translated into action.

The economic crisis in Korea has highlighted the problems associated with enforcing government commitments. In February 1998 new labour legislation permitting widespread layoffs was adopted by the National Assembly but one of the conditions attached to this legislation was a prohibition on redundancy on the grounds of gender. In practice, however, women have been laid-off in larger numbers than men. This appears to be partly because most women are employed in small companies (many of which have gone bankrupt) and because many women do part-time or temporary jobs, which have been the first jobs to be lost. But there have also been many reported cases of overt discrimination where women have been made redundant because they are not considered to be the family’s main earner and are considered less likely or able to resist than their male colleagues.

**PRISON CONDITIONS**

In recent years Amnesty International has expressed concern about aspects of the prison system in South Korea which do not conform with international standards. These include the lack of medical facilities and care, restrictions on exercise, use of solitary confinement, lack of heating in winter and punishments inflicted on prisoners. While these concerns relate to male and female prisoners, there are some particular concerns about the situation of women prisoners. These concerns have been described to Amnesty International by released political prisoners, but are likely to equally affect women held for ordinary criminal offences.

Women constitute a small percentage of the prison population and Chongju Prison is the only women’s prison. Women held in other prisons are detained separately from men. Female prisoners in most prisons are reported to have difficulty obtaining items of clothing and footwear of the correct size because prison clothing is mainly designed for men. They also report difficulties obtaining sanitary items. There appears to be no special provision for the health needs of women prisoners who are also reported to have fewer opportunities for vocational training than men.

In all prisons, political prisoners are held separately from ordinary criminals. Because there are so few female political prisoners, they are invariably held in solitary confinement with little or no human contact. Son Min-young, a political prisoner who was released in October 1997, said she was held in solitary confinement for three years and was not permitted to talk with other inmates. When she was released she found it difficult to communicate through lack of practice. She said, “In my third year of imprisonment I could not remember the names of close friends and family and easy everyday conversational vocabulary. I had difficulty speaking during visiting hours. I tried to read aloud and sing for at least an hour everyday, but I would soon lose my voice. Even now, I can only speak comfortably for about two hours a day and in many instances my voice sounds strained as if it was machine-made”. (Political prisoners are generally allowed only two very short family visits per month). Son Min-young also found it difficult to obtain medical treatment for arthritis or to have access to a doctor.

**POLITICAL PRISONERS AND POLICE ILL-TREATMENT**

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1The UN Human Rights Committee has noted that “prolonged solitary confinement of the detained of imprisoned person may amount to acts prohibited by Article 7” (of the ICCPR, prohibiting torture and ill-treatment). Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 20 (44) (Article 7) at para. 6.
In March 1998 there were at least 250 prisoners held under the National Security Law, many held for the non-violent exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and association. Most political prisoners are men, but women are the main force behind campaigns to provide support for the families of political prisoners and care for released political prisoners who have no family members in South Korea.

While the vast majority of political prisoners are men, women are the indirect victims of political imprisonment. The wives of political prisoners are left to raise families alone but are sometimes unable to obtain work because of the stigma attached to political prisoners, and in particular those considered to be communist sympathisers. For example, the wife of political prisoner Chang Jang-ho qualified as a teacher in 1992, the year he was arrested and sentenced to 12 years’ imprisonment under the National Security Law. A job offer was withdrawn and she has been unable to find teaching work since then.

Amnesty International is campaigning on behalf of several female political prisoners including Chong Min-ju, aged 25, and Lee Hye-jong, aged 23, students who were arrested in October 1995 and sentenced to three years’ imprisonment under the National Security Law for making an unauthorized visit to North Korea. They had travelled there as representatives of the student organization Hanchongryon (National Federation of University Student Councils) to participate in a reunification celebration to mark the 50th anniversary of Korea’s liberation from Japanese rule. During their stay in North Korea they visited universities and tourist sites and met officials and students. Amnesty International believes the two students are held for the non-violent exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and association and is calling for their release. Chong Min-ju is held in Kongju Prison and Lee Hye-jong is held in Hongsong Prison. Amnesty International does not have specific information about their conditions of imprisonment.

Ham Jung-hee, aged 33, and Byon Ui-sook, aged 31, were arrested in September 1992 by the Agency for National Security Planning (ANSP, South Korea’s intelligence agency) for involvement in a large and controversial case called the "South Korea Workers Party" case. Over 60 people were arrested in the same case, 13 of whom remain in prison. Since 1992 Amnesty International has called for an investigation into the whole case in view of the reported illegality committed by the ANSP and is concerned that many of the prisoners may have been convicted unfairly.

Ham Jung-hee is reported to have been denied access to her lawyer and family for 20 days after her arrest, during which time she claims to have been ill-treated by ANSP interrogators. She was sentenced to seven years’ imprisonment under the National Security Law for passing "state secrets" to North Korea but according to her lawyers this information consisted of newspaper cuttings and other materials which are publicly available in South Korea. Ham Jung-hee is currently held in Wonju Prison. Amnesty International does not have specific details of her conditions of imprisonment.

During interrogation by the ANSP, Byon Ui-sook said she was deprived of sleep for long periods, threatened and subjected to sexual harassment. She was sentenced to 10 years’ imprisonment under the National Security Law for making an unauthorized visit to North Korea in 1991 and divulging "state secrets" to North Korea. In her defence, Byon said she had visited North Korea to learn more about its people and help bring about reunification of the two Koreas.
There have been dozens of National Security Law arrests in the first few months of 1998, including several women. They include Chu Su-young who was one of 17 members of a group called "International Socialists" who were arrested on 7 May on charges of "praising" and "benefitting" North Korea. She claims to have been threatened and interrogated throughout the night of 7 May, although she was in poor health having suffered a leg fracture two weeks earlier.

Women who are detained and questioned by the police or the ANSP claim to have been subjected to threats of a sexual nature during interrogation. It is often difficult to obtain specific information about such abuse as women are reluctant to speak out, but Amnesty International is concerned that there are inadequate safeguards to protect the rights of detained women. In 1996 seven women made an official complaint of ill-treatment following an incident at Yonsei University in Seoul where some 2000 female students were detained on 20 August following a student demonstration. Many of these students reported that during arrest and interrogation police had touched their breasts, shouted insults of a sexual nature and threatened rape. One student told Amnesty International that she was on the 5th floor of the university building when the police burst in and ordered her and other women to descend the stairs to the bottom. As they did so, policemen were standing on either side of the stairway and grabbed at their breasts and other parts of their body. With the help of women’s organizations, seven students filed a complaint against the head of the National Police Administration, but the prosecution rejected the complaint on the grounds that there was insufficient evidence. This incident demonstrated an urgent need to improve police training in human rights protection, but to Amnesty International’s knowledge this has not occurred.