

Opening the Door to Peace on the Korean Peninsula: Women Cross DMZ

Christine Ahn

Interviewed by Gregory Elich

On July 27, 1953, after two years of negotiations, hostilities on the Korean Peninsula were brought to a halt with an armistice agreement. The signatories, the United States on behalf of the UN Command, China, and North Korea, committed to sign a peace treaty. Sixty-two years later, the Korean people are still waiting for that peace treaty, reconciliation, and the bringing together of divided families.

Since taking office, the Obama Administration has engaged in no meaningful dialogue or diplomatic contact with North Korea, and relations between the two Koreas have become more deeply strained.

Christine Ahn, a long-time activist on issues concerning Korea, had a vision. Since current relations are at an impasse, perhaps women could take the initiative and act as a spark to progress. She went on to organize Women Cross DMZ, comprised of thirty accomplished women of varied backgrounds, including women's advocate Gloria Steinem and Nobel Peace laureates Mairead Maguire and Leymah Gbowee.

In May of this year, Women Cross DMZ realized Ahn's dream by crossing the border between the two Koreas and meeting with women on both sides of the divide. By crossing the demilitarized zone (DMZ), the group symbolically demonstrated that if the will exists there are no divisions that cannot be overcome.

There were many challenges to overcome,

beginning with the dominant political culture in the West demanding total adherence to the demonization and isolation of North Korea. Anyone seeking to open a channel of engagement to advance the cause of reconciliation can expect to be vilified.

Not surprisingly, there was a persistent effort by sectors of the media to disparage Women Cross DMZ, and significant press coverage was focused on the group's critics. Very little was said about Women Cross DMZ's actual activities and accomplishments in the two Koreas.

[Elich] You've just returned from a remarkable trip. I must confess that my initial thought when I first learned of Women Cross DMZ was that the plan was admirably audacious but had little chance of overcoming the obstacles to its realization. Would you explain what was involved in preparing for the trip?

[Ahn] Well, it was audacious. And totally out of the box. I think it surprised everyone—especially the South Korean women—that we were able to cross the DMZ. Yes, enormous work went into preparing for this historic crossing. It's one thing to organize a conference or a demonstration in one place; imagine trying to do both in these two completely different places without knowing whether we could move ahead on the dates planned. It was stressful but also incredibly thrilling to actually pull it off.

The idea of this women's peace walk emerged from a dream I had in 2009. I woke up in the middle of the night and read a story about the

Imjin River, a symbolic river that flows north to south through the heart of Korea. It was flooding, and North Korea, to save its farmland, allegedly lifted the floodgates without telling South Korea, and six South Koreans drowned, including a father and his son who were fishing in the early dawn. I remember thinking, why can't these two men—Lee Myung-bak and Kim Jong-il at the time— just pick up the phone and communicate? Sad and frustrated, I went back to sleep. And then I had the most incredible dream.

It was dark and I was wading in the river with others, and we wondered, will they come? Just as the sun rose over the horizon, there was a glow of light gently gliding down the river. It was people, and they were carrying candles in their palms. Then there was the most beautiful scene of family reunions and the deep wailing of elderly mothers holding tightly their grown children they had not seen in 60 years. It was so heartening and moving, yet I wanted to keep going up the river to find the source of the light. And when I finally got there, I could hardly believe my eyes. There was a circle of women stirring something thick, which they poured into little pails that then became the light flowing down the river. It was at that moment I awoke and realized that women will end the Korean War.

Through a fellowship at the University of Michigan, I researched efforts made by Korean women to build peace across the DMZ. For example, in the early 1990s a Japanese woman named Shimizu Sumiko, a member of the Diet, helped support Korean women's wishes to meet at the first gathering of North and South Korean women. Shimizu had heard from a South Korean woman at a Northeast Asia Peace and Security conference that in order to stop the arms race in the region, the Korean War needed to end. Shimizu then contacted a North Korean colleague, and in May 1991, they organized the first gathering of North and South Korean women in Tokyo for a conference

on Peace in Asia and the Role of Women. They had several meetings, but when the political situation worsened, their communication would be halted. But with the Sunshine Policy, and particularly the June 15th North-South Joint Declaration in 2000, different sectors of women's groups in North and South Korea regularly met in both North and South Korea to work towards peaceful reunification. When the conservative South Korean president Lee Myung-bak came to power, these meetings came to a halt. The role that Shimizu played planted the seed in my mind that international women had an important role to play in bringing North and South Korean women together, especially during moments of political impasse between the two Koreas. Then when five New Zealanders crossed the DMZ by motorbike in 2013, I thought -- if they can cross, international women peacemakers can certainly cross too! I contacted the Kiwis and asked them how they did it. They told me that they first contacted North Korea and requested formal permission to cross.

In the winter of 2013, I contacted the DPRK [Democratic People's Republic of Korea: the formal name of North Korea] Permanent Mission to the United Nations. I knew one of the counselors there who I had met years ago when I first visited Pyongyang on a peace delegation, so I approached him about the idea. He asked me to submit a proposal that he then forwarded to Pyongyang. For over 15 years, I had worked with a wide range of organizations advocating for peace and engagement with North Korea, including with the Nautilus Institute where I began and with a Korean American seed scientist supporting the rehabilitation of North Korean cooperative farms. I'd long written about the need for peace and engagement, whether through my column at *Foreign Policy In Focus* or through op-eds such as in *The New York Times*, and I organized several forums across the country through the Korea Policy Institute and the National Campaign to End the Korean War, two

organizations that I helped form. With this track record, I got the green light to come to Pyongyang and discuss the idea with the Korean Committee for Solidarity with the World's People [KCSWP]. As soon as I got some indication that this might be possible, I contacted Gloria Steinem, a friend I'd made over our work together in support of villagers opposing a South Korean naval base at Gangjeong on Jeju Island. She responded right away that she would join me, that she had lost several high school classmates in the Korean War, and that she would do what she could to help heal the division.

In late February 2013, I traveled to North Korea with Hye-Jung Park, a Korean-American filmmaker and longtime Korea peace and reunification activist. Hye-Jung had significant experience working in North Korea, including shooting documentaries, and during our meeting with the KCSWP, her insight, translation and cross-cultural communication proved invaluable. Unfortunately, my 22-month old daughter got very ill on the trip, so I had to leave immediately after our meeting, but Hye-Jung stayed on and was able to obtain a Letter of Intent from the Secretary General of the committee stating their interest in moving this peace walk forward, with the firm caveat: only if conditions were ripe.

With that letter in hand, Gloria reached out to Cora Weiss, the President of the Hague Appeal for Peace and a legendary anti-war activist who helped draft UN Security Council Resolution 1325, and I reached out to Medea Benjamin, co-founder of Code Pink, and we got going on recruiting several prominent women peacemakers, including two Nobel Peace Laureates, Mairead Maguire from Northern Ireland and Leymah Gbowee from Liberia, and many other amazing women from a broad range of political perspectives and areas of expertise. In the end, we were thirty incredibly savvy peace women with enormous collective experience in conflict resolution, human rights,

foreign policy, international relations and demilitarization.

The challenge now was South Korea. The women's peace movement there was and still is fragmented, in part because of the hardline policies stemming from the Lee Myung Bk administration, including the use of the National Security Law to attack the opposition party, reunification activists and labor groups, but also because some of the more progressive activists were experiencing political turmoil due to the split of the Unified Progressive Party and subsequent banning of the party in the fall of 2014. The red-baiting by the government and conservative extremist groups of people engaging with North Koreans really put a chill on those involved in peace and reunification work, which made it extremely difficult to get firm commitments from South Korean women leaders in the peace and reunification movement. They all loved the idea, but they were nervous, and some didn't believe that we would be able to pull it off. They said that if we could get President Park Geun-hye's approval, they would be on board. But I felt we needed to have their partnership to get President Park's approval. Progressive women working on the international level are very sensitive about stepping on anyone's toes on the grassroots and domestic level, but I felt the political climate called for international women to step up. After a trip to South Korea in September 2014, I made the decision -- the international women would have to approach President Park directly.

On my flight back to the US, I drafted a letter to President Park, the women on the WCDMZ Organizing Committee edited it, and Gloria Steinem sent it to a high-level UN official she knew, who wrote back enthusiastically that the idea for the women's peace walk was "spectacular." The South Korean government obviously didn't agree because after we had sent it to the ROK [Republic of Korea: the formal name of South Korea] Mission at the

United Nations, we never received a response. In fact, for months we sent several letters to the UN Mission and the ROK ambassador to the United States, but the only reply we got was “silence”. Meanwhile, we explored channels for obtaining approval from the UN Command which has jurisdiction over the DMZ.

On Christmas Eve in 2014, our advisor, former New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, received an email from the UN Command, basically stating that once they received approvals from both sides they would be prepared to facilitate our crossing. It felt like a breath of fresh air to us that in fact the UN Command, headed by the U.S., might actually be amenable to this.

In fact we were caught in a bureaucratic game between the UN Command and the South Korean government for months. We weren't certain whether they were inadvertently sending us down blind paths, they didn't know who could make the decision, or they didn't want to agree to our crossing the DMZ. But one thing was clear: all parties lacked procedures to decide upon or manage such crossings. One of our unofficial advisors, a longtime backchannel Korea negotiator, had visited a high level official in South Korea who intimated that they weren't going to allow us to cross, and that if we pushed hard enough, things would get ugly. I didn't exactly know what that meant, but I suspected that it would look something like the CNN segment or the Foreign Policy piece discrediting our delegation—and me specifically—by describing us as pro-North.

Thanks to the determined push of our delegation, especially by Mairead Maguire, we decided to proceed and if South Korea wasn't willing to give us the green light, we would carry out parallel events and walks in North and South Korea without crossing the DMZ. We would still accomplish what we set out to do, which was to meet with North and South Korean women and walk with them. Of course

we hoped to cross the DMZ because of the symbolic significance of bridging this man-made militarized division, but we also needed agency as women to take the initiative.

Then for some undisclosed reason, partly due to the ebola travel ban, Pyongyang started getting cold feet. They signaled that this couldn't go forward in May, which was hugely deflating. The whole project was now starting to unravel, and it was February. If North Korea wouldn't grant us visas, we would only have an event in South Korea. Things were not going well.

Still, we were determined to have a women's peace walk this year on May 24, International Women's Day for Peace and Disarmament, so we organized a press conference at the UN during the Commission on the Status of Women meetings. It was the 20th anniversary of the historic Beijing World Conference on Women and the 15th anniversary of UNSC Resolution 1325 on women and peacebuilding, a fitting occasion to announce our peace walk. We got major media coverage, including from the Associated Press and *The New York Times*, which were positive, and I believe this was what finally elicited a response from the South Korean government, which informed us that they would soon make a decision. I then got a call from the DPRK Mission to the UN inviting me to come to Pyongyang and discuss details of the peace walk. Within a week, I packed my bags and flew to North Korea, where I spent several days meeting with various committees to explore the idea. They were very ambivalent -- this was very risky for them. At one point, an official asked me point blank “What do these women think about North Korea?” and I answered, “To be honest with you, I don't know since they have never come here, but they are peace women, and they are invested in this because they believe that war is not the answer.” I spent many hours waiting in my room at the Koryo Hotel in Pyongyang wondering how they would respond. I left

Pyongyang without a firm answer.

A few days after I returned to the US at the end of March, the news finally came: Pyongyang approved our peace walk. Now we had some leverage to put pressure on South Korea. In mid-April, we got a very vaguely worded letter from the South Korean Ministry of Unification stating that they would “render full cooperation” upon receiving final confirmation from the relevant North Korean entity. That letter was finally hand-delivered via the Red Cross channel from the DPRK to the ROK in early May, and it wasn’t until we were about to board our flights to Beijing that we heard from media reports that South Korea would allow us to cross the DMZ at Kaesong.

Basically, we had to plan in the dark, in the hope and with a collective determination that South Korea would ultimately give us the green light. It wasn’t easy, and I certainly aged in this process.

[Elich] Just organizing the trip alone was a major challenge. Meanwhile, you also had to cope with challenges of a different sort. Some of those who wish to maintain tensions on the Korean Peninsula wanted to see your project fail. There was at least one endeavor to pressure members to abandon the walk. When the effort to break up your group failed, your opponents attempted to hijack the agenda of Women Cross DMZ, and push the group into doing their bidding on the trip rather than carrying out its planned mission. Your critics found a ready audience among many in the Western media, and the misrepresentations and attacks on your group tended to drown out any mention of the actual goals of Women Cross DMZ. Your thoughts?

[Ahn] Without a doubt, those opposed to peace and engagement did their best to vilify me and our delegation, which would give the South Korean government an excuse to deny our DMZ crossing. But I think our walk was too powerful conceptually to stop. We were quite clear what

we stood for, and while that’s not how CNN and some other corporate media portrayed us, some top-tier media communicated our goal quite clearly: to replace the armistice with a peace treaty, to reunite families, and ensure women’s leadership in the peace process.

It was unfortunate that these self-described human rights advocates got so much airtime when their perspective is so fringe in comparison to longtime human rights advocates who believe that peace and engagement are crucial towards improving human rights. One such human rights leader who recognized the possibilities of the walk, Jack Rendler, the North Korea Country Specialist for Amnesty International, sent an endorsement, in which he wrote, “The 2015 Women’s Walk for Peace in Korea is precisely the kind of citizen activist initiative which created and has sustained the international human rights movement. Christine Ahn and the other organizers of this Walk should be congratulated for their insight and courage. I hope and expect that their efforts will make a significant contribution to the well-being of all Koreans.” Jack’s email came at just the moment when the CNN segment framed me as a pro-North apologist; it was a courageous step for him as a human rights leader in this highly politicized field. Mairead Maguire said it brilliantly at the press conference in Dorasan Station: “You can get to human rights when you have a normal situation and not a country at war.”

The unresolved Korean War is the oldest and most sophisticated propaganda war in modern history. We’re of course rightly focused on halting nuclear weapons proliferation and the military build-up, but the hard work is overcoming the fissure in people’s hearts and minds, the deep mistrust, and unresolved human trauma. Towards that end, our goal is to reach mature and thoughtful people to persuade them that another future beyond permanent warfare is possible and necessary.

When the situation is so entrenched in its tragedy, Korea doesn't need another round of six-party talks; it needs imagination that this border can and must be crossed. Not only do I believe that our walk was helpful to revive the peace, reconciliation and reunification movements in Korea and around the world, but it also gives a shot of energy to women's movements worldwide about the crucial role of women in peacemaking, foreign policy, and international relations.

[Elich]] That leads me to the topic I am particularly interested in covering. The very essence of what Women Cross DMZ was about is the person-to-person contacts and attempts to establish dialogue with women on both sides of the border. It is precisely this that has been missing from Western media reports, which were almost uniformly superficial in their coverage. Let's start with your time in Pyongyang. Who did you meet? What were the discussions like? What were some of the messages each side had for the other? Were contacts strictly through formal meetings, or were there also opportunities for more informal communication?



The delegation arrives in Pyongyang

[Ahn] We had a packed schedule in North Korea. From the moment we landed, we checked into our hotel and were shuttled right

away to a formal dinner hosted by the chairwoman of the KCSWP, Kim Jong-Suk, who coincidentally has the same name as Kim Il Sung's late wife. Our delegates were paired with North Korean women leaders from a variety of different backgrounds. It was a nice mix and a wonderful surprise for many of the international women to realize that North Korean women actually got to travel to other parts of the world. For example, Medea Benjamin of Code Pink sat next to Chae Choon-Hee, the vice chair of the Korean Democratic Women's Union, who was fluent in Spanish and had just returned from Mexico, where she participated in a labor conference. Writer-activist Gwyn Kirk sat next to a woman who was a specialist on environmental issues, especially energy and sustainable agriculture. Although it was a little strange at first—the high ceilings, dramatic landscape painting, fluorescent lights, and background noise of the low-grade PA system—by the end of the evening, the room was abuzz with connections and chatter. Women can get warm pretty quickly!

On day two, we started our official tour of Pyongyang with a visit to Mangyongdae, the birthplace of Kim Il Sung. During my last preparation visit to North Korea, I gingerly brought up the need to skip a visit to Mansudae, the towering statues of North Korean founder Kim Il Sung and his late successor Kim Jong-Il. I explained that our delegation was comprised of feminists and that given what they had heard about North Korea through the western press, some would be very uncomfortable. As an alternative, they suggested we visit Mangyongdae, explaining that it was important to understand the history of North Korea and learn about the North Korean founder, Kim Il Sung. To my mind, it was a fair compromise if we could skip Mansudae.

When we arrived at Mangyongdae, there was a major press corps presence, including the

Associated Press, North Korean, Chinese and Japanese media. I could see how the North Korean government was going to use our visit there to show that we were there to pay our respects to the founder of North Korea, *and* how our critics were going to have a field day when they saw images of our group at the birthplace of Kim Il Sung. No matter what we did or didn't do, merely being in North Korea to engage with women was going to be used to advance various political agendas.



North Korean child performs for international delegation at elementary school

I could see that the press focused on Gloria, and so I did my best to try to block shots of her -- which is really funny because I'm about 5'0, and Gloria is about 6'0. I was so preoccupied with protecting the delegation that I was sort of sidelined by a North Korean reporter from *Rodong Sinmun* who came up and asked me what I thought about the North Korean founder. Seeing the trap I was in, I said that my late mother who grew up during the colonial period knew -- despite her 6th grade education and living her adult life in South Korea with so much anti-North Korean propaganda -- that Kim Il Sung was a guerrilla fighter who fought for Korea's independence. The North Korean media nevertheless reported that I had praised

the North Korean leader, allowing the South Korean media to have a field day. This is so amusing because they never believe anything the North Korean media say except when it serves their own agenda. Still, the damage was done.

After that, we visited a kindergarten for musically and artistically gifted children. The children were prepared for us, with makeup and costumes to perform. Of course, our delegation went gaga over these adorable children. Some of the women, though, felt sad that these children had to perform for us, that they couldn't just be children. I understand that -- my daughter is three, and I wouldn't want her to have to be a high-performing stressed out child at that young age, but I thought, this is Korean culture, whether in the north, south or overseas. Add that family culture to the nationalistic culture of a poor, underdeveloped country that has been struggling to maintain its sovereignty and dignity in the face of military aggression and sanctions -- and here we came as visitors, the majority from the United States and several with South Korean citizenship. They were going to show their best, that despite hardship, they can still be on par with the outside world, and even excel, as did these gifted North Korean children.

The afternoon site visits were to a women's hospital, a new children's hospital, and the new dormitory building for women workers in a textile factory. Some of us stayed back at the Yanggakdo Hotel to hold a press conference with Eric Talmadge of the Associated Press. Looming large during our trip was the question of where we would cross -- Kaesong or Panmunjom. Before we left for Pyongyang, we held a press conference in Beijing, where we announced our intention to cross at Panmunjom. It was where the South Korean women organizers wanted us to cross, and it was where we hoped to cross because of the historic significance of Panmunjom, since that was where the Armistice Agreement had been

signed and where the two sides continued to confront each other across the DMZ. But in all honesty, I knew it would be nearly impossible. The public relations liaison for the UN Command had already communicated to us by email that Kaesong was more appropriate for civilian crossings whereas Panmunjom was for official government meetings, which is of course precisely why we wanted to cross there.

On day three, Thursday, May 21, we began the International Women's Peace Symposium by listening to the testimonies of six North Korean women, including a five-star general and a woman whose hands were dismembered by US soldiers during the Korean War when she was aged seven. It was a very heavy morning with them sharing their experiences, and us listening to their harrowing stories of the violence and brutality they had experienced and witnessed over sixty years ago, as well as the current form of war being waged against the people of North Korea in the form of US-led sanctions. As the session wrapped up, the international delegation started to embrace many of the North Korean women, sharing their pain -- about the tragedy of the Korean War.

Then Hyun Kyung Chung brought out a quilt with quadrants made by North Korean, South Korean, Korean diaspora and international women. Several of us took a needle and thread and began to sew the quilt as a symbolic gesture of stitching Korea back together. Amid chatter and laughter, I joked with the North Korean general that she was the zippiest in sewing, and she retorted jokingly, "But of course I am the military; we do everything fast and efficiently!" We all laughed and before anyone realized it, the North Korean women broke out into song, singing "Our Hope is Reunification," which is a song that both North and South Koreans sing and which our delegation had been practicing, starting in China and for days afterwards as we traveled by bus. It was a beautiful moment, where we

were able to express our sorrow and empathy. In that moment, we dissipated this sense that the other is the enemy. As Gloria Steinem so poignantly noted during one of our [press conferences](#) in Pyongyang, "The hormones in us, the chemicals that allow us to empathize with each other as human beings do not work on the screen, and do not work on paper. Neurologists will tell you they are only generated when we are physically together with all of our senses. And that does not mean that all of our communication is not useful, but it does mean that nothing on earth can replace being in the same space with all five senses to allow empathy to happen."

That afternoon, we continued the peace symposium where several international women -- Mairead Maguire from Northern Ireland, Leymah Gbowee from Liberia, Takazato Suzuyo from Okinawa, Japan, Patricia Guerrero from Colombia, and Medea Benjamin from the USA -- shared how militarism has impacted women in their communities and how women are mobilizing against it and to build another future. The North Korean women listened with keen interest, and asked informed follow-up questions. After all, when do they have the opportunity to hear stories of women leaders around the world resisting militarism? Rarely, if ever. That's what I wanted to emphasize in planning this trip: that there is a sharing, a two-way transmission that advances the goals of demilitarizing our world.

On day four, we had an outing to the countryside to Mt. Myohyang, and visited the Friendship Museum, which is where gifts from world leaders given to the Kim regime are stored and many foreigners have visited. It's a place to understand the geopolitics of North Korea's friends and allies, but it is also rather suffocating. It's completely airtight to preserve everything, and everyone must put cloth coverings over their shoes as they enter the building. When we went into the rooms with wax figures of Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il and Kim

Il Sung's late wife, Kim Jong-Suk, our guides bowed and some on our delegation felt obligated to do the same so as to be respectful. But for others, this felt oppressive. It was one of those moments where I could understand both sides -- how the North Koreans were raised believing the mythology around Kim Il Sung, and how Westerners were taught how brutal and repressive the North Korean leaders were. There is truth to both sides, no doubt. But I think this situation presented a wonderful opportunity for the international delegation to engage in frank conversation with their guides/interpreters about their discomfort. In trying to explain to our guides why the women felt so uncomfortable, I likened the situation to having North Korean guests visit a museum in the United States that had a wax figure of George W. Bush and expect them to bow or salute. They could see where I was going with this.



**May 23 press conference in Pyongyang:
Suzy Kim, Mairead Maguire, Gloria
Steinem and Christine Ahn via Periscope
(Coleen Baik live streaming) from
Yanggakdo Hotel, Pyongyang**

On day five, Saturday morning, before we left the hotel in Pyongyang to begin our walk at the National Reunification Monument, we held a live press conference via Periscope, a new

application from Twitter which Coleen Baik, a former staff designer at Twitter had coordinated. Gloria Steinem, Mairead Maguire, historian and North Korea specialist Suzy Kim and I fielded questions about what we had experienced in North Korea and the status of our DMZ crossing. It was the first live press conference using Periscope, and from none other than Pyongyang. During the press conference, we announced that we would be crossing at Kaesong rather than at Panmunjom. Many people wondered why we chose Kaesong over Panmunjom, but ultimately the decision wasn't ours. The South Korean government had announced first via the media that they would allow us to cross at the Gyonggi Railway Line, and while we were in North Korea, they sent an official letter from the ROK Ministry of Defense to the DPRK Korean People's Army. Our North Korean hosts informed us that even if we wanted to cross at Panmunjom, the Korean People's Army wouldn't allow it because without South Korea's permission, they could not guarantee our safety and that any small incident in Panmunjom would further intensify already wrought tensions between the two Koreas.

After the press conference, we headed straight to the National Reunification Monument, where some 5,000 North Korean women in traditional dress greeted us. It was awesome to see them all lined up, including an all-women's marching band. The rally began with a speech by Mairead Maguire, followed by the reading of the women's peace declaration by Gloria Steinem, Leymah Gbowee, and Liza Maza. We walked with the North Korean women, and many women also cheered us on along the sidelines, chanting, "Jaju tongil," which means "reunification on our own terms."



Women walk for peace in Pyongyang

After our walk, we boarded the bus headed south towards Kaesong and the DMZ. We settled into a folk village hotel in Kaesong, a beautiful ancient city, which also had solar panels everywhere.

[Elich] How did it go when it came time to depart North Korea and cross over into the south? What kind of farewell did you receive from your hosts in the north? I understand that the delegation was picked up in North Korea by a South Korean bus, which took you over the border and you were dropped off near Dorasan Railway Station. What kind of reception did you receive upon your arrival?

[Ahn] On Sunday, May 24, International Women's Day for Peace and Disarmament, we met at Namdaemun in the city center with nearly 2,000 North Korean women who are members of the Kaesong Democratic Women's Union. There, we gathered and held our banners and began our walk towards the DMZ. I don't know if it was that we were walking through a neighborhood versus a wide boulevard on the outskirts of Pyongyang, but the walk through Kaesong was especially touching. There were elderly women, young mothers with children, men wearing undershirts -- ordinary people -- waving from their apartment windows, cheering us on. One elderly woman was waving flowers and

sobbing. She was clearly over seventy, of a generation that preceded the war and division. It brought tears to my eyes, as it did to so many other women on our delegation.



Elderly North Korean woman waving to peace walkers from apartment building in Kaesong, North Korea

We walked a good distance and then boarded the bus to Panmunjom, the "truce village" where the Armistice Agreement was signed. A North Korean army officer greeted us and gave us a tour of the area, including the actual building where the ceasefire was signed by North Korea on behalf of North Korean and Chinese forces, and the US, representing the UN Command. We unfurled our quilt and sang the reunification song. Then we quickly rushed to the North Korean Panmun Pavilion, which overlooks the iconic blue UN buildings where North and South Korean soldiers face off. We read our Women's Peace Walk declaration and flashed peace signs across the DMZ towards the South Korean Freedom House building. It was surreal to be there, knowing that this Joint Security Area is the living relic of the unresolved Korean War, and that although it is just Korean troops facing off, overlooking South Korean troops are US soldiers, as the United States still has wartime operational control over South Korea's military.

While driving to Kaesong, we asked our North Korean hosts if we could get off the bus and walk to the northern border of the DMZ. We didn't know whether we would be able to walk across the 2.5-mile wide DMZ. They graciously agreed, so we walked, holding our banners and singing songs about women walking for a peaceful world and reunification. We bid farewell to our North Korean friends, which was rather emotional for many of the delegates. You just don't know if you will ever see them again. Then we went through North Korean customs to exit. Waiting for us as we came outside was a South Korean bus.

We tried to convince the South Korean bus driver that we had received an email from a high-ranking US official to Gloria Steinem indicating that as a compromise for our crossing at Kaesong, we would be allowed to stop at checkpoint 5 and walk to the DMZ border and into South Korea. The bus driver had heard no such thing, so he made a call and informed us that we would be met at some point. Two US Forces Korea officers and South Korean soldiers met us at the 4th point (the 1st check-point in SK) , and Gloria, U.S. Army Col. (ret.) and anti-war activist Ann Wright, Hye-Jung Park and I got off the bus, along with two journalists, to explain to the US officers that this was what was promised to us. They explained that we would be able to walk some of the way to the Unification Bridge, which we later realized is on the south side and not within the DMZ. The bus, however, just went straight to Dorasan Station; it was so fast. The DMZ is about 2.5 miles wide, which goes by very quickly when you're tense and traveling by bus. When we arrived, we were confused, but ultimately we were relieved that we had succeeded in crossing the DMZ. We didn't have to go back through Beijing to get to Seoul. We had crossed the DMZ, the militarized division that has languished on for seventy years, keeping millions of families separated, and a people divided and in a state of war. That was a huge success, path-breaking.



Christine Ahn and Gloria Steinem share an embrace before heading to the Kaesong walk to cross the DMZ

Although we were feeling celebratory, to be frank, I was a little terrified when we arrived at Dorasan station. The South Korean women organizers greeted us as we disembarked from the bus, and told me that there were one thousand South Korean police in riot gear prepared to protect us from potential violence. And I was the main target, they said, in part because I was the leader and organizer of this historic walk, but also because of the way the North Korean media had misquoted what I had said about their founder Kim Il Sung.

Out of fear for my safety, I was advised not to speak at the press conference and told that I should stand away from the front line during the walk to avoid being attacked. The South Korean organizers said that individuals who used fake identities to attend the press conference were plucked one by one by the Ministry of Unification from Dorasan Station. It was inconceivable to me. Here we were, many prominent women peacemakers from across the world -- many aged over seventy -- wearing white and our rainbow-colored scarves, walking to call for an end to the Korean War and help heal the division between North and South Korea that has gone on for over seventy years,

and some people were waiting to violently attack us? I was beside myself.

At first I resisted, thinking that perhaps it would be good for these people to be discredited by showing their true colors. But then I thought about my three-year-old daughter and my husband, who had just traveled from the US to meet me on the other side of the DMZ. Having them witness violence against me, or even experience violence by virtue of being near me was not an option. I decided not to speak at the press conference, but upon the insistence of the delegation, I walked in the front between Gloria Steinem and Leymah Gbowee. I'm so glad I did.

Another thing happened as we cleared customs at Dorasan station. Several of us were given a letter which stated that if we were to violate the Constitution by "engaging in political activities" such as "unification policies and foreign relations" that threaten the sovereignty of the Republic of Korea, we would be subject to deportation. I was the only one who was pressured to sign it, but I didn't do so. We were similarly searched as we entered North Korea, and some books and computers were reviewed for content but eventually returned.] It was bizarre to be in democratic South Korea and have literature taken away from us and being threatened with deportation for expressing our political views.

We walked into the main hall of Dorasan Station, where about 200 reporters were awaiting us. The atmosphere in the room was tense; they were keen to hear what had happened in North Korea, but some were ready to pounce on us. Gloria Steinem, Mairead Maguire and Leymah Gbowee all made strong statements about what we had accomplished. As we were already greatly delayed before we began our walk to the peace rally, we cut the press conference short after fielding twenty minutes of questions. In video footage I saw online, at the end of the press conference a

South Korean reporter harassed one of the women organizers, demanding to know where Christine Ahn was. You could see his vitriol.

As we passed through the barrage of harassing journalists, we were ushered upstairs for a quick lunch. As I gathered my plate of food, I heard the welcome voice of my longtime friend journalist Tim Shorrock, who had just received an honorary citizen award from Gwangju for his crucial reporting on the United States' role in quashing the 1980 democratic uprising. Tim had obtained classified documents years afterward which revealed that the U.S. government had given the green light to Korean generals to use force to quell nationwide demonstrations against military dictatorship. The documents also showed the U.S. knew in advance about the deployment of ROK black beret special forces to crush the resistance in Kwangju, where they beat and murdered hundreds of citizens. Tim understood the hardship I'd endured but was proud of what we had just done, our desire for reconciliation, and the important symbolism of our crossing.



International delegation join South Korean women in Paju and walk to peace rally

Upon leaving Dorasan Station, thousands of women and men and children greeted us, walked with us, and cheered us on. During the

walk, I didn't see any protestors, though some delegates did and said they were very insignificant. One of the documentary filmmakers from South Korea reported seeing one protester assault a middle-aged Korean woman wearing a rainbow scarf, so there was some violence. We walked along the barbed wire fence in Paju and finally arrived at a peace rally with several hundred people waiting for us. Gloria Steinem told the audience that the North Korean women knew that the South Korean people were at the rally and that they shared similar hopes for peace and reunification.



Peace rally at Imjingak Park in Paju

We have no illusions about what our initiative will do overnight. We said from the beginning that this would be a long walk and that we would continue to walk until the Korean War ended. When people think about the conflict in Korea, many think first about North Korean nuclear weapons or the potential misstep that could trigger a full-scale war. But what I came to realize is that one of the many divides that we must cross is psychological. In many places around the world the Cold War is over, but in Korea the most sophisticated propaganda war exists across an armed divide, making peace work on the Korean Peninsula a political landmine. In walking through that political

landmine, I was targeted and red-baited like thousands of people before me working for peace and reconciliation. Of course, I will be portrayed as a villain by those in the military-industrial-political-academic-media complex who want to maintain the status quo, but the cost of doing nothing is high. If I can contribute in some small way to ending this war in my lifetime, I will do so. I cannot deny that this was hard on me. It was. Organizing this women's peace walk took its toll on me, but I was so heartened to be given a hero's welcome by longtime South Korean women activists for peace and social justice, and to receive deeply moving letters of gratitude and solidarity from all around the world. We made history. Hopefully, we will continue to make history.

[Elich] Once you were in Seoul, how did the meetings with women's groups go? Who did you meet with, and what were the discussions like? Did you note any revealing commonalities or differences in those meetings compared with those you had in Pyongyang?

[Ahn] After crossing the DMZ we were met by the South Korean women. We took a bus to Seoul for a welcome dinner with South Korean women leaders and members of the National Assembly. The South Korean organizers worked so hard to pull off several events in such a short period of time and under great duress and uncertainty. The South Korean women's groups represented everything from small grassroots organizations to large national ones, including the Gyeonggi Women's Network, Korea Women's Political Solidarity, Iftopia, Women Making Peace, YWCA of Korea, Korean Women's Association United, and the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan. They hosted us in a traditional tea house and had dinner in an open court. It was a beautiful cool spring evening and we were overwhelmed by having started the morning in Kaesong and ended the evening in Seoul.

On Monday, May 25, we held an International Women's Peace Symposium at City Hall in Seoul, hosted by Mayor Park Won-soon. Many congratulatory speeches were made by South Korean women leaders, such as the former minister of gender equality Lee Yeon-sook, godmother of Korean feminism Lee Hyo-jae, and Yoo Seung-hee, the chairwoman of the Gender Equality and Family Committee of the National Assembly. Especially wonderful was the presentation of reunification efforts by North and South Korean women delivered by Lee-Kim Hyun-sook, the standing representative of the Women's Forum for Peace and Democracy. I hope we can share this history more broadly. In seventy years of division, there has been very limited cross-border contact, and from what I have learned, those connections mostly concerned state-sanctioned issues like Japanese war crimes, justice for comfort women, and humanitarian aid. Many of the international delegates shared their stories of women mobilizing to end violence in their countries, but they also offered reflections on their time in North Korea.

At one point, a well-known North Korean defector stood up and demanded that she be allowed to speak. She had signed in under a pseudonym. At the urging of the international delegation, she was given the microphone and allowed to speak for several minutes. Basically, she said that she hoped that rice could be sent to her family in the north and that she hoped to see them one day. What struck me was that this was not at all in opposition to what we have been calling for. We are calling for family reunification and the de-militarization of the DMZ so that people and goods can move freely. This defector subsequently wrote an op-ed article in the *Chosun Ilbo*, the leading conservative Korean newspaper, stating that she was silenced and not allowed to speak, when in fact we have footage showing she was given ample time from the floor and then embraced by the women delegates, including

Leymah Gbowee, who came to tell her, "Sister, we are not your enemy".

Upon the request by the South Korean organizers for protection, about a dozen undercover police monitored our hotel. According to one of the delegates, there were at most thirty protesters at the Seoul peace symposium, including an American named Lawrence Peck, who has been giving McCarthyite-style lectures based on bad intelligence on the subject of Korean-Americans working for peace and reunification.

In terms of differences, there's definitely an ease in being in Seoul versus Pyongyang. The women in South Korea can speak more freely whereas I imagine that the women in North Korea were selected for their testimonies, which were likely reviewed. But I have no doubt that what was shared was authentic, especially their stories of surviving war. Brinton Lykes, a professor of community psychology at Boston College, noted was the desire for revenge and deep hurt in the North Korean women's testimonies that felt very raw, over six decades later. Professor Lykes theorizes that it's because they haven't been able to have closure from their wartime trauma because of the continuing conflict. The feeling is different in South Korea because Americans are not their enemies, and we're not taught to hate them, nor are they taught to hate us. It's different in North Korea because we are still at war.

At the end of the symposium, I delivered the closing remarks, and as I looked out at the nearly 300 women in the audience, I wept seeing many heroines who have stood up for women's rights, peace, reunification, workers' rights, comfort women, sex workers in camp towns around US bases, and migrants. There were leaders who waged massive grassroots campaigns of farmers and villagers against the expansion of US military bases. There were women who as university students stood up

against dictatorship and brought about democracy in South Korea. I was standing in front of giants and I thought: we made this crossing as much for the movements in South Korea that have suffered so much under repressive administrations as for the entire Korean peninsula. They were all deeply touched that these international women would invest so much to walk for peace and to help heal the divisions. Without a doubt, they were inspired and motivated. Our boldness shook things up, and I'm hoping that -- like winds leading to the creation of powerful ocean waves -- our collective actions will continue to energize peace movements in South and North Korea.

[Elich] I've read that you have plans for Women Cross DMZ to return to the two Koreas next year, to build on the foundation the group has laid and to encourage peace movements there. Aside from not being able to cross the DMZ at Panmunjom, was there anything you felt disappointed in, and which you hope will go better on the next trip? It's still early, but has there been discussion in the group about how to extend and deepen your contacts with women on both sides of the border? Given the current state of affairs, do you see any prospect in the near future of Korean women's groups being able to establish direct contact with each other across the border? And finally, is there anything else you would like to add?

[Ahn] Yes, I was very disappointed in the North Korean media for misquoting me. I understand that twisting words is what the media does everywhere around the world, but they obviously could anticipate how those opposed to engagement would use that to label me and our delegation as pro-North. I know from one of our delegates who recently returned to North Korea for a disarmament meeting that our hosts were very concerned about our safety and well-being after we left the north, so I understand that they weren't behind this. Still, it is disappointing and I hope that this will spur

some discussion—and changes—in Pyongyang for future delegations who are trying to advance peace and reconciliation.

Although I was grateful that they did provide security, I was also deeply disappointed with the South Korean government for its treatment of some of our delegates, including myself, upon our arrival. It's unbelievable that the democratic side of the two Koreas was the one that warned us against using political speech, and it speaks volumes about how the unresolved Korean War is used to justify repression on both sides of the DMZ. That clearly reflects what the women's peace and reunification movements have been saying about the current administration and its predecessor. It's a sad reflection of South Korea's backward steps away from a free and open society and its return to more autocratic rule.

As for Panmunjom, the South Korean women are insisting that we cross there next year. When we were debating in Pyongyang whether to accept the South Korean government's proposal that we take the Kaesong line this year, Gloria Steinem suggested that we cross Kaesong this year and Panmunjom next year when she will be 82. It sounded like a good compromise then, so we will just have to see.

Deann Borshay Liem, the documentary filmmaker who was also a delegate on the walk, made a very good point at a recent report back in San Francisco. She said she was one of the delegates very wedded to our crossing at Panmunjom, but in hindsight, she said that given that Kaesong is the channel that is currently open with hundreds of workers going daily to North Korea to work there, the crossing should be expanded to include families and civil society. Panmunjom, on the other hand, is a relic of the past and should be made into a museum. It's an interesting insight, and I think it makes a lot of sense.

There are many wonderful initiatives we are

seriously considering in addition to a 2016 DMZ crossing, including exploring strategies to replace the Armistice Agreement with a peace settlement to formally resolve the Korean War. We are definitely exploring how to help re-establish a communications line between North and South Korean women that was open during the Sunshine Policy years, as well as holding track II dialogues among women to discuss paths towards reconciliation and models of reunification. But we need to hear from the two sides what would benefit them, so we're still processing our next steps. One thing for sure is we are holding a Congressional briefing a few days before the anniversary of the Armistice Agreement in July to educate policymakers about our trip and try to open the door even more.

It was an amazing trip. I think all of our lives were transformed in some way by this journey—the international women, the North Korean women, the South Korean women and the global women's peace movement. Frances Kissling, longtime women's rights scholar-activist wrote on my Facebook page soon after the DMZ crossing that expecting a linear and immediate result of our DMZ crossing is a very patriarchal way of looking at how social change takes place. I think she's absolutely right. As the renowned anti-militarist feminist scholar, Cynthia Enloe, wrote me, "People are going to be talking about your action -- and the feminist on-the-mark thinking that fueled your action! -- for a long time to come."

On that note, I'd like to end with a poem that my friend Anasuya Sengupta, a feminist scholar-activist-poet (and Rhodes Scholar) from India, shared on my Facebook page on May 24, International Women's Day for Peace and Disarmament as a tribute to our walk. "Today is a day to salute you, Christine, and all the extraordinary women (and men) around the world who have moved beyond their governments' rhetoric and bellicose actions, to confirm that the savagery of war and violence

does not bring lasting peace. The world spends nearly 5 million dollars - *every day* - on arms (more than half of this by the US). Clearly, military or militarised money can't buy us love. Or shared prosperity and peace." She wrote this poem for the people of Kashmir and her friends on both sides of the India-Pakistan border, "who know that their shared histories are more real than those claimed by their governments."

Singing Across the Borders, by Anasuya Sengupta

We refuse to be enemies.

We refuse to use your words,

claim your politics,

accept your versions of history.

We will wear our anger

like a shroud,

we will hold our defiance

like a shield,

we will carry our compassion

like a sword.

We refuse to be enemies.

We refuse to believe

that hate is justified,

that peace is weak,

that conflict is endless.

We will sing

across the borders,

we will march

across the divisions,
we will fly our peace
like a flag.

We refuse to be enemies.

Christine Ahn is the initiator and International Coordinator of Women Cross DMZ, a global campaign led by women to end the Korean War. She is a columnist with *Foreign Policy in Focus* and co-founder of the Korea Policy Institute and the National Campaign to End the Korean War.

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