

A Contemporary History of North Korea: The Socioeconomic Rise of Women in the Post-Cold War Era as Witnessed in Different Regions*

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Abstract

The breakdown of the public distribution system in North Korea and the famine of the 1990s made way for citizen-led grassroots marketization as a means of survival. A confluence of several factors including the skewed ratio of males in official jobs, the state-sanctioned role of women as housewives and mothers, mandatory military service for males and the predominance of females in the light industry and service sectors allowed women greater opportunity to participate in this burgeoning market economy. An understudied aspect of this new phenomenon is if regional discrepancies in North Korea affect the role of women in the markets. While large regional socioeconomic differences do exist in North Korea, previous studies only used haphazard samples of refugees who were coming primarily from the Northeastern province close to China. Through semi-structured, open-ended oral history interviews with five female refugees coming from different regions of North Korea, this study paid special attention to women who witnessed changes in several provinces, including the capital. The findings here are that while some disparities certainly exist across regions, the urban/rural gap is more pronounced. This study also confirmed that despite being “double victims” of both state marginalization and social discrimination, North Korean women are now the primary breadwinners for the nuclear family—challenging the traditional gender roles as a result of this nationwide market participation.

Key words

North Korea, society, economy, gender, markets

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Introduction

The economy of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), widely known as North Korea, precipitously declined following the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in the late 1980s. The public distribution system which had previously provided the population with the bulk of its food and commodities gradually weakened then disintegrated. During the early to mid-1990s most parts of North Korea were beset by one of the worst famines of the twentieth century (Natsios, 2001). The social impact of the famine was almost immediate, as the previous socialist, ration-based system morphed into a market economy initiated from the ground up. The majority of the North Korean population began to seek alternative means to earn an income to feed themselves and their families. In essence, this citizen-initiated marketization of North Korea emerged as an outcome of the failure of the state to provide for its people. As the markets continued to grow and diversify, they came to embody the loss of control by the regime over its people.

The emergence of a market economy has been widely researched and will only be discussed briefly in this paper. What is also somewhat known that these nascent markets are predominantly fronted by women. Yet, an important but understudied question remains how regional discrepancies in North Korea affect the role of women in the markets. While large regional socioeconomic differences do exist in North Korea, previous studies investigating the role of women or discussing the markets only used haphazard samples of refugees who were coming primarily from the Northeastern province located next to China. For instance, 76 to 84% of all refugees interviewed outside of North Korea were from the Northeastern provinces, even though only 24% of the North Korean population has been living there (Schwekendiek, 2010a). Through oral history interviews with five female refugees coming from different regions of North Korea, this study will pay special attention to women who witnessed changes in several provinces, including the capital. In brief, the overarching goal of this research is to create an oral-historical record of this female experience that is not based on witnesses coming primarily from one province only.

Literature Review

Overview

To investigate the rise of women in the markets as witnessed in different regions, an extensive literature review is in order. This review will fall into three sections. First, the rise of the markets in the post-Cold War era will be addressed—a topic that is widely researched in academia (Lee, 2005; Haggard & Noland, 2007; Kim & Song, 2008; Joo, 2010; Smith, 2015). Second, the rise of specifically women in that emerging market economy will be briefly discussed, which is an issue that has been recently investigated by a few North Korea specialists (Lim, 2005; Park, 2011). Third and last, the issue of regional differences in living standards in the DPRK will be addressed, which is an issue that has been brought to light in only a very few studies (Smith, 2009; Schwekendiek, 2010b).

The Rise of the Markets

The rise of the markets has been widely studied. What is commonly known is that a nationwide public distribution system provided almost all the daily necessities for the North Korean population from the 1950s to the 1980s. The collapse of the Soviet Bloc in the late 1980s precipitated a crisis for the North, in what was termed a “slow motion collapse of Stalinist society” (Lankov, 2009, p.52). Due to a combination of the withdrawal of Soviet aid, the disappearance the socialist trading bloc, inefficiency problems inherent in a command economy and natural disasters like floods and droughts, North Korea saw negative economic growth in the 1990s. A food crisis emerged that soon morphed into a nationwide famine. As the government could no longer feed or clothe its population, black market activity began to increase (Pak, 2005). Many communal farm workers ceased to carry out the threshing work required for a successful harvest, and people began to grow their own food despite the threat of severe punishment (Pak, 2005). Around 1994 the first victims of the famine began to be emerge, and by the following year markets activity had surged. It has been estimated that throughout the 1990s, around 60 to 70% of all goods and foods were purchased on the black market (Hale, 2005). Some scholars put the total number of markets in North Korea by the mid-1990s

as between 300 to 350, with perhaps three to five markets operating in every metropolitan area, illuminating the enormous rate of change in a relatively short period of time (Natsios, 2001). Thus, engaging in hard currency-earning activities became the only method to keep hunger at bay. The bulk of the emerging unofficial economy in the mid 1990s fell into the following categories: private plot farming, direct manufacture and sale of goods, barter operations between different work units for commodities produced outside of the planned system, private services such as hairdressing and sewing, hard currency earning enterprises, and joint ventures outside of the planned system (Michell, 1998).

Similarly, the markets themselves formed unique characteristics. While some were housed inside in a semi-official sanctioned location, others were outdoors or erected on the roadside. Some markets developed into large, permanent city establishments (Smith, 2015). Sellers were often those who had bought food or commodities elsewhere and were on-selling it for a greater price (Pak, 2005). A significant development occurred as a result of the failure of the public distribution system and the famine of the 1990s. Due to the collapse of the public distribution system, semi-legal farmers' markets became public markets (Park, 2011) while black markets began to flourish. A huge inflow of Chinese goods from across the Sino-North Korean border entered the country. This was a bottom-up market-based response to acute demand for food and other necessities that the state system could no longer provide. Facilitating this increase in trade was the relative permeability of the Sino-Korean border during the famine years. China did not place guards on the border, and the North Korean state could arguably no longer feed its border patrol, inevitably resulting in susceptibility to corruption. Another effect of the collapse of the public distribution system was that the North Korean population, previously heavily restricted in its movements around the country now began to roam the countryside in search of food. This increased mobility led to large numbers of North Koreans moving into China to engage in trade, or to merely escape hunger. Both of these trends are evidence of the exponential growth of trade and market activity in North Korea. A 2008 survey of 675 refugees concluded that a large proportion of the population, up to 78%, have participated in the nascent economy in some capacity (Kim & Song, 2008).

The rise of the unofficial economy has created a kind of dual system in tandem the official, state-sanctioned economy in which most citizens are re-

quired to participate in some form. Those engaging in the unofficial economy are effectively out of the state's realm, and are serving individual interests rather than those of the state collective. By 2002, the North Korean regime under the leadership of Kim Jong Il was concerned by the continuing contraction of the national economy and the simultaneous expansion of the private economy, as labor and materials were being diverted from the former into the latter (Hong, 2002). In essence, a new system was developing from within the old. This presence of this dual economy led to a series of sweeping reforms that aimed to mitigate the gap, officially termed *The July 1st 2002 Economic Management Improvement Measures*. These reforms brought about the following changes: an increase in prices and wages, a shift in the price-fixing mechanism, increased autonomy in enterprise management, and economic decentralization. The 2002 economic reform measures led to hyperinflation, as there was no increase in production to match the devaluation of the North Korean currency Won. Predictably, a gap between official grain prices and black market grain prices grew rapidly. Not long after the reforms, the vast bulk of grains were again being distributed through the black markets (Hale, 2005). While the government placed an official ban on the markets for five months following the reforms, this ban was ignored and they continued to operate. Another unintended outcome of the 2002 economic reforms was the growing wealth gap between those who had access to foreign currency and those who did not. This was further evidence that the state no longer presented a viable means of income, and ones' livelihood would have to be sought in the private economy. Post 2002, various laws and restrictions have been enacted regarding private market activity. In March of 2003, the farmers' markets were reclassified and reorganized into general markets with the official line that markets were a more proper tool than the state for meeting society's demands. In this way the state could exercise greater control over markets and to earn revenue through taxation of market operators. In 2005, the government enacted a nationwide ban against the private sale of grain. In October of the same year, it was declared that the public distribution system would be reintroduced (Lankov, 2009). While Pyongyang had continued to receive rations during the famine years, the rest of the country had not. While the old rationing system was partially restored, grain continued to be sold on the black markets. Other governmental edicts since 2005 have included caps on market prices, limits on how much one in-

dividual vendor may sell, and crackdowns on traders operating outside of designated areas (Lankov, 2009). Key governmental measures aimed at restricting the markets between 2008 to 2009 included banning women under 40 from the marketplace, restrictions limiting the sale of food products to individually cultivated produce, the scale-back of wholesale trade occurring at the Pyongsong Market in South Pyongan Province and the eventual closure of this market in June 2009 (Noland & Haggard, 2010; Schwekendiek, 2011). In November 2009, currency reform was enacted in what was referred to as “a direct attack on the emerging market economy and independence from the state control it represents” (Noland & Haggard, 2010, p. 1). The reform targeted those who had amassed savings through market activity and rendering those savings worthless. Citizens were given only two days to convert their money, and limits were placed on how much an individual could change at one time. In addition to currency redenomination, workers’ salaries were raised and official prices for commodities were re-set.

Yet despite all indications that the regime no longer places a blanket ban on all private market activity, the government still monitors the population by assigning official workplaces. Workers must show up to this place of work regardless if there are tasks to be completed or not. If a worker wishes to rid themselves of this obligation in order to pursue private economic activity, they have to pay a fine reportedly worth 10% of their monthly wages. The fact that this fee is often paid may be indicative of how much bigger the rewards may be in the marketplace (Pak, 2005).

Women in the Markets

The rise of specifically women in the markets has been investigated in a few studies. The traditional patriarchal order in pre-modern Korea has been perpetuated by the North Korean regime in its own self-styled “women’s paradise” (Park, 1992-1993, p. 527). In the early days of the regime, and in line with Marxist principles, Kim Il Sung promised emancipation for women from the burdens of the past. Liberation would be attained through the socialization of labor and the creation of a nation of strong women actively participating in the workforce. Around this time the traditional clan system all but disappeared, the written lineage system in which only the male line was recorded was abolished and the nuclear family emerged. Yet whether Kim Il Sung was truly concerned about gender

equality is questionable. Some have argued he was more interested in mobilizing the female workforce to aid his socialist revolution and nation-building ambitions, rather than freeing women from the bonds of traditional patriarchy (Jung & Dalton 2006). In particular, the mobilization of the female workforce was a practical necessity due to the high casualties of the Korean War (1950-1953), which caused a long-term gender imbalance in North Korean society (Ryang, 2000). Also, due to the military draft of all young men, factories had to be oftentimes operated by women along with old men (Hunter, 1999). What the North Korean regime produced instead was a “state-household nexus” which in effect replaced the traditional and oppressive clan system (Ryang, 2000, p. 342). Prior to the growth of grassroots market activity, women in North Korea were faced with a “double burden.” Not only were they expected to participate in the command economy, they concurrently maintained the “natural” (as deemed by the state) female responsibility of childrearing. In the workplace the women were not treated equally to men, who tended to be paid more, received more sought after job placements and were promoted faster. Women’s forced dependence on the state for food, childcare services and various other social provisions further emphasized the patriarchal system at work (Jung & Dalton 2006). Furthermore, households were required to designate a male head of household, whose role was to maintain order at home and in the community (Kang, 2011).

Several new social trends have emerged in North Korea since the mid-1990s that tentatively indicate gender empowerment. Higher divorce rates and the delaying of marriage and childbirth for example suggest that gender transition is underway in North Korea (Jung & Dalton 2006). Since the end of the famine and the Arduous March, anecdotal evidence has emerged from North Korea claiming that it is indeed women who are at the forefront of market activity, as they began to travel in search of income and food to maintain the family unit.

In fact, opportunities to participate in the informal economy were limited for both men and women in the pre-crisis era. All adults in North Korea were member of a social unit, which has substituted the family as the primary unit of society (Hunter, 1999). Permission to engage in any kind of economic or non-economic activities let alone to move from one county to another had to be given by the one’s unit. Moreover, both husband and wife had long working hours, from 7 AM to 10:30 PM (Hunter, 1999),

which likewise decreased opportunities to engage in any kind of market activities.

An important factor explaining the rise of the women relates to North Korea's post-Cold War shift from heavy industry to light industry, in which women were better placed to work in textile factories, and in lower service and food retail positions (Schwekendiek, 2011). Many women were also sent abroad to Eastern Europe to work in the light industry sector in the Czech Republic and Mongolia (Hosaniak, 2009). Furthermore, most employees working in the Kaesong Industrial Complex and in other light-industrial factories located in the special economic zones set up by the government were female, too. The type of work in these lower service jobs feature more readily in North Korea's burgeoning economy, in contrast to the traditionally male-dominated heavy industry sector. On top of that, men were not willing to participate much in the lower service industry because it was considered a degrading job in North Korean society (Park, 2011).

Some academic research has specifically addressed this new trend by highlighting both some of the positive and some of the negative effects. Haggard and Noland surveyed 300 refugees in order to gauge the experiences of women in North Korea's market economy, and concluded that "the increasingly male-dominated state preys on the increasingly female-dominated market" (Haggard & Noland, 2013, p.51). This point was also touched upon in a report by Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, where it was stated that as women travel around the country to source goods to sell in the markets, 'violence against women by third parties' has increased (Bang, 2011). Not only has violence against women increased by third parties, research also suggests that wife battering by frustrated husbands has increased too as their economic roles as primary breadwinners had declined (Park, 2011).

Nevertheless, the rise of the women as primary breadwinners is a very new phenomenon. In the pre-crisis era, women represented the vast majority of college students, perhaps over 70 percent, since many of them were educated in teachers' colleges and medical schools (Hunter, 1999). However, while women were over-represented in these fields, they were largely under-represented in economic fields such as business management, trade, and finance. Despite lacking formal education in business administration and economics, ordinary women such as unemployed females or those leaving their professional sector suddenly started to engage in market

activities at the end of the Cold War (Park, 2011).

The presence of women in the markets can be traced back to several state policies dating back to the mid 1980s, where female workers were hired in lesser numbers in factories, leading to a reduction in the number of women recruited in the labor market (Park, 2011). Moreover, like in most countries, women were the first to be laid off because they were not considered breadwinners (Park, 2011). At the same time, noticeably fewer females were given appointments in offices after high school graduation, leading to a growth in the number of idle women (Choi & Koo, 2005). In 1998, the clause stipulating that the state shall 'liberate women from the heavy family chores' was removed from North Korea's Constitution (Park, 2011), suggesting that the state no longer supported the labor market participation of women. The impact of the 2002 economic reforms were also felt, where unemployment grew by close to 11%; much of it borne by women (Kim & Song, 2008).

One positive outcome of being pushed to the margins was that women found themselves with plenty of time; something their male counterparts were short on, as they were required to keep up appearances in their government-sanctioned workplace. Interestingly, though absence from work was illegal for both men and women, this rule was more strictly enforced for men (Smith, 2015). Men were also required to serve four additional years (i.e., up to 14 years) during the famine period, a factor that may considerably restrict individual enterprise (Spoorenberg & Schwekendiek, 2012). Regarding the participation of women in the markets as a non-commercially motivated and necessary act during the crisis years, the government tolerated their presence in the beginning (Smith, 2015). Also, women did not pose a political threat at that time.

However, the state has taken note of female face of the markets after the crisis years and has acted accordingly. One indirect method of governmental control over the markets has been the banning of women riding bicycles (Hosaniak, 2009). Indeed, bicycles were a common means of transportation during the crisis years until semi-privatized bus services emerged in the late 2010s (Smith, 2015). In December 2006, the regime prohibited males from participating in any form of trade. From this time, men were forbidden to enter official market areas unless he was deemed a "dependent," as opposed to a "breadwinner." At the time, official rations were set at 300 grams per day for dependents, and 700 grams per day for

breadwinners. As men were to work for the state, they were rarely bestowed “dependent” status. In December 2007, women under the age of 50 were also banned from participating in the markets (Lankov, 2009). Females also make up the majority of small-scale cross-border trade with China. Many women move into China proper for work, as it is easier for women to move somewhat more freely throughout North Korea, and the predominantly service jobs available in China are considered women’s work. Also, unlike men who were tied up in the military or militia, both of which were mobilized to respond to the flood disasters in the late 1990s, women were allowed to move more freely to look for food (Smith, 2009).

Regional Variations in Living Standards

Very few studies have addressed regional disparities inside North Korea. Indeed, almost all previous studies using refugee samples either did not pay attention at all to regional socio-economic variations in living standards inside North Korea (Lim, 2005), or used haphazard samples of North Korean refugees, most of whom disproportionately represent the Northeastern province of North Hamgyeong (Kim & Song, 2008; Haggard & Noland, 2013; Lankov, Kwak, Kim, & Cho, 2013).

While the Northeastern provinces are known as the *Siberia* of North Korea, anecdotal evidence suggests that this region has also experienced a greater level of grassroots marketization than other regions in North Korea in the post-famine period owing to its proximity to the Sino-Korean border (Smith, 2009). Across the Tumen River from North Hamgyeong lies Yanbian, the autonomous Korean Prefecture of China. Those residing in this region are predominantly ethnic-Koreans with Chinese citizenship. Thus trade and border crossing between North Hamgyeong and Yanbian is carried out with greater ease than other border areas due to language ties, and often, family ties. This was the case during the pre-famine period, but the famine precipitated a sharp increase in interaction. In a meta-analysis of surveys of North Koreans residing in South Korea and China, previous research discussed factors that have influenced the disproportionate number of refugees from North Korea hailing from North Hamgyeong Province (Schwekendiek, 2010a). While *push factors* like being cut off from the public supply system during the 1990s certainly played a part, relative ease of travel and word of mouth are also key in analyzing this disparity. North

Hamgyeong contains more flat stretches of land that allow for easier river crossing than neighboring, mountainous Ryanggang Province, thus those areas closer to the Sino-Korean border in the North-East of the DPRK were more likely to be able to source food via trade and petitions to relatives, access that those living inland were deprived of due to heavy restrictions on population movement or due to long travel distances.

On the other hand, legal farmers' and illegal black markets were more likely to spread out in high yield regions (most of which are located in the West, particularly Hwanghae province) as surplus food could be distributed there. For example, Schwekendiek (2011) showed the regional distribution of refrigerators in North Korea, which represents an expensive item that was primarily bought in the markets. According to that distribution, people living in counties located in the Hwanghae provinces frequently owned a refrigerator, suggesting that residents there must have had better access to the markets. Data were based on a random household survey. Another independent study using satellite images found that Hwanghae (i.e., Haeju in South Hwanghae and Sariwon in North Hwanghae) had the second and third largest markets in terms of square feet among 11 provinces examined (Silberstein, 2015).

While haphazard samples consisting mostly of refugees from Hamgyeong Province have been extensively used in research (Kim & Song, 2008; Haggard & Noland, 2013; Lankov, Kwak, Kim, & Cho, 2013), the question remains how women in the rest of the provinces have experienced marketization.

Method

In order to provide a more accurate assessment of the women in the markets, this study sampled cases from different areas of North Korea. Fortunately, we were able to sample respondents who originated from South Hamgyeong, Ryanggang and Pyongyang respectively in addition to those from Hamgyeong province. The North Korean women who participated in this study are described as follows; age as of interview and primary place of residence in North Korea: Respondent A: 40s, North Hamgyeong; Respondent B: 40s, Ryanggang; Respondent C: 20s, South Hamgyeong; Respondent D: 30s, Pyongyang; Respondent E: 30s, North Hamgyeong.

To analyze the experiences of women in the markets in North Korea,

this study employed oral history interviews. Oral history interviews have a long tradition in research, beginning sometime in the 1930s (Neuman, 2006). In particular, oral history interviews have been applied to study non-elites such as working class people in Britain (Ritchie, 2011) in order to give lower class people a voice in the historiography that has traditionally been written from the perspective of the privileged. Oral historians commonly conduct personal, open-ended interviews with people about their lives or about certain events the respondents witnessed in the past (Neuman, 2006). Typically, oral history interviews are first recorded and then transcribed. Needless to say, thanks to the technological progress in digital sound recording in the 1990s, oral history research has been expanding dramatically among both students and scholars over the recent decades (Perks, 2011).

In the tradition of classical oral history interviews, all North Korean women were interviewed face-to-face and on an individual basis using a semi-structured, open-ended questionnaire. The questions asked of the respondents were centered on three core themes; marketization, gender, and regional disparities. Where necessary, questions were added or removed depending on the individual circumstances of the respondent. The average interview spanned around one hour and a half. The shortest interview was 50 minutes, and the longest interview took two hours. All took place in Seoul, South Korea and were conducted in Korean. All oral history interviews were recorded and later transcribed word-for-word. This helped to reduce bias as the transcripts were conversational, rather than point by point.

On average, adult North Korean refugees usually stay for 3.4 years in transit countries (such as China) before entering South Korea (Schwekendiek, 2010a). Not surprisingly, all respondents in this study had also been exposed for varying lengths of years to South Korean culture by the time they were interviewed in 2013. Thus, it should be borne in mind that all respondents commented on their life in North Korea from a somewhat comparative perspective rather than from a native North Korean's perspective. Furthermore, all North Koreans entering South Korea are registered with the National Intelligence Service of South Korea, and might arguably feel inclined to portray North Korea more negatively to protect themselves. Also, participation in the study was voluntary, so it is possible that the respondents may have been motivated to portray North Korea in a negative light to scholars as

a way to bring about political change and rewrite history, which is a well-known issue in oral historical research. Nevertheless, there were no obvious contradictions made by any of the respondents. All were eager to share their stories and did not take much prompting to open up. Their stories were internally consistent, and often matched the life stories of others, further corroborating their validity.

Results

Our analysis based on the oral history interviews with the North Korean women is consistent with the results of previous studies as outlined in the section above. All respondents reported that there was little in the way of medium to large-scale market activity in North Korea prior to the 1990s. All stated that rations were fairly regular and reliable throughout the country, absolving the need for a private income outside of state employment. Invariably, the exact year pinpointed for when living conditions worsened considerably was 1994, the year of Kim Il Sung's death. One respondent from North Hamgyeong summed up:

In 1994 our rations went from fortnightly to once a month. Then to once every three months. Gradually they just stopped completely. Under Kim Il Sung we received rice, but not after he died. By 1995 it was once a year, and so many people starved and died.
(Respondent A)

Rations did not suddenly cease, but rather incrementally lessened in both frequency and quantity. Respondent A further detailed one way in which the state would try to manipulate the weighing system for rations;

The corn wasn't processed when we got it. It was pulled straight from the field and given to us 'as is', with the grains still wet. If it was dry then they would have had to have given us more, as the rations were distributed by weight.

The collapse of the rationing system did not initially affect the population equally. Some families would receive more than others, depending on the nature of the employment of the breadwinner of the family, usually the

father. However, by the mid 1990s, all respondents recalled a time when there was literally nothing to eat but grass. Coping mechanisms included shirking and stealing from the workplace. In the early stages of the food shortage, these coping mechanisms appeared consistent throughout regions, with the exception of Pyongyang;

I lived near to a cigarette factory. People would strip the copper wire and the bearings from the machines and sell it to buy food. It would be no use even if resources for production had been available, because the machines in the factory didn't have the parts to work anymore. (Respondent A)

Another common coping mechanism and response to the collapse of the state rationing system was to turn to private plot farming for consumption and sale, as pointed out by the same respondent;

Around 1998 people started going up to the mountains to light fires in secret. After lighting the fires they would run away so they wouldn't be caught. After the fire had died down people would run up and claim the land, and spread seeds for farming. The food grown there would be sold in the markets, and things improved slightly because you could buy things to eat.

The majority of these private plot farmers were women. As previously documented, the men were tied up in their official workplaces in the state system or had to serve in the military, while females were free to stay at home. Thus the women essentially became the drivers of a basic market economy, centered on sourcing buyers for their hand-grown produce. The term *jangsa* entered the common lexicon in North Korea, meaning literally to engage in business or trade.

It was the housewives who went out into the fields, and not to areas close to their homes. They had to travel kilometers at a time, on foot, with compost and fertilizer loaded up in huge bags on their back. (Respondent A)

This trend eventually emerged in the nation's capital, as one respondent,

a former resident of Pyongyang confirmed;

After the Arduous March, women's roles were magnified. They had to run their entire lives by jangsa. Men couldn't go out to the market and make money so it came to be thought of as a woman's role. In Pyongyang, 70% of the population is ordinary citizens. If they don't do jangsa they can't live on just what the state gives them. There are almost no women who are against the concept of jangsa. They are responsible for their families, so that's how they think. (Respondent D)

It soon became apparent following the collapse of the economy that engaging in the market was often the only means of survival for women, and their families. Those who realized that if you smuggle things in and out of China could live better whereas those who kept going to their office and relied on their rations would be undernourished. Yet, for those still employed by the state, there were ways around the system. One respondent told of how several of her extended family members would participate in the markets in Pyongyang;

Some of those people in the markets have an official job in name only. You go and get your attendance taken and then you pay some money to have your name taken down, which buys you your own personal time. (Respondent D)

For others, however, there was not always a way to make a living in the markets during the Arduous March. This discrepancy was a function of location, and proximity to urban areas. For one respondent who lived in a rural area in North Hamgyeong Province, the markets eventually grew large enough in size that one started up close enough to travel to from her workplace;

In the early years, people in offices and factories were able to do jangsa. But we were all farmers, and we couldn't leave our farm. We had no time for ourselves. Even if I had wanted to go out to buy and sell goods, I couldn't leave my work. Around the year 2000 there was a market that sprang up about 4km away from

the farm where I worked. My lunch break was from 12pm to 1pm, and I would ride my bike or walk there, then quickly return. I grew vegetables in my front garden to sell. (Respondent E)

In the midst of this fast-paced social change in the wake of the nationwide famine, there was a marked change in social atmosphere, particularly in regard to ideology. Resentment toward the state grew as people, especially women, came to rely solely on themselves to provide the necessities of life;

There is kind of a joke thrown around the women doing *jangsa* now. They say: I believed in and worked for the Party, and I got a penny. If you live by the Party, you will get one spoonful of rice when you're hungry. (Respondent C)

By the early 2000s, and regardless of location, respondents estimated they were receiving anywhere from 70-100% of their income from market activity. This percentage was dependent on what sort of official employment they, or their immediate family, were engaged in. One respondent, a trader in sea food products, remarked that “By the 2000s, the markets had become really active. There is nothing given by the state. People make ends meet by doing *jangsa* or farming” (Respondent A). Another respondent, a housewife from Ryanggang Province testified to this high ratio: “Our family got 100% of its income from the market. There are absolutely no wages in my area. What they called monthly wages was not even a day's worth of food or money” (Respondent B). Indeed, because men had to keep up appearances in their government-sanctioned workplace, they were oftentimes working without receiving regular wages (Park, 2011). Despite the public distribution system continuing to operate in Pyongyang throughout the crisis in the 1990s, albeit at lower quantities than before, the capital nevertheless witnessed drastic change due to the famine and the advent of grassroots marketization. As the result of its preferential treatment from the state, diversification and spread of markets within Pyongyang did not occur at the same rate as other parts of the country, as described by a former resident of the capital;

By 1999 Pyongyang still hadn't latched on to the market economy,

but around 2002/2003 it really took off. We were later than other regions because we had more rations. Now people in Pyongyang get over 50% of their income from jangsa. (Respondent D)

Indeed, while in the Cold War era, privileged citizens living in the capital Pyongyang were among the most desired bachelors, border guards who receive bribes from border peddlers have become the most favored spouses by now (Schwekendiek, 2011).

As to gender equality the respondents in this study stated that boys and girls in the mandatory education system in North Korea were treated equally. However, the views of some of the respondents were challenged after graduating and entering society as young adults. Respondent E from rural North Hamgyeong province claimed;

When I was at school I thought that we were equal with the boys. Girls could be class captains after all. But my thinking changed after I finished high school. I went out into society with hopes of joining the military—that had been my childhood dream. I realized that men had to go to the military, it was their duty. But for women it was a choice. I didn't think that was fair. As time went on I realized that there was nothing women could do in our society.

Further independent statistics corroborates this. Despite claiming gender equality, only some 15% of professors (Park, 1992-1993) and only some 10% of judges (Schwekendiek, 2011) are estimated to be female in North Korea.

Following the collapse of the rationing system, the onset of the famine and subsequent marketization, not every child was able to attend school, many of them girls. This trend was especially apparent in rural areas;

The number of younger girls doing jangsa is rising. They don't go to school, as they have no money. They graduate from elementary school and just go straight into it. They go to the market and sell oil, or go up into the mountains to cut trees to sell. You always see kids riding the trains with wares stacked up next to them. (Respondent B)

As previously noted, few females in North Korea hold high ranking positions of power, despite official reform. As a result, one of the only possible career paths for a woman is to engage in the informal market economy. Within the official state employment sector, women and men often work do the exact same work. Nevertheless, discrimination does exist in the workplace: “The men get promoted faster, so there is a gap there. Even if you enter the company at the same time as the man, it’s the man who gets promoted first” (Respondent D).

All respondents strongly emphasized that women were not on equal par with men in North Korea. Traditional norms were specifically mentioned: “Even when you haven’t had anything to eat yourself, you have to give your husband the good portion. If there were no women everyone would starve” (Respondent A). Similarly, Respondent B confirms that “Women can’t do anything, they just do the housework and are kind to their husbands. You are supposed to build up your husband and stand behind him.” Respondent D agrees to this too: “The social atmosphere was, and still is, that the men work and the women take care of the family, which is Confucian culture.”

This kind of thinking and behavior has been perpetuated over generations, as one respondent from rural North Hamgyeong explained;

From my mother’s point of view, she didn’t see a problem. She thought that when the man talks, he is king, and you have to listen. She didn’t disobey even once. Women just have to go to live with their husband and his parents. There are no hopes, no dreams, nothing. Everything is for males. But the people who this is happening to don’t know about it. Even now, I call my mother in North Korea and I tell her this. But she doesn’t feel it. North Korean women think that they are equal with men. (Respondent E)

However, because the respondent had already lived for a couple of years in South Korea, she had been naturally exposed to different gender norms. Her view that “North Korean women think that they are equal with men” apparently contrasts with the view of her mother, who continued to live in the countryside in North Korea and uncritically accepts her traditional

role. Whether or not the different views of the respondent and her mother reflect a generational difference, or a contrast between the respondent's exposure to alternative gender norms and her mother's lack of a comparative perspective, or both, was not investigated during the interview—calling for future investigations.

When it comes to money management, nearly all the respondents explained the husband or father traditionally took on that responsibility: “My father managed the money; it's always been that way. The women doing *jangsa* have their money managed by the man of the house, even though it's mostly them who earn it.” (Respondent B).

After the growth of the markets in the North and the increasingly important role the women began to play, men began to become frequently referred to as useless;

The women of North Korea are so unfortunate. They suffer so much. The life of a woman is getting up with the sunrise and returning by sunset. But the men don't do anything. They just have to go out to their official job. (Respondent A)

For further illustration, derogatory terms such as ‘light bulbs in daytime’ have emerged in North Korea to describe the phenomenon of useless men (Park, 2011).

With respect to regional variations in living conditions, it is important to mention that in principle, the population of North Korea in its entirety receives equal treatment. In practice, however, select areas have received special treatment. As the nations' seats of power, Pyongyang is considered a favored city, as well as some regional capitals, foreign currency-earning zones and places of significance to the Kim family cult. The following are comments by Respondent B who has never traveled to Pyongyang herself and has relied on second-hand information to form her opinion, indicating the status that Pyongyang holds throughout the country; “Pyongyang is the best place to live. The best people live there, and they have all the foreign embassies. The people doing the best trade are there too. Chongjin is second, and (special economic zone) Rajin third.”

However, as befitting the North's showcase capital, Pyongyang trumps all others in terms of living standards. The North Korean regime strictly controls the right of residence in Pyongyang as a form of punishment and

reward. Those residing in Pyongyang are the privileged of North Korean society. Intra-migration rates are extremely low in North Korea (Eberstadt & Banister, 1992). Similarly, following the growth of the markets, regional differences emerged in terms of trade. The breadbasket areas trade in produce with the border areas close to China, due to their relative ease of procuring imported commodities;

Before Kim Il Sung died, everywhere in North Korea was about equal. You couldn't sense a big difference between those who lived well, and those who didn't. But once the markets grew, North Hamgyeong and Ryanggang Province did okay because they lie adjacent to China. People from other provinces like Hwanghae, Pyongan, Jagang and even Pyongyang started to drift up toward Hyesan. They came to trade with the Chinese there. They couldn't sell anything in their home provinces, because there was no one who could buy. (Respondent B)

The rise of the markets has also seen a change in cultural elements between regions. Chinese culture has taken hold in the Sino-Korean border areas, where clothes are vibrant and colorful. Gangwon Province on the border with South Korea, South Pyongan Province in the central-west region and Jagang Province in the central-north were deemed the worst off by the respondents. Interestingly, Jagang Province also borders China. Despite its relatively close proximity with the ethnic-Korean population in China, it has lower movements of people across the Sino-North Korean border in part due to its geography. Jagang is more mountainous than in the North Hamgyeong area, and the river is less easily traversed;

Nothing of value comes out of Jagang Province. Even the country bumpkins of North Hamgyeong and Hyesan have changed their appearance due to trade with China. But in Jagang they haven't moved an inch because they have no contact with the Chinese. And in South Pyongan Province they can't make a living at all. (Respondent B)

Respondent D who had personally traveled to Jagang Province for trading purposes stated that;

Jagang Province is mostly mountains. Mountains and mountains. They had the highest death rate during the Arduous March. Most people without work came from that province. I heard they are the most faithful and sincere people in the whole of North Korea. A lot of them moved into the lower provinces. Many of them starved and died during that time.

Most respondents believed the gap between rural and urban areas was more significant than regional differences. Respondent E coming from rural North Hamgyeong Province stated that one of the main differences between rural and urban areas was a difference in attitude toward market activity;

The biggest difference between rural and urban areas is economic. In the city you can do *jangsa* to support yourself but in the countryside you just get what you are given. In the countryside there is just rice and corn which you need to sell to buy necessities like clothes. Country people would sell their produce cheaply in September and October around harvest time, and then have to buy clothes when they are most expensive, in the winter months. People from the city would buy the rice and corn in October and November then sell it in May when there was a shortage. In this way, the gap grew large [...]. Right from the start, those from the city were better at *jangsa*. They are more quick-witted than the people from the country.

Furthermore, the respondents similarly confirmed that the rural/urban gap also extends to the marriage markets. For instance, when people started to get clued up after 1994, rural partners wanted to marry into a city family. But the government tried to stop that by pressurizing the urban counterpart to go out to work in the countryside with their spouse. Not surprisingly, rural partners became less attractive. To put it simply, city people marry city people, while country people marry country people. This way the rural/urban divide has been further exacerbated.

Conclusion

This study has paid special attention to the rise of women in the markets as witnessed in several provinces of the DPRK in order to tap into the vast resource of knowledge and experience held by the North Korean refugee population currently residing in South Korea. This approach is a shift from previous studies using oral history interviews that have adopted haphazard sampling by primarily sourcing ex-residents of North Hamgyeong Province. That special attention needs to be paid to regional differences across provinces has been shown in previous studies utilizing nutritional and demographic indicators gathered from population statistics (Schwekendiek, 2010b; Smith, 2009). It therefore remains questionable whether or not one can take haphazard samples from North Hamgyeong as a representative province of the entire country.

Through semi-structured, open-ended oral history interviews with female refugees witnessing changes in different regions, including the capital, the tentative finding of our study is that while marketization and gender disparities certainly exist across regions, the urban/rural gap is more pronounced. Our study further confirms previous studies based on haphazard samples of refugees coming primarily from North Hamgyeong Province, which found that women were presented with greater opportunity to participate in the burgeoning market economy as a result of the famine of the 1990s. This study also confirmed that despite being *double victims* of both state marginalization and social discrimination, North Korean women are now the primary breadwinners for the nuclear family, regardless of residence. Furthermore, despite the dire social realities for women, many are now challenging the traditional gender roles as a result of this growing market participation. However, whether or not this new economic role of women will translate into a higher status remains to be seen (Park, 2011; Smith, 2015).

The overarching goal of this research was to create an oral historiography of pre and post-famine changes of the female experience in the markets as witnessed in several regions, and to what extent this increased participation has precipitated socioeconomic change. As an oral-historical account, the political and humanitarian implications are beyond the scope of this study.

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