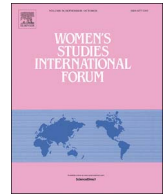




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From patriarchal socialism to grassroots capitalism: The role of female entrepreneurs in the transition of North Korea

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ABSTRACT

Since the collapse of North Korea's command economy in the 1990s, a large number of women have become entrepreneurs. This remarkable feature of North Korean marketisation cannot be adequately explained by female entrepreneur (FE) deficit premises, which highlight women's supposed shortcomings in what is considered a male enterprise. Based on in-depth interviews with female North Korean defectors, and viewing entrepreneurship as a catalyst for socio-cultural change, this paper questions how FEs emerged in North Korea and whether women's market participation influences gender relations, or attitudes toward the North Korean regime. There have been noticeable changes in gender roles, son preference and choice of marriage partners. Our findings suggest that female entrepreneurship has the potential to both challenge and support the North Korean system. This research significantly advances scholarship on gender and entrepreneurship by adopting a constructionist approach to gender and transcending the prevalence of descriptive analysis of gendered entrepreneurial practices.

Introduction

The majority of academic and media interest pertaining to North Korea is focused around its nuclear capabilities and leadership succession. However, there are changes of equal importance occurring within the country worthy of academic attention, namely, the emergence of an informal market economy. With ongoing food shortages and an unreliable government food-rationing public distribution system (PDS), markets have become the chief source of food. It is reported that private markets account for roughly 80% of household income and that approximately 60% of citizens obtain food from markets (Lee, 2016, p. 33). Due to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a series of natural disasters, and exorbitant expenditure by the government, the 1990s was a period of financial and agricultural hardship for North Korea (Tudor & Pearson, 2015, pp. 17–18). The North Korean economy shrunk by approximately 30% between 1991 and 1996 (Jung & Dalton, 2006, p. 741), causing a crippling famine. While estimates vary, it is thought that between 600,000 and one million people, equating to roughly three to 5% of the country's pre-famine population, died as a consequence of the famine (Haggard & Noland, 2009, p. 384).

Given its highly authoritarian and repressive political system, its

command economy and closed society, some may question the characterisation of North Korea as experiencing any kind of transition at all. The spread of markets has not fully transformed the system from socialism to capitalism. Private business ownership, while tolerated, remains technically illegal and entrepreneurial resources and opportunities are extremely scarce. Nonetheless, informal unregulated economic activity now flourishes in North Korea, and is, in a sense, the country's de facto real economy. North Korean marketisation presents a unique case in two ways. Firstly, as many scholars have indicated, in North Korea, society, not the government spontaneously began to construct a market economy as a coping response to the trauma of famine and state failure (Choi, 2017; Haggard & Noland, 2005). Secondly, women have played a major role in this marketisation process, to the point where female entrepreneurs (FEs) actually outnumber males. It has been argued that high rates of female entrepreneurship are only typically seen in countries that demonstrate high levels of overall entrepreneurial activity (Verheul, Van Stel, & Thurik, 2006). However, in North Korea, high levels of female entrepreneurship exist in an economy with low total rates of entrepreneurial activity, wherein there are comparatively lower rates of activity among males.

Despite the prevalence of strict state controls, increasing numbers of

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North Korean women have entered into entrepreneurship by identifying business opportunities, allocating resources, and creating value. This is a remarkable phenomenon with female entrepreneurship now playing a vital role in meeting the basic needs of the North Korean citizenry (Lankov & Kim, 2008; Smith, 2015). Based on forty-one interviews with North Korean defectors, this paper explores how, and in which context, FEs emerged in North Korea and whether entrepreneurial activities are gendered practices. Further, the paper questions the influence of FEs on broader North Korean society and whether women's participation in markets has any bearing on gender relations within the household and family, as well as on attitudes toward the North Korean regime. Providing a gendered perspective into the unprecedented economic and social changes currently unfolding in North Korea, the paper adds further depth to existing scholarship on gender and entrepreneurship.

Methodological approach and description of participants

Scholars on female entrepreneurship have indicated that studies in the discipline must “move away from traditional, broad-sweeping quantitative approaches towards more focused qualitative and innovative methodologies such as in-depth interviews, life histories, case studies, ethnography or discourse analysis” (Henry, Foss, & Ahl, 2016, p. 236). To fill the void in research on FEs and go beyond descriptive analysis of female entrepreneurship as gendered practice, this research is based on in-depth interviews.

Like the majority of research on developments within North Korean society, we rely on interview data garnered from defectors. This approach has been facilitated by a substantial increase in the number of North Koreans defecting to South Korea in recent years. In the early 1990s, the total number of defectors numbered in the low hundreds. By September 2016, a total of 29,830 North Koreans had made their way to the South. Approximately 70% of these defectors are women (Ministry of Unification, 2016). Through field work in September 2014, May 2015 and January and December 2016, we conducted forty-one in-depth interviews with female defectors resettled in South Korea. We used snowball sampling, and to diversify the sample, new contacts were made in various fieldwork sites, including NGOs and two Protestant churches that offered special services for North Koreans. Interviews were between two and four hours in length.

The majority (thirty) of those interviewed left North Korea between 2010 and 2015, with ten defecting between 2001 and 2009, and one between 1994 and 1999. Twenty interviewees were in their twenties and thirties at their time of departure, with ten in their forties, four in their fifties, four in their sixties and three in their teens. At the time of interview, eighteen were in their thirties and forties, ten were in their twenties, nine were in their fifties, three in their sixties and one in their seventies. Testimonies from participants defecting from North Korea at various times have been included as this allows for exploration of how market activities have evolved in North Korea over time. It also allows for examination of women's developing roles and status within society in comparison to men. In addition, consideration of the experiences of North Koreans living in North Korea during each of the three generations of dynastic rule (those of Kim Il Sung (1948–1994), Kim Jong Il (1994–2011) and Kim Jong Un (2012–the present)) yields important insights into the changing attitudes toward socialism unfolding in the country.

In terms of geographic representation, the majority of participants (twenty-six) were from the North Korean north-eastern province of North Hamgyeong. Ten were from Yanggang province, three from South Pyeongan, and one from South Hamgyeong. Only one of the defectors we interviewed was from North Korea's relatively privileged capital of Pyongyang. This heavy representation from North Hamgyeong and Yanggang provinces mirrors a general trend in overall defector statistics. Owing to their geographical proximity to China, the majority (over 75%) of all defectors entering the South originate from these two provinces. In fact, approximately 60% of all defectors come

from North Hamgyeong (Ministry of Unification, 2016). The proximity of these provinces to China also accounts for the high levels of economic activity engaged in by interviewees from these regions.

Those interviewed are of reasonably high educational achievement. Twenty-three noted having completed high school studies, seven having trained at vocational school, and eleven having graduated from university. Their occupations within North Korea were also diverse, ranging from none at all, to housewife, hairdresser, construction or factory worker, farmer, librarian, clothing designer, or accountant or book keeper. Some interviewees revealed that they were doctors, nurses, teachers or even a researcher, professor or university lecturer. One of our participants claimed to have been a military security officer, one a government officer, while another was a soldier. Moreover, in the sample, thirty-nine of the forty-one had been directly involved in market trading in North Korea. To protect the identities of participants, pseudonyms are used. While the month and year of interview, together with the participants' ages at the time of interviews are included, no other personal details are revealed. Data from defectors have been augmented with data from experts in the field, and analysis of other secondary sources to increase validity and credibility.

Gender and entrepreneurship: female deficit thesis

The scholarship on this area has largely placed FEs “as an interloper in the field who demonstrated a relatively poor fit” (Marlow, 2014, p. 103). That is, as individuals, whom by definition of their sex and gender, lack the skills to engage in entrepreneurship as frequently and successfully as men (Marlow, Henry, & Carter, 2009). Data from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor show “women are less likely than men to engage in entrepreneurship” with only six out of the sixty-two participating economies demonstrating equal or higher levels of female entrepreneurship in 2015 (Kelley, Singer, & Herrington, 2016, p. 25). Most research therefore appears to focus on the apparent deficits of FEs and ponder why they cannot “be more like a man” (Taylor & Marlow, as cited in Marlow, 2014, p. 103).

Much of this focus can be attributed to the continued tendency to associate entrepreneurship with masculinity and the traditionally masculine qualities of “aggressiveness, ambition, dominance, and independence” (Eddleston & Powell, 2008, p. 247), based on the liberal feminist notion of binary/essentialist sex traits. Even when research began challenging the so-called “deficit thesis” in the 1990s, masculinity still appeared to be presented as the ‘norm’ (Marlow, 2014, p. 104). As Susan Marlow (2014) explains, despite theoretical advancements in the field, the archetypal representation of entrepreneurial success remains “persistently male” with FEs “forever defined as other” (pp. 114–115).

This is a pattern also identified by Henry et al. (2016) who assert that the majority of studies on female entrepreneurship are preoccupied with the “assumed, innate sex differences” between men and women, which not only contribute to the “othering” of women, but to the view that women “need to be fixed in order to meet the norm” (p. 235). Henry et al. (2016) also suggest that research in the field requires more of a constructionist approach to gender, wherein gender is seen as “socially and culturally constituted,” as changing with time and context, and even the individual (p. 221). Such an approach enables researchers to study not only how female entrepreneurs ‘do’ genders, but how they construct and transform both their lives and society. It also allows researchers to explore how social systems, institutions and practices are gendered, and how gendering is constructed within social, political and cultural contexts. This research on FEs in transitional North Korea thus fills a gap in gender and entrepreneurship scholarship in that it goes beyond the ‘women's deficit’ approach by adopting a constructionist approach to gender. It does so by considering a specific context (North Korea) where entrepreneurship is both somewhat atypically dominated and driven by women's success.

This archetypal representation of entrepreneurial success

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