



# North Korean women defectors in South Korea and their political participation



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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the political participation intentions of North Korean women refugees. Previous literature tends to highlight the sufferings and difficulties that female refugees experience as they leave their homelands and settle in a new country. Few studies have been directed toward the political dimension of refugee life. The empirical results show that North Korean women defectors hold generally participatory attitudes toward politics and mostly liberal opinions on policy issues. Furthermore, among the socio-demographic variables, age and marital status are generally influential in the intention of political participation among the North Korean women defectors. Among the political attitudinal variables, attitude toward environmental policy consistently affects political participation intention. With respect to defector-specific variables, satisfaction with life in South Korea is influential, whereas cultural adaptation is not.

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## 1. Introduction

This study examines the political participation intentions of North Korean women refugees. Previous literature tends to highlight the sufferings and difficulties that female refugees experience as they leave their homelands and settle in a new country. For example, many researchers have emphasized the economic, social, and cultural circumstances of such refugees (Boyd, 1999; Freedman, 2008; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992; Kebede, 1991). Existing studies suggest that female refugees are more likely than male refugees to be exposed to the risk of sexual violence and prostitution during the asylum process (Boyd, 1999; Freedman, 2008; Kebede, 1991). Studies also show that women tend to be discriminated against when they apply for refugee status because they have difficulty meeting admissibility criteria, which usually include assessments of education, vocational skills, job skills, and income potential (Boyd, 1999; Freedman, 2008; Kebede, 1991).

This tendency to concentrate on the ordeals of women refugees is limited because various aspects of these individuals' lives require examination to achieve a thorough understanding of the issues that confront this population. The present study fills this gap by investigating the political dimension of the lives of women refugees, an issue that has thus far been inadequately analyzed. According to the Ministry of Unification of South Korea,<sup>1</sup> until the late 1990s, the majority of North Korean refugees were males, whereas females accounted for only around 10% of the total refugee population from the country. Since the 2000s, however, the number of females who escaped from North Korea has sharply risen and currently

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.unikorea.go.kr/content.do?cmsid=1518> (Accessed on November 12, 2014)

exceeds that of male refugees. As of October 2014, the number of North Korean refugees has amounted to 27,000, among which 19,000 are female, constituting nearly 70% of the total.

According to [Lankov \(2006\)](#), the increase in female North Korean refugees may be due to the internal changes occurring in North Korea. In the past, North Korean refugees primarily came from privileged families ([Lankov, 2006](#)). Because North Korea is a male-dominated society and because women are subjected to control and violence ([Cho, 2012](#)), the privileged group predominantly comprises males. Thus, defectors from this group always outnumbered female refugees. The mid-1990s witnessed the deteriorating political and economic situation of North Korea. This backdrop encouraged the poverty-stricken to escape from the country, thereby increasing the proportion of females among the total North Korean refugee population ([Lankov, 2006](#)). The chronic food shortage and malfunctioning distribution system in North Korea forced women to find ways to earn a living. North Korean women are also relatively exempt from military service and free of work-related burdens, thus providing them opportunities for long-term travel to the border between China and North Korea ([Baek, 2002; Kang, 2005](#)). Given that North Korean women freely travel to and from China, they are afforded access to information regarding defection and eventually decide to escape from North Korea ([Cho, 2012; Park, 2010](#)). With the expansion of activities in the market economy, North Korean women may have developed a broader conception of human rights, thereby prompting hope for a more humane life ([Park, 2010](#)). These circumstances may have contributed to the sudden increase in the proportion of North Korean women defectors.

The issue of North Korean defectors is not merely an issue between the two Koreas but a matter of international importance. On December 18, 2014, the United Nations Security Council referred North Korea's poor handling of human rights to the International Criminal Court (ICC). The North Korean Human Rights Resolution, which sanctions the Pyongyang leadership that oppresses the people, was passed at the United Nations General Assembly, with an overwhelming 116 votes (versus 20) in favor of the Resolution ([ABC News Online, 2014](#)). A resolution that urges the North Korean government to improve its human rights situation has been previously established, but the December event was the first time that the UN recommended "referral to [the] ICC" ([Yonhap News, 2014](#)). In deference to the recommendation of the UN General Assembly, the Security Council adopted the North Korean human rights issue, not the nuclear issue, as part of its official agenda for the first time in December 22, 2014 ([Vincent, 2014](#)). Despite the nonbinding nature of the Resolution, the Security Council's inclusion indicates that the international community has begun attaching importance to North Korea's human right issues. A development contributory to the increasing attention paid to North Korean human rights is North Korean defector Park Yeon-mi's selection as one of the BBC's "100 Women of 2014." With such recognition, she emerged as a global icon of the fight for North Korean human rights. She has travelled the world and recounted horrific experiences in North Korea and her ordeal of escaping from the country through China.

Although the issue of North Korean defectors has received international attention, aside from South Korean scholarship, little academic research has been devoted to this matter. Most studies on North Korean defectors by South Korean academics tend to follow two trends: the first stream of research examines how South Koreans perceive North Korean defectors (see, e.g., [Lee, 2011; Sohn & Lee, 2012; Yang & Chung, 2005; Yoon & Song, 2013](#)), and the second investigates various other dimensions of the ordeals of North Korean defectors. The present study belongs to the second body of research. Previous studies of the second type are predisposed toward the economic, social, and cultural adaptation of North Korean defectors to South Korean society (see, e.g., [Cho & Jeon, 2005; Park, 2008; Song, 2014; Sung, 2014](#)). This is not to say, however, that no research has been carried out with respect to North Korean defectors' political attitudes/behaviors. Several scholars, including [Lee \(2012\)](#), [Kim and Lee \(2013\)](#), and [Hyun \(2014\)](#), have probed into this matter. Nevertheless, only a few such investigations have been conducted, which leaves the question of how North Korean defectors assimilate into the South Korean political process inadequately addressed.

The present study bridges the gap in the literature by examining the political adaptation of North Korean defectors. In this regard, an issue worth probing into is how North Korean defectors who experienced North Korea's hereditary rule and dictatorship respond to South Korea's democratic political process. Also, North Korean defectors may experience value and structural changes as they settle in South Korea ([Hyun, 2014](#)). In particular, they may be exposed to post-material values,<sup>2</sup> which might influence their political behaviors and attitudes. Furthermore, this work contributes to the literature by focusing on North Korean women defectors. The present study pays a special attention to North Korean women defectors, not North Korean defectors in general for the following reasons. First, the majority of North Korean defectors are female. That is, the gender imbalance is already present in our study population. Statistics show that more than 70% of defectors from North Korea are female, and in recent years, this has risen to 80% ([Ministry of Unification of South Korea](#)). Because females are a super-majority among defectors, my study on female defectors reflects the reality well and can provide more practical implications regarding defectors. Furthermore, it is difficult to find a questionnaire with suitable questions regarding political participation of North Korean defectors. The data set used in this study is among the rare data sets that address politics-related questions, and of the 200 respondents, only 49 were male defectors. In sum, the present study focuses on North Korean women defectors for two primary reasons: first, to reflect the reality of North Korean defectors, and second, because of the limited availability of data sets.

<sup>2</sup> Post-material values are defined as emphasizing the quality of life, environment, autonomy and self-expression, instead of focusing material values such as economic and physical security ([Erickson & O'Neill 2002](#)).

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