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Gender in Transition: The Case of North Korea

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Summary. — This paper uses survey data to examine the experience of women in North Korea's economic transition. Women have been shed from state-affiliated employment and thrust into a market environment characterized by weak institutions and corruption. More than one-third of men indicate that criminality and corruption is the best way to make money, and 95% of female traders report paying bribes. The increasingly male-dominated state preys on the increasingly female-dominated market. Energies are directed toward survival and this population appears to lack the tools to act collectively to improve their status.

Key words — gender, transition, refugees, North Korea

1. INTRODUCTION

Socialists, going back to Marx and particularly Engels (1985), have grappled with the "woman question" in both theory and practice. Socialist states typically enshrined gender equality in law at an earlier stage than their capitalist counterparts, though socialist emancipation often created a "double burden" as women were called onto enter the workforce while simultaneously bearing the traditional burden of homemaker. In certain respects North Korea followed this pattern, albeit with some distinctively North Korean twists.

However, the North Korean economy is now undergoing a second transition: from a planned state-socialist system to a hybrid system in which the state has grudgingly acquiesced to a larger role for the market. This second transition has a strong gender dimension. Women have been shed from the state-owned enterprise sector in greater numbers than men and have gravitated to market-oriented employ. This development appears particularly pronounced among married urban women.

In other settings, this new-found freedom might be empowering, liberating women both from the surveillance of the workplace and traditional patriarchal relationships rooted in the household; we return this possibility in the conclusion. However in other developing countries, the informal sector is allowed to play a central role in both urban and rural employ. The North Korean regime, by contrast, has taken an ambivalent if not actively hostile posture toward the market, and thus toward the women who populate it.

Documenting changes in North Korea's notoriously closed economy presents formidable challenges, but researchers have begun to exploit the opportunity provided by refugees (cf. Chon, Huh, Kim, & Bae, 2007; Chang, Haggard & Noland, 2009a, 2009b; Haggard & Noland, 2010a, 2010b; Haggard, Lee, & Noland, 2012; Kim, 2010; Kim & Song, 2008; Lankov & Kim, 2008; Lee, 2007; Lee, Lim, Cho, Lee, & Lee, 2008). This paper explores the gender dimensions of North Korea's transition by considering the results from a 2008 survey of 300 North Korean refugees living in South Korea.

The paper begins with a brief historical overview of the role of women in the North Korean political economy, with an emphasis on the dramatic shifts that occurred as the state socialist system broke down during the famine of the mid-1990s and the country experienced "marketization from below."

We then turn to an examination of the sample, household economics and the implications of the fact that North Korean women have been disproportionately involved in marketization that the state has sought to limit, control and even criminalize. Women are not differentially prone to arrest and do not appear to receive distinctly worse treatment than men. Indeed, there is evidence that the police exercise relative restraint toward the middle-aged married women who figure prominently in retail trading. But women's higher levels of market participation make them more susceptible to confrontations with officials and entanglement with the penal system. We argue that high levels of discretion with respect to arrest and detention together with high levels of brutality facilitate predatory corruption. Among the most recent cohort of refugees to leave North Korea 95% of female traders report paying brides to avoid entanglement with the penal system. In short, the increasingly male-dominated state preys on the increasingly female-dominated market.

Do these findings have political implications? Do women have distinctive attitudes? Are they more likely to engage in collective action? Our survey shows that women are cognizant of growing levels of inequality and corruption. However, we do not find that women hold distinctly dissident views, are more willing to communicate them to their peers, or are more likely to organize. Taken together, these results paint a picture of a vulnerable group that has been disadvantaged in North Korea's transition. Women's energies are directed toward survival. Despite episodic reports of spontaneous protest, market women appear to lack the tools or social capital to act collectively to improve their status.

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2. WOMEN IN THE NORTH KOREAN POLITICAL ECONOMY: FROM PLAN TO UNPLANNED MARKETIZATION

In 1945, even before the 1948 founding of Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), local authorities abolished the traditional hierarchical patrilineal household registration system. The following year the Gender Equality Law was enacted, prescribing equal rights to women in the areas of inheritance, marriage, divorce, child custody, and support claims. The law also banned polygamy, concubinage, and prostitution. The 1946 Statute on the Labor of Manual and Clerical Workers guaranteed equal pay for equal work (Jung & Dalton, 2006; Shin, 2001). In 1958, Cabinet Decision 84, established targets to increase women's participation in education and various professions. To support both reproduction and women's participation in the labor force, some traditional women's work was socialized through the establishment of nurseries, kindergartens, laundries, and other household services (Ryang, 2000; Shin, 2001). The 1972 Constitution guaranteed equality, and subsequent legislation such as the Socialist Labor Law (1978), and the Infant Education Law (1976) elucidated legal guarantees with respect to maternity and childbirth.

Nevertheless, as in other socialist states, women continued to face a double (or triple) burden. In a speech to the Fifth Congress of the Korean Workers Party, founding leader Kim Il-sung declared that women would be "liberated" from heavy household chores via technological change: gas or oil instead of coal cooking, access to appliances such as refrigerators and rice cookers, and greater provision of processed foods. These goals were subsequently enshrined in the 1972 Constitution as well (Ryang 2000; Shin 2001).

Needless to say, reality did not live up to the rhetoric. As Park (2011, p. 160) observes, "In the authoritarian culture so prevalent in North Korea, the concept of equality was alien to both men and women." Women continued to be channeled into relatively low status and pay occupations. As the economy began to falter in the mid-1980s, the resources devoted to the nurseries and other institutions designed to ease the "double burden" on women were cut. Married women increasingly dropped out of the labor force, and the role of housewife became the norm in some locales (Jung & Dalton, 2006). The so-called August 3rd (1984) movement created new work units (August 3rd units) sought to mobilize marginal participants in the labor force, including young mothers, to use waste materials for the local production of consumer goods. But as the economy deteriorated through the 1990s, the lofty aspirations with respect to gender equality became increasingly illusory, and the 1998 Constitution even dropped the clause from the 1972 Constitution stipulating that the state "shall liberate women from the heavy family chores" (Park, 2011).

Ryang (2000) argues that the early efforts to enshrine equality were made by the People's Committee under the auspices of the USSR with limited local buy-in by North Korean officials or participation of North Korean women themselves. Instead, as Jung and Dalton (2006) argue, the cult of personality around Kim Il-sung (often described as the benevolent "Fatherly Leader") had strong patriarchal elements, recasting the whole country in line with traditional or even Confucian family structures. The revolutionized female ideal became that of mother. In traditional Marxist terms, the "woman question" was transformed into the "mother" or "mother-worker" question with little attention to other dimensions of gender. For example, while North Korea has all sorts of laws on reproduction, there is no legislation on sexual violence and harassment (Jung & Dalton, 2006).

Such was the status of women when North Korea entered its particularly problematic "transition" beginning in the mid-1990s. Prior to that time, North Korea maintained a classic centrally-planned economy, notable only for the rigor with which markets were suppressed and autarky from the world economy was pursued. Over the past two decades, the importance of the market has grown, but not due to pro-active reform. Rather marketization emerged as the product of state failure and particularly the famine in the 1990s. The state's inability to fulfill its economic obligations unleashed an unplanned, bottom-up marketization of the economy resulting in the alteration of social and political relations among the populace.

Rather than leading a transition, policy has been ambivalent, sometimes acquiescing to facts on the ground, at other times attempting to reverse them. In July 2002, the government initiated a major policy reform with four components: microeconomic policy changes, including alteration of administered prices and wages; macroeconomic policy changes, including the introduction of direct taxes; the establishment of special economic zones; and aid-seeking. [1] Since roughly 2004–05, the policy trend has been one of "reform in reverse." The government introduced new controls on both domestic markets and cross-border exchange, and pursued a failed attempt to resuscitate the state-run quantity rationing system for food. A botched November 2009 currency reform epitomized this trend, destroying an unknown share of household savings and adversely affecting market traders in particular.

One side effect of the famine, economic mismanagement, and political repression has been an ongoing exodus of refugees, primarily into China from whence more than 20,000 have eventually found asylum in South Korea. Most are women, and the gender dimension of the refugee problem is now thoroughly documented (Amnesty International, 2004; Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2002; Lee, 2006; Muico, 2005; National Human Rights Commission of Korea, 2010).

There is evidence that men and women have had differing experiences in transit. In China, male refugees are often employed in heavy labor such as mining, construction, and forestry, and may possibly be more involved in "round-tripping": voluntarily returning to North Korea bearing food or money, then returning to China. As we found in our sample, women refugees reaching South Korea spend longer in transit than men, in part because they are more likely to be the victims of human trafficking, sex work, and brokered marriages with rural Chinese husbands. [2] Not surprisingly, a survey of North Korean refugees in China found that women were more likely than men to experience fear and anxiety about their vulnerabilities in China (Chang et al., 2009a).

However, the differential experience of men and women was not limited to the refugees; the failed transition of the mid-1990s within North Korea also had a strong gender dimension. During the famine, women as well as men took responsibility for securing food for their families, both by generating income and in navigating the cash transactions and barter through which staples and other foodstuffs were secured (Lankov & Kim, 2008). As the state socialist system frayed, households appear to have decided that it was important for male heads of households to retain state employ. This allowed households to meet security requirements and access residual social services provided through the work unit, however inadequate. Women either lost their jobs as state-owned enterprises downsized ("necessity entrepreneurship") or left declining state firms to exploit more lucrative market opportunities ("opportunity entrepreneurship"). [3]