



NORTH KOREAN WOMEN AS NEW ECONOMIC AGENTS: DRIVERS AND CONSEQUENCES

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This Issue Brief explores the changing social and economic role of women in North Korea since the so-called Arduous March of the 1990s. With the breakdown of the public food distribution system and deteriorating economic conditions, many women have been forced to become breadwinners for their families. While this new-found economic agency carries the seeds of societal transformation in a traditionally patriarchal system, women have borne a disproportionate burden in securing not only their families' survival, but also arguably that of the North Korean economy.

Introduction

The past three decades have witnessed the worsening economic condition of North Korea. With the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the early 1990s, the North Korean economy suffered as a result of the rapid decrease in trade with ex-socialist countries. Between 1990 and 1994, average annual trade between North Korea and Russia fell from 2.26 billion to 140 million USD.¹ In addition, a series of natural disasters between 1995-1998 in the form of floods and droughts impacted the lives of ordinary North Koreans, with many, arguably hundreds of thousands, losing their lives due to starvation and disease. More recently, international sanctions on North Korea's nuclear and missile programs have had far-reaching social and economic consequences.

The famine in particular destroyed not only livelihoods but also the country's social system. The North Korean regime lacked the capacity to sustain a functioning food rationing system and other vital areas of support, which especially impacted the public health system and planned socialist economy. In response, the North Korean regime launched a policy of self-reliance with all individuals subsequently having to seek their own means of survival. This period came to be known in North Korea as the "Arduous March," which triggered a vast transformation in the everyday lives of the people, in particular affecting women's lives.

Remarkably, the unintended consequences of this

transformation were that women became not only the main economic agents in their families, but also that of the emerging market economy based on the establishment of grassroots markets known as Jangmadang. The rapid increase in economic activity became a resource for the nationwide spread of market activity with relative autonomy from the official economic structure of the state.

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Accordingly, this issue brief investigates the changing role of women in the evolving socio-economic context of North Korea. In particular, it will illustrate the ways in which North Korean women have reconstructed their role as economic agents and to what extent this role has affected change in North Korean society.

Women's Evolving Role

Early in its establishment, North Korea promulgated the Gender Equality Law in 1946 that included the revolutionary reform of women's rights in almost all areas including politics, economy, culture, and suffrage.² In so doing, at least legally, North Korea was far quicker in acknowledging equal rights between men and women than South Korea.

Following the ravages of the Korean War (1950-53), North Korean women were desperately needed in the nation-building process.³ The Chollima movement, launched in 1956, saw the role of North Korean women become that of revolutionary workers in the national project. As part of this process, the unit of production rapidly changed from a family-based to a more socially structured system, including collective farms, factories, and industries.

In the late 1950s, however, the North Korean regime

chose to promote heavy industry, causing women's labor to be regarded as secondary; the majority of women worked in light industry. Married women were allocated to their husbands' workplaces to support male labor. Their work remained highly gendered, largely limited to cooking, cleaning, and carrying out other unskilled tasks. Those married women who remained at home were organized under the Socialist Women's Union of Women, mainly contributing to delivering the messages of the Party to households and the wider community.

Women's status as workers did not exempt them from their gendered duties as mothers and wives at home. The North Korean leader, Kim Il Sung, proposed the liberation of women from domestic work and its burdens through a technological revolution by attempting to provide more home appliances (refrigerators, cookers, etc.) and running "meal factories" supplying ready-made meals to lighten the burden of North Korean women. However, he did not call into question patriarchal gender relations in the domestic sphere. For him, women with fewer domestic duties simply created more opportunities for work directly linked to the interests of the national economy.

A strong ideology of motherhood was promulgated as a part of the nation-building process. The North Korean regime constructed an ideal image of North Korean women – that of being a revolutionary (good worker) and simultaneously a mother with a strong ideology. The role models of Kang Ban-seok (mother of Kim Il Sung) and Kim Jong-suk (wife of Kim Il Sung and mother of Kim Jong-Il) were mobilized for propaganda purposes. Both were identified as "mothers" rather than individual women.

Contrary to the advanced laws on gender equality, therefore, the North Korean regime circulated somewhat contradictory messages of what it meant to be the ideal woman, and this produced a double burden for North Korean women in so far that they were simultaneously expected to become revolutionary workers at work and sacrificing mothers at home.

With the massive impact of The Arduous March in mid-1990s, however, the ideal of motherhood was rapidly reformulated through an emphasis on Kang Ban-seok and Kim Jong-suk as “breadwinners” amid economic hardship. That is, the failure of the food rationing system in the late 1990s forced the regime to change its message to stressing women as economic agents for family survival.

While men were still required to be at work, women tended to be much more flexible and could adjust due to the nature of their work and social position. In other words, the hierarchy of gender in the workplace provided unexpected opportunities for women to become active in the emerging unofficial Jangmadang markets. Male labor by contrast was predominantly maintained on the production line of heavy industry.

The Jangmadang and the Rise of Donju

The Jangmadang had existed on a small scale throughout the history of North Korea, in particular so-called famers’ markets (Nongmin sijang) had flourished for the exchange of homegrown produce such as vegetables alongside fish and meat. The Arduous March, however, saw these small-scale markets develop into more established markets dealing in diverse goods and everyday wares. At the outset, trade in basic necessities and food remained within the rural villages, but later evolved to trade in goods between towns and eventually cities.

In 2002, the regime allowed the Jangmadang under its planned economy leading to the dramatic increase in official markets nationwide. The number of official markets is now known to number at least 436.⁴ Each official market has up to 20,000 sales stalls where only females aged over 20 are permitted to sell products. The total number of entrepreneurs in these markets was estimated at over one million in 2016, accounting for approximately 15 percent of the female population.⁵

A noticeable number of North Korean women,

moreover, have become Donju, meaning simply “master of money,” and are involved in a wide range of businesses from retail to smuggling. (The term Donju used to refer to loan sharks, but now widely denotes an entrepreneur with a considerable amount of capital.) These days Donju actively engage in the state’s planned economy through the provision of supplies and accumulation and dissemination of capital. Some establish strong cooperation networks with managers in state-owned factories, providing raw materials and sharing profits. A few Donju have also set up their own businesses in production and distribution industries.

North Korean women still face obstacles in accessing economic resources and political support due to the patriarchal characteristics of North Korean society.

In line with their increasing capacity and visibility, their impact on the economy seems to be immense. The newspaper Nodong sinmun reported in June 2020, for example, that Kim Jong Un had praised 18 people for their support in the Samjiyeon city construction project – a new city near Mt. Paektu designed to attract tourists.⁶ Among the individuals named, 10 appeared to be female whose role had been to provide materials and supplies for construction. This would appear to indicate that large-scale construction projects are carried out with the cooperation of Donju, especially a considerable number of female Donju. This clearly shows that North Korean women have evolved to become important players in an emerging market economy on the basis of their new-found agency.

However, North Korean women still face obstacles in accessing economic resources and political support due to the patriarchal characteristics of North Korean society. Market activities require collusion with the

regime, yet women typically experience difficulties in establishing strong networks with the regime. The regime's political power is unquestionably male-dominated. This requires women to become more strategic in market practices to gain an upper hand.

North Korean women's economic agency has had a noticeable impact on social relations, especially within the family. North Korean women's transformed role in the family has had unintended consequences that modify the family structure. Previously the family and intimate relationships had fallen under the purview of the state's ideology under the slogan of "revolutionary comradeship." Accordingly, the private sphere was considered public, and, as such, strictly controlled.⁷ However, the more agency women achieve, the more that "individualistic desires" emerge.

Even married women are increasingly avoiding having children due to the economic burden.

Free marriage has become common and divorce has become widely accepted despite being only possible via a strict legal procedure. Furthermore, the hierarchical relationship between husband and wife is gradually faltering and cohabitation becoming more visible. Young women prefer not to marry at an early age as they attempt to avoid the responsibility of family breadwinning. Even married women are increasingly avoiding having children due to the economic burden.

In sum, assuming dual responsibility as a wife and a mother was considered as an unquestionable social duty until the late 1990s, but, after the emergence of the Jangmadang, women appear to have increasingly realized their own agency in choosing marriage and childbirth. That is, North Korean women with economic power – albeit still relatively small in number – have become individuals with relatively

greater independent agency in determining their life trajectories.

North Korean Migrant Mothers

Another significant trend is that more and more North Korean women have become mobile, with some even conducting cross-border business in the Sino-North Korea borderland, that stretches for 1,416 kilometers.⁸ Since the Arduous March, a significant number of North Koreans have crossed the border – mostly illegally – for the purpose of economic exchange as well as labor and marriage migration, which has been fueled by the rapid urbanization on the Chinese side of the border.

North Korean migrant mothers tend to work in the care sector, restaurants, and massage parlors amongst others. Some have obtained legal documentation, but even those with illegal status tend to extend their stay in China for economic reasons in order to transmit remittances to family left behind in North Korea. Some later develop more sustainable means of support, such as setting up businesses involving their families.

Exposed to a more advanced market economy in China, some women use their entrepreneurial skills to conduct cross-border trade with left-behind family members. One typical example is the import of baking and noodle-making machines from China for family members (typically daughters) to produce bread and noodles for sale in North Korea.⁹ This illustrates how even those North Korean women who have migrated to China take on the role of breadwinning for the family.

Migrant mothers tend to hire foster mothers, mostly relatives and friends, to take care of their children while they are away.¹⁰ With the spread of mobile phones in the Sino-North Korea borderland, however, these mothers regularly communicate with their children and even supervise the children's education by favoring private tuition over the official education system provided by the regime. In so doing, they typically encourage their children to

learn Chinese and English (instead of Russian) in view of their future opportunities.

Despite this, increasingly migrant mothers experience the breakdown of the family. Physical absence leads to emotional separation from their children in North Korea. Left-behind children come to understand their mothers as mere breadwinners without emotional attachment. In addition, migrant mothers' lives in the Sino-North Korea borderland are vulnerable due to their illegal status. They are exposed to constant threats such as withheld wages, possible deportation, and even sexual and physical abuse. These hardships cause some to gradually tire of sending remittances and taking responsibility for left-behind children.

International Sanctions and Covid-19

The maintenance of international sanctions has had a disproportionate impact on women. Although the aim of sanctions is clearly to impede North Korea's development of nuclear arms and missile programs, it is widely known that the sanctions target the regime's economic capacity. Even though the sanctions regime allows humanitarian assistance and certain exemptions for needed supplies, the reality is that ordinary people's lives have become increasingly harder under a sanctions regime that has little prospect of being lifted in the near future.¹¹

As North Korean women increasingly take responsibility for family survival, they face more difficulties in conducting market activities. The North Korean regime has attempted to overcome sanctions by accelerating the efficiency of domestic industry, but the limits of their efforts are quite visible. In particular, the imports of basic raw materials such as petrol and gas – subject to sanctions – negatively affects the market activities of North Korean women.

Women in rural areas are especially affected by the lack of materials and products which directly impact their living conditions. Given their responsibility for family survival, they do not have much choice but to have to work even harder by facilitating all

possible resources. As a recent report by Korea Peace Now has illustrated, the economic burden has fallen increasingly on women who also face increasing rates of domestic violence and exploitation in their jobs.¹²

Cross-border trade, labor migration, and even marriage migration are considered survival strategies for North Korean women to meet the needs of the family.

The situation has been made worse by the Covid-19 pandemic, which prevents even informal trade in the Sino-North Korea borderland where a number of North Korean women rely on cross-border economic exchanges. As the smuggling business is incontestably an important part of people's livelihoods, the sudden border closure has pressurized North Korean women to a great extent.

Kim Jong Un, in his address on October 10, 2020 during the military parade celebrating the 75th Anniversary of the Founding of the Workers' Party of Korea, assessed that North Korea is facing two crises at the same time - the threat of Covid-19 as well as the extensive flood damage caused in August 2020.¹³ Coming on top of the worsening condition of the North Korean economy, ordinary North Koreans, and women in particular, would seem to face an increasingly precarious future. It is widely acknowledged that vulnerable groups, especially women, are more severely affected by national crisis, and North Korea is surely no exception.

Conclusion

North Korean women have transformed themselves from "revolutionary" and conventional "mothers" into "economic agents" amidst rapid social and economic changes in North Korea since the Arduous March of the 1990s. However, in reality their role

has expanded to carry a double burden in private and public spheres. In particular, the state failure of the food rationing system saw the responsibility for the provision of foods and necessities increasingly handed to women, not men. As a so-called “patriarchal socialist country,” the state’s failure does not jeopardize the authority of the patriarchy. Rather women, considered as the secondary labor force, share the responsibility of the state in each household.

With the flourishing number of markets nationwide, the economic activities of North Korean women have rapidly increased, with some managing to accumulate a substantial amount of capital. Their changed position in the economy has a great influence on family and social relations. North Korean women have gradually achieved more agency in intimate relationships, marriage, and childbirth. On the other hand, a significant number of women still remain focused on mothering practices especially providing for their children’s development. Cross-border trade, labor migration, and even marriage migration are considered survival strategies for North Korean women to meet the needs of the family.

In conclusion, North Korean women might be considered not only the real “victims” from the era of the Arduous March, but also an emerging group with a high level of agency who might signify the future prospects of North Korean society. If the North Korean regime opens up its market and society with the process of denuclearization, it is highly likely that North Korea will go through speedy economic development and social transformation. In this vein, North Korean women will be a main agency behind this possible transition.

However, tragically, the possibilities for North Korean women are now being jeopardized by the negative impact of international sanctions (with the deadlock in nuclear negotiations) as well as the Covid-19 pandemic. Their active agency in the market seems to be facing fundamental challenges and they are now forced to find more radical strategies to survive whereby they have become more vulnerable to sexual violence, labor exploitation, and

other dangers.

In order to ensure family survival, there is a little choice but to “sacrifice” themselves and it is perhaps for this reason that the North Korea economy has to some extent managed to sustain itself under the exceptional circumstances the country currently faces. ■

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Endnotes

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