

# Daily Lives of North Korean Women and Gender Politics

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**Printed** August 2020  
**Published** August 2020

**Published by** Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU)  
**Publisher** Yu-hwan Koh, President  
**Editor** Yeowon Lim, External Affairs and Public Relations Team

**Registration number** No.2-2361 (April 23, 1997)  
**Address** 217 Banpo-daero(Banpo-dong), Seocho-gu, Seoul 06578, Korea  
**Telephone** (82-2) 2023-8208  
**Fax** (82-2) 2023-8298  
**Homepage** <http://www.kinu.or.kr>  
**Design** Designintro Co. Ltd (82-2) 2285-0789  
**Print** Hancompany Co. Ltd (82-2) 2269-9917  
**ISBN** 979-11-6589-004-9 93340 : Not for sale

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Also available at the Government Printing Office Sales Center  
Store (82-2) 734-6818; Office (82-2) 394-0337

# **Daily Lives of North Korean Women and Gender Politics**

This English translation is a summarized and edited version of the research paper “*Daily Lives of North Korean Women and Gender Politics*” by Jeong-ah Cho, Ji Sun Yee, and Hee Young Yi (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, December 2019). The analysis, comments, and opinions contained in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Korea Institute for National Unification.



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Daily Lives of North Korean Women  
and Gender Politics

# 1. Introduction



Economic crisis and marketization have transformed the lives of North Korean women in various ways. During the Arduous March when factories stopped operating and rations halting, women shouldered the livelihood of their families, replacing their heads of household and the government. They went beyond the fences of their household, crossing regional and national boundaries to secure the survival of their family and society. With the growing marketization trend, women's role in securing and maintaining the family and society has only increased thereafter. At the same time, the changing role of women has brought changes in gender policies, relations, and perceptions. However, women still face sexist social norms and unequal gender relations. In addition, gender relations, gender perceptions, and women's daily lives are being expressed in vastly diverse forms depending on class, region, and generation.

In light of the aforementioned issues, this study examines the transformations of gender politics in the daily lives of North Korean women before and during the Kim Jong Un regime. First, the study analyzes the national level changes in laws, policies, and discourses on gender politics. Second, by looking into their lived experiences, the study explores what kinds of actions the women took within the structural gender system. In conclusion, the study analyzes how gender politics unfolds within the daily lives of North Korean women and the North Korean society.

Applying feminist perspective and methodology, this research seeks to shift the focus from a study on 'women' to a study on 'feminist perspectives,' and from 'women's' studies to 'gender' studies. This study traces the changes in North Korean gender issues through the experiences of North Korean women from their

own perspectives. Especially, the study seeks to read the symptoms of the changes in North Korean society by delving into how women make meaning out of their own experiences and how they subjectify themselves.

Conventionally, gender, a sociocultural category, has been distinguished from sex, a biological category. However, the validity of this distinction has been questioned since the late 1980s. Feminism began to focus on how women is structured in a certain historical phase. The concept of gender has been perceived as the force that structures the female or the male and as a certain classification system that generates subjects and meanings in reality.<sup>1)</sup> This study examines the gender differences extant in North Korea's public and private realms by analyzing the gender discourses and realities in North Korea from the perspective of viewing gender as an effect produced in a discursive and historical sense. Furthermore, the study answers the question, "How do sexual differences themselves act as principles and practices that organize the society?"<sup>2)</sup>

Meanwhile, gender cannot be prescribed deterministically based on roles and norms but rather is something dynamically and actively acted upon and produced by actors.<sup>3)</sup> This study explores how women's independent gender performances are being expressed amidst the recent social changes in North Korea, and how gender performances interact with the structural gender

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1) Eun-Kyung Bae, "Gender' as a Category for Social Analysis: Focusing on the History of the Concept," p. 56. (in Korean)

2) Joan Wallach Scott (translated by Eun-Kyung Bae), "Some reflections on gender and politics," p. 226.

3) Eun-Kyung Bae, "Gender' as a Category for Social Analysis: Focusing on the History of the Concept," p. 88. (in Korean)

system. This study uses the concept of ‘gender politics’ as a comprehensive term encompassing the North Korean society’s structured gender system and the different gender performances of actors. Analyzing North Korea’s gender politics is examining both the national planning surrounding the sexual differences in society and the functioning of the gender order amidst various power relations and the reactions and practices of actors.<sup>4)</sup>

This study reviews the traits of North Korean gender politics by providing a two-level analysis—one at the gender/women policy- and discourse-level and another at the level of actual lives of the North Korean women. To analyze the gender/women policies and discourses, the study utilizes official documents such as Kim Jong Un’s speeches and *Rodong Sinmun* and *Korean Woman (Joseon Nyeoseong)*. In addition, the study utilizes the images of women in North Korean arts and propagandas and looks into how the narratives on women were reproduced.

Also, the study engages in qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews of women on oral history in order to grasp North Korean women’s act, experiences, and how North Korean women give meaning to their experiences in life. Instead of trying to identify some universal or typical gender traits, the study focuses on capturing the characteristics of gender politics from the different experiences of various women. Specifically, the author of the study conducted life history interviews and semi-structured in-depth interviews with 23 female North Korean defectors who were born and raised in North Korea but recently fled the North.

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4) Gender differences not only mean differences between men and women but also comprehensively include various gender identities. However, in North Korea’s reality, gender politics is limited in terms of focusing on the problems between men and women.

Most interviewees escaped North Korea after 2015, and all but two women in their 40s are in their 20s and 30s. Their places of residence in North Korea and occupations vary.

## **2. The Government's (Re)naming of Women and the Gender Discourse**





This section examines the Family Law and the Laws on the Protection of the Rights of Women, which were legislated or revised during the Kim Jong-il era and are still valid legal structures underpinning the gender policies of the Kim Jong Un era. Also, the section looks into the changes in women-related discourses after Kim Jong Un's coming to power, focusing on the changes in social recognition and naming of women and the expansion of maternalistic social care functions based on the 'Grand Socialist Family' theory.

### **A. The Continuation and Changes of Legal Devices in the Kim Jong Un Era**

Policies on women in the Kim Jong Un era are characterized by legal guarantees of women's rights. Most legislations and policies on women in the Kim Jong Un era have succeeded those of the Kim Jong-il era. For instance, in the revision of the Socialist Labor Law in 2015, maternity leaves have been greatly extended from '60-days pre-labor and 90-days post-labor' to '60-days pre-labor and 180-days post-labor.' Such maternity protection policies are connected to the intention to increase the birth rate by enhancing the welfare of female workers.

The Family Law, which regulates the principles of family in the socialist society, was enacted in 1990 after the breakdown of the rationing system which has been a controlling mechanism against the citizens. Ever since, the Family Law has been revised four times to help the family unit better function as the foundational backbone of the society and the state, providing a legal ground. The Family Law designates the family as a basic unit of life and stipulates that the state must consolidate the family unit. It became

a legal tool for gender politics, through which the establishment and deconstruction of the family became subordinated to the regulations of the state. However, the same law is also a reflection of the changes where women's property rights are legally guaranteed by codifying the recognition of private property and recognizing the right of inheritance. This transformation reflects the post-economic crisis social change where women have become central actors in producing family income and wealth by actively participating in the market.

The Laws on the Protection of the Rights of Women, which guarantees women's social and economic rights, is a symbolic piece of legislation showing the changing roles of women and the characteristics of gender policies. This legislation portrays North Korea's efforts to meet the international demand on improving women's rights and to propagandize the image of normal country toward the international community. At the same time, it warrants attention because the legislation shows the socioeconomic changes of the state over the past 20 post-crisis years. Legislations on women's rights failed to promote groundbreaking policy shifts or produce strong effects in the real world. Nonetheless, they still hold significance in that it declared the changed status of women's rights, thereby inducing behavioral changes in women's daily lives. For instance, certain cases on how women react to domestic violence or get a divorce to pursue an independent life show the gender practices that occur in a space provided by the legal and institutional transformations. Meanwhile, the Laws on the Protection of the Rights of Women has its limits in that its particular clauses not only contain bans on male-female discrimination and stipulate the equal rights such as the property rights and

inheritance rights but also contain the conventional gendered norms. These norms include the ‘freedom of childbirth’ clause where the government encourages women to give birth and the child-care related clause that primarily recognizes males as legal guardians of minors.

## **B. Social Recognition and Naming of Women**

### *1) Social recognition of women’s commitment and hard work:*

*“the flowers of the generation pushing one side of the wheel of revolution”*

A unique trait of top-down gender politics is portrayed in how the state names and recognizes women. In the statement released prior to the centennial of Kim Il-sung’s birth in 2012, Kim Jong Un emphasized the role of women. While naming women the conventional way – those capable of pushing one side of the wheel of revolution – he newly named them as the ‘flowers of the generation’ in a statement.

Socially, the culture of calling women ‘flowers’ or praising their hard work by likening women to ‘flowers’ has also proliferated. The popular 1991 song ‘Women are Flowers’ describes women who take care of the family, nurture children, and support the society as ‘Flowers of Living,’ ‘Flowers of Happiness,’ and ‘Flowers of the Nation.’ Also, after the Arduous March, the March 9<sup>th</sup> International Women’s Day became a day when husbands cook breakfasts and give flowers to their spouses. Such a convention signified the restoration of the family and of daily life which was destroyed during the Arduous March, and flowers act as symbols for recognizing women’s hard work.<sup>5)</sup> Mother’s Day has also

become a day of giving flowers to women. Kim Jong Un established November 16 as Mother's Day in 2012 and held the 4<sup>th</sup> National Mother's Convention. The International Women's Day, Mother's Day, and National Mother's Convention all hold ceremonial characteristics that pay tribute to women as expressions of deep and noble gratitude from the party and the public. These are national events that officially recognize women's commitments to the survival of the family even during economic turmoil.

## *2) Mobilizing housewives and emphasizing the role of professional women*

Praising and socially recognizing women's hard work often functions as justifications for the two or threefold burden of house labor, livelihood labor, and social labor and as a mechanism of mobilizing women for social labor. Mobilizing women unfolds in two directions. On the one hand, mobilization emphasizes the role and participation of professional women in meeting the national goal of economic takeoff through science and technology in the era of the 'knowledge economy.' On the other hand, mobilization seeks to fill the labor vacuum in the public sector by urging housewives through the Socialist Women's Union of Korea to participate in various types of social labor. By combining mobilization with recognition, women have become not only the 'flowers of the household' but also the 'flowers of society' and 'flowers of the state.'

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5) Jisoon Lee, "Experience and Literary Representation of Anniversary," *Asian Cultural Studies Research Institute*, vol. 47 (2018), p. 252. (in Korean)

At the 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2016, the 6<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Korean Democratic Women's Union was held for the first time in 33 years, and a written decision was announced to change the Union's name from 'the Korean Democratic Women's Union' to the 'Socialist Women's Union of Korea.' In his letter to the participants, Kim Jong Un, again, emphasized the social participation of housewives. Such an emphasis was given under the intention to fill the labor vacuum in public sectors such as construction through mobilizing housewives. The Union's periodical – the 'Korean Woman (*Joseon Nyeoseong*)' – published articles on how women have participated and generated results in construction sites. Members of the Union were encouraged to participate at the construction sites as the Union's 'storm troops,' work as Mobile Art Propaganda Corps, and support construction works by sending various products to the construction sites.

Meanwhile, since Kim Jung Un's coming to power, professional women were named as miraculous and innovative creators committed to the nation's prosperity and were appraised for their active participation in the fields of industry and technology. With the rise of discourses on 'cutting-edge breakthroughs' and 'knowledge economy,' women began to appear in high-tech industries where only men used to dominate. Housewives and mothers were portrayed by the media as professional women who also bear the burdens of social responsibility. Also, new female model figures were being established through stories of female entrepreneurs. For instance, recent North Korean novels included female characters who were design engineers, food machine operators, researchers at the Kim Chaek University of Technology, scientists, researchers at the Academy of National Defense Science,

and other science-related professionals.<sup>6)</sup> In 2015, Kim Jong Un rewarded the first female fighter pilot. These cases all portray the Kim Jong Un era's gender discourse, which emphasizes female professionalism and requires the social utilization of the professionalism.

### 3) *Civilized socialist country and the control over the female body*

In North Korea, female appearances and apparels are subjects of state control. As Kim Jong Un declared the national vision of his era as becoming a 'civilized socialist country,' the control over female apparel and bodies also unfolded in line with the vision. The new control does not deviate much from the conventional demand for 'elegance and chaste.'<sup>7)</sup> However, North Korea is also facing slight changes toward more personal preferences and self-expression as can be seen from the quote, "One must choose apparels of one's taste and dress in style in order to overly express a sense of culture."<sup>8)</sup>

Female apparel during the early period of the Kim Jong Un era, as in previous eras, has been dealt with from the perspective of enlightenment and control. Women were demanded to dress as "modest and civilized Joseon women" and in "line with the demands of the time."<sup>9)</sup> They were also obliged, as mothers who

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6) Ok-gyu Lim, "The State and North Korean Women in the shape of North literature in the Kim Jong-un Era: - Focusing on *Joseon Literature* (2012~2013)," *The International Association For Literature Of Korean Residents Abroad*, no. 13 (2014), pp. 250~251. (in Korean)

7) "Let's make appearances and apparels uplift and sound to meet the needs of the socialist civilization power," *Korean Woman*, no. 11 (2016), p. 53. (in Korean)

8) "Dressy and cultural women dressed in autumn vibes," *Korean Woman*, no.11 (2016), p. 40. (in Korean)

are mirrors to their children, to 'educate' their children to dress and style their hair modestly. Clothes that were too tight, short, dark, stained, extravagant, and flashy were subject to regulation.<sup>10)</sup>

Although women's desire to decorate themselves is considered to stem from the adoption of decadent foreign cultures and are also under social management and control, women's desire to preen themselves as self-expression is being newly developed under national planning. A scrutiny has been loosened on apparel, hairstyle, makeup, and other aspects of the female body and appearance thanks to women who have made their self-expressive desires socially known building on their economic power. Such a change is strengthening women's desires for self-expression. 2018 Korean Woman articles include cultural apparel such as the traditional attire, western clothing, and hairpieces in much more diverse color and design, and introduce a lot of cosmetics and beauty information.<sup>11)</sup> Partial easing of national control over the female body is a projection of the North Korean society and women's increasing desire to differentiate and express themselves through apparel, hair, cosmetics, and decorations. Also, it projects the policy focus on improving the general standard of living by diversifying the spending patterns of the citizens.

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9) "Dress appropriate for women's bodies," *Korean Woman*, no. 2 (2012), p. 55. (in Korean); "Let's put on winter clothes to meet the needs of the Songun era," *Korean Woman*, no. 11 (2012), p. 53. (in Korean)

10) "Let the women appearances and apparels be in our way," *Korean Woman*, no. 3 (2017), p. 53. (in Korean)

11) "The secret of beauty hidden in the kitchen," *Korean Woman*, no. 8 (2018), p. 34 (in Korean); "History of cosmetics in my country," *Korean Woman*, no. 8 (2018), p. 55. (in Korean)

## C. Social Expansion of Motherhood

### 1) *Social code on the role of mothers*

In North Korea, ideal female figures are Kang Pan-sok – Kim Il-sung’s mother – and Kim Jong-suk – Kim Jung-il’s mother. The women in the Kim Il-sung family are portrayed as the conventional model of ‘good-wives-wise-mothers,’ revolutionaries embodying a revolutionary mindset, and mothers who are devoted and make sacrifice.

A dictionary definition of mother provides an interesting insight into the role of mothers in North Korean society. The first definition of mother in the revised edition of the Grand Dictionary of Korean, published in 2017, states, “a female adult of the family that gave birth to oneself” while the first definition of ‘father’ in the same dictionary states, “the husband of the mother who bore oneself or a person in such status of the family.” While mothers are defined directly in relation to the child, fathers are primarily defined as the husband of a mother. Genealogically, the 1956 the Abridged Dictionary for Joseon Language defines father as “a male that gave birth to oneself or a male is in such status” but changed to “mother’s husband” as early as early 1960s. After the late 1960s when Kim Il-sung’s Monolithic Leadership System has settled, the word ‘father’ added the meaning of “one who provided sociopolitical life” or ‘supreme leader.’ In the North Korean society, the name and the role of the father is given within the extended family with the supreme leader at its head while the name and the role of the mother derives from their childbearing and child-rearing roles within the individual family.



## *2) Expansion of mothers' social care function*

Another characteristic of the gender discourse in the Kim Jong Un era is that it emphasizes maternal instincts and socially expanding and practicing them. North Korea has given women the dual role of 1) a laborer for developing the socialist economy and 2) a mother who nurtures their children into cultured members of society. The state has actively provided women with a legal and institutional tool to move back and forth between the family and society by assigning functions of child nurturing and housework to society. Such a trend is not changing in the Kim Jong Un era. In fact, North Korea has recently expanded the sphere of nurturing and caring to the entire society, relocating some of the roles of social welfare, nurturing, and education from the government to women.

In the 2016 letter addressed to the Congress of the Socialist Women's Union of Korea, Kim Jong Un repeatedly emphasized women's reproduction as an important responsibility for the nation's future. He gave a macro-scale meaning to the role of child nurturing and education by connecting such a role to national development and the future, and emphasized child nurturing and caring as a calling for women as mothers. Unlike other discourse that emphasized professional women, this discourse restructured the female identity around maternity.

The event that symbolizes such a discourse is the Korean Mothers' Congress. The Congress began in 1961 and has taken place four times. The 4<sup>th</sup> Congress, which was held in 2012 after Kim Jong Un's coming to power, called women to be 'maternity-heroes' (a queen of fertility) and 'effort-heroes' (a king of

labor). A common demand seen throughout the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> Congress was multiple childbirths. North Korea appraises women with many children as ‘maternity-heroes’ and women who take care of orphans or children with incurable diseases as ‘effort-heroes.’ The 4<sup>th</sup> Congress established the Mother’s Day, bestowed the maternity-hero label to many women, and symbolized them as heroes.<sup>12)</sup>

The story of the maternity-heroes also appeared in many art films since Kim Jong Un’s rise to power. The film “Flower in Snow (2011),” based on the true story of Ju Bok-soon of Chagang Province, is a story of a woman who became the new owner of a decaying factory, nurtured orphans abandoned by her colleagues and revived the factory. The film “The Story of Our Home (2016)” shares a similar narrative. The movie is about the true story of Chang Jung-hwa, a 20-year old unmarried woman who raised seven orphans in 2015. Ever since Kim Jong Un called Chang the ‘virgin mother,’ she has been propagated as the ideal maternity hero through various literature and art mediums.<sup>13)</sup>

Since Kim Jong Un’s rise to power, the trend of expanding maternal instinct to the entire society, rather than sticking to the conventional gender role within the bloodline family – mother, housewife, daughter-in-law – has strengthened. For instance, women are called the ‘revolutionary comrades of the gunner husband’ and ‘sisters and mothers of the soldiers,’ both emphasizing women’s supporting roles in the people’s army. Women are also increasingly becoming responsible for caring for

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12) Hyunjin Song, “A Study on Hero Politics of North Korea,” Ph.D. dissertation, Ewha Woman’s University, 2019, p. 242. (in Korean)

13) “Virgin Mother: One Who Moved Ten Thousand People,” Rodong Simmun, July 6, 2015. (in Korean)

the honorary soldiers, families of the deceased, and families of soldiers. The responsibility to care for the vulnerable in society including the orphans, elderly without family, and disabled veterans has been transferred to women.

Such a trend reflects the government's intention to fill the gap caused by the reduction of social welfare after the economic crisis – caring for the orphans or the old – by relying on women's maternal instincts and sacrifice. Also, as the socialist welfare state and the rationing system that vertically connected the supreme leader and the people has collapsed, the *Suryong*-led socialist extended family could not be maintained. The state's effort to maintain the socialist extended family system shows the traits of gender politics by trying to fill the vacuum of government's role through praising maternity and persuading and mobilizing women to practice maternal instincts beyond the boundaries of the family.



### **3. Women's Labor at Work and Gender Hierarchy**



## **A. Gendered Division of Labor and the Sexist Structure**

### *1) Women's career choice and gendered division of labor*

Since Kim Jong Un's rise to power, North Korea has encouraged women, at the policy level, to work and tried to bring women into the official labor force by propagating exemplary cases of professional women. However, case studies have found that a gendered division of labor exists in the form of male-official labor and female-unofficial labor dichotomy. Even within official labor, female labor is highly concentrated on limited fields.

According to female North Korean defectors, single women use bribes, diseases, and fake marriages to stop working in official jobs and to rush into the market. Married women who used to work in official jobs before marriage mostly stop working after marriage and work in the unofficial labor sector. Since the economic crisis, the market economy has vitalized and women's economic activities in the market have increased. Such changes have triggered a further exodus of women from the official labor market and consolidated the gendered division of labor of 'male-official labor vs. female-unofficial labor.'

While the halting or reducing of rations further removed reasons to work in the official labor sector, women voluntarily chose to work in the unofficial labor sector in order to produce income to feed their families. Women's exodus from the official sector is also attributed to the consolidated gendered division of labor that exists in spite of the lack of livelihood guarantees and rations. Labor in North Korea is arranged through national planning, and women are highly likely to be arranged in relatively

low-paying fields that require ‘feminine traits’ such as light industry, education, cultural, and service industries. The gendered division of labor within the official labor market is directly reflected in women’s career preferences. When asked about women’s career preferences in interviews, most North Korean women answered teacher, doctor, nurse, and accountant. Due to the narrow career choice, many women who need to choose a job after graduating from advanced middle schools do not have a “clear career goal” in mind. Meanwhile, daughters of high-ranking officials or rich parents are able to “picture their future.”

A decent job would include doctor and teacher, and then nurse would come next. Nurses are a decent and feminine job with white uniform so it is considered a good job, I think. I guess an accountant too [is a decent job]. The place you work, the building, the environment ...the environment should be clean. Next, the wage should be pretty high. If you become a teacher, you can earn a lot of money. Parents ask you for things, and they bring a lot of money. So, that job has its own merits. Doctor is a decent job, too. The government doesn’t give you much, but patients give you some money to show gratitude or something like that. Nurses are like that too. Accounts can just get their heads around the money that they are dealing with, and they can find a way to pocket some money like that. (Case 9, in her 20s, North Hamgyeong Province Urban area, Nurse/Merchant, Defected in 2018)



## *2) Sexism in the workplace and the glass ceiling*

Many of the interviewees not only had to quit their jobs and go into selling goods in the market in order to make a living but also had to support their husband's study in college and help them get a decent job. Even the single women in their 20s, many of whom thought that North Korea had gender inequality, want to support their husband and have them "rise up" the ranks once they get married. One reason why they prefer to support their husband over investing in themselves and their education to succeed in their own career is that there is a limit for women in moving up the hierarchy in political institutions or to succeed in society.

Women are fully aware of the glass ceiling that exists in the official labor market. Although the Kim Jong Un era calls for policies to support women's social labor, especially in the science and professional fields, women mostly think that women are being used merely 'for display' in such policies.

Women really don't sit on the highchair much. Look at the judges. Judiciary and the military alike are all occupied by men. There are rarely any women. Women are usually big as merchants. Law or government workers are rarely women. [...] In North Korea, we take for granted that all high-ranking officials are men. (Case 3, in her 20s, Ryanggang Province Urban Area, Merchant, Defected in 2017)

On the other hand, some women say that the social atmosphere in the Kim Jong Un era puts more women in the frontlines

compared to the past. One former professional woman testified that, under Kim Jong Un, the administrative body commanded 30% of high-ranking positions to be filled by women, so many college graduates who underwent military service were recruited as heads of institutions, party secretaries, and other high-ranking officials. More research is needed to figure out how broadly such gender quota systems have been utilized.

## **B. Women's Labor in Various Official Sectors and Gendered Division of Labor in Workplaces**

### *1) Production 'Battles' at the Light Industry Factories and the Gendering of Labor*

Within the official labor sectors, female laborers usually work in light industry factories or food industry factories. Since his coming to power, Kim Jong Un has emphasized the development of industries directly related to improving the livelihoods of the people, and related factories have experienced a surge in production since then. In light industry factories where production 'battles' are happening, laborers work for lengthy hours, not being able to do any kind of personal economic activities unlike those in small factories in the region. Such factory works are often assigned to female high school graduates. Such a gendered trait stems from the consideration that women are fit for the delicate, iterative, and endurance-demanding work that the light industry requires unlike labors in heavy industry that demands physical strength. In some shoe factories or textile factories where the work intensity is high and therefore, women do not prefer to work, the company or the

government often arranges marriages or weddings as a means for controlling the female workers or the few male workers, which can be called gender politics.

## 2) *Workplace Hierarchy*

According to case studies, workplaces at which the women interviewees worked were mostly filled by women but were managed by a few male managers. These workplaces were structured in a way that old male managers controlled young female workers; gender hierarchy structure is simultaneously run by gender hierarchy and age hierarchy. What controls the female workers efficiently is the powerful male with a gender power combined with a political power in the form of party membership.

There is no female manager. There are only male managers. That is because most women are middle-aged mothers (*ajumma*), talkative, demanding, and overbearing. So they put a man there. The rule is to have a male manager only. No women. And they make the party member the manager. Men served in the army. Those who went to the army and were discharged from the service and have party membership, those people become the managers. No *ajumma* should become a manager. [...] [To control the workers], the managers do not let workers talk. They do not let workers talk, and they speak in vulgar language. Then, those people [who do not listen to him] well...there is a lot of mobilization there too. Mobilization for storm troops. Those people get sent to

storm troops. So, the workers try to gain favor of the managers. (Case 20, in her 30s, North Hamgyeong Province Urban Area, Worker, Defected in 2017)

### 3) *Parallel Labor at Official Workplaces and Unofficial Workplaces*

Unlike normally operating big factories, regional light industry, or food factories, many small factories and businesses in the region do not operate normally, and no rations are distributed. In such instances, workplaces provide workers with ‘time’ in place of rations or economic incentives. Many cases show that women work not only in selling goods in the market but also in services or in domestic production.

[When women graduate] they have nothing to do and nowhere to go, nothing...I don't know how this job came in, but there was this hat and wig knitting job that came from China. People find these ‘service (*sseo-bi*).’ [...] These jobs are called *sseo-bi* jobs, and people got paid 8,000 won for knitting one hat. We got 8,000 won and we knit this thing all night. We spent the whole night knitting with our eyes turning red, and we saved that 8,000 won. We saved 8,000 won every day, and we bought rice or clothes. We also sold hair. A lot of people sell hair now. People with long hair “sell them by centimeters.” When we collect our hair pieces, there are people who take them. (Case 5, in her 20s, North Hamgyeong Province Rural Area, Worker/Merchant, Defected in 2018)

#### 4) *Labor of Professional Women*

Whereas female factory workers tend to quit their jobs and work in unofficial labor sectors or sell goods in the market, some professional women pride themselves on their work. In North Korea, high school graduates are sent to local NPC (National People's Congress) Labor Offices but college graduates are considered potential high-ranking officers, so they are sent to provincial or city NPC's separate HR Office. Most professional women are college graduates. Many cases show that professional women pride themselves on their work, receive social recognition of their work, and are able to gain economic benefits using their social status aside from official income.



## **4. Market Experience and Changes in Women's Senses of Identity**





## **A. The Social Role of Women and Market Activity**

### *1) Family as an economic community and the role of women*

After the economic crisis and the consequent marketization, the family has become a unit of survival and an economic community. With the collapse of state-run rationing system that used to guarantee individuals' livelihoods, individuals experienced the dire reality that their survival relied on the family unit. The realization that only the bloodline family can help one's survival led to the implicit disbelief in the party and the state. It is evidenced by the phenomenon that 'party worker's popularity has fallen in the match-making market. It also reveals the demise of the relationship among the supreme leader, the party, and the people caused by market activities—a relationship used to be directly intertwined on the economic foundation called 'rationing system.' And the relationships and responsibilities at the family level have been strengthened.

As families have become economic communities, women have become the center of the families. After the marketplaces (*jangmadang*) have been organized in various forms, women started to participate in wholesale and retail, or work as an intermediary in the marketplaces, crossing borderlines between legal and illegal activities. According to case studies, most women work in marketplaces aside from university students, housewives, and spouses of military servicemen in the upper class, and laborers in some official labor sector. Female college graduates often become teachers or doctors, while separately give a tutoring or looking after patients as an extracurricular activity. However, female high school

graduates mostly hold official jobs on paper while working at the marketplaces with their mother, sisters, and friends to support their families together. Conventionally, women would work in the market until their mid-20s to support their families and save for their weddings. Married women would register themselves as ‘dependents’ of their husbands and work at the marketplaces to make a living. In the end, it was women’s reproductive and productive labor that maintains the individual family units.

## *2) Various types and scales of market activities*

Various case studies show that women’s market activities take place all the way from small local marketplaces to an international trade prevalent in rich upper-class towns in Pyongyang, structuralized at various forms and levels. In the case of Pyongyang, South Korean goods that flowed in from the Gaesong Industrial Complex are sold at the highest prices. Small retailers and big investors who trade international aid products, Japanese goods, and Chinese goods via trucks or containers also work in the marketplaces. In Pyongyang and other big cities, necessities spanning anywhere from baby formulas to German pharmaceutical products are sold in the marketplaces. While most big players who trade with Chinese traders are men, many women also trade at large scales. Near the Chinese borders, herbs, minerals, and consumer goods like clothes are smuggled in for sale. Overall, commercial transactions exist at various level—from sales of food and vegetables to distributions of herbs, living essentials, and minerals.

Though almost 20 years have passed since marketization, being

a merchant is an unofficial activity not respected by society and is forbidden to adult men. While a few veterans with disability who have no other ways to make a living get to participate in the marketplaces, those leading the market activities are the housewives who are called ‘women in residential zones (*gadu nyeoseong*).’ One woman recalled her experiences selling pharmaceutical products and performing simple medical practices as the following:

[I sold] many popular drugs, from Chinese drugs to more than 300 types overall. They came in 25% glucose, polyaminoacid, molamine and other things in liquid form [...] we also had vitamins in liquid forms. I performed medical practices at home and gave IV injection to people. I also performed cupping therapy and moxibustion. I had to do all that while selling drugs. Why did I do it even when I didn’t have a license? I self-taught clinical internal medicines. My father was a doctor, so he taught me everything. I began with pinholing, and I sold drugs for almost 10 years. (Case 6, in her 30s, Ryanggang Province Urban Area, Merchant, Defected in 2018)

### *3) Dual economic strategy by helping husbands succeed*

Through national and social education and indirect experiences, most married women believe that they have a responsibility to make ends meet in the household. As a result, women who become ‘dependents’ of their husbands, ‘work on behalf of the family to provide for family members’ in reality. However, women have limited ways to succeed in the North Korean society, so, rather

than going into the official labor market themselves, they make money in order to support their husbands to receive a good education and, eventually, secure a high social status. Even when arranging marriages, an ideal division of labor between married couples is considered to be between a female who makes money in the market and a male who makes money and holds power through their careers in the party, judiciary, or police force. Hence, women who are rich and men who have the conditions to progress far in their careers (class background—*todae*, and academic background) are favored in the marriage market.

Through this women's practical strategy, women seek both vicarious satisfaction via their husband moving up the ranks and economic benefits by the division of role. If men attain quality positions through the wives' support, not only does the entire family's honor elevate but the women can also use their husbands' powers to benefit their market activities. Through a compressed social transformation of economic crisis and marketization, the North Korean style division of gender roles – women working in unofficial labor sectors and men working in official labor sectors – have settled as the survival strategy of the individual families. However, if men's social position affects how many economic resources women have at the marketplaces, the division of gender roles ends up strengthening men's powers in and outside the family. In other words, while helping husbands succeed through women's labor at the marketplaces might elevate the entire family's honor and increase their wealth, such activities fail to lead to the recognition of women's labor while only strengthening the social status and power of men. In addition, such activities may not even lead to changes in the power structures within the family.

Meanwhile, some case studies showed that women's experiences in the market and increasing wealth, though indirectly, have led women to have more voice in the family and caused changes in family relations.

## **B. Changes in the Sense of Identity through Market Experiences**

### *1) Increases in unofficial labor income and in women's voices in the family*

Women's marketplace activities have not received official recognition and been excluded from state protection for 30 years after the economic crisis. Women are frequently exposed to personal damage if they fail to respond well against illegal activities such as bribes, frauds, and black-mailing. Women try to make their husbands successful in the official labor sector for this exact reason – to safeguard themselves in the market. As such, while women's unofficial economic activities lack institutional recognition, the fact that the wives' incomes often exceed the husbands' income represents the changes in the material foundation of families.

Marketplace women making money on the border of legality and illegality have implicitly resisted the patriarchal demands within the family. Unlike before, women openly express discontent when faced with coercive behaviors from the husbands' family members or affairs by their husbands. The case studies on women in their 30's – those born after the mid-1980s – showed that their experiences at the marketplaces and increased wealth are connected to the changes in their sense of identity.

With more female activities in society, we get more voice. It is much better than before. We are different from our mothers' generation when women used to simply obey. The sword is in our hands now. (Case 8, in her 30s, North Hamgyeong Province Rural Area, Merchant, Defected in 2018)

## 2) *The struggles over recognizing women's leadership and the changing relationship*

While social recognition of women's labor remains at the symbolic level, changes in the family are proliferating. Women who make large sums of money receive recognition on their economic role within the family, causing shifts in the gender relationships within the family. In other words, many families are observing the breakdown of the hierarchical order that demanded women of complete obedience; some are even observing a reversal of hierarchy.

That economically incompetent husbands often called 'dogs (*meongmeongyi*),' 'day lamps (*natjeondeung*),' or 'discomfort (*boolpyeon*)' portray dual meanings of both the women's 'ridicule' against the conventional social discourses and their pride over their labor.<sup>14)</sup> In fact, aside from the few central party and governmental authorities, most men working in business facilities cannot make a living off of their rations. In other words, most men have lost the

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14) '*Boolpyeon*,' which means discomfort and inconvenience is a wordplay meaning "husband (*Nampyeon* in Korean)." Dog connotes a person who safeguards the house, and day lamp connotes a being who is useless like a lamp turned on in daylight.

material foundations for independent living. Hence, they have lost the power to demand obedience from women. While the demand for ‘revolutionary good wife and wise mother’ and countless cases of authoritative behaviors or domestic violence still exist, changes are happening broadly.

Interestingly, many men have adapted to the changing gender roles by participating in house works. In fact, many younger generation men boast about having a rich wife or look for wives with business acumen. Some cases show that women running big businesses often demand their husbands to do house chores or hire people to replace their housewife chores.

Meanwhile, many women who participated in this study described their job as either ‘being unemployed’ or ‘support (*buyang*).’ ‘*Buyang*’ refers to housewives who work in the marketplaces, and it means that they are dependent on their heads of household. The term ‘*buyang*’ displays well how marketplace activities are considered unofficial labor and are not socially recognized. Although women were supporting their families, they were officially categorized as being a dependent. This shows how there is a lack of the word to truly represent their status.

In the Kim Jong Un era, families are going through struggles over family leadership and changing relationships. On the one hand, there exists societal controls of viewing women’s livelihood activities as unofficial. On the other hand, a new trend on renewed sense of identity and shifted relationships within the family economic community is emerging.

### *3) Increased autonomy and new practices*

The North Korean government has both legally emphasized women's rights and reconstructed the existing gender order. For instance, while women officially have the right to abortion, the government justifies socialized gender roles based on population policies that 'encourage multiple childbirths.' Also, as the background of the enactment of legislations indicates, women still face rampant cases of domestic violence. And the passage of laws substantially limiting divorces controls women's autonomous choices.

However, women with marketplace experiences and economic capabilities have developed a strong sense of identity. Having developed value in self-sustained living and having refrained from depending on rations, women's autonomy has increased while their connections with the supreme leader and the party have loosened. For instance, when the husband has an affair or exert domestic violence or the husband's family suppresses the wife's economic activities or makes unfair demands and intervenes in unwanted ways, she has become much more active in demanding separations or divorces. In spite of legal hurdle on divorces, women use money to bypass them.



## **5. The Weakening of the ‘Grand Socialist Family’ and the Restructuring of the Family**



## A. Changing Marriage Style

### 1) *New marriage culture within the upper class*

Female participants of this study are mostly in their 20s and 30s who experienced the marketization of North Korea during their teenage years and in their 20s. Their cases illustrate that arranged marriages based on the parents' social status are still the norm, but 'love marriages' are becoming more common among the younger generations. Regardless of gender, everyone prefers someone with good class background (*todae*) and party members. When those with college degree are assigned to a job with power – party workers, and legal workers, they are considered to belong to the highest ranks. In this realm, marriages usually occur between families of similar backgrounds. The reason why the so-called 'swallows with swallows, magpies with magpies' marriage norm still persists is because there exists an action-governing rule that minimizes the mutual harm where one family's 'flaws' hurt the other family.

While the convention is for the men to prepare the house and for the women to prepare the '5-closets and 6-appliances,' marriage procedures have changed in the Kim Jong Un era. The upper class in urban families with significant power have been developing a culture of sharing the costs of marriages equally. They are sharing the costs equally regardless of gender and are more likely to hold the wedding at specialized wedding halls rather than at homes.

In large cities like Pyongyang, generational differences stand out. Dating has become normal among college students. Aside from *todae*- and power-concerned upper-class families, men and

women prefer love matches than arranged marriages. Ever since it became possible for female party members to be high-ranking officials, female college graduates began serving in the military to earn the party membership, raising the average age of marriage for women to their early 30s. Urban upper-middle class women are showing new trends in the age of marriage, marriage culture, and life plans for social activities after marriage.

## 2) *Commoner's practical marriage*

While dating has become a trend among the younger generation since the full-blown marketization in the 2000s, marriages in most of the regions other than Pyongyang and other large cities are still mostly mediated by relatives, colleagues, or neighbors. In most mediated marriages, the conditions and status of a person act as the most important factor. Though variations exist, the female's wealth and livelihood skillsets are traded against the male counterpart's occupation, *todae*, and capability. The conditions that women seek in a potential spouse are money, background, and the possibility of further development. Women prefer occupations that either make a lot of money or can help generate wealth; aside from occupations that bring in foreign currencies, women prefer "men with uniforms" such as the judge, military officers, security officers, and Ministry of State Security officers or high-ranking officials. Women also prefer drivers or doctors who can make a side income. As backgrounds, women often look for good *todae* and the parents' socioeconomic status. Although political power – represented by party membership – does not resonate as strongly as it did before the financial crisis, it

is still considered an important marriage criterion. Political power does not only provide political benefits but also provide foundations for obtaining socioeconomic capital and producing wealth. Possibility of further development means becoming a party member after serving in the military and being smart enough to graduate college if his spouse provides financial support or having graduated college already.

### *3) Relaxation of marriage institutions*

Even amidst the maternity discourse and the gender discourse that emphasizes re-familyization in the Kim Jong Un era, marriage institutions that constitute and bond the cell family are breaking apart. Many marriages are happening outside the conventional marriage structures, and various revisions are occurring to the structures especially amongst the younger generations. The most prominent anomaly is simply avoiding marriages. Recently, many women avoid getting married due to high economic and housework burdens that marriages bring along. Also, many defector women testify that the average age of marriage is rising. Women's avoidance or hesitance of marriage is related to the gender structure that takes for granted women's economic responsibilities.

Looking at our generation, nobody wants to work at an office. We just want to go out to the society and sell stuff and make money. They don't even think about getting married. Life is hard. My friends who got married and had children [...] they used to be really pretty, but

they lose so much weight after getting married. Our parents say, “hey, if you are going to live that hard after getting married, you’d be better off living alone, run your business, and live off of what you make.” We don’t think about marriage much. It’s the same with men, too. Even if we were to get married, we haven’t saved up much for it anyway. We don’t even know how to make money. That’s why neither men nor women can get married. (Case 5, in her 20s, North Hamgyeong Province Rural Area, Worker/Merchant, Defected in 2018)

Increasingly, even those who get married often go through premarital cohabitation or do not register their marriage even after their wedding until they have children. Such phenomena are happening not only near the border regions but also the inland areas. Recently, premarital cohabitation has become more acceptable if it leads to a marriage afterwards. In other words, cohabitation is being taken the same way as ‘cohabitation premised on marriage’ in South Korea. However, a premarital cohabitation that ends in a breakup often leads to social criticism on the woman’s side.

#### 4) *Increasing intermarriages in Songbun-Party Membership System*

What deserves attention in North Korea’s marriage culture is the relative concentration of power distributions depending on *todae*. Previously, the *Songbun* (North Korea's Social Classification System, or ‘*todae*’)-Party Membership System, strictly restricted job assignments and marriages. However, after the financial crisis in

the 1990s, new policies seemed to have given preferential treatment to those with economic abilities. Previously, defectors from South Korea or returnees who returned to North Korea from China or Japan upon liberation or during pre- and post-war have been classified as having unclear *songbun* and were restricted from quality occupations and intermarriages (marriage between different classes). However, after the 2000s, many returnees have been assigned to various important positions by financially contributing to the party and the military through a variety of joint enterprises. Although their *todae* is returnee backgrounds, they gained recognition through economic power, which also gave them social power. Although it cannot be generalized, such marriages between “magpies and swallows” do exist.

Some orphaned lower-middle class women who are under no protection of their parents often ‘intermarry’ those who are wealthy and powerful but have physical or social defects. Though such intermarriages have been conventional in the past, the expansion of the marketplaces have shown to trigger a pragmatic expansion of inter-class marriages. Many women in bad *todae* also amass wealth in the marketplaces and marry men with good *todae*. Whereas female merchants with bad *todae* were largely neglected in the past, women with business acumen to provide for the family and the capital and personal connections to help husbands succeed have been increasingly admired.

## **B. Ruptures in Gender Roles and Relationships among Married Couples**

### *1) The 'Grand Socialist Family' and changed practices*

Marriage cases from the 2000s imply that gender roles and relationships among married couples were still premised upon the 'Grand Socialist Family' norm. According to the norm, individuals who formed a family are loyal to the supreme leader and the party, responsible for the livelihoods of their family, and hold the duty and responsibility to nurture their children. In order to maintain the 'Grand Socialist Family,' which refers to the North Korean society as a whole, individual families function as places for nurturing and protecting warriors of the socialist revolution. Prominent North Korean dictionaries define mothers in various ways but define fathers as 'husbands of mothers.' The definition implies that fathers do not have official responsibilities in the family. On the other hand, women have responsibilities over housework, childcare, and social mobilization work, and duties to honor and obey their husbands.

Under such social norms and atmosphere, urban upper-class women in Pyongyang and other large cities rely on the rations and goods provided by their husbands' workplaces, obey their husbands, and focus on housework and childcare while they are exempt from mobilization labor via *inminban* (People's Unit) activities. In order to prevent the 'knock-on-the-door' calls to mobilization labor for *inminban* (People's Unit) activities, they generally pay monthly fees. Amongst the upper-class families that are guaranteed rations and income, the 'revolutionary



good-wife-wise-mother' norm is firmly observed. However, married couples in their 30s mostly consider a husband's authoritative and coercive behavior that was prevalent in their parents' generations as 'old-school.'

Previously, in my father's generation, they didn't even think about hanging out between man and woman. Now, married couples go on dates or double dates. People used to say "husband, wife," but we just call each other by their names even when people are watching. Or we even say "my darling, my darling" in front of other people. In our parent's generation, I don't think there was any of that. (Case 18, in her 30s, Ryangang Province Urban Area, Merchant, Defected in 2017)

## *2) Maintaining the 'revolutionizing of the family' through pain and coercion*

Many stories of the interviewed North Korean women contained traces of scars and pain. Within the individual families that make up the 'Grand Socialist Family,' women support their children and husband through housework, child-nurturing, and selling goods in the market, and partake in the mobilization labor for the Women's Union and the People's Units. However, they are excluded from social recognition within the male-centered State Patriarchy. They receive neither the recognition within the family for supporting the in-laws nor social protection from life-threatening domestic violence. In the midst of harsh economic conditions, they suffer from the pains of intense labor and scars of intra-family gender hierarchy.

Meanwhile, as the below quote shows, some women view the assigned responsibilities as “their share that they should take up.” In other words, women are actors of the family supporting the State Patriarchy within the North Korean families.

So, even if women make the money and lift up their husbands and children, they still prioritize their husbands. Women think that it’s their duty to do so. Many women think that maintaining their families like that is the mandatory share of the duty bestowed upon them. They live with such perceptions. That’s why every household has a sense of respect for the husband and treat him as such. Women don’t get to enjoy the same treatment. (Case 15, in her 30s, Ryangang Province Rural Area, Merchant, Defected in 2016)

### *3) Remnants of the rationing system and the changes in marriage institutions*

According to case studies, the current North Korean society’s rationing system, which functioned as a material basis for the State Patriarchy, has practically broken down. However, remnants of its control remain as norms governing daily lives. North Korean men receive recognition for their ‘social labor’ at their workplaces regardless of whether they actually receive rations whereas wives who are not obligated to maintain an occupation sustain the family’s livelihoods. Allowing married women to go to work or register as a dependent of the male head of the family is both a consideration of the women’s housework and child-nurturing

burdens as well as a result of a gendered institutionalization that ties women's duties to reproductive labor.

However, with a broken rationing system, the current North Korean society continually experiences a mismatch between the social control system and the gender system. Previously, the society maintained a male-centered, gendered marriage relationship through the rationing system. However, it is facing overt criticisms on its unbalanced emphasis on male-centered norms in the midst of the breakdown of the rationing system after economic crisis.

Also, the weakening of the rationing system is bringing about the decline of the marriage system based on national registration. Before the economic crisis, the North Korean rationing system was the fundamental mechanism justifying the male-being the breadwinner-centered family hierarchy and the gendered social roles. The delays in marriage registrations imply the partial loss of control in rationing-based State Patriarchy. However, since birth registrations are required for children to receive the various 'gifts from the supreme leader' on holidays and go to school, people often register for birth and marriage together when the necessity arises. In this respect, while the material bases for the 'Grand Socialist Family' have practically decayed, it is being maintained through 'gift politics' which provides social recognition and a sense of belonging.

Another reason for postponing marriage registrations is that the Arduous March left numerous members of family dead or missing as well as families in deep conflicts, increasing the unpredictability of the survival of a family and yet, getting a divorce is still difficult. Though divorces are legally possible, a woman's intent to divorce is rarely well taken and the procedures are very complex. However, if

a couple did not register for marriage and one reached a conclusion that living together is impossible, they can go separate ways without a divorce procedure. The recent trend of not registering for marriage shows a facet of the North Korean women's strategic gender practices to circumvent the rigidity of the family institution and to shape their own life paths.

Now it's a fad. If you register right after getting married [...] you know, it's hard to get a divorce in North Korea. If, like in here (South Korea), you can just divorce by agreeing to divorce, marriage would be different. However, it's really hard to divorce, and much of the urge to break up comes from livelihood issues. In North Korea, it's scary to register for marriage because it's so hard to get a divorce. That's why everyone has children, tries living together for a few years first, and then go through the marriage registration process if nothing particular happens. If you don't register, you don't have to get a divorce even after you have children if things happen like my case. That's why everyone refrains from registering, and it has become a fad. I think this trend began about 5 years ago. (Case 16, in her 30s, North Hamgyeong Province Urban Area, Housewife, Defected in 2018)

## **6. 'Romantic Love' and New Generation Culture**



## A. 'Romantic Love' and Places for Dating

### 1) *Love songs, romantic movies, and 'romantic love'*

Among young North Koreans, dating has become increasingly common. Within the North Korean official discourse, true love has been portrayed as 'revolutionary comradeship.' However, when observed from case studies, North Korean women's love stories differ not only from 'revolutionary comradeship' but also from those of people in their 40s. Love stories of women in their 20s show what A. Giddens named 'romantic love.'

The channels that provide North Korean women with the idea of 'romantic love' are foreign cultural contents such as movies, dramas, and music. During the economic crisis, North Korean people brought in various products from China which included South Korean, Chinese, and American movies, dramas, and music and the digital devices that played the contents. The music and videos flowed through the trade channels and were distributed all across the country, affecting the perceptions and behaviors of North Korean women. The inflow of new culture from the external world led to the change in sexuality where women began to actively express love within a relationship.

South Korean and Chinese movies and dramas are much more direct in showing the emotional and romantic love relationships that are rarely portrayed in the North Korean media. The emotion of love portrayed in films spread over to the country's young women. The way of communications and relationships portrayed in media contents eventually transform the new generation – the "awaken" generation – to behave differently.

In our days, I think we're more awoken. The reason is, since Kim Jong Un's rise to power, we began watching things from China. Many video recordings like Chinese dramas come in [to the country]. Illegally. Those who watch those films are all younger people. If you watch those things, you are a bit more awoken, a bit better. Still, in most cases, men dominate. Women are still neglected and taken down, and things like that. (Case 20, in her 30s, North Hamgyeong Province Urban Area, Worker, Defected in 2017)

'Romantic love' has gone beyond touching the hearts of individuals and permeated into the everyday lives of women and their generations. Through such a force, 'romantic love' has converged with the marriage institution. Whereas previous generations married through mediations focused on 'conditions' of one's counterparts, younger generations connect 'love' with marriage. In fact, many North Korean women in their 20s link the practice of 'romantic love' to a marriage as their turning point in life, autonomously pioneering their life paths. Marriage as a fulfillment of love and a happy marriage life afterwards have both become areas of autonomous life subject to individuals' choices.

## 2) *Places for dating and intimacy*

'Intimacy as a transactional negotiation of personal ties by equals,'<sup>15)</sup> which is a characteristic of romantic love, is formed by

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15) Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 2.



the specific activity of dating. Dating styles vary across regions and age groups. The older generation's dating consisted of evading other people's eyes, secretively meeting in parks or under streetlamps. However, the younger generation's dating has become much more open and diverse. Especially in Pyongyang and other large cities, dating takes place in various cultural spaces such as playgrounds, community service centers, roller-skater places, swimming pools, movie theaters, and karaoke bar. Contrary to large cities, rural regions lack adequate places for dating, so young couples go outside their towns and meet in secluded places or parks in neighboring towns.

Recently, with external influences from Chinese movies and South Korean dramas, more people have begun engaging in physical interactions. North Korea lacks spaces to develop sexual intimacy. Social perception of physical touches or premarital sexual intercourse varies across regions. In Pyongyang or cities on the border regions with China, many couples are seen holding hands or crossing arms. This is not the case in rural areas.

In North Korea, if you are close with a man, people consider that as living together. Now, if you break up after having been together, people think that is a flaw. For example, one woman dated three men. She said he was a 'husband' but broke up with him. Again, she introduced a new man as 'husband.' Then we said that the woman went through too many men, that her body is dirty. If she changed men three times, we perceive her as dirty. In North Korea, if you really meet someone, we consider that as living together. Here [in South Korea], it's just a

boyfriend. You can breakup any time. The difference is too drastic. We consider breakups as a big shame, especially for women. ... [For men] it's not as bad as for women. Of course, if men have too much women, we might call him a "player." Still, we would let it go by saying, "men are always like that." Men are always like that. (Case 3, in her 20s, Ryanggang Province Urban Area, Merchant, Defected in 2017)

## **B. Sexual Self-determination and Regulations of the Body**

### *1) Sex education and acquisition of sexual knowledge*

Various new practices of sexuality are broadly occurring in forms of free love, physical intimacy, and premarital cohabitation in North Korea. However, such social changes are not topics of discussion in the public realm. North Korea's primary and secondary education mostly lack any form of sex education. The second-year junior middle school curriculum in the 'Basic Skills' subject demands teachers to teach 'female hygiene' only to female students, but the textbook for that subject does not contain any information on this issue. Most interviewees also don't recall receiving any education on menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth, sexual knowledge, and birth control.

With no sexual education provided at schools, North Korean women acquire knowledge of sexual intercourse, birth control, abortion, pregnancy, and childbirth from females around them, such as mothers, female friends, and female neighbors. Most trustworthy sources of information are older female friends who

are old enough to date.

## 2) *Birth control and abortion*

While married women's use of birth control and abortion can be interpretable at the level of demographic control of state power, single women's use of birth control and abortion is closely connected to sexual self-determination. In North Korea, intrauterine devices were introduced as a way of contraception in the early 1980s and abortion became legal in 1983 to help control the population surge.<sup>16)</sup> However, all these changes were applicable only to married women; from the testimony that a student's pregnancy leads to expulsion, premarital pregnancies seem to be considered as harming the socialist traditions and customs, even leading to the woman being at social disadvantages.

Recently, as the younger generation became more open about relationships with the opposite sex, premarital sex, birth control, and abortion has become important issues for North Korean women. Although premarital sex has become more common, premarital sex brings "extreme responsibilities" to women, so women "fret over and over about sleeping with a man." During premarital intercourses, men rarely use contraception, leaving the responsibility of birth control to women. Schools do not provide any education on birth control, so young women share information about birth control among themselves.

In North Korea, two forms of birth control devices are widely used: contraceptive pills and "rings," which are intrauterine

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16) Keum-sang Kwon, "Research on Sexuality of North Korean Women: Focused on Dynamics between State Power and Subjects of Women," p. 99. (in Korean)

devices. Although condoms are known to women, not many use them. Pills are available at the local “drug houses,” but taking the medicine is cumbersome and costly, so only the rich or those who “want to keep the words from spreading” take them. Installing intrauterine devices is also difficult for single women, so women often become pregnant during their dating processes. In North Korea, too, one does not have to live with whom one’s dating, so women who do not want marriage or to have children often choose to pursue an abortion. Most abortions occur at private clinics or homes where doctors visit to operate the surgery.

North Korean women share information among similar age groups and practice various sexual activities unaccommodated by public discourse. They use birth control and pursue abortions through unofficial medical institutions in order to maintain a minimum level of sexual self-determination in the midst of a society that puts the burdens of sexual relationships on women. However, because birth control and abortion procedures occur at unofficial medical institutions, women are always exposed to threats ranging from hygienic problems to medical accidents. North Korean women are practicing sexuality beyond the boundaries of public sexuality discourses and social norms, but these practices are not protected specifically because they are outside the public discourse.

### *3) Crackdowns on appearances and the pursuit of ‘style’*

North Korean women adopt what they have seen and heard from media contents in a real world, especially apparel. North Korean women try to replicate South Korean women from South

Korean dramas, apply South Korean middle-class house interior design to their homes, and speak in a gentle, Seoul dialect to their boyfriends, reifying the virtual reality in the North Korean contexts. In North Korea, a woman's appearance and apparel were subjects of government control and regulation rather than a means of self-expression. Also, women's desires to preen themselves were considered the products of decadent foreign cultures. However, after Kim Jong Un came to power, regulations on women's appearances have relaxed, and the light industry that produced cosmetics and apparel has developed, leading to increased consumption of appearance-related products. When female defectors were asked about the changes in women's lives after Kim Jong Un's coming to power, the highest response was on the relaxation of appearance controls. Recently, the appearance of the first lady Ri Sol-ju has largely influenced women's apparel.

The hole in the government's regulations on women's appearances increased young women's interests in their bodies as expressions of personality. Similarly, certain lifestyle patterns formed from a style of appearances and consumption patterns drew public interest in the past, a phenomenon coined *chusae* (trends). The *chusae* phenomenon was mainly about following a collective trend. On the other hand, recent attention to women's appearances and apparel is more centered on individualized self-expression.



## 7. Conclusion





This study examines the changes of gender politics in daily lives of North Korean women before and after Kim Jong Un came into power. The study looks into the characteristics of gender politics in North Korea during the Kim Jong Un era and presents the findings as follows.

First, a gender division of labor—men in charge of formal labor and women informal labor—has emerged as a new gender system along with an expansion of the markets, replacing the distribution system that made up the backbone of the old gender system in an era of pre-economic crisis.

Second, the function of the family has shifted to an economic community after having gone through economic crisis and marketization. This changed family unit underpins a gender division of labor.

Third, the institutional mechanisms of family unit, such as marriage registration, and divorce are starting to weaken while the gender discourse with a focus on motherhood and re-familiarization has come to the surface since Kim Jong Un took power.

Fourth, it is women who have driven a change of gender politics: they have obtained economic power through economic activities, developed a sense of identity and autonomy, and practiced changing the status quo beyond institutions, policies, and practices. In particular, young women dream of being in a 'romantic relationship' with the person of their choice and contemplate their future as an independent being rather than being complete as someone's wife through marriage. There are variations but some instances suggest that women are leading the changes in sexuality: they are in control of every aspect of sexuality and seek their own style in their appearance, going beyond what is socially allowed in a conservative

sex culture of North Korea.

Fifth, the changes in North Korean gender politics demonstrate that a crack is opening up in the existing gender order. Such a pattern has already entered a path of ‘irreversible changes.’ The driving force of such changes is the struggle of women who have been responsible for their own survival in the midst of economic crisis in North Korean society.



