

Women of North Korea: A closer look at everyday life

Kim Won-hong (Researcher, Korean Women's Development Institute)



Ministry of Unification
Institute for Unification Education

This book has been published as reference materials on unification education. A scholar has written this book, therefore the book may not be consistent with the official view or opinions of the Ministry of Unification.

Women of North Korea: A closer look at everyday life

Kim Won-hong (Researcher, Korean Women's Development Institute)



Ministry of Unification
Institute for Unification Education



CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: NORTH KOREA'S POLICIES TOWARD WOMEN

1. How women are perceived in North Korea 6
2. Gender equality policy 12

CHAPTER 2: FAMILY LIFE OF NORTH KOREAN WOMEN

1. Family system 25
2. Marriage and divorce 27
3. Pregnancy and childbirth 31

CHAPTER 3: ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES OF NORTH KOREAN WOMEN

1. Economic participation 38
2. Social policies in support of women's economic activities 44

CHAPTER 4: SOCIAL ACTIVITIES OF NORTH KOREAN WOMEN

1. Education 50
2. Politics 54
3. Public organization activities 58

CHAPTER 5: CHANGES IN NORTH KOREAN WOMEN'S LIVES AFTER THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

1. Changes in the way of life and survival 71
2. Changes in life and perceptions 86
3. Changes in role and status 92

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION



CHAPTER 1

NORTH KOREA'S POLICIES TOWARD WOMEN

1. How women are perceived in North Korea
2. Gender equality policy

1

How women are perceived in North Korea

The way in which women are perceived varies widely, depending on their status and roles. In the Confucian patriarchal system, there is a clearly defined hierarchy, which ranks males above females, and limits women's activities. The way women are perceived in North Korea has been greatly influenced by both the Confucian patriarchal system and the late Kim Il-sung's Juche ideology, and the resulting social organization has changed in step with the political and economic environment.

A. The role of women during North Korea's socialist period (1945-1972)

Following the establishment of the North Korean government, a series of reforms were enacted to eradicate imperialism and feudalism. Land reform and nationalization, in particular, marked the beginning of socialist restructuring.

Based on the basic principles of land expropriation without compensation and free land distribution, land reform was administered by the people's committees and farming

committees at the regional and local levels under the direction of the North Korean Provisional People's Committee. About half of the 2 million bo of arable land was confiscated, and more than 90 percent of this confiscated land was distributed free to farmers, while the rest was nationalized. In that process, land was distributed equally to both genders, and women became landowners. Under the pre-modern patriarchal system, women had held no ownership rights, but as members of society under the new system, they were recognized as equal, and shared the same rights as men.

North Korean women also gained equal rights in the areas of politics and social life through the enactment of the Law on Equal Rights for Men and Women, which also gave them the right to vote and to run for office. In addition, the Democratic Women's Union of North Korea (hereafter, Women's Union) was established to organize a women's movement. Even before the inception of the Women's Union, Kim Il-sung had mentioned two reasons for supporting such an organization dedicated to women. The first reason was that women should unite to contribute to the building of the nation, and the second was that they should participate in the realization of social emancipation. Thus, the Women's Union became established not only to encourage more active female participation in nation-building, but also to implement government policies. Meanwhile, the enactment of the Labor Law provided for women's mandatory labor

and commensurate compensation. The law thus provided an institutional mechanism that not only increased women's economic self-reliance, but also encouraged their social participation.

B. Emphasis of women's traditional role and the expansion of the patriarchal political culture (1972-1989)

In the 1970s and 1980s, North Korea underwent significant social changes due to a number of developments, including the establishment of the Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il regimes and the low performance of the planned economy. In 1972, the North introduced the Juche (Supreme Leader) system in its Constitution, and in 1974, ordained the Juche ideology as the essence of Kim Il-sung Chuui (Kim Il-sung-ism), declaring the establishment of the Kim Il-sung regime both at home and abroad. In the process of institutionalizing the hereditary succession of power along with its justification, the regime affirmed the importance of Kim Jong-suk, the mother of Kim Jong-il. Beginning in 1976, Kim Jong-suk would be referred to as the 'mother of the revolution.'

Kim Jong-suk was especially propagandized and idolized following the official announcement of Kim Jong-il as Kim Il-sung's successor in 1980. The regime erected a bronze statue of Kim Jong-suk and opened the Sinpa Revolutionary History Hall in Sinpa-eup, the birthplace of Kim Jong-suk,

designating them as a must-visit place for women. Kim Jong-suk was especially promoted for her faithfulness to Kim Il-sung, her appearance as a fighting revolutionary, her leadership in the women's emancipation movement, and her unflagging devotion to the people. In short, North Korean women were educated to follow the example of Kim Jong-suk, who embodied virtuous womanhood, and this was intended to foster a sense of reverence for the family of Kim Jong-il.

As part of recruiting women for the workplace, North Korea adopted the policy that the state should be responsible for childcare and managing the household. And in response to the economic challenges of the times, the North proposed the 'Socialist Theory of the Great Family' In that theory, society was an organism comprised of the Suryong (the great leader) as the nucleus, surrounded by the party and the people, each having an inseparable relation within a community bound by a common destiny. Just as in a family relationship in which the head of the family is at the center, great families like a society or a state are headed by the Suryong, which gave life to that family. Such organic metaphors were aimed at overcoming real-life crises by reinforcing the traditional and conservative patriarchal values. However, from the women's perspective, the regression of the women's policy back to a patriarchal system only meant the return of a heavier burden of domestic chores.

C. Women forced to fulfill their obligations (after 1990)

Amidst the transition of most socialist countries to democracies or capitalist systems since the 1990s, North Korea had to find its own means of regime survival. After the death of Kim Il-sung, the regime focused on consolidating internal unity. It developed a personality cult in which the late Kim Il-sung was imagined as still guiding the country. Meanwhile, his son Kim Jong-il focused on maintaining the regime by preventing internal agitation and consolidating unity.

As severe economic hardship continued, the regime merely emphasized women's obligations, rather than guaranteeing their rights under the socialist state. While the state could offer nothing for them, women were nevertheless forced to show loyalty to the state and to repay the kindness of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. The regime developed the logic that an ideal North Korean woman was faithful to the supreme leader and dutiful to the family.

In the traditional patriarchal system, the responsibility of supporting the family had always rested on the head of the household, but ongoing economic difficulties have toppled the male as family leader, increasing the burden of female members. In practice, given the collapse of the planned economy, there is a general tendency for men to feel that engaging in commerce is shameful, even though it has become

the only means of livelihood. Consequently, women, not men, have taken a greater and most important role in supporting the family. Despite being engaged in economic activities, however, North Korean women themselves maintain the traditional patriarchal perception that it is natural for them to get married, serve their husbands and bring up their children well.

2 Gender equality policy

From its inception, the gender equality policy of North Korea focused on the “revolutionization of women and the institution of the class line” through legal and institutional reform based on the basic philosophy of Marx and Lenin. In other words, women should be emancipated to participate in social production and to gain economic independence and freedom. In the wake of the economic crisis that has continued since the 1990s, however, women have been forced to labor in the workplace, as well as to take care of their homes. Key changes in North Korea’s gender equality policy occurred during the periods of 1950s, the 1960s, the 1970s and 1980s, and the 1990s and onwards.

First, during the 1950s, a series of legal and institutional efforts were launched to transform North Korean females into model communist women. Following liberation from Japanese colonial rule, North Korea launched the Workers’ Party of Korea in October 1945 and eliminated the vestiges of Japanese imperialism and feudal customs. As part of changing the ideological mentality of women and mobilize

their economic power, it established the Women's Union in November 1945, while enacting laws pertaining to various women's policies on gender equality. Laws that emphasized gender equality and provided for women's welfare included the Twenty-point Platform, much like the Constitution (March 1946), Law on Equal Rights for Men and Women (June 1946), and the Labor Law for Laborers and Office Workers (July 1947). The Twenty-point Platform provides the basis for wide-ranging policies related to women including gender equality, the guaranteed eight-hour work day, and educational system reform. The Law on Equal Rights for Men and Women guarantees "equal pay for equal work and the right to social insurance and education." The Labor Law for Laborers and Office Workers was the first attempt at laying out the basic legal principles of labor and specifically providing for the guaranteed eight-hour work day, equal pay for equal work, regular time off and other types of leave, protection of female laborers, and a social insurance system.

In addition to legal enactments, North Korea pursued the goal to transform women into socialists through the Women's Union and gradually focused on the overall mobilization of the female workforce as part of its mass mobilization campaign launched in December 1946. Subsequently, in June 1947, the state enacted the Rules on Nurseries to provide day care services for children between 30 days and three years of age. It also developed various campaigns encouraging

medical visits and preventive care to protect the health of women and children. Just like any other socialist country, the North established as a priority various female -related legal and institutional fundamentals, recognizing that it would be difficult to build a socialist state without the societal participation of women.

Second, the 1960s were marked by an expanded effort to build upon its women's policies to prepare the female population for communism. From 1957, the North established a five-year economic development plan, inducing a larger number of women to contribute to the economic development of the country, emphasizing that the ideological overhaul would help make them builders of communism. The ideological drive was carried out mainly through the Women's Union, with initiatives aimed at 1) promoting a socialist lifestyle, 2) revolutionizing women's ideology, and 3) organizing various forms of communist education to promote the various classes of communism.

During this time, North Korea also carried out campaigns to encourage competition among women as contributors to socialism. In particular, to ensure the successful implementation of the seven-year economic development plan, the country encouraged them to actively engage in various campaigns such as the Shock Troops Recovery Campaign, Championship Flag Winning Campaign, Chollima Movement, Cheongsan-ri Campaign, and the Dae-

an Enterprise Management System.

Beginning in 1968, the North established factories to produce prepared meals and ready-made side dishes, under the slogan “Family Revolutionization.” Also, from April 1966 to March 1967, it carried out the resident registration project, dividing the population into 51 subclass categories. From then on, the state emphasized the three revolutions—ideological, technical and cultural—as it sought to revolutionize and classify women into one of these labor classes. Laws related to women’s welfare that were enacted during this period include the Regulations on the Working Hours of Working Mothers (1966) and the Cabinet directive on improving and reinforcing children care through the establishment of nursery schools and kindergartens at the state level and by engaging the whole population in this campaign (1986). This period was marked by developing more policies to make women builders of communism. This was done through the expansion of the female workforce, more child welfare services, and free medicines.

Third, during the 1970s and 1980s, North Korea strived to complete the development of women as builders of communism, ready to support the cause of the Juche ideology. In 1972, according to the national constitution, North Korea had realized a true socialist state. It went on to emphasize the ‘revolutionization of women, institution of the class line, and development of women as intellectuals’ to realize the ideal

communist state. For this purpose, the Women's Union organized classes to 1) teach the Juche ideology, 2) learn from Lady Kang Pan-sok (mother of Kim Il-sung), 3) imbue women with the love of labor and the spirit of collectivism, and 4) encourage them to be wise mothers.

Various initiatives for which women were mobilized included the Campaign to Win the Three Revolution Red Flag, the 1980s Speed Creation Movement, and the 1990s New Speed Creation Movement. Thanks to these campaigns, the ratio of women in the workforce reached 49 percent in 1988. Major women's welfare-related legislation enacted during this period include the Socialist Constitution (December 1972), the document regarding the all-out implementation of the 11-year compulsory education (September 1975), the Child Care and Education Law (April 1976), the Socialist Labor Law (April 1978), and the Family Law (October 1990). Among others, the Socialist Constitution and the Socialist Labor Law expanded the scope of labor protection and motherhood protection as part of women's welfare. The document pertaining to the 11-year compulsory education provides for mandatory schooling for children from the age of five years as part of compulsory education that covers children of preschool age. The Child Care and Education Law covers all matters related with children welfare services and provides for a systematic approach to services for preschool children.

This period is characterized by a reinforcement of the

Kim Il-sung Juche Ideology. The state thus proclaimed that it had fully realized socialism, having women participate in the strengthening of the nation's economic power while consolidating female-related policies.

Fourth, the post-1990s period was marked by economic hardship and the return of women to their homes. The economic crisis that hit North Korea in the 1990s has not been fundamentally resolved even to this day. This period was also influenced by a number of domestic and external factors, such as the collapse of the socialist states, the death of Kim Il-sung (1994), a series of natural disasters, and the accumulation of inefficiencies in the socialist economy. After the Arduous March in the 1990s, the state's central control of the economy was considerably weakened, and the informal economy of the people expanded. This prompted the state to take a series of measures to overcome the economic crisis, one of which was the Economic Management Improvement Measures announced on July 1, 2002. Reportedly a demonstration of the state's will to resolve the economic crisis through these measures, the authorities raised wages by an average of 18 to 25-fold, depending on the job position, with the highest wage increases in the heavy and chemical sectors, followed by the agriculture, forestry and fisheries sectors, the service sectors, and light industries, in this order. On the grounds of prioritizing its heavy and chemical industries and the protection of motherhood, the state placed women mainly

in light industries and the service sector, where the average wages are reportedly the lowest.

North Korean women, who account for approximately 50 percent of the country's economically active population, are engaged mainly in certain socially underestimated sectors. By restricting women's freedom of vocational choice, the authorities have placed women in inferior vocations. More recently, a larger number of women were mobilized to part-time work rather than to full-time positions, such as work-at-home units with no additional benefits or unpaid support units. As a consequence, women's labor conditions have remained at inferior levels compared to men's. To make matters worse, the increase in wages has failed to keep pace with price increases, further exacerbating the inequality of the structure. This has also led to a trend in which a larger number of economic crimes are committed by women.

As a follow up to the 2002 Economic Management Improvement Measures, the country introduced general markets in March 2003, allowing individuals to take part in the distribution market, a function hitherto limited to the state, and set up private stalls. However, starting in October 2005, the state strengthened policies to control individual economic activities and the market economy, in particular. In fact, in December 2006, it prohibited males aged 17 years or older from participating in trade at *jangmadang* markets. In October 2007, it also issued instructions on age limits for

women trading in jangmadang markets, as well as restrictions on the types of items that could be traded there. Women under 40 were thus edged out of their market jobs. Every day, they appeal to the people's committee to have the restrictions lifted or ask that they be placed in a job since they are no longer allowed to do business in the markets. The tighter market controls have led to a rising number of itinerant traders. Also, the strict dress code, which forces women to wear skirts, causes them further difficulty.

In short, the gender equality policy of North Korea of today has regressed from the initial socialist gender equality policy of the 1980s. Women are forced to assume double roles based on the entrenched traditional roles and the patriarchal system. The Family Law enacted in 1990, in particular, is a far cry from the gender equality concept as it follows the legacy of traditional family relations while emphasizing women's primary responsibility for child care and education. Though women's status is officially defined as being equal to that of men and in principle women are granted equal social opportunities, the laws and institutions have failed to translate this into higher status for women.

The actual regressive nature of North Korea's gender equality policy is very closely related with the impacts of the economic crisis. Starting in the 1980s, the growth of the North Korean economy began to stall, and entering the 1990s, the state-controlled economy and the ration system collapsed,

spurring the growth of the informal economy, exemplified by jangmadang markets. While this has introduced changes in people's lifestyles and in the regime, more and more it is assumed that women are wholly responsible for housework and childcare while, in fact, they are taking on the role of family breadwinner. Moreover, the widespread patriarchal view that women should unconditionally obey their husbands has become even more entrenched. Consequently, women are now subject to a double burden of social economic activity, which renders them inferior to men, as well as housework and childcare. Thus, there exists a significant gap between the North's gender equality policy objective and the gender inequality that women face in real life.



CHAPTER 2

FAMILY LIFE OF NORTH KOREAN WOMEN

1. Family system
2. Marriage and divorce
3. Pregnancy and childbirth

A family in North Korea is the basic living unit of society. Families are closely connected with the state and the revolutionization of families is the foundation on which communism is built. Through the socialist development of the marriage and family systems, society as a whole becomes 'one extended socialist family.' While marriage and family are based on affection in South Korea, revolutionary comradeship is an additional requirement in North Korea.

Family system

North Korea's family system is important from the perspective of women's economic role and as a vehicle for learning and practicing the socialist revolution theory. According to its Socialist Constitution and Family Law, the state should reinforce the family system and protect marriages and families with the goal of creating socialist families. In other words, the state protects families based on the principle of collectivism, and families, the basic units of society, are more than a private matter as they are related to the interests of the society and the nation.

North Korea's Family Law emphasizes equal rights between husbands and wives and extensively stipulates the obligation of support among family members. Adopted in 1990 and later revised in 1993 and 2004, the Family Law covers an extensive scope of prohibited marriage; the principle of recognizing paternity; the extensive scope of family support; and other elements of the traditional patriarchal order. For example, the state should designate guardians to protect the rights and interests of incapable persons (Article 4), and husbands

and wives have the obligation to support their spouse who has lost his/her labor ability (Article 19). Article 7 defines the applicable scope of the Family Law as ‘regulating socialist marriage relations and personal and financial relations among family members and relatives.’

This Family Law is not unrelated to the economic crisis at the time of its enactment. The responsibility for the support and welfare of citizens held by the state was transferred to the families from the 1980s, and the law expanded the scope of the duty to support incapable family members ranging from between husbands and wives, parents and children, and grandparents and grandchildren to brothers and sisters.

North Korea abolished the family register system long ago, introducing the citizen card system in September 1946. The authorities claim that discrimination against women has been eradicated and gender equality has been achieved, but in reality, discrimination against women is still practiced. Women in North Korea assume an excessive burden, being wholly responsible for housekeeping, raising and educating children, and taking care of parents-in-law. This shows that, while socialization policy for legal equality and housework is in place, the emphasis is still on women’s traditional role, and thus there has been no role change in the marital and family relations and division of domestic labor.

Marriage and divorce

The minimum marriage age is similar between the two Koreas. The age for men is 18 in both Koreas, and that for women is 17 in the North and 18 in the South. However, North Korean men and women were encouraged to marry at 30 and 28, respectively, with the July 1976 decision by the State Administration Council to secure the workforce. The Family Law stipulates that, though men and women past the marriage age can marry according to their free will, “the desirable social ethos is that youths marry after they experience the joy of working for the nation and people and for society and the community.” Until the 1970s, men and women generally got married at between 30 and 31 and 28 and 29, respectively. Due to high unemployment resulting from the economic crisis of the 1980s, the marriageable age for men changed to 25 and 26, and 23 for women. After the serious economic crisis of the 2000s, the current practice is that North Korean women get married late or avoid marriage altogether.



A North Korean wedding

North Korea emphasizes legal marriage by specifying that “married life is not allowed without marriage registration” in Article 11 of the Family Law. With the economic crisis, the professions of spouses preferred by North Korean women have also changed. High-ranking officials of the Workers’ Party of Korea or the military and technicians used to be regarded as the ideal spouses. Today, the preferences are cooks, who are better positioned to feed families, those in positions of managing raw materials and produce, those working at trading companies that deal with foreign currency, and diplomats or students studying abroad with overseas access. The professions of ideal female spouses are also service and sales professions such as restaurant employees and those trading things. Men in farming villages used to be looked down on as spouses, but with the aggravated food situation, their popularity as spouses is increasing.

Weddings in North Korea

The frequency of love marriages has gradually increased since the 1980s and now the ratio of arranged marriages and love marriages is similar. In fact, the former has almost disappeared in large cities like Pyongyang. Physical appearance is not the most important consideration in the selection of a spouse, but women with a round face and double eyelids and tall and sturdy men are popular.

Weddings are held at the groom's or bride's home, public places, or meeting rooms of workplaces on public holidays or outside of working hours. The groom typically wears a regular suit, and the bride wears traditional clothes in light pink. The wedding starts with an officiant's message, the couple exchanges wedding presents and drinks, and commemorative photographs are taken.

Receptions are held by both the groom and bride parties, and the newlyweds take three to four days' leave to go to distant locations like Kumkangsan and Myohyangsan mountains and Jueul hot spring or just visit nearby scenic spots or Kim Il-sung's birthplace and take photos.

The wedding expenses are shared by both families, and couples have to live separately for a considerable period of time if not assigned a house. The furnishings that brides typically prepare for their new homes include bedding, a sewing machine, a radio, and a television.

Source: Kim Won-hong, et al., 2003, (Revised edition) *Women's Studies of Today*, Publishing Department of Konkuk University

North Korea holds monogamy very highly and strictly prohibits concubinage and prostitution by law, but with the worsening economic situation, the bond among family members has weakened along with the marital relationship. In the early days, North Korea acknowledged divorces by agreement but rescinded this stance in 1956 and institutionally restricts divorce by only acknowledging divorces through legal proceedings. The Family Law is

not restrictive about the reasons for divorce through legal proceedings, but in reality, divorces may be granted only when there is evidence of one of the spouses living with another person or when a soldier spouse dies. Any legal action for divorce against a pregnant woman or a woman with a child a year of age or younger is dismissed. By law, mothers are granted preferential custody for children less than three years old unless there is a reason not to. In reality, when a couple undergoes a divorce, the father generally raises the children. Child support expenses can be claimed within the scope of 10 to 30 percent of monthly income, depending on the number of children.

Since the 1980s, requests for divorces have gradually increased and the time required finalizing a divorce suit, which used to be no less than a year, has been reduced to about three months. After the introduction of the Economic Management Improvement Measures in 2002, divorce is being allowed but restricted by imposing a substantial fine on the requesting party, rejecting approval for divorce, banishing divorced people, and through other measures. Domestic violence against women in North Korea used to be serious. With their increased economic activity and other changes, North Korean women have developed a sense of identity and the ability to resist violence, and they now stand up to abuse or increasingly opt for divorce.

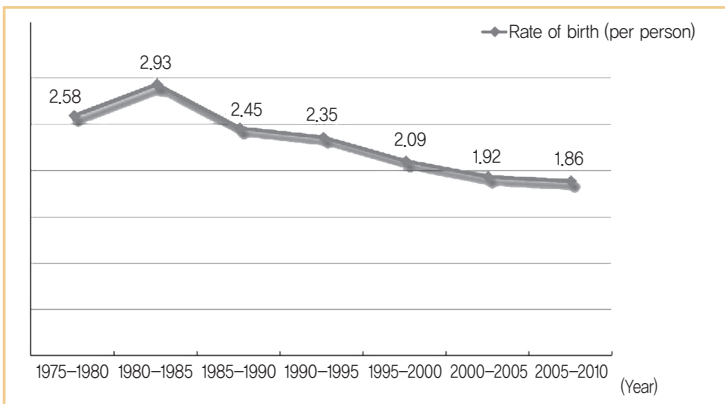
Pregnancy and childbirth

The North Korean Family Law stipulates that ‘the interests of children and mothers should be particularly protected, and the state should strive to guarantee conditions in which mothers can raise and educate their children in a sound way’ (Article 6). Accordingly, to protect women’s capacity to give birth, they are given one day of paid menstrual leave every month. Pregnant women receive a free checkup every month and every 15 days or every week when nearing childbirth. They then give birth at maternity centers free of charge. From 1946, a maternity leave of 35 days before and 42 days after childbirth was introduced for working women. The number of days increased in 1986 to a total of 150 days, with 60 days before and 90 days after childbirth. During the leave, women are given the same rations and monthly pay as while working. Pregnant women are also exempted from overtime and night work.

Nevertheless, the rate of population growth, which remained at a high rate of 3.08 percent in the 1960s, has gradually declined to 1.70 percent in the 1970s, 1.80 percent

in the 1980s, and 1.02 percent since the 1990s. The birthrate also decreased from 2.93 per 100 people in the early 1980s to 1.96 in 1998. It has remained at a similar level since then, registering 2.02 in 2008. These statistics can be explained by the needs of the North Korean regime, which initially facilitated population growth to supplement the insufficient workforce and solve the difficulty of maintaining the number of troops after its establishment, and then implemented the socialist industrialization policy in the latter half of the 1970s and encouraged late marriage and discouraged childbirth until the 1990s. The drop in the population growth rate since the 1990s is largely attributed to the decrease in childbirth and increase in infant mortality resulting from the severe economic difficulties.

Figure 1 Trends in birth rates in North Korea



Rate of birth: Average number of births per female

Source: Statistics Korea (2010), Key statistical indicators of North Korea

The UNFPA's State of World Population 2010 reported that 370 mothers died per 1,000 newborns and 47 infants died per every 1,000 in North Korea. The mortality rate of infants of five years of age or younger in North Korea ranked 77th in the world according to the UNICEF's State of the World's Children 2011, which reported that 33 died per every 1,000. The health of newborns deteriorated with the worsening health and immunity of women among North Korean residents. The UNICEF 2006 Analysis of the Situation of Women and Children in North Korea stated that 32.4 percent of fertile women with a child of two years of age or younger were malnourished and 21.1 percent suffered from low weight at no heavier than 45kg. These indexes show that the reproductive ability of malnourished North Korean women decreased and miscarriages and stillbirths are frequent due to undernourishment during pregnancy.

To reverse the trends of increasing infant mortality and women's avoidance of childbirth resulting from the continuing economic crisis, North Korea has adopted pro-natal measures. The second Mothers' Convention was held on September 28 to 29, 1998, which was the first in 37 years, to emphasize mothers' and women's roles. In particular, the convention strongly encouraged women to 'have many children.' The reason North Korea stresses the role of mothers and multiple births is that the population growth rate is slowing down due to young women's avoidance of multiple births and the

increased infant mortality rate resulting from the economic crisis and changed social conditions.

It is known that twins are given preferential treatment: twin births are regarded as ‘happy occasions for the nation’ and gifts like fabric, nutritional food, and gold rings are provided. Hamheung City of Hamgyongnam-do Province has provided rations to entire families that have a second child since 2007, and every school in Sinuiju City of Pyonganbuk-do Province exempted households with no less than three children from all social tasks (nontax payment).



A North Korean woman who gave birth to triplets



The triplets receiving care at Pyongyang Maternity Hospital



ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES OF NORTH KOREAN WOMEN

1. Economic participation
2. Social policies in support of women's economic activities

1

Economic participation

In North Korea, the Law on Equal Rights for Men and Women and the Socialist Labor Law provide for women's right to work and equal right to employment. The Constitution itself provides for women's participation as well as advancement in North Korean society based on the principle that men and women hold equal social status and rights. Such provisions are further specified under the Labor Law, which states that based on women's equal responsibility for, and rights to labor, they can participate equally alongside men as full-fledged participants in the labor force. As such, North Korea provides the legal and institutional framework for women's economic participation. In fact, the percentage of socially active North Korean women had risen from 20% in 1956 to 53.7% in 1971, and presently, the percentage stands at more than half. North Korea's Central Television has stated that women's participation in the workforce is not only aimed at utilizing their untapped labor in a rational way, but also as part of a major political initiative to recruit women in the construction of socialism.

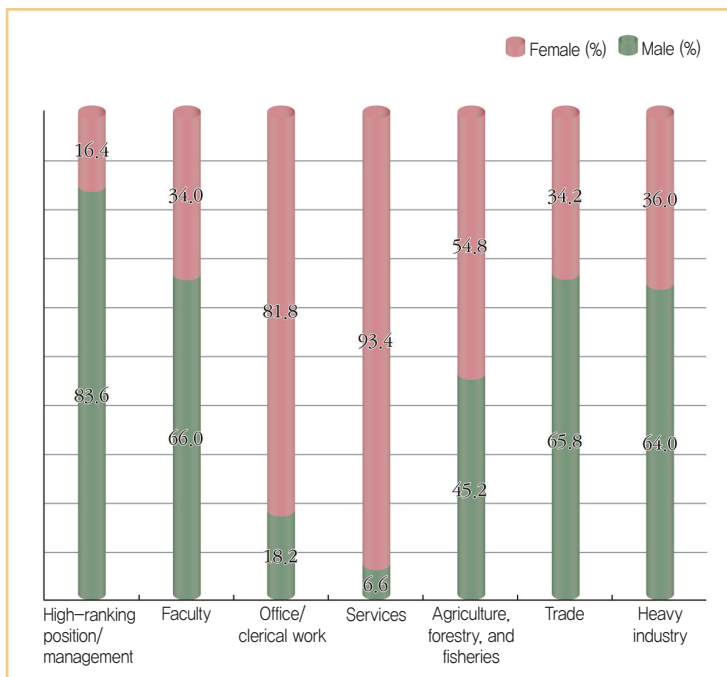
Daily routine of female workers in North Korea

A typical day in the life of a North Korean female laborer begins at 7 in the morning and ends at 5 in the afternoon, with lunch from noon until 1 o'clock. Women usually go home for lunch as their workplace is usually situated close to home. Regulations provide that women with three or more children aged 13 years or younger can work for six hours so that the extra two hours can be spent doing house chores. Women are also given breaks to breast-feeding infants during the work day. After work, each work group conducts a self-critique session, which lasts about half an hour. Before starting work, women leave their children in a day nursery, and must pick them up after work. Usually stopping on the way home to do the grocery shopping, they then prepare the evening meal. Rarely do husbands help with the cooking. Work does not stop there, either. The people are governed by local village counsels, which can order them to perform tasks such as sweeping a yard or a main road at 4 or 5 in the morning. Additionally, members take turns cleaning communal water fountains and toilets.

Source: Song Jung-mo (2001). "Life of North Korean women laborers," Labor Society, October 2001 issue, p. 130

According to the DPRK 2008 Population Census conducted by the North, with assistance from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 47.8 percent of the working population aged 16 years or older were women. Including domestic labor, the percentage of women in the total working population was 51.4 percent. However, most female workers were engaged in low-paying and underestimated sectors. For example, while the percentage of males in higher ranks or managerial positions is 83.6 percent, female represent 93.4 percent of the service and sales sectors. Also, while the percentage of female workers in the agriculture, forestry and fisheries stands at 54.8 percent, 64.0 percent of those engaged in the heavy industry are male.

Figure 2 Sex ratios by occupation



Source: Central Bureau of Statistics of DPR Korea. 2009. DPR Korea 2008 Population Census. National Report; Table 38 reorganized

On the other hand, ‘the country mainly places female laborers in its light industries and service sectors based on the policy to prioritize the heavy chemical sector and in the name of protecting motherhood. The average wage in these particular sectors is reportedly the lowest. The percentage of women workers in the light industry reaches 70 percent, but their wage is only 86 percent of the average wage or 69.7 percent of the wage in the heavy industry.’¹¹ In the services sector, most female workers are engaged in sales or supplies, which pay the lowest wages of all industries. Despite the

principle of equal pay for equal work, structural wage differences and gender discrimination exist due to wage differences among occupations and job descriptions.

Up until the 1970s, North Korea had been introducing an initiative to shift males to more demanding sectors, while filling the vacancies created with female workers. North Korean labor forces are, in principle, allocated according to gender, age, physical strength, and skill level, meaning that 'easy jobs' are performed by women and physically weak individuals, while 'demanding jobs' are filled by healthy young men, and technology slots, by skilled workers. A North Korean textbook on labor administration theory characterizes women as physically weak compared to men. It states that women carry the additional burden of childbirth, child-rearing and household chores, and that the nature and desires of women differ from those of men, and thus, the jobs should be allocated differently by gender considering female characteristics. As a result, the significance of female labor has been underestimated and female workers have been relegated to a supportive role in unskilled jobs.

Economically active North Korean women have limited freedom in job selection and are subject to poorer labor conditions compared to their male counterparts. A case

1. Kim Won-hong et al., (2009), "Analysis of North Korea by area and future direction for policy towards North Korea: Part 2, Education, Women, and Public Health," Research Studies on Unification Affairs, pp. 157-158

in point, in recent years, women have been mobilized to housework units with no additional benefits or to unpaid volunteer units instead of full-time paying jobs. No wonder the overall economic status of North Korean women is considerably lower than that of North Korean men.

Following a review in 2005 of North Korea's first report on implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women expressed concerns about the country's traditional, stereotypical attitude towards the roles and responsibilities of females and males, which, it stated, had significantly affected education, employment and other aspects of life. The Committee also pointed out that, amidst the severe economic crisis, North Korean women faced more severe economic and social difficulties because they received less benefits for the roles they were expected to play, resulting in multiple forms of discrimination.

Meanwhile, marriage and childbirth is still cause for women to end their careers. It is reported that North Korean women in general quit their jobs when they get married. Despite the gender equality policy, there is still a fixed idea about a woman's traditional role as a wife and mother. In short, husbands want their wives to be good housekeepers. Moreover, women are not welcome in the workplace, a phenomenon that is particularly noticeable in cities as compared to rural areas.



North Korean women working at a factory in Pyongyang

According to North Korean defectors, in the mid-1980s when female employment rate was at its peak, the majority of females hired were single, compared to only 30 to 40 percent for married

women. Except for those working in skilled or physically demanding jobs, women working in commerce or clerical jobs are often laid off when they get married or give birth. The food rationing system is also pointed out as a factor affecting female unemployment. Unemployed, single women are not eligible for food rations, but married women who quit their jobs to raise children can transfer their food ration eligibility to her husband's workplace. Also inhibiting women's ability to secure employment is the regulation requiring them to seek work in the area of their husband's residence.

2

Social policies in support of women's economic activities

To guarantee women's economic activities, North Korea implemented a policy of community support for child care by organizing nurseries and kindergartens to bring children up in a collective environment. The North's child care policy was designed not only to secure the female labor force, but also to foster North Korean children as future actors in the communist revolution. The child care philosophy of North Korea is mainly characterized by the idea of raising children as revolutionaries according to the Juche Ideology, fostering them as revolutionaries in the struggle to develop communism, freeing women from the burden of child care, and providing early education for children.

Based on this policy, North Korea established a number of nurseries in every region nationwide. The number of these facilities depends on the size of factories, businesses, and cooperative farm work units in each area. Weekly and monthly nurseries were established in 1961 and 1965, respectively. With their number gradually increasing, by 1976 there were 60,000 facilities caring for 3.5 million children.

Mothers of infants under a year old are excused from their jobs for 30 minutes of breastfeeding twice in the morning and again, twice in the afternoon. Mothers with infants over a year old can breastfeed for 30 minutes in the morning and again in the afternoon. In addition, mothers of infants up to 18 months are allowed to visit their children once a day.

Nurseries are financed by various entities: centrally-run facilities are financed by the central budget; municipal, provincial, and county facilities are financed by regional government funds; and cooperative agricultural farm nurseries, by the common consumption fund. In general, depending on the age of the infants, two nursery attendants care for every 15 to 20 children, and they help with feeding and toilet-training.

The nation's instability of the child care system has been further deteriorated by the economic crisis, because many nurseries have been closed, leaving working moms to take full responsibility for child care. Moreover, regarding the food shortage that has degraded the overall health of the population, reports show that maternal health is even worse because mothers tend to give their share of food to other members of the family.

North Korean mothers are expected to play multiple roles, as exemplary communist mothers, (labor warriors), frugal housewives, and loving nurturers. In short, they must

demonstrate a revolutionary spirit by actively participating in the workplace, while at the same time, fostering a communist spirit in the home, which is the cell unit of the socialist state.



CHAPTER 4

SOCIAL ACTIVITIES OF NORTH KOREAN WOMEN

1. Education
2. Politics
3. Public organization activities

1

Education

North Korea's education focuses on establishing socialism and fostering human resources who obey their leader rather than on individuals' self-development. Its goal under the DPRK Education Law is to "nurture reliable people equipped with sound ideology, profound knowledge in science and technology, and physical strength." This is no exception in home discipline. North Korea highly regards discipline and education at home and often emphasizes that 'mothers are the foremost persons responsible for their children's education' and 'raising children well so that they will contribute to the establishment of a strong and prosperous nation' is a mother's 'duty.'

Model of talents in North Korea

"The goal of socialist education is to nurture people into creative and independent talents who contribute to the communist revolution. (...) The basic principle of socialist pedagogy is (...) to arm people with communist revolutionary ideology, and based on such, equip them with profound scientific knowledge and physical strength."

Source: "Thesis on Socialist Education" presented at the 14th plenary session of the fifth Workers' Party of Korea Central Committee (September 5, 1977)

With the general implementation of 11-year compulsory education in 1972, North Korea declared that the conditions for people to receive general secondary education were in place. It offered more opportunities for higher education by rationalizing the regional arrangement of schools so that more women could enter regular college courses. The goal was to generate 'female intellectuals.' This was also evident in its offering of technical education for women who joined the workforce after their graduation from middle school to learn while having a job and develop expertise; in nurturing female scholars with master's and doctoral degrees; and in increasing the expertise of women working in the industrial and agricultural fields through technical education. It can be said that North Korea's policy to support and encourage the education of women contributed to a certain degree to women's participation in labor, their increased status, and the improvement of the quality of the female workforce.

North Korea divides male and female students into different classes but does not run separate girls' and women's schools. All of its schools are coeducational. This is due to the idea that they should develop an attitude and character of respect and cooperation with each other at school, as society itself consists of men and women and develops through their cooperation. The division of boys' and girls' schools is seen as a sign of gender inequality.

However, it is difficult to see that the division between

the roles of different sexes has been dissolved or that gender equality has been achieved in North Korean education. The education system utilizes separate classes to teach traditional roles according to sex. At middle school, girls learn how to make clothes, cook, raise children, and nurse sick people, and boys have practical training at factories. This is based on the premise that, despite the encouragement of women's social participation, the foremost responsibility for housekeeping and caring lies with women, and women should engage in jobs that are similar to what they do at home.

North Korean women's role models

The main role models suggested for women in North Korea are Kang Pan-sok, the mother of Kim Il-sung, and Kim Jong-suk, the mother of Kim Jong-il. Since the late 1970s, they were featured as ideal women in the magazine *Joseon Women*. Kang was portrayed as an 'outstanding leader of the women's liberation movement' who organized the Anti-Japanese Women's Society, a women's revolutionary organization from the period of the anti-Japanese armed struggle; the 'mother' who raised the leader Kim Il-sung; and a 'dutiful daughter-in-law.'

Kim Jong-suk was also described as a female revolutionary fighter, a mother who raised the son of a revolutionary, and a wife who assisted her leader husband. Her loyalty to the leader Kim Il-sung was of particular importance.

The image of women demonstrated by these two role models reveals the requirements of women in North Korean society: women are to participate in the building of communism just like men and at the same time perform the traditional roles of wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law.

The status of female and male students at coed schools reflects the Confucian convention of the predominance of men over women. It is a common practice that female students call the same-age male students who completed military service ‘comrades’ and use the honorific when addressing them. Labor like cleaning required at schools is mostly left to female students. Accessibility to school education also differs between the two. Under the 11-year compulsory education system, girls can receive education up through middle school, but it cannot be said that opportunities to go to college or go overseas to study are equally granted to female students. The entrance ratio of female students to each university is limited to no higher than 30 percent on the average. Female college graduates are so few that they are regarded as elites. It is easier for discharged male students to go to college, and students are admitted into college based on their loyalty to the Workers’ Party of Korea rather than on their abilities. Under these circumstances, male students are better positioned to go to college and defectors often testify that female students are wholly excluded in the selection of students for overseas studies.

2 Politics

Before the establishment of the regime, North Korea provided for women's political equality in the Law on Equal Rights for Men and Women and guaranteed women's participation in government administration by giving them equal suffrage and eligibility for being elected as men. Its Constitution, Child Care and Education Law, Socialist Labor Law, and Family Law also guaranteed women's political and social roles. Institutional improvements were made, like the abolition of the family register system and childcare provided by the state, and further efforts were made for women's advancement in the political and social arenas and to improve their status through the socialization of housework.

To guarantee women's political participation, 20 percent of the 687 seats of the Supreme People's Assembly are assigned to women. As such, North Korean women are guaranteed the same civil and political rights as men in terms of women-related laws and institutions.

North Korea formally advocates the separation of the

three powers, but in reality the country is ruled through the governance system of the supreme leader and the Workers' Party of Korea. In the 1960s, the Juche ideology was designated as the only overarching guiding principle in every domain, and Kim Il-sung was systematically idolized. The Socialist Constitution of 1972 introduced the president system, and through the supreme leader and heir theories, the transition to the ruling system by the supreme leader was completed. North Korea's government structure centers on the supreme leader, who leads the Workers' Party of Korea, Supreme People's Assembly, cabinet, and more.

It is within the Supreme People's Assembly and Local People's Assembly where women's political activities are most conspicuous. The ratio of female deputies in the fifth Supreme People's Assembly in 1972 was already over 21 percent but then dropped to 20.1 percent in the tenth assembly in 1998 and the 11th assembly in 2003, and to 15.6 percent in the 12th assembly in 2009. Female representation in the Supreme People's Assembly Presidium was 20 percent in the eighth and ninth terms, 11.8 percent in the tenth term, and back to 20 percent in the 12th term. The ratio in the Local People's Assembly is maintained at a slightly higher level of 25 percent.

Although the ratio of female deputies at around 20 percent in the Supreme People's Assembly is relatively high, it cannot be said that women are being well represented. The Supreme People's Assembly deputies participate in regular sessions that

are held once or twice a year, but the majority of them are not politically well-versed, having backgrounds as ‘labor heroes’ or salespersons



North Korean women taking part in a Supreme People's Assembly election

rather than professional politicians. The ratio of female members in the Supreme People's Assembly Presidium and Standing Committee, where they can directly exercise political influence, was lower than that in the Supreme People's Assembly but did increase in the recently-organized 12th Presidium. That in the Presidium was 3 percent in the first term, 6 percent in the second and fourth terms, and 13 percent in the ninth term, typically reaching around 11 percent in most terms. In the eighth and 12th Presidiums, three of the 15 members were women, securing a mark of 20 percent for women's representation. Nevertheless, despite being the highest branch of state power and legislature under the Constitution, the Supreme People's Assembly in practice merely serves as a rubber stamp for decisions already made by the Workers' Party of Korea. Therefore, the high ratio of female members in the Supreme People's Assembly does not have a significant political meaning.

Regarding the role of female deputies in the Supreme People's Assembly, mainly they discuss budget and settlement issues, as is the case with male deputies. These discussions are mostly praises about how well the budgets are planned and executed. There are also discussions on Korean reunification, the development of the people's economy, childcare and education system, and compulsory education, but they mostly stay within the boundaries set by the Workers' Party of Korea's. As such, it is difficult to uncover women issues or articulate such agenda items in the assembly. Moreover, candidate deputies are selected by the Workers' Party of Korea according to its policies in consideration of sex, region, occupation, and hierarchical distribution, and women deputies are elected according to the prescribed ratio. Therefore, the 20 percent ratio that has been maintained since the 1970s can be paradoxically understood as a lack of serious efforts to increase women's representation since then.

3

Public organization activities

North Korea sees the organization and systemization of the public as an important gauge of socialist success. Its representative public organizations are labor organizations, namely, the Korean Democratic Women's Union, the General Federation of Korean Trade Unions, the Kim Il-sung Socialist Youth League, and the Farm Workers' Union of North Korea. They are organized by age, occupation, and sex, and include all the North Korean residents who are 14 years of age or older and do not belong to the Workers' Party of Korea. As about 10 percent of the population has membership in the party, most of the residents belong to these organizations and receive and practice the party's policies through them. In short, the party is responsible for controlling these public organizations, which serve to connect the Workers' Party of Korea and the public and teach ideology.

Among them, the Women's Union is North Korea's largest women's organization. Officially established on November 18, 1945, the organization became what it is now after its consolidation and name change at the joint politburo of the

South and North Korean Women's Unions held in January 1951. At first, all North Korean women between 18 and 55 years of age were required to join the union. A revision was made at the plenary session of the fifth Women's Union politburo in 1983 to limit its membership to women who are not affiliated with other labor organizations. As a result, the union currently mainly consists of housewives and senior female citizens within the age range of around 30 to 69.



Women's Union female executives

Table 1 Public organizations in North Korea

Public organizations	Established on	Size	Member eligibility	Major activities
Democratic Women's Union of North Korea	Nov. 18, 1945	About 200,000	Women aged 31-60	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Establish socialist lifestyles - Revolutionize women and promote labor class lines - Strengthen general education on communism - Execute the Chollima Movement - Organize classes for the younger generation - Strengthen activities to support the People's Army
General Federation of Korean Trade Unions	Nov. 30, 1948	About 1.6 million	Laborers and office workers aged 31-65 (60 for women)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organize general education classes on communism for laborers, technicians, and public officials - Provide education on class lines to members - Carry out training on technology, culture, and general knowledge - Mobilize worker groups to production tasks - Enforce organization for workers' protection initiatives - Provide guidance on socialist competition campaigns

Public organizations	Established on	Size	Member eligibility	Major activities
Kim Il Sung Socialist Youth League	Jan. 17, 1946	About 5 million	Students, workers, and military personnel aged 14-30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have the combat backup forces and shift workers involved in the building of communism of the Workers' Party carry out their mission - Struggle for the construction of socialism - Arm with the Party's ideological system - Strengthen general education on communism - Execute the Chollima Movement
Korean Agricultural Workers Union	Jan. 31, 1946	About 1.3 million	Cooperative agricultural workers aged 31-65 (60 for women)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promote farmers' class lines - Carry out the Three Revolution for rural areas - Carry out the socialist agricultural tasks - Strengthen ideological education for farmers

Source: Institute for Unification Education, Ministry of Unification (2011), "Understanding North Korea 2011," reorganized from content on p. 274

Initially in 1946, Women's Union focused on laying the foundation for the women's movement, such as breaking down feudalistic customs and eradicating women's illiteracy. Then, Kim Il-sung's 1961 instruction greatly changed the organization's mission: it was ordered to serve as 'one of

wagon wheels of the establishment of socialism' to achieve the Workers' Party of Korea's major tasks rather than improving women's status. For instance, the 44th plenary session of the Women's Union politburo held in October 2005 discussed how to implement the Workers' Party of Korea's "songun (military first)" ideology and politics through Women's Union projects. The following tasks were identified: ideological education should be faithfully conducted through propaganda about the greatness of songun politics; Women's Union should be developed into a well-organized and well-disciplined women's revolutionary organization to respond to the demands of the songun era; and Women's Union members should be nurtured into songun revolutionary fighters, a spirit emphasizing that the military should be instilled, and the highest preference should be placed on building up military strength. The 43rd plenary session dealt with a similar agenda and pointed out that, "The Women's Union members should perform the duties of strongly upholding our noble socialist lifestyle; earnestly keeping our streets, neighborhoods, and homes clean and beautiful; and raising our children into capable citizens who can contribute to the establishment of a strong and prosperous nation."

Overall, the role of Women's Union has not changed significantly. Being a labor organization, it remains as the Workers' Party of Korea's extra-governmental body and does not take up a high place in North Korea's power structure.

Women's issues have never risen as major agenda items in the Workers' Party of Korea except at the 5th Workers' Party of Korea Congress in 1970. As such, Women's Union activities have so far been conducted within its basic framework. Meanwhile, as an organization overseeing half of the North Korean population, the union remains responsible for controlling, managing, and educating women according to the Workers' Party of Korea's instructions notwithstanding the political and social changes. In other words, the continuous existence of the union is required to maintain the status quo of the North Korean regime.

The Women's Union activities change according to changes in the Workers' Party of Korea's policies. The union is regarded as an organization designed to establish socialism, protect women's rights and interests, and liberate women. Yet, it mostly strives to enhance the party's foothold among the public, mobilize women, and champion women's traditional gender roles. In conclusion, except for during its initial days, the union has only functioned to encourage women to better perform the party's tasks and has failed to make independent efforts or exercise political influence to achieve gender equality.

Table 2 Evolution of the Role of the Women's Union

Period	Characteristics
<p>Organization and mobilization of women for the construction of socialism (1945-1946)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Remodel women into socialist human beings and mobilize/organize them for the construction of a socialist state - Focus on initiatives to eradicate illiteracy, promote the regime, and educate ideology - Establishment of a foundation for women's participation in production activities - Expansion and reorganization of 'mother schools'
<p>Revolutionization of women and families for the full realization of socialism (1965-1982)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Revolutionization of women, institution of the class line, and revolutionization of families proposed as key objective and major tasks - Organization of classes on the Juche ideology, learning from Lady Kang Pan-sok (mother of Kim Il-sung), and imbuing women with the love of labor and the spirit of collectivism - Assessment made by the Party that the Women's Union is assuming an axis of the 'material fortress' while 'driving one side of the wheels of the revolution'
<p>Transition to an organization under Kim Jong-il regime (1983-1997)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Change in eligibility for membership: previously from women 18 years of age or older to women with no adherence to any other labor organizations; consequently, the majority of Women's Union members were housewives or seniors, and the number of members fell - Women's Union became more necessary to mobilize and manage women workforce amidst exacerbated economic situation

Period	Characteristics
Bureaucratization of the Women's Union, gunstock families and motherhood heroes for the realization of Songun Politics (1998-)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Realization of 'gunstock families' and 'motherhood heroes' proposed as goals - Women's traditional role, i.e. their responsibility for child care and education, is emphasized and the role of a revolutionary mother is defined as 'bearing as many children as possible who can later join the military' and supporting their children to their fullest after they have joined the People's Army - The number of members increased with the adherence by women who left other public organizations

Source: Kwon Su-hyun (2010), "Evolution and continuation of the Democratic Women's Union of North Korea," *Social Science Research Journal*, 18(2), reorganized from pp. 17-29

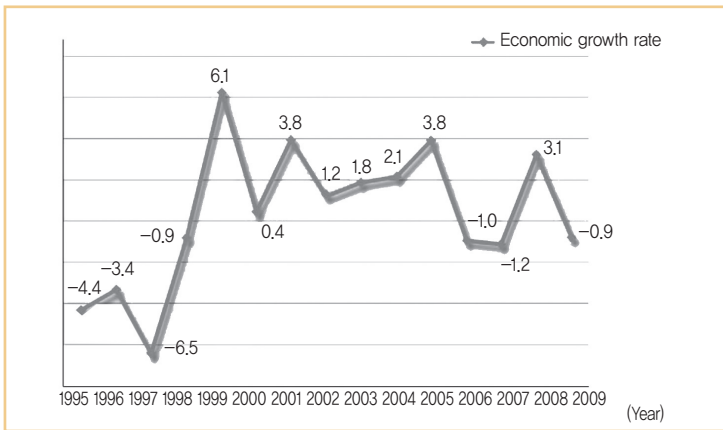


CHANGES IN NORTH KOREAN WOMEN'S LIVES AFTER THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

1. Changes in the way of life and survival
2. Changes in life and perceptions
3. Changes in role and status

With its economy constantly recording negative growth since the 1990s, North Korea is faced with a serious crisis of overlapping shortages of energy, raw materials, and more. Moreover, the people's quality of life has greatly deteriorated with food shortages from continued natural disasters. The informal economy has expanded and social order has been weakened.

Figure 3 Economic Growth Rate

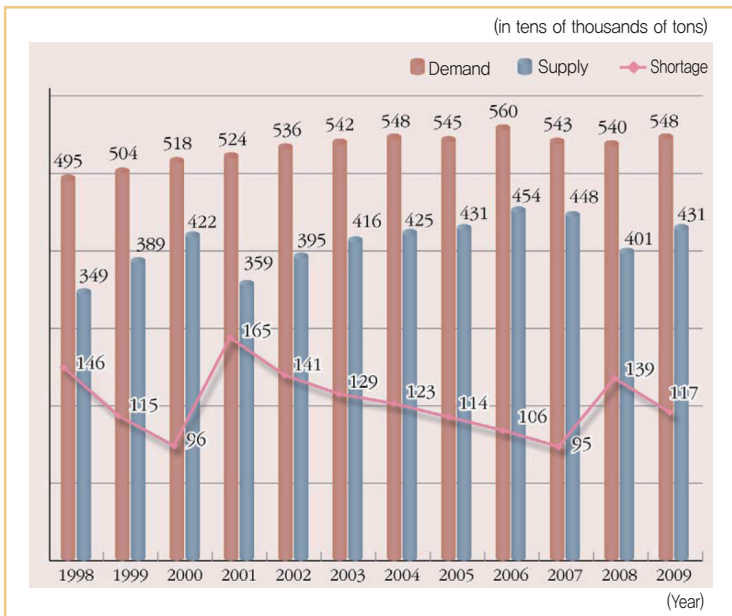


Source: Statistics Korea (2010), Key statistical indicators of North Korea

Most of all, the food shortage, which started to aggravate from the mid-1980s, further worsened with a succession of natural disasters including the flood damage of 1995. Even into the 2000s, it has not been fundamentally resolved. North Korea had already cut the per-capita ration of food (an average of 700g) by 22 percent in 1987. Nevertheless, the food pro-

duction crashed to no more than 5 million tons due to dwindling assistance from other socialist countries; sharp decreases in the production of agricultural materials; and continued natural disasters. As a result, a severe famine occurred. With the intensifying food shortage, starvation spread throughout the entire nation. Today, North Korean residents are finding food in the fields and mountains and selling household items and homes to secure food. The vulnerable groups of the population are undernourished, and more domestic animals are being consumed.

Figure 4 Changes in Food Supply & Demand



* The food demand is estimated based on the decreased ration amount (546 grams per adult person) and the supply represent the grain harvest in the previous year. Source: Rural Development Administration (2010)

Despite the state's strict social control policy to enhance ideological and psychological unity based on the Juche ideology, the people are increasingly turning against the regime as economic hardship persists, and the control system is showing signs of weakening. As a rapidly growing number of people travel to obtain food, an information exchange network among them has been activated as they meet each other and exchange information in the streets and markets. With the worsening food shortage and economic conditions, the socialization policy of housework and childcare has lost its momentum, and the burden of housework and childcare is not properly shared within the home. As such, women are suffering from an excessive role burden of supporting the family. A Workers' Newspaper or Rodong Sinmun article offered a glimpse into the status of North Korean women whose quality of life is declining amid the poorer living environment: "The unexpected difficulties brought by the shortages of food, electricity, firewood, and more first befell our women²⁾" "Looking back, the dark clouds of hardships already hovering over this land for several years first cast shadows on the hearts of this country's women."³⁾

2. Rodong Sinmun, "The happiness of living as a daughter faithful to the party," March 8, 2000

3. Rodong Sinmun, "North Korean women are strong," July 30, 2000

Changes in the way of life and survival

A. Emphasis of women's role as family provider

Traditionally, the North Korean woman has been assigned a dual role as an 'innovative laborer' to further the development of socialism and as 'a mother of the revolution.' Even before the establishment of the regime, North Korean society had demanded that women fulfill their traditional domestic responsibilities. With the country's political realm being hierarchically organized under the absolute leadership of the man in power, women saw their role as 'mother of the revolution' being transitioned to one that fosters back up forces for the protection of the absolute man in power. Thus, their integrity and loyalty were affirmed and, in the name of gender equality, their active participation in the workforce was rationalized.

The economic crisis that hit North Korea after the 1990s increased the labor burden of North Korean women in their dual roles as domestic worker and supporter of the revolution. The paralysis of the central distribution system

exacerbated the dramatic impacts on the North’s economy. The responsibility for making a living fell to every member of the family and prompted women to actively seek whatever work they could find in order to make ends meet. This was particularly so because women had more mobility than their husbands who had to go to their plant or company even if it was not in operation or had no materials to work with.

The emancipation of women was one of North Korea’s ‘three technological revolutions’. However, when the proposed mechanization and industrialization of domestic labor proved a failure due to a shortage of supplies and electricity, the 1998 Constitution had to eliminate the clause from the 1972 version of the Constitution, instead stipulating that the state “shall liberate women from heavy family chores” (Park 2011).

The worsening economic situation further exacerbated the difficulties faced by North Korean women. Those living in high-rise apartments were even forced to carry water up in buckets due to the failed water supply system. The responsibility of finding food also fell to women as it was considered domestic labor. Furthermore, nurseries that had taken on a significant part of



● A North Korean woman attempting to sell to a foreigner

child care responsibilities were gradually closing, shifting the burden of child care back to the women.

In the aftermath of the economic crisis, most women sustained a livelihood by working as day laborers or street vendors, rather than working in a full-time capacity. Even prior to the economic crisis, their economic activities had been in low-pay, low status jobs, compared to men. Worsening economic woes made full-time jobs even harder to get for married women. Women were first on the list for staff reductions, which led many of them to opt for jobs in commerce or other ancillary jobs. Amid such changes, social class often determined the type and size of commercial endeavors, and some women even took advantage of their husband's social positions when changing jobs.

Specifically, women whose husbands held senior positions could start businesses under more favorable conditions, while most of those married to common laborers had very little capital to invest in a sideline business. Those whose husbands held managerial positions had traditionally looked after their families, but since the 1990s, some of them took specialized jobs like photographers, later working their way up to full-time jobs in a business earning foreign currency. North Korean women who worked in comparatively white-collar occupations could continue to go to work even after the food supply had diminished. However, when the food supply was discontinued after the death of Kim Il-sung, many

women had to transition to sideline businesses or foreign-currency earning businesses. Then, when food rations dried up completely and more and more people died from famine, a rising number of women were found to be involved in a sideline business, working a regular job in the morning and then going to another job in the afternoon.

After food rationing was totally discontinued and the authorities loosened controls over the market, a significant number of working women started their own businesses⁴⁾. Women who ran a sideline business in addition to their regular jobs worked until late at night.

Under the socialist system, North Korean women engaged mainly in agriculture, commerce, light industries, or small-scale industries to produce, distribute, or manage daily necessities, but when economic decline resulted in the failure of the resource distribution system, daily necessities had to be made at home. Cottage industries soon sprang up to produce these daily necessities.

Manned by laborers and their families, these work-at-home units were initially production units where materials and half-completed goods were brought in from factories to be finished. Workers used their own tools and equipment, and

4. Lee Mi-kyung (2006), "Prospects of change in North Korean women's status after the economic crisis based on in-depth interviews with female defectors," *Family and Culture*, 18(1): pp. 33-55



North Korean women working at a work-at-home unit

worked individually at home or in groups at specific sites. Hours were not specified because the pay was determined by the amount of production. Neither work-at-home unit workers counted

as part of the official labor force.

To cope with extreme economic hardship, North Korean women engaged in a variety of sideline jobs or piecework production in work-at-home units, while trading or investing products and capital in markets. Amidst a decline in factory operations, the North Korean regime emphasized that factory production would soon be normalized, while mobilizing women to produce goods at Producers took 70 to 80 percent of the goods' selling prices on average, with the remaining 20 to 30 percent taken by the state. Women with exceptional sewing or production skills could accumulate significant earnings, and various channels and networks were established for sales of goods produced at work-at-home units.

Women also sold home-grown vegetables in the local markets at the going rates or exchanged them with industrial products manufactured in cities, gaining greater economic self-sufficiency. Gradually, as the women learned the

Private trade run by North Korean women

North Korean women are engaged in private trade in one of the following five ways. The most common type is the use of oversized backpacks.

- Sale of home-made rice cakes, bread, or noodles in a (unauthorized) stall
- Authorized sale of home-grown vegetables and homemade food items at jangmadang markets
- Illegal purchase of goods from Korean-Chinese in border areas and resale in North Korea at a premium
- Peddling daily goods in an oversize backpack around the nation
- Illegal trade of gold, silver, copper, and other mineral resources

Source: Bae Young-ae (2010). "Changes in the roles and perceptions of North Korean women following the economic crisis in the 1990s," *Unification Strategy*, 10(2): pp. 107-108

fundamentals of capitalist profit-making, they sold products themselves in jangmadang markets, rather than in the state commercial network⁵⁾.

Other social conditions add to the labor burden shouldered by women. There is no social welfare system that provides care for the sick or the elderly, meaning that family members, especially women, must assume that duty. An additional burden is faced by unemployed married women who are compelled to join unpaid labor units organized by local neighborhoods. Additionally, without strong policies to protect their rights regarding domestic labor and child care,

5. Bae Young-ae (2010). "Changes in the roles and perceptions of North Korean women following the economic crisis in the 1990s," *Unification Strategy*, 10(2)

women have been forced to take on all household chores and child care alone. Clearly, the economic crisis has significantly degraded the quality of life for North Korean women.

B. North Korean women human rights situation

As severe economic hardships persisted, a phenomenon of commercialization of sex has emerged where women can easily and quickly resolve their livelihood problems. Following the food crisis, prostitution has become prevalent among both single and married women, and in some instances, prostitution has become a business. An increasing number of women are using sex as a way of building wealth rather than making a living. Reportedly, a large number of women are full-time prostitutes catering to wealthy businessmen in jangmadang markets.

In general, prostitutes conduct business in and around lodgings near train stations. Until 1998, anyone engaged in prostitution was executed by a firing squad, but now female prostitutes reportedly receive three- to six-month sentences in a labor camp, and are then released. Married women making a living as prostitutes are either excused, or they receive reduced sentences, depending on the extenuating circumstances. The same applies to single women with valid identities. However, those who have left families, and are later found engaged in prostitution receive the maximum sentence

at a camp⁶⁾. Despite the harsh sentences, the economic crisis has triggered a sharp rise in prostitution, which, in turn reveals the human rights issues facing North Korean women.

While domestic violence is just as serious as prostitution, it is not made an issue in the North. Considered a family affair rather than a breach of the law, such cases (and only if the Women's Union intervenes) are addressed at a people's unit meeting or Women's Union meeting where the male offender is criticized and the case is closed. Despite being breadwinners, North Korean women are being victimized in rising numbers by drunken husbands who beat and abuse them. Moreover, a growing number of women leave home to escape the domestic violence⁷⁾.

In July 2005, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women expressed concerns that the North Korean state did not recognize the existence of domestic violence, and that as a consequence there were no measures to prevent violence against women or to protect the victims. The Committee asked North Korea to investigate the rate of prevalence for all forms of violence against women and the causes and consequences, and to report the findings in the next regular report. The

6. Lim Sun-hee (2004), Food crisis and changes in the role and perceptions of North Korean women, Korea Institute for National Unification
7. Lim Sun-hee (2004), Food crisis and changes in the role and perceptions of North Korean women

Testimony on domestic violence in North Korea

In North Korea, men do nothing. Here, women do things like chopping down trees or hammering nails. There's nothing that men have to do. (...) Women do everything. If a woman doesn't know how to do something, then she will get blamed by the man for it, (...) and men beat their wives if they don't do enough. They drink and beat their wives, and there's nowhere for women to turn, even if they get beaten up. If they talk about it, people are going to say they got beat up because they had an affair. That's about it. Nobody cares about men forcing sex on them or hurting them. It's nothing—everybody knows that women get beaten by their husbands.

The reason is because most people still think that men are superior to women. Today, just like the past, it's the usual thing for men to choose a spouse who can go out and make a living. Women have to work themselves to death to make enough money for their husbands. I think only about 20 to 30 percent of men take care of their families. The woman is the one who brings home the bread, so she goes out to work and then has to come home to take care of the family. A lot of North Korean men, almost half, think women should even be prostitutes to support them. And if they don't do it, the women get knocked around. I witnessed that myself. (...) Men beating their wives practically to death. Even if there is no way for a wife to make money, their men beat them—it's just so common.

Source: Dongguk University, North Korean Studies Research Institute (2005), "Research on human rights conditions in North Korea through the testimony of North Korean defectors," excerpts from pp. 107-109.

Committee also recommended that the North introduce a law on domestic violence to define violence against women as a criminal act, provide for immediate relief and protective means for female victims of violence, and guarantee the prosecution and punishment of offenders⁸⁾.

8. Park Young-ho et al., (2010), North Korea Human Rights White Paper, Korea Institute for National Unification, quoted from p. 321

Meanwhile, trafficking of North Korean women has reached dangerous levels. Human trafficking begins with forced abduction either through violent means or through subterfuge, using a broker. In a complex web of transactions between Korean-Chinese brokers in China and intermediary brokers in North Korea, the women, and in some cases married women, are sold against their wills to the Chinese⁹⁾.

During the famine in the 1990s, some parents sold off their daughters, and some women even chose to be sold. The most common instance was when head of a family sold a daughter or a wife to human traffickers so there would be fewer mouths to feed¹⁰⁾. According to the testimony of North Korean defectors, daughters usually obeyed their parents' wishes, saying, "My mom took me to a broker and turned me over for 10,000 North Korean won. I guess she sold me, but I don't blame her." Another testified, "We crossed the Amnok River and reached Zhangbei, China. That's where we settled, but my parents told the broker to get me married off anywhere"¹¹⁾. The consistent pattern shows that daughters do not oppose being sold because they understand the food situation and the hard choice their parents face. Apparently, some even opt to

9. Lim Sun-hee (2004). Food crisis and changes in the role and perceptions of North Korean women

10. Andrew S. Natsios (2003), *The Great North Korean Famine: Famine, Politics, and Foreign Policy*, translated by Hwang Jae-ok, Dahal Media

11. Andrew S. Natsios (2003), *The Great North Korean Famine: Famine, Politics, and Foreign Policy*, pp. 61-67

marry for the sole purpose of supporting their families¹²⁾.

C. Health issues and unwillingness to bear children

The ongoing food crisis has resulted in serious malnutrition among North Korean women. According to a North Korean report on a study conducted with the support of the United Nations Children's Fund in 2002, one-third of the mothers surveyed suffered from malnutrition and anemia, which, in turn, had caused prenatal malnutrition¹³⁾. To provide for the family during the food crisis, North Korean women overworked themselves to the point of physical exhaustion. That, and the psychological pressure to look after their families by any means possible, combined to make maternal health even worse.

Meanwhile, changes in material conditions had transformed the way North Korean women think. While the food crisis had degraded their quality of life, it had also changed their perceptions. Reductions in social security measures and the increased responsibility for child care resulted in the desire for only one child or rejection of the idea. Due to the lack of

12. Lim Sun-hee (2004), Food crisis and changes in the role and perceptions of North Korean women

13. Central Bureau of Statistics of DPR Korea (2003). Report on the DPRK Nutrition Assessment 2002.

technology to determine the sex of a fetus, abortion of female fetuses was uncommon. Moreover, the widespread preference for sons had been the reason for parents to have many children. After the 1990s, however, the fall in the birth rate directly affected the preference for sons over daughters. While it has not vanished completely, preference for boys is definitely less important.



A North Korean woman caring for a malnourished child

Table 3 Nutritional status of mothers and children in North Korea (2002)

Classification	Nutritional status	Percentage
Maternal	Low weight (less than 45 kilograms)	16.7
	Malnutrition	32.0
	Anemia	33.6
	Postpartum Vitamin A absorption	33.1
Child	Low birth weight	6.7
	Child malnutrition	39.2
	Low birth weight	20.2
	Weakness	8.1
	Breastfeeding in infants less than six months age	69.6
	BCG immunization rate in children aged over 1 week	88.3
	Polio immunization rate in children aged 5 months over	98.5
	DPT immunization rate in children aged 5 months over	68.0
	Measles immunization rate in children aged 10 months over	95.2
	Coverage of Vitamin A supplementation in children under 2 years of age	98.6
	Incidence of diarrhea in children under two	19.1
Percentage of children with diarrhea that are not given either food or fluid during the illness	86.7	

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics of DPR Korea. 2003. Report on the DPRK Nutrition Assessment 2002. Tables 13-17, 21, 23-30 reorganized

The unwillingness to bear children is reportedly a very serious issue in North Korea. Due to the lack of a sound medical distribution system, methods for safe contraception are difficult to obtain. As a result, pregnant women seek unsafe ways to abort at the risk of their own health and that of the child. With a growing number of women engaging in economic activities, birth has come to be perceived as a hindrance to women's commercial activities. Moreover, the perception that a fetus is not a fully viable human being also leads many to opt for abortion so as to take care of the family members they already have.

After the food crisis, a growing number of women began to contract tuberculosis or gynecological diseases such as uterine or breast cancer. In addition, prostitutes with sexually transmitted diseases are unable to get proper medical care at hospitals, so they resort to home remedies and Chinese medicine purchased at jangmadang markets. This situation has not changed much since the mid-2000s. The absolute shortage of medicine to treat gynecological diseases is forcing most people to use Chinese medicine or drugs provided by international organizations. There aren't even sanitary pads available. Finally, the lack of food and poor postnatal care facilities means that mothers cannot even seek treatment for postpartum illnesses¹⁴⁾.

14. Park Young-ho et al. (2010), North Korea Human Rights White Paper, Korea Institute for National Unification, p. 323

Not only the food crisis but also the lack of fundamental knowledge led to the deterioration of women's health. There was a general ignorance about gynecological diseases, the cause of these illnesses, and how to diagnose and treat them. The sex education conducted at schools is also at rudimentary levels.

North Korean women's perception of health

Given the present state of North Korea, young couples are reluctant to get married. Even if they do, they feel uncertain about how they will make a life for themselves. And the thought of being unable to provide a child with the life it deserves leads to the decision against having children. If, by chance, a woman does get pregnant, many just seek an abortion at the cost of serious health complications.

Mothers rarely teach girls about the facts of life, including menstruation. Rather, they learn about it from a middle school teacher. The only thing girls learn is how to deal with menstruation hygienically. Even though it signifies the beginning of womanhood and fertility, teachers don't tell their students that menstruation means that a girl is ready to conceive. Hoping to avoid an awkward situation, they simply caution them, "You comrades be careful with men when you begin to menstruate." There is no explanation as to why they should be careful or how. When girls turn sixteen, they receive a book on menstruation, which offers information on their period, when pregnancy is possible, when it is not, how to calculate ovulation times, etc. According to one witness, teachers just told them to read the book. So they read it, and learned it on their own.

I haven't used much medicine in my life. I was poor and even if I was really sick, I would just think about it a little, but that's about it. My mom was also very sick, but she just suffered.

Source: Lee Wu-young et al. (2008), Survey of North Korean human rights conditions, National Human Rights Commission, p. 114; Compiled by Good Friends (2000), Story of North Korea as told by North Korean people, Jungto Publishing, pp. 50-51; Kim Tae-hyun, Roh Chi-young (2003), Life of North Korean women defectors in China, Hawoo Publishing, p. 70

2

Changes in life and perceptions

A. Independence and self-esteem

Since the economic crisis, women have assumed the role of breadwinner in the family. As such, they have begun to question the custom of unconditional obedience under the patriarchal system. Women had been indoctrinated to live the life of a dedicated mother and wife, but since the 1990s, they began to develop a stronger self-awareness as masters of their own destiny, striving to achieve self-realization rather than blindly sacrificing themselves for the family. In the process, they have become more independent-minded and have developed self-esteem. They pursue economic activities not only to make a living, but to ensure a richer, more satisfying life for themselves.

Women's increasing responsibility to provide for their families in the aftermath of the food crisis has resulted in a higher divorce rate. In addition, many more women opt to be childless and they favor the single life. Women are also choosing to divorce to escape domestic violence and

overwork, in the hope of a more comfortable life on their own. Reportedly, an increasing number of women are filing for divorce because of their husband's economic incompetence, particularly during the period of the Arduous March. "In North Korea, divorce is like a breeze. The trend is to get married but not register the marriage during the first two to three years. So, if a couple chooses to divorce during the first years of marriage, they can do so without going through the divorce process. In the North, people talk about living together for a few years. Then, if one finds that the other is not really the one, they break up just like that."

In addition to the serious food shortage and the failing economy, a third cause for the decreasing birth rate is the growing number of unstable de facto marriages. In some extreme cases, some parents leave their newborns alone to die, while others simply demand their children to find food on their own. As a natural consequence, it has become a prevalent phenomenon for North Korean women to prefer a single life, partly due to the widespread notion among women that they would be "better off earning for themselves and living on their own," and the reduced bias that all single women are prostitutes.

B. Expansion of materialism and individualism

The collapse of the social and economic system as a result

of the continued food crisis has also changed the way women view the economy. As it becomes more and more difficult to survive on earnings from regular jobs, informal domains have gained precedence over the state-led domain, triggering the introduction of market elements. By engaging in micro-enterprises or other economic activities in informal markets, women have become less wary of capitalism. While they had been taught by the state that capitalism was evil, they learned about its benefits through their private trade.

In addition, the influx of capitalist culture has provided a benchmark on which to compare North Korean society, and has encouraged women to embrace new values. With new information about the outside world garnered through their trade with China, women of the North began to think differently. “We knew only how to obey, and would never try to overcome our situation. That was the general tendency throughout society, but things began to change in the 1990s. Because more products were coming in from China and more North Koreans were going to China, many were exposed to the Chinese culture, and that is how capitalism came into the country^{15]}.” In sum, the information reaching the North from the outside world caused people to be more critically aware of their own lifestyles.

15. Lee Mi-kyung (2006). “Prospects of change in North Korean women’s status after the economic crisis based on in-depth interviews with female defectors,” *Family and Culture*, 18(1): pp. 47-48

As economic power gradually gained importance, the North Korean society became more materialistic. Average citizens began to think in terms of capitalism, placing an absolute value on money. Moreover, individualism took the place of collectivism. This trend also contributed to the gap between rich and poor, which continued to widen due to the price hikes following the July 1st Economic Management Improvement Measures. According to a witness, “The wealthy people made even more money, but the poor had no other way than to become servants in wealthy homes. Before the measures, it had been possible to trade with a small investment, but afterwards, there was no way to do business with such a small sum. So, if you want to stay alive, you’ll have to work as a servant¹⁶⁾.”

Despite the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots, the overall economic situation and the standard of living have recently improved. As a result, women have become more conscious of their looks, and are paying more attention to their attire and make-up. This trend is seen in both upper-class women and female factory workers. Because of the economic crisis, social stratification has become more pronounced, and the way one dresses has become a key indication of social and economic background. Women now

16. Lee Mi-kyung (2006). “Prospects of change in North Korean women’s status after the economic crisis based on in-depth interviews with female defectors,” *Family and Culture*, 18(1): pp. 48

realize that if they have earning power, money can elevate their standard of living and make their lives more comfortable. Clearly, the impetus for economic activity is not so much to make a living as it is to make a profit and to secure a better quality of life.



North Korean women trying cosmetic products at a Pyongyang Department Store

Passage from a North Korean novel about North Korean women

“Where d’ya work at? You, young girl, come to work without any makeup?” Okryun felt a strong sentiment of shame, as if she had been stripped naked in front of them. She had never really cared about makeup. But after that incident, she felt a strong urge to use it. She secretly read books about hair styles, fashion, and makeup, so that her makeup would look better than all the others. She paid particular attention to the hair and makeup of Munsok with whom she worked. Munsok had never used anything other than cream on her face until she turned 40. The first real makeup she had ever worn was forced upon her by Okryun after she came out of the bath one day. Munsok said rather sheepishly, “I feel dizzy with all this ginseng cream, hair oil, and fragrance. What good is it to have such a nice makeup on when I am just a furnace worker? Tomorrow, I will just get all black again from the coal dust.” Okryun replied, “That’s exactly why we need to wear makeup and dress the best we can. So no one looks down on us just because we are furnace workers.”

Source: Kim Mun-chang’s *Desire*, pp. 190-191; Cho Jung-ah (2006), *Changes in North Korean people’s lifestyle as revealed in North Korean literature after the economic crisis*, Korea Institute for National Unification, re-quoted from p. 61

In effect, the more North Korean women engage in private

trade in the market place, the more materialistic they tend to become. Meanwhile, the so-called immorality of women involved in capitalistic pursuits is being criticized in North Korean novels and periodicals. According to these publications, income and consumption create the “yellow winds of capitalism,” which in turn, lead to extravagance and hedonism. Ultimately, it results in despair. The novels fail to persuade, however, as women do not trust the authorities as much as they did in the past.

With the rise in materialistic individualism, North Korean women's views on sex have also become more liberal and realistic. Since the 1990s, young women have thought of love and marriage as separate issues, and it is reported that there are many examples of premarital or extramarital pregnancies. As a matter of fact, a growing number of people are advocating free love. Additionally “love matches” are increasing rapidly. Until the mid-1980s, women had exhibited an unwavering sense of virtue, but that has been changing gradually. In fact, some women sell sexual favors as a way to survive. This phenomenon has naturally weakened the value that women have always placed on purity, and instead is feeding the tendency to use sex as a means of making a living. In a word, the rise in capitalist values goes hand in hand with the marked change in the way people view sex.

3

Changes in role and status

A. Change in family structure and rise in women's say

Before the economic and food crises, North Korean families were organized according to strict gender division. However, the failed state food distribution system has forced wives to assume a more important role in the family, triggering negative changes such as the breakdown of families and abandonment of children. Following the economic crisis, the structure of North Korean families has been marked by contradiction, such as weakening family versus stronger solidarity among members, and blurring of the line between gender-specific tasks versus stronger traditional roles.

First, the stronger solidarity among family members is explained by the need to divide tasks and collaborate in order to survive. This phenomenon is clearly evident in testimonies of some North Korean women, “You can never go out on your own because you will come across a thief and get robbed” or “if you don't want to starve to death, you must cooperate with other members of the family. So tasks are assigned, like one

goes to get ears of corn while another goes to get mugwort. We have to cooperate with each other to survive.¹⁷⁾” Because the factories and companies are not operating, husbands just show up at their workplace and then come back home, taking care of some housekeeping or going out to pick wild vegetables. The wives go to sell in another region, while children wander around looking for food. Finally, the lax security since the economic crisis has forced families to operate as a group in order to protect themselves.

Meanwhile, some attribute the breakdown of the traditional family to women being absent from home for trade elsewhere for long periods of time, while the husband and children go out on their own to find food. And sometimes, the conflicts between the husband and wife escalate to the point of divorce. In the aftermath of the economic crisis, the rise in official divorces, separations, and abandonment has resulted in many homeless children, known as *kotjebi*.

17. Lee Mi-kyung (2006). “Prospects of change in North Korean women’s status after the economic crisis based on in-depth interviews with female defectors,” *Family and Culture*, 18(1): p. 44

Life of children living on the street due to family breakdown

Life of children living on the street due to family breakdown

Homeless children, referred to as kotjebi, have no place to go. Even their own relatives don't welcome them into their homes, so sooner or later they are kicked out or run away. As these homeless children wander, they carry only a plastic sheet in their backpack. They wander all around, and when they stop to sleep, they take out the plastic sheet and spread it on the ground. The life of a kotjebi is described in the following dialogue between a kotjebi and an elderly person.

What's your name? / My name is jebi.
That's a good name. / But I am a kotjebi (homeless child).
What do you eat? / I eat ori (duck).
You must be quite well off. / But I eat guksu ori (bits of noodle).
Where do you live? / I live in sudo (the capital).
You live in a nice place. / But I live in a hasudo (sewer).

Source: Compiled by Good Friends (2000), *The Story of North Korea* as told by the North Korean people, Jungto Publishing, pp. 145-146

In the present situation in the North, women are participating in economic activities, hoping to make enough to buy food. The fact that they are very busy outside the home has led to a change in the division of household chores in an otherwise patriarchal family life, though these changes are minor. There are increasing instances in which men help with household chores. In addition, women are beginning to voice their opinions in family matters. Since the mid-1990s, there has been a saying that “if a woman in the family works, then the whole family can eat and survive; if the woman stays put, then the whole family starves to death.” As women have assumed the role of breadwinner, they are not as obedient to their husbands as in the past. “When they went out to

work and make money, husbands had a strong say in the family. Now that the men don't provide as much as they once did, they are as useless as a lamp in the daytime. So, they'd better do well by their wives and help out more¹⁸⁾." Unlike in the past, men take their wives to work at the market in the morning and help out with getting ready to return home in the evening. Some even do household work voluntarily. This is not a generalized phenomenon, however, as the situation is mostly seen in mid- to low-income families, which are the hardest hit by the economic crisis.

Division of tasks and a greater voice for women in family matters

In the past, women would cook dinner and take care of household chores after work. Now, if men fail to fully assume their role, that's not really their fault but a state problem. Women go out to the market to sell things, or go picking wild herbs in the mountains for a living. They are assuming the role of head of the household. So, the trend is for men to cook or do the cleaning. In the past, men felt humiliated doing such things, but now they think it's a way for them to be useful, and they do not feel so shameful about it.

Still, it's thanks to the support of the husbands, either in the form of preparing meals or taking care of the children, that women are able to make a living. Women did not do all that on their own. They have more of a voice in family matters than in the past but the situation hasn't changed completely, and women still show respect to their husbands.

Source: Park Hyeon-seon (1999). "A study on the family institution in North Korea in modern times: based on the social reproduction of the family and the relationship of the family system," a doctoral dissertation at Ewha Women's University, re-quoted from pp. 245-246, and p. 241

18. Lee Mi-kyung (2006). "Prospects of change in North Korean women's status after the economic crisis based on in-depth interviews with female defectors," *Family and Culture*, 18(1): p. 44

Basically, patriarchal customs among men have not changed in North Korean society. Though women do not think that they should have to obey their husbands totally, they don't negate the authority of the patriarch. They think that men help them with household chores out of kindness and consideration. They don't regard it as task-sharing. Specifically, women still believe that husbands hold absolute authority over decisions on how many children to have, type and extent of education, and household purchases. Women's influence is

Entrenched traditional gender roles

No matter how much work they do in and outside the home, women rarely make it a point. They just think 'this is my job, so I just do it,' Rarely do they brag about what they do for their husbands or challenge them in an argument.

Gender inequality based on the patriarchal system is part of everyday life in the North. Husbands force their wives to obey them no matter what, saying that a true woman should be like 'a mother who dedicates her life to housekeeping and caring for the family members and gains satisfaction from it' or 'an outstanding worker at the workplace and a wise wife at home.' Women are forced to restrain themselves, not complain, and fulfill their role as the daughter-in-law who takes care of her parents-in-law on behalf of her husband, who is morally obligated to serve his parents. If anything goes wrong in the family, the parents-in-law blame their daughter-in-law because 'harmony in the family depends on the daughter-in-law.' It is customary for men to avoid any domestic labor. Even today, men just wait with arms crossed until the wife gets the food, sets the table and serves their meal.

- * Park Hyeon-seon (1999). "A study on the family institution in North Korea in modern times: based on the social reproduction of the family and the relationship of the family system," a doctoral dissertation at Ewha Women's University, re-quoted from pp. 240-241; Choi Myung-suk (1999). "Life of North Korean women at home after the 1990s," Korean Women's Institute, Yanbian University Women Issues Research Center, "The lives of Korean women in South and North Korea, and in China," symposium sourcebook, p. 11

limited to matters related to savings, insurance, and managing day-to-day living expenses. The ideal woman is one who is respected by the elders in the family and who supports her husband. Now that North Korean women have become more involved in providing for the family, the role of men as head of the household has weakened, and consequently, women's authority and status have improved (at least superficially). Yet traditional gender roles are even more entrenched in existing patriarchal thinking.

B. Changes in North Korean women's social and economic status

The role of North Korean women has changed not only within the family structure but also in societal terms. There is general social acceptance of women's growing involvement in economic activities. Particularly, women engaged in a private trade as a source of greater income, are learning to be economically independent. Moreover, they are more knowledgeable of the circumstances in and outside the country. This phenomenon is a topic covered in novels or periodicals. For example, some novels are about soldiers, especially female soldiers, a genre that had once been traditionally confined to men, or they include female characters working as professionals¹⁹¹. As a matter of fact, an increasing number of North Korean women do join the military. Following the Arduous March, the popularity of party membership and joining the military both dwindled, prompting military authorities to



North Korean women soldiers marching

accept females. As a result, the number of women in the military rose to 15 percent²⁰. This increase underlines the authorities' position welcoming women's participation in the struggle to overcome economic conditions in the country.

More than anything, women are called to emulate social motherhood. The state emphasized women's social motherhood through the 'Theory of Great Family' of the 1960s and the 'Theory of Social and Political Organism' of the 1980s. Given the collapse of the state-led welfare system following the economic crisis and the lingering traditional views that place value on the extended family, it has been difficult for

19. Lim Sun-hee (2004), *Food crisis and changes in the role and perceptions of North Korean women*, p. 168

20. Yun Mi-ryang (2006), "North Korean women status and role," *Society and Culture of North Korea*, The Sejong Institute North Korea Research Center, Hanul Publishing Company, p. 499

women to reject the state's calls for women to display ethical behavior. This is how the state is encouraging women to exert their motherhood at the social level.

However, it is important to note the following regarding the economic and social competence of North Korean women²¹. First, the growing role of women in economic activities, including selling in markets, does not directly translate into greater economic independence. It is also important to consider both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of women's economic activities as negative commercial activities (e.g. prostitution) can distort women's vocational ethics. Meanwhile, as shown by the percentage of women and men by vocations, the majority of women are still concentrated in light industry or the service sector, which are menial, low-wage jobs. Private trade also offer limited opportunity for women as they only involve simple transactions or trading of agricultural products, which do not require professional knowledge or training. If these are the only choices for women, their abilities are being underestimated. Finally, because their economic activities generally occur in the informal economy, women are exposed to illegal and even violent situations. In a nutshell, women's economic activities are mostly triggered by external factors such as the need to provide for the family, and thus, do not guarantee their autonomy.

21. Lim Sun-hee (2004), Food crisis and changes in the role and perceptions of North Korean women, p. 90-91



CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Similar to other socialist countries, North Korea established legal and institutional mechanisms and implemented policies on women with the post-liberation launch of the communist regime, so as to encourage female participation in society. However, in the wake of the severe food shortage, life for a North Korean woman is bleak. In fact, the hardships they experience go far beyond common understanding. The problems women face include gender inequality, sexual discrimination, a patriarchal family system, extreme overwork, health issues (caused by overwork), sexual violence and domestic violence.

Plagued by famine, malnutrition, diseases, and even death, women were the hardest hit by the food crisis, followed by children and the elderly. Suddenly responsible for providing for the family, they faced overwork, worsening health, and sexual violence. At the same time, the patriarchal system took for granted women's self-sacrifices without guaranteeing their rights at all.

The food crisis, which began in the 1990s and continues to this day, is significantly tied to the deteriorating health of the female population. In order to support their families, women have taken on an impossible workload at the cost of their own physical strength. They bear a psychological burden as well, as a result of their increasing responsibility in the family. The collapse of the state medical distribution system has also played a part. Women must depend on unreliable

contraceptive methods or seek abortions to the detriment of their health. Because abortion is illegal, many women abort the fetus themselves using drugs, or seek assistance from illegal clinics. Consequently, they do not receive proper post-abortion medical treatment. Some even die during the operation²². The state, by refusing women the right to self-determination, is treating them like brood animals rather than human beings. Moreover, the policy threatens their lives. Given these circumstances, it is unlikely that the phenomenon of women avoiding pregnancy or resorting to illegal abortions will be reduced unless realistic conditions for child care are improved and women's domestic work is reduced. In short, North Korean women face many obstacles, including health problems as they struggle to survive and cope with the severe deterioration of the economy.

22. Compiled by Good Friends (2000), *Story of North Korea as told by North Korean people*, Jungto Publishing, p. 105



REFERENCES

Ku Su-mi et al. 2005. "Change in the status of North Korean women living in the cities during the period of regime change: A comparison with Chinese women living in the cities". Korean Association of North Korean Studies. 9(2)

Kwon Su-hyun. 2010. "Evolution and continuation of the Democratic Women's Union of North Korea". Social Science Research Journal. 18(2)

Kim Won-hong, Lee In-suk, Kwon Hee-wan. 2003. Revised: Women's Studies of Today. Konkuk University Publishing Department

Kim Won-hong, Kim Jung-hye. 2007. "A comparative study on the terminology used by South and North Korean women for the publication of a comparative dictionary on South-North academic terminology". Korean Women's Development Institute

Kim Won-hong et al., (2009), "Analysis of North Korea by area and future direction for policy towards North Korea: Part 2, Education, Women, and Public Health," Research Studies on Unification Affairs

Moon Jang-sun. 2009. "How North Korean women's perceptions are changing". Research on the Culture and Arts of South and North Korea. 4: 7-38

_____, 2010. "Changes in the role of the Democratic Women's Union of North Korea and its causes". Journal of Peace Studies. 11(1)

Park Young-ja. 2005. "Women politics in North Korea: reorganization

into innovative laborers and revolutionary mothers". *Social Science Research Journal*. 13(1)

Park Young-ho et al. 2010. "North Korea Human Rights White Paper". Korea Institute for National Unification

Bae Young-ae. 2010. "Changes in the roles and perceptions of North Korean women following the economic crisis in the 1990s," *Unification Strategy*, 10 (2)

Yun Mi-ryang. 2006. "Status and role of North Korean women". Korean Association of North Korean Studies. *North Korean women and families*. Kyungin Publishing

Lee Mi-kyung. 2006. "Prospects of change in North Korean women's status after the economic crisis based on in-depth interviews with female defectors," *Family and Culture*, 18(1)

Lee Ja-hyung et al. 2006. "Study on North Korea's public health and women's health status". *Nursing Science*. 19(1)

Lim Sun-hee (2004). "Food crisis and changes in the role and perceptions of North Korean women". Korea Institute for National Unification

Korean Central News Agency. 2004. "Korean Central Yearbook Volume 57". North Korea: Korean Central News Agency

_____, 2005. "Korean Central Yearbook Volume 58". North Korea: Korean Central News Agency

Statistics Korea. 2010. *Key statistical indicators of North Korea*

Institute for Unification Education, Ministry of Unification. 2011. "Understanding North Korea 2011"

Hwang Na-mi et al. 2008. "Status of public health in North Korea and strategy for approaching public health projects with North Korea". Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs

Central Bureau of Statistics of DPR Korea. 2003. *Report on the DPRK*

Nutrition Assessment 2002

UNFPA. 2010. State of World Population 2010. From Conflict and Crisis to Renewal: Generations of Change

UNICEF. 2011. State of the World's Children 2011. Adolescence. An Age of Opportunity

[http://www.idea.int/uid/countryview.cfm?id=121#Gender quotas](http://www.idea.int/uid/countryview.cfm?id=121#Gender%20quotas)

Yonhap News

Korean Central News Agency

Korean Central Television

Series of Unification Lectures with a Theme

- 01 Understanding South Korea's strategic negotiations with North Korea
- 02 Rethinking South Korea's policy of humanitarian assistance to North Korea
- 03 The North Korean food crisis: Myth and reality
- 04 Establishing peace on the Korean Peninsula: Lessons learned from the European Union
- 05 Changes in the international order and their implications for the Korean Peninsula in the 21st century
- 06 Understanding developments in inter-Korean relations: A legal perspective
- 07 Worlds apart: A comparison of historical perspectives in North and South Korea
- 08 Evolution of the arts in North and South Korea
- 09 A comparison of IT terminological usage in North and South Korea
- 10 Changes in North Korean education during the Kim Jong-il era
- 11 A guide to North Korean legal system

- 12 North Korea in the era of informatization
- 13 Understanding the growth of science and technology in North Korea
- 14 The current status of North Korean-Chinese cross-border trade and the growth of North Korean markets
- 15 An easy-to-read story on unification
- 16 North Korean environmental policy in perspective
- 17 Religious freedom in North Korea: Current prospects for inter-Korean dialogue and exchange
- 18 The current status of medical care in North Korea
- 19 A guide to legal and institutional organization in North Korea: Trends and characteristics
- 20 Tourism in North Korea: Current status, prospects and resources
- 21 The current status of sports in North Korea
- 22 The current status of North Korea's cultural assets
- 23 North Korea's foreign relations strategy towards the South
- 24 20 years after German unification: Current status and lessons learned
- 25 The DMZ: Past, present and future
- 26 Implementing a future-focused unification education curriculum in South Korean schools
- 27 Costs versus the benefits of unification
- 28 Rethinking the need for unification
- 29 The hereditary power succession in North Korea
- 30 Is North Korea really changing?

Women of North Korea: A closer look at everyday life

<not for sale>

Published in 2014,10

Created by Institute for Unification Education

123, 4.19-ro(Suyudong) Gangbuk-gu Seoul, Korea

Tel. 82-2-901-7166 Fax. 82-2-901-7088

Designed and produced by

Neulpum Plus, Inc

Tel. 82-2-2275-5326

