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Death by Indifference: The Tragic Deaths of a North Korean Defector Mother and Her Son

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In late July, a North Korean defector mother and her son were found dead in their flat in Gwanak-gu, Seoul. They appeared to have been dead for two months before the tragedy was finally discovered. The heartbreaking news raises two questions for the North Korean defector settlement system. The first question is how to help North Korean defectors who are still struggling to adapt even after the end of the government protection period. The deceased mother's empty bank account indicates that her financial condition was destitute despite having lived in South Korea for more than 10 years. The second question is how to help North Korea defectors in addressing family-related problems. Having divorced recently, the deceased woman was probably in a highly vulnerable state, both financially and psychologically. To prevent a similar tragedy from happening, the South Korean government should trace the cases of maladjustment for an extended period of time and provide extra support tailored to their needs. It is also necessary to provide North Korean defectors with psychological support. Most importantly, a negative public perception against North Korean defectors should be addressed. This goal cannot be achieved through financial means alone. South Koreans need to change their views on defectors from North Korea.

On July 31, a tragedy was revealed in South Korea: a North Korean defector and her son were found dead in their apartment, presumed to have died two months earlier. Their lifeless bodies were left undiscovered until a water meter inspector knocked on their door and startled by a bad smell. While the police is still waiting for autopsy results to find the cause of their death, there are speculations that the mother and the son might have died of hunger, citing no food discovered in the house. The heartbreaking news shocked many South Koreans as it sounds almost surreal that someone starved to death at a time of material abundance and surplus.

Ms. Han, the 42-year-old defector who was found dead, went through the Arduous March in her late teens and early twenties in North Korea. The Arduous March represents one of the most materially deprived periods in the history of North Korea. Countless people died of starvation and many fled the country. Ms. Han arrived in South Korea in 2009, the year that saw the biggest number of North Korean defectors (2,914) entering the South. Around that time, many North Korean defectors fled the country to escape poverty and Ms. Han was one of them.

In her early days in South Korea, Ms. Han made efforts to settle with the help of various government supports. She was in close contact with her protection officer (police) and got a job and started to work. In 2012, she married a Chinese man and gave a birth to her son a year later. As an economic downturn hit Korea's shipbuilding industry—where her husband worked—the family left for China in 2017. When Ms. Han returned to South Korea with her son a year later, she had divorced her Chinese husband.

“Blind Spots” in Defector Settlement Support

The tragedy of Ms. Han and her young child highlights the need to contemplate on what measures South Korea should take to help North Korean defectors who fail to integrate into society at the early stage of settlement. All North Korean defectors are subject to government protection upon arrival in South Korea for five years. During that period, they have legally-guaranteed access to a range of support measures aimed at facilitating their settlement to the South Korean society. Local support centers (Hana Centers) offer various programs to assist them

as well. Despite all the assistance, not all North Korean defectors successfully adapt to the new environment within five years.

In addition, those who have seemingly gained a stable foothold of life in South Korea may quickly lose it and become vulnerable in times of social insecurity such as an economic recession or natural disasters. It is likely that Ms. Han's economic difficulty began when a crisis in the shipbuilding industry threatened her husband's work. Presumably, the family departed to China in 2017 in search of a second chance, believing that her efforts for settlement in South Korea had failed. Even after eight-long years of stay in South Korea, full adjustment must have been a challenge to Ms. Han.

The tragedy of Ms. Han and her son demonstrates the loopholes of the current settlement support system, in which the government protection is no longer available after a given period. If a defector struggles to adapt even after living in the South for an extended period, the government should identify them and provide tailored support. Whether a defector is successfully integrated cannot be judged solely based on how long he/she has stayed in the country.

Married Life and Settlement of North Korean Female Defectors in the ROK

The fact that she was divorced recently deserves our attention. As a single mother and defector, she was doubly vulnerable. Such a social status could have been a contributor to her dire financial situation. On average, women account for 72% of all North Korean defectors in South Korea. Among those who reached the South in 2018, the proportion of women was as high as 85%. A large number of them start a new family in South Korea. Unfortunately, however, many of them experience family troubles owing to stress from relocation, cultural differences, social discrimination, and prejudices against defectors. It is likely that Ms. Han, a divorcee who had to take care of a young child, struggled but failed to find a job or make a living.

It is in stark contrast to societal care given to marriage immigrant women. They have access to a range of programs designed to assist their family life and childcare with protective measures in cases of domestic violence.¹⁾ It might be hard

to directly compare marriage immigrants and North Korean defectors because the defectors do not come to South Korea for the purpose of marriage. However, South Korea has been largely ignorant to the challenges that North Korean defectors, mostly female, face in their marriages such as marital tensions and difficulties in childcare. South Koreans only emphasize the political meaning of their escape, praising them as “leaders of unification,” but have been inconsiderate of their hardships as women and mothers living in South Korea.

Micro-approach to Defector Settlement Support

It is time to focus on the details in designing and implementing defector settlement programs. For most North Korean defectors, their first real encounter with South Korea occurs within the context of family and local communities. Family is where many experience the South Korean society firsthand. Therefore, having a happy and functioning family is critical in facilitating the defectors’ successful adjustment. Presumably, a depressed emotional state and divorce-driven financial difficulties may have drained Ms. Han’s willingness to resettle. Such a situation would make a successful adjustment impossible.

Also, local communities are the primary environment where defectors live as members of the South Korean society. It is critical for the defectors to have a network of friends and neighbors to whom they can immediately ask for help in times of need. Laws and regulations, even functioning ones, may feel distant to the defectors. South Koreans should contemplate on how to create effective support networks for them at the local community level. The formulation of defector networks and defector-resident networks may help North Korean defectors better prepare to respond to challenges.

1) According to the Basic Plan for Multicultural Family Policy 2018-2022, the Korean government provides counseling services, police hotline, shelters and residence support to prevent domestic violence and aid the victims in order to facilitate the long-term settlement of intercultural families. In addition, the government strengthened case-based management so that multicultural families can effectively respond to emergencies or crises. Diverse education programs for all family members are developed to promote healthy marital relationships and mutual understanding between spouses.

Improving Public Perceptions of North Korean Defectors

The tragedy of Ms. Han brought to light the shortcomings and blind spots of the current settlement support system. The South Korean government should fix the loopholes so that no one else ever experiences such a tragic incident. We need to ease the requirements for basic living security benefits for defectors. Also importantly, the Ministry of Unification, responsible for the protection of the defectors for the first five years, should strengthen systematic cooperation with the Ministry of Health and Welfare, which is in charge of ensuring the welfare of defectors after the five-year term ends.

Institutional measures alone, however, are insufficient to fill all these loopholes. As of June 2019, a total of 33,022 North Koreans made their way to the South. All of the cases are unique and valuable. However, it is practically impossible to create a system that covers all these cases. Institutional measures should be accompanied by enhanced public perceptions on North Korean defectors. Many North Korean defectors risked their lives to enter South Korea but only to face indifferent locals. As a result, they often feel intimidated and insecure at the start of a new life in the South. Discrimination and prejudice against defectors must be addressed to further promote their integration into the society.

In addition, South Korea needs to understand the emotional issues of defectors and provide relevant psychological support. According to the 2018 Survey on Social Integration of North Korean Defectors, conducted by Korea Hana Foundation, 14.6% of North Korean defectors experienced “suicidal impulses during the last year,” which is far higher than the general population of 5.1%. Of the reasons for suicidal impulses, 20.7% answered “loneliness and solitude.” (12.3% of the general population chose the same answer.) Perhaps, the solution lies more in people than in money. Financial troubles can be addressed with money; emotional troubles cannot. ©KINU 2019

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