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The Food Crisis and the Changing Roles and Attitudes of North Korean Women

By Lim Soon Hee

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Attitudes of North Korean Women



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Korea Institute for National Unification

The Impact of Personality Cult in North Korea

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By Lim Soon Hee

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The analyses, comments and other opinions contained in this monograph are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of Korea Institute for National Unification.

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I . Introduction

In order to properly understand the changes taking place in North Korea today, it would be desirable to carefully analyze the impact of the food crisis on various groups and classes of people, since social change is bound to occur when the perceptions of the constituents of a society change. So far, however, there has been a relative paucity of research in this area, except for some studies under such general headings as “the food shortage and changes in North Korean society”. It is widely known that women were more directly affected by the North Korean food crisis than other groups or classes of people, and that women’s roles and attitudes have changed as a result. Various studies on the North Korean family system and the lives of women who defected to China or South Korea have touched on this issue, but in-depth studies devoted exclusively to this subject are rare.

This paper will examine the impact of the food crisis on North

Korean women, and the consequent changes in their roles and attitudes, so that we may properly understand the realities of social change taking place in North Korea today. This paper will rely on “content analysis” techniques, and examine various documents and materials, including the diaries and testimonies of North Korean defectors living in China and South Korea. In an effort to carefully examine and verify the contents, intensive personal interviews were conducted with 10 North Korean women new settlers(North Korean defectors living in South Korea), in addition to drawing on published materials. In 1995, North Korea officially admitted the deteriorating food situation, and requested assistance of the international community in the form of grain supplies. Therefore, this paper will cover the period from 1995 to the present. Most of the materials including the in-depth interviews with North Korean women who had defected before 2000 come from sources compiled before that date as well. Therefore, this paper will focus mainly on the 5~6 year period from the mid-1990s when the food shortage was most severe.

II. The Impact of The Food Crisis on North Korean Women

1. The Realities of The Food Crisis

According to a researcher at China's Yanbian University, the grain shortage has been a serious problem in North Korea since the mid-1980s.¹ With the proclamation of Cabinet Decisions No. 96 and 102 in November 1957, North Korea began to implement a grain rationing system for all citizens, with the exception of those working for the 'cooperative farms'. Until the 1970s, even the inhabitants of the other provinces, not to mention those living in Pyongyang, did not have to worry about skipping meals, poor in quality though they were. However, since 1973, the government began a policy of requisitioning four-days' worth of grain under the pretext

¹ Choi Myung-sook, "On the Family Life of Korean Women since the 1990s," in *The Life of Korean Women in South and North Korea and China* (Seoul: the Korea Women's Affairs Research Institute, Ewha Womans University and the Women's Affairs Research Institute, Yanbian University, 1999), p. 1.

of maintaining a “wartime reserve” and since 1987, it began requisitioning an additional three-days’ worth of grain for reasons of “conservation”. Therefore, the actual quantity of the ration was reduced to about 70~80 percent levels of the regulation issue.

The food shortage, of which early symptoms were in evidence in the 1980s, began to deteriorate in the 1990s when the former Soviet Union, North Korea’s largest supplier of energy, grain and fertilizer, collapsed and China changed its North Korea policy. These external factors had sharply reduced the supply of energy and raw materials as well. The food shortage was further exacerbated by a series of natural disasters, including damage to crops caused by the unusually cold weather in 1993 and 1998, floods in 1995 and 1996, tsunami and drought in 1997, and poor rains once more in 1999. The most tragic consequence of the food shortages throughout this period was, of course, hunger and starvation. As the grain shortages persisted, hunger and starvation spread throughout all of North Korea. Desperate efforts aimed at survival were manifested at this time: Searches were undertaken for wild grains; malnutrition arose among the most vulnerable population groups; increased consumption of domestic animals occurred together with the selling off furniture and houses; the uprooting of whole families, and large scale migrations to other regions.²

Generally speaking, the North Korean grain shortage began in the early 1990s. It had been drastically exacerbated by the mid-1990s and reached its peak in 1997~1998. According

² Andrew S. Natsios, trans. by Hwang Jae-ok, *The Great North Korean Famine* (Seoul: Dahal Media Pub., 2003), p. 66.

to a survey based on interviews with North Korean women who defected to China, their life began to deteriorate from 1993 onwards, as the amount of rations began to dwindle. Deaths attributable to starvation began to increase in 1994 and the period from 1997~1998 was the most difficult.³

According to another survey of North Korean defectors conducted by South Korea's Good Friends Association, the North Korean food shortage was not necessarily caused by natural disasters such as the 1995 floods, but had been developing from before 1992, only to get worse in 1994~1995.⁴ According to the testimony of a defector living in China, North Korean party officials had issued warnings to the people in 1996 and 1997 to be ready for a painful period. Similar warnings were issued again in 1998, alerting the people for a "most painful" period.⁵

The North Korean food shortage, which was progressively worsening since the mid-1990s, was well reflected in the dwindling amount of rations distributed to the people. According to a researcher, who had visited Pyongyang in 1996 to survey the actual grain ration situation, the ration per person per day was 300g (with an additional 100g per dependent). However, no more than three months' worth of rations per year were issued to the inhabitants of Chongjin and Musan, Hamkyong Bukdo provinces. In 1998, they received only two days' worth of grain four times a year, including the occasions such as

³ Kim Tae-hyun and Roh Chi-young, *The Life of North Korean Women Defectors in China* (Seoul: Hawoo Pub. Co., 2003), p. 65.

⁴ Kang Jung-koo and Bob-ryoon, ed., *Searching for Hope for the Korean People, 1999* (Seoul: Jungto Pub. Co., 1999), p. 195.

⁵ Natsios, trans. by Hwang, op. cit., p. 49.

the birthdays of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il.⁶ Firsthand accounts such as “Our household routinely skipped meals for 3~4 days in a row;” are to be found easily in sources containing the testimonies of defectors living in China.

In an effort to overcome the grain shortage, the North Korean government launched various campaigns such as the “porridge-eating”, “two-meals a day” and “tighter belt” campaigns, while encouraging the people to develop alternate dishes such as “vegetable dish”, “mixed-Kimchi dish”, and “wild-herb dish”. However, most people are known to have taken an average of one meal a day, cooked with the roots of grass and rice plants, the inner bark of pine trees, or grass from mountains and fields. The Good Friends Association conducted a survey of the North Korean defectors living in China from November 1998 to April 1999. According to this survey, since the stoppage of the grain ration system, North Koreans had to survive on the roots of grass, rice plants or the bark of pine trees(57.2%), peddling(46.0%), selling off their own furniture and possessions (40.8%), or with the help of relatives(19.4%).⁷ According to the accounts of the defectors in China and South Korea, many North Koreans faced with desperate food shortages would make porridge out of the roots of grass or cook the inner bark of young pine branches. Once the harvest was over, they would pick the roots of rice plants and mix and grind them with corn to make noodles out of them. Because people ate such rough food substitutes, they would suffer from constant indigestion, resulting in death in the more serious cases. Many North Koreans would obtain, on credit and at wholesale prices,

⁶ Choi Myung-sook, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-3.

⁷ Kang and Bob-ryoon, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

small amounts of goods from their relatives, friends or neighbors who were engaged in large-scale private trading and sell them in other towns and villages for a small margin. They would then come home, return the principal, and obtain food with what little profit they might have made that day.⁸

The extent of these ordeals and the degree of suffering experienced from the food crisis would vary according to people's occupation and their area of residence. Variations in the degree of hardships experienced by people would also depend upon the size of their household, their health, the availability and quality of labor, and any opportunities for support by relatives.

In terms of the severity of starvation experienced, people living in the Northeastern region, in provinces such as Hamkyong Namdo, and the Northwestern region, like Pyong-an Namdo, seemed to have suffered the most. However, the people living in the Southwest, like Hwanghae Namdo Province, and the special cities, like Pyongyang, seemed to have suffered relatively less.⁹

Because most of the international assistance was concentrated in the western region around Pyongyang, and due to the poor transportation network in outlying regions, the food shortage was more serious in the northern mountainous region and the

⁸ Rim Keum-sook, "Changes in Socio-economic Activities of Korean Women since 1990s," in *The Life of Korean Women in South and North Korea and China* (Seoul: the Korea Women's Affairs Research Institute, Ewha Womans University and the Women's Affairs Research Institute, Yanbian University, 1999), pp. 24-25.

⁹ Lee Sok, "The Starvation in North Korea, 1994~2000: The Scope Excessive Deaths and Demographic Changes by Regions," *The National Strategy magazine*, Vol. 10, No. 1.

eastern region.¹⁰ As for the severity of starvation in the north-eastern region, Andrew S. Natsios offered another explanation. He highlighted North Korea's discriminatory distribution policy toward these regions. He further pointed out that more than 80% of North Korean defectors in China came from North Korea's northeastern region. This region, of course, offered the easiest access to the large Korean-Chinese community across the border. However, the most important reason was that they were the victims of North Korea's policy of discriminatory treatment, hence the most poverty-stricken group of Koreans. In early 1990, the North Korean authorities decided to reduce food rations to the northeastern region and in 1994 they completely discontinued grain distributions to the region. As a consequence, cases of starvation deaths occurred earliest in this region and the rate of starvation deaths was also the highest in all of North Korea.¹¹ Hunger and starvation were more serious in cities than in farm villages, where people had patches of land to grow crops, and the impact upon urban industrial workers in the eastern region was hardest, where access to Chinese goods was especially difficult. These facts were also confirmed by the results of personal interviews with the defectors living in China. Some 25% of North Koreans had been engaged in agriculture, but only 4% of the defectors in China were former farmers. Some 70.4% of survey respondents said hunger was more serious in the cities but only 1.9% said it was more serious in the farms.¹² Nonetheless, the food shortage, along with overall economic hardship, had also seriously

¹⁰ Lee Keum-soon, *Cases of Humanitarian Assistance by International Organizations and NGOs* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU), 1997), pp. 98-99.

¹¹ Natsios, trans. by Hwang, op. cit., pp. 155-158.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 140.

hurt the livelihood of farmers. According to a survey, the rate of starvation deaths varied according to occupation: for example, professional workers 7.0%, office workers(11.8%), production workers(18.4%), farmers(24.0%), and the jobless (45.6%).¹³

North Korea is a class based society built on the basis of personal (and familial) background. Depending on one's family background, the levels of benefit and supplies offered by the government would vary. Therefore, the impact of the food crisis was also noticeably different. This fact was also supported by the disparate rates of deaths outlined above. The death rates of production workers and farmers were more than twice the rate of professionals and office workers. Looking at the situation by occupation, female office workers, in particular, were not very aggressive at seeking out alternative foodstuffs to solve their food shortages. Perhaps this was due to their uniformly scheduled life styles, including the periodic and repeated obligations to attend ideological classes. Professionals like teachers and doctors could not engage in private business even if their living conditions were harsh, because they were not allowed to neglect their duties for their schools or clinics. Furthermore, the party's supervision over them was stricter than over other occupational groups. Therefore, they had to endure greater difficulties than the people in other job categories.

During the food crisis, the people who received economic assistance from their relatives in China, Japan or the United States were able to ride out the crisis less painfully than the

¹³ Kang and Bob-ryoon, op. cit., p. 188. The authors report that the causes of death of North Koreans during the food crisis was not so much starvation itself as hunger-induced diseases and the ensuing deterioration of health.

majority who did not. In particular, those who got support in US dollars were able to live in relative comfort.

The North Koreans with relatives in China would write letters to them asking for help, or cross the border into China. Sometimes, the relatives in China would visit North Korea to offer some assistance. In most cases, however, the support from their Chinese relatives mainly consisted of essentials such as grain and clothing, and their support would be largely short term, covering only the most difficult periods, rather than being long-term. The reason for this, apparently, was that most of these relatives living in the nearby Yanbian region were not themselves rich enough to provide sustained support over the long term.

In terms of the number of starvation deaths, the North Korean authorities announced it to be about 220,000. However, South Korean relief organizations and researchers have estimated the number to reach somewhere between several hundred thousand and several million. The reasons for this divergence could be many: the different methods of estimation, the sources relied on, the types and causes of death included in the results, the time frame of tabulation, etc. For example, the Good Friends Association announced that there had been approximately three million starvation deaths between August 1995 and July 1998, and hundreds of thousands of people had crossed the border into China in search of food.¹⁴ Meanwhile, a researcher who has closely examined various materials on the subject of starvation deaths in North Korea using a more reliable method,

¹⁴ Good Friends Association, *The North Korean Food Crisis and Human Rights* (Seoul: Good Friends, 2004), p. 29.

reported that the food crisis in 1994~2000 had caused a massive number of starvation deaths, having a significant impact on North Korea's population level. The study estimated that starvation had caused a minimum of 250,000~690,000 deaths and a maximum of 250,000~1.17 million deaths beyond the normal population attrition rate.¹⁵

In short, over a million North Korean deaths during this period were attributed to starvation. However, there were other causes contributing to the high numbers. Examples would include malnutrition, lack of clean water and soaps, the poor quality of drinking water, and the overall unsanitary environment. The unhealthy environment, in turn, contributed to the spread of contagious diseases such as tuberculosis, paratyphoid, liver diseases, cholera and typhoid. These diseases are completely curable with modern medical science. However, as their illnesses worsened many North Koreans inevitably began to die for lack of basic medicines and due to poor medical facilities. In addition to the deaths resulting from malnutrition and illness, there were other deaths caused, directly and indirectly, by the food crisis. For example, some senior citizens would venture out to other regions to help support their younger family members. However they would often encounter untimely natural deaths or robbers on the road. They would die due to physical exhaustion from peddling or hard work like collecting firewood, and due to other circumstances.

Faced with such unbearable hardships, some people would even commit husband-wife or parent-children suicide. This "group" suicide is particularly noteworthy. Even in South Korea, some

¹⁵ Lee Sok, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-144.

deeply depressed people who were driven by economic hardship would commit such “accompanied suicide”. Suicide in North Korea is a form of “anti-state behavior”, hence a serious crime. Many North Korean defectors testified in interviews that cases of partial-family suicide as well as entire-family suicide were on the increase.

According to a survey, the death rates were highest among children, including infants, and seniors above the age of 60.¹⁶ North Korean defectors, generally, give the following four reasons for the high rates of death: First, they usually died of extreme indigestion or stomach troubles caused by eating indigestible, hard-fiber alternative foods like roots of grass or the bark of pine trees. Second, grandfathers and grandmothers would work harder than others to obtain food but they would purposely eat much less to ensure the survival of their young children and grandchildren. Third, senior citizens and children, including infants, would die in many cases because they were left unattended. Because most North Koreans were undernourished, the new settlers said, “Even if mothers gave birth to children, they would have little means to feed them, let alone raise them. Therefore, they would often abandon their newborns in the marketplaces or lobbies of railroad stations”. Ultimately, the North Korean authorities issued a rule in 1996~1997 requiring mothers with children to be allowed into the rail station lobbies only if they had “citizen cards” or travel permits on them.¹⁷ Finally, many infants and children would die of malnutrition because their mothers had no means to feed them, or because the pregnant women who were themselves suffering from malnutrition, would abort the pregnancy.

¹⁶ Good Friends Association, op. cit., p. 32.

¹⁷ Kwon Hyuk, *The Hardship March* (Seoul: Jung-To Press, 1999), p. 168.

2. The Impact of the Food Crisis on North Korean Women

A. Burdens of Increasing Workload

All North Korean women were suffering from the dual burdens of household chores and the duty to respond to labor mobilizations for socialist construction projects, because North Korea demanded them to display the traditional virtues of both housewife and to fulfill the role of a revolutionary by actively participating in building socialism. From the early days of its foundation, North Korea has demanded all women to faithfully carry out their traditional duties as a housewife, and justified their participation in the nation-building labor mobilizations in the name of the equality of man and woman.

As the food shortage and economic hardship became further exacerbated, it was becoming all the more difficult for North Korean women to carry out this dual burden. Furthermore, the government's attempt to "socialize" household chores and childrearing failed to work properly under these conditions of extreme economic hardship. Therefore, all North Korean women had to suffer from overwork stemming from this dual burden. In order to obtain food, the amount of their extra workload has increased tremendously. Enormous effort was expended on very time intensive activities such as peddling and vending in the marketplace, working in the fields and mountains to collect roots of grass, tree bark and other edible vegetables; and cultivate patches of land along hillsides to grow food. The patch-lands, in particular, were basically a thicket of shrubs and brushwood along steep slopes that required exhaustive labor to clear and turn them into strips of land suitable for cultivation.¹⁸

Many defectors reported that due to the lack of electricity, household chores also became more physically demanding. Since running water was not available, women had to fetch water from the source to their homes. Additionally, since the elevators would not operate for lack of electricity, families living on the 20th or 30th floors of an apartment building had to carry water up to their floor, which was hard work by any means. Those women who lost their jobs due to the economic hardships had to return home only to be called up unconditionally for unpaid labor detail (such as street cleaning or offering help to the collective farms) organized by the “neighbourhood unit”. Therefore, the dual burden on women was becoming even heavier.

Article 62 of the 1972 ‘socialist constitution’ stipulates, “All men and women shall enjoy equal social rights and status•••The state shall liberate all women from heavy burdens of household chores and guarantee all conditions for their social advancement”. However, Article 77 of the revised 1998 constitution says, “Women shall have the same social status and rights as men••• The state shall provide all conditions for their social advancement”. The phrase “liberate all women from heavy burdens of household chores” was deleted. This would imply a significant weakening, or minimizing, of the policy that tried to “socialize” the household chores and childrearing, under the weight of the impending food shortage and economic hardship. In short, during this period of economic hardship, the policy of socializing the household chores and childrearing has been put on hold, adding greatly to the physical workload on the already overworked North Korean woman. North Korean women today are suffering

¹⁸ Good Friends Association, op. cit., p. 63.

not only from added workloads but also from the rapidly deteriorating quality of life.

B. Increasing Sexual Violence and Sex as a Means of Survival

1) Increasing Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is a form of violent behavior in which one imposes non-consensual sex or forces sexual submission on a partner. Such behaviors can include all sorts of physical, verbal and mental assaults and abuse inflicted mostly on women, including sexual harassment, sexual abuse, wife beating, human trafficking, and sex slavery. In fact, fears of sexual assault and the resultant fear-ridden, submissive behavior induced would also constitute indirect sexual violence.¹⁹ In most cases, the victims of sexual violence are women. Sexual violence is a cultural and social phenomenon stemming, in part, from the sex culture of a society. In this respect, North Korea is no exception. North Korea is traditionally a society in which a “male-superior, female-subservient/patriarchal, male-dominant” pattern of thought prevails. Therefore, cases of violence against women, such as sexual harassment, sexual abuse and wife beating are commonplace there, and yet most North Korean women seemed unconcerned and paid little attention to this problem. The sources of this strange lack of concern appear to be two misguided, age-old precepts on sex: One is the “male-superior, female-subservient” patterns of thought and the other is the imperative of the purity of women. The absence of sex education in schools is another reason for the lack of serious concern. It is widely reported that sexual violence against

¹⁹ Kim Won-hong, et. al., *Woman Studies Today*, revised ed. (Seoul: Kunkook Univ. Pub., 2000), pp. 292-293.

women has been increasing in North Korea since the onset of the food crisis in the 1990s, along with significant increases in the rate of human trafficking and rape cases.

At a UN Human Rights Committee meeting in July 2001, which was reviewing the second human rights report submitted by North Korea, a North Korean delegate flatly denied the existence of trafficking of women in North Korea. He said that trafficking of women was absolutely banned and for the past 50 years there has never been any case of trafficking of women in North Korea. In the same report, however, North Korea seemed to admit the fact that trafficking of women, though prohibited by law, might nevertheless still be taking place. North Korea insisted that trafficking of women was absolutely inconsistent with North Korea's laws and institutions and there was no such social problem, and then added, "although we are not aware of what is going on along the border regions".

As a matter of fact, interviews with North Korean defectors in China have revealed that trafficking of North Korean women was indeed taking place. According to a fact-finding survey conducted on North Korean "food refugees" living in 2,479 villages in the Northeastern Region of China, some 75.5% of the refugees in the survey area were women. Additionally, most of them were living there under the conditions of "illegal marriage" or "forced marriage" as a result of human trafficking.²⁰ The "marriage" discussed here is not a legally approved relationship, but a kind of "common law wife", status which was forced on women who had been "trafficked" or "paid

²⁰ Good Friends Association, ed., *People Who Crossed the Tuman River: A Survey of 'Food Refugees' in 2,479 Villages in Northeast Chinese Region* (Seoul: Jung-To Press, 1999), p. 14.

for”. Consequently, they are not under the protection of the law. Another survey found that the reason for the predominantly large number of women refugees was that human trafficking networks were deeply involved in the process of defection. In the same survey, North Korean women defectors gave the following reasons for their current marriage: “Caught and sold on after defection (33.2%)”, “Introduced by the people around me in China when I had no other place to go (26.7%)”, “I got to know my current husband after my defection (8.4%)”.²¹

The trafficking of North Korean women usually takes two forms: Abduction by use of force and by enticement through intermediaries. The most common practice inside North Korea is enticement through intermediaries. Deals are struck between an intermediary in North Korea and his/her Korean-Chinese counterpart in China, and women are unwittingly and unintentionally sold off to people in China. Many human trafficking networks are known to operate even inside North Korea, and the networks would even kidnap married women and trade them off to unknown destinations.²²

In many cases, the networks would maintain surveillance along the riverbanks of border areas as well as throughout the region where many potential defectors were living, and kidnap and trade them off.²³ Sometimes, an entire family would join in a conspiracy for human trafficking.²⁴ Generally, two types of

²¹ This is a result of personal interviews with 202 North Korean women defectors in China, mostly in the Yanbian region, conducted between July-October, 1999. See Moon Sook-jae, et. al., “The Life and Motives of the North Korean Women Defectors”, *Korean Family Studies*, magazine, Vol. 38, No. 5 (Seoul: Korea Family Studies Association, 2000), p. 147.

²² Kim Tae-hyun and Roh Chi-young, op. cit., p. 105.

²³ Ibid., p. 104.

human trafficking are taking place inside China. For example, there would initially be an offer of food and boarding to the defecting North Korean women. After this, the traffickers would discreetly make deals behind the women's backs and turn them over to Chinese or Korean-Chinese men. The people the defecting women came to know in China would trade them off to human trafficking networks there, or the networks would forcibly kidnap these women and sell them off to others. In an unusual case, a North Korean woman defector who married a Chinese man was engaged in the luring and trafficking business across the border, frequently traveling to North Korea. In the process she herself was caught by others and forcibly sold off.²⁵

A researcher reported, "At the brink of starvation, cases of trading off a female member of a family as a means of sustaining livelihood were commonplace in 18th~19th Century Europe and 20th Century Africa and South Asia. The most frequently observed cases in North Korea today is the practice of selling off to 'human traffickers' a daughter, or even her mother, to reduce the number of 'mouths' in the family".²⁶ In fact, there were many incidents in North Korea during the food crisis, in which mothers would give up their daughters for money, or housewives would volunteer to put themselves up for trade. According to a collection of testimonies of North Korean defectors, the daughters would usually oblige when their parents

²⁴ Interview with new settler Shim, Nov. 3, 2003.

²⁵ Roh Ok-jae, "The Life and Human Rights of North Korean Women under the Food Crisis," in *The Life, Dreams, and Agonies of North Korean Women* (Seoul: North Korea Studies Committee of the Council for Peaceful and Democratic Unification of Korea and Good Friends Association, 2003), p. 18.

²⁶ Natsios, trans. by Hwang, op. cit., p. 105.

tried to trade them off. They generally would not put up any resistance, because they were aware of the dire situation and understood the heart-rending decisions of their parents. For the survival of their family, some women would volunteer to be sold, and others who were already in China would ask to be traded to overcome the difficulties there.²⁷

A woman new settler related a story she witnessed firsthand. In the late 1990s many teenage girls were traded off to China. One of her relatives, a mother of a 16-year old, told her daughter, “Even though you are being sold off to China, I wish you to eat well and live well”. She was taken by a North Korean intermediary to a Korean-Chinese intermediary and sold off to a Chinese man.²⁸

The primary cause of human trafficking of North Korean women is the extremely harsh living conditions caused by the food shortage crisis. A 1999 study listed the motives of defection of North Korean women as follows. “Hunger and survival (81.7%)”, “to make more money in China(75.2%)”, “to support the family in North Korea(50.5%)”, “followed other defectors (37.1%)”, “to marry a Chinese(15.8%)”and “to comply with the advice of parents and neighbors(8.4%)”.²⁹

The rising demand for women in China also contributed to the rapid increase in the trafficking of North Korean women. The Chinese government policy allowing only one child per

²⁷ Good Friends Association, *People Who Crossed the Tuman River: A Survey of 'Food Refugees' in 2,479 Villages in Northeast Chinese Region*, op. cit., pp. 61-67.

²⁸ Interview with new settler Huh, April 16, 2004.

²⁹ Moon Sook-jae, et. al., op. cit., p. 145.

family has brought about a serious discrepancy in the balance between men and women, especially among young people. The Chinese preference for boys has resulted in a shortage of brides today.

The imbalance between the sexes brought about a shortage of brides in China in the 1990s. The shortage was more serious in the provinces than in the cities. This situation in the Chinese farm villages left little choice to young North Korean girls who were in desperate situations but to accept the “propositions” of young men in Chinese farm villages. The young North Korean girls who were being shipped to China were traded and treated like slaves.³⁰

The North Korean women who were trafficked to China, are known to suffer from extreme ordeals and inhuman treatment, such as forced marriages, unwanted pregnancies, gynecological diseases, exploitation of labor, and as sex-objects at drinking establishments. Women who got married in China in particular would be beaten and mistreated by husbands and their families amid dire economic situations. In addition to homesickness for the family left behind in North Korea, they are also constantly in fear of threats to report their illegal status to the authorities.³¹

In the past, sexual violence in North Korea usually occurred in work places over such matters as offers of KWP party membership, better pay, or promotion. A party official would sexually harass or entice a woman worker, saying he would get her party membership or assign her to a better position. If a young woman earned party membership, sex or sexual

³⁰ Natsios, trans. by Hwang, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

³¹ Kim Tae-hyun and Roh Chi-young, *op. cit.*

violence was involved in most cases.³² Another type of sexual violence would involve officers and men of the military abusing women service members on the bases.³³ In other cases, if women who were found in violation of certain regulations on the street, they would be dragged to the homes of patrol officers and sexually assaulted.³⁴ In general, sexual assault on women does not constitute a major problem in North Korea. Most people do not even have any predispositions about sexual offenses. In addition, because of the social atmosphere in which women are generally looked down on, North Korean women have little options but to endure various sexual offenses. If an incidence of sexual violence is reported in a workplace, it would be the woman who is humiliated or at a disadvantage. Therefore, most victims of sexual assault would rather keep it to themselves, hoping the incident would pass, unknown to others.

It is generally known that cases of sexual violence involving North Korean women have increased after they began to assume greater responsibilities for feeding the family under the increasingly dire food crisis and economic hardship. Unlike the usual baits of the past, such as offering party membership and better working conditions, the recent incidents would involve safety agents who police the marketplaces, inspectors on trains, and soldiers who would sexually assault women peddlers and vendors on flimsy grounds. Recently, sexual assaults by soldiers have been also on the increase. They would attack women peddlers who had to travel, in dark trains or cars. A particularly noteworthy case would be the sexual assault cases on women who had been forcibly repatriated to North Korea after defection

³² Interview with new settler Lee 1, Jan. 7, 2004.

³³ Interview with new settler Huh, April 16, 2004.

³⁴ Interview with new settler Lee 2, Nov. 16, 2002.

to China. Since the onset of the food crisis, people who were forcibly repatriated by China would have to undergo torture or some type of mistreatment under detention. The inspectors would search women's bodies, including their wombs, to find concealed money, confidential letters or secret documents. Under the pretext of interrogation, they would apply electric charges on specific parts of their naked bodies.³⁵

One thing we need to bear in mind in discussing the issue of sexual violence against women in North Korea is that like in any other society there are numerous cases in which women would voluntarily submit to men for reasons of her own survival. As we have seen earlier, many North Korean women voluntarily would submit to her superiors to get party membership or better positions in her workplace. This was usually the case before the food crisis. However, since the food crisis struck, unmarried single women who had to travel in search of food, would submit to inspectors on the train or in the marketplace. If they needed to travel to remote areas for peddling, they would sometimes provide sex services to the driver of a vehicle to get free transportation.³⁶

In addition to sexual violence and human trafficking, there is another serious problem concerning North Korean women, namely, domestic violence or wife beating by husbands. In North Korea, violence in a family does not become an open issue. The National Women's League usually deals with these issues at the local branch meetings or neighborhood unit meetings, the members would simply lodge open criticisms once or twice

³⁵ Good Friends Association, "The North Korean Food Crisis and Human Rights," *op. cit.*, pp. 102-105.

³⁶ Kwon Hyuk, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

at and conclude that it is largely a family matter, instead of appealing to the legal authorities.³⁷ Wife beating, at whatever levels of severity, is a routine affair in many North Korean homes, and the food crisis has not alleviated the practice. As women tried to solve the food problem through peddling and other means, their husbands would indulge in heavier drinking and wife beating in many North Korean homes. Increasingly, the wives who could no longer stand domestic violence would simply leave their family for good.

Sexual violence is a socio-cultural phenomenon that reflects the sex culture and women's status in a society.³⁸ That sexual violence against women became more widespread with the worsening of the food crisis and would be indicative of the deteriorating status of women in North Korea, and the distorted sex culture of that society.

2) Sex as a Means of Survival

The sex business is another one of those 'anti-socialist' forms of behavior that appeared as a result of the dual price structure between the official (state-mandated) price system and the market price system. The large gap between the two prices quickly made people place a top priority on the value of money. Moreover, for those women, who had to meet the critical needs of earning a living, sex was the easiest means at hand. However, North Korean women were not the only ones who chose sex as a means of survival. Immediately after the Korean liberation in 1945, many South Korean women also practiced sex as

³⁷ Interview with new settler Kim 1, Oct. 20, 2003.

³⁸ Kim Won-hong, et. al., op. cit., p. 317.

a means of their livelihood. By the late 1970s, the age-old practice of prostitution as an ultimate means of survival began to decrease and was gradually replaced by the so-called “managed prostitution” through the sex trade or “prostitution as a second line” in which reflective of a desire for easy money pleasure seeking.³⁹ In times of serious economic crisis when job opportunities for women were extremely limited, or in the absence of viable alternative means of supporting a family, women would and did choose prostitution as an ultimate alternative. This has been the case through history transcending ideologies and systems.

It has been widely known that since the onset of the food crisis, the practice of prostitution to earn a living was widespread among North Korean women regardless of their marital status. Reportedly, there were some cases of prostitution as organized business. Also, in many cases, college girls were also involved in the sex business. In Pyongyang, many college girls would entertain foreigners, wealthy people and military officers to support their family.⁴⁰ Many women who ventured out to other provinces for peddling or trade were also involved in prostitution.

In extreme cases, parents would demand that their daughters, or husbands to wives, to submit to paying customers. There were also many reported cases of prostitution involving under-aged girls.⁴¹

As the food crisis persisted and the society’s attitude toward

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 116-117.

⁴⁰ Interview with new settler Kim 2, April 29, 2004.

⁴¹ Kwon Hyuk, op. cit.

prostitution for survival became more lenient, some women would now even go into the “commercialized” sex business for pleasure and money, while prostitution for survival continued. In the marketplaces, in particular, many women would engage exclusively in prostitution to rip off money from rich merchants. Prostitution would normally take place in “overnight inns” near the rail stations.⁴² Widows in their 20s and 30s would entertain travelers, agents on business trips, or military personnel at their homes where they also sold food and drinks. When sex was involved, their homes would serve as an “overnight inn”.

Among full-time prostitutes, some would even steal, or rob, money and/or other valuables from their customers.⁴³

One new settler testified that until 1998, prostitutes, if caught, would be executed by firing squad.⁴⁴ Normally, however, when prostitutes are caught, they would be sent to a “labor training camp” for 3~6 months and released. If a housewife were involved in a prostitution case to support her family, the inspectors would sometimes leniently overlook the case or shorten the duration of detention. Even in the case of unmarried, single woman, they would shorten the duration of detention if her family background was solid. However, those who were caught for prostitution, having already deserted their family, would be punished with a detention of maximum duration under the law.⁴⁵

⁴² The term “overnight inn” is used for a boarding house run by citizens for people awaiting trains.

⁴³ Kwon Hyuk, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

⁴⁴ Interview with new settler Yoo, April 29, 2004.

⁴⁵ Interview with new settlers Chung and Roh, April 14, 2004.

C. The Worsening Health of North Korean Women

The starvation that swept across North Korea since the mid-1990s has killed somewhere between several hundred thousand and over a million North Koreans. Contributing factors to this tragedy would include malnutrition, unsanitary drinking water, no clean running water, contagious diseases and unsanitary living conditions. Most of the victims were senior citizens and young children, as well as women. Like many North Koreans, most women fell victim to malnutrition. North Korean women, particularly mothers in the family, had to experience severe deterioration in their health, largely because they would either skip or reduce portions of their meals for other family members. The mothers would feed their family first, and they would eat barely one meal a day out of leftovers. Sometimes, they would go for 4~5 days without food. Many died from such diseases as tuberculosis and pellagra, which would develop from malnutrition. Of course, the death rate of grandmothers was the highest.⁴⁶ Most women defectors would testify that mothers “would skip even a bowl of porridge for their husbands and children”.⁴⁷ This type of subservient culture, they pointed out, was basically a result of the male- dominant, patriarchal family culture. For example, the husband and boys were regarded as the backbone of a family, hence treated on a priority basis, and women were told that this was the rule. Therefore, mothers had to survive on a bowl of flour mixed with ground corn and some type of vegetable. Additionally, on many occasions they would go without eating anything all day. One defector, who used to live in Pyongyang, where the situation

⁴⁶ Ibid. Also, interview with new settler Kim, April 29, 2004.

⁴⁷ *The Rodong Shinmun*, “The Happiness of Living as a True Daughter of the Party,” March 8, 2000.

was better during the food crisis, testified, “men who were in the military service did not suffer from hunger. However, when they came home on leave, they always felt uncomfortable at the dinner table, because they (husband and boys) had to eat first, while their mothers and sisters could not eat properly”.⁴⁸

One of the most serious results of malnutrition of women was the deteriorating health of North Korean women in general, especially in connection with pregnancies, childbirth, and child-rearing. Due to malnutrition, women’s ability to get pregnant has dropped sharply.⁴⁹ Even when they got pregnant, they would experience unwanted abortions, stillborn infants, or under weight babies, which in turn would seriously harm mothers’ health.

A survey has found that the sharp decline in the birthrate was due to fewer pregnancies suffered by nutrition-deficient mothers. The survey indicates that, before the food crisis, in the early 1990s, that the birthrate was 21.8 babies per 1,000, but in 1997 it was only 11 babies per 1,000, showing a 50% decline in the birthrate.⁵⁰ As starvation persisted, the birthrate dropped drastically because the North Korean women could not and would not get pregnant.

The food and economic crisis also caused the collapse of North Korea’s medical service system, which in turn prevented women from safely avoiding pregnancy. In numerous cases, pregnant

⁴⁸ Choi Myung-sook, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁴⁹ The women new settlers testified that since the onset of the food crisis, many North Korean women had experienced irregular monthly periods. Some women would not experience them at all.

⁵⁰ Natsios, *trans. by Hwang, op. cit.*, p. 101.

women would attempt abortions on their own and put their and babies' lives at great risk.⁵¹

The most widely used method of avoiding pregnancy is the use of “loops” distributed free of charge by local hospitals, but many women experienced serious side effects from their use. First of all, the quality was poor. More important was the fact that many North Korean women would keep wearing them for over 10 years, when they should be replaced every 3~4 years, thus developing gynecological ailments.

Since the mid-1990's when the food shortage became more serious, the distribution of loops was discontinued because too many North Korean women tried to avoid pregnancy. Many women, therefore, had to discreetly buy conception-preventive devices from vendors returning from China. However, the Chinese products also caused numerous harmful side effects.

Premarital sex and extra-marital sex are both punishable by law in North Korea. However, North Koreans' attitude towards sex began to change with the influx of foreign culture in the late 1980s. Additionally, as prostitution as a means of livelihood increased, instances of pre-marital and extra-marital sex also increased. Those who got pregnant as a result of pre-marital or extra-marital sex would also attempt illegal abortions to avoid punishment. Moreover, during the food crisis, the infant mortality rate and the death rate of young children have drastically increased, alongside the increase in the number of women trying to avoid pregnancy. Therefore, the Second Mothers' Rally in 1998 passed a resolution encouraging North

⁵¹ Good Friends Association, *The North Korean Food Crisis and Human Rights*, p. 76.

Korean women of childbearing age to give birth to many healthy children. In addition, Kim Jong-il also issued instructions on “the issue of childbirth”, according to which abortion and conception-preventive procedures were banned at hospitals. Consequently, many women would attempt illegal abortions. In some cases, women would bribe the doctors to secretly perform abortion procedures at their homes. Due to the fact that it is illegal and because no anesthetics were used during these procedures, many of these women experienced serious post-procedure complications. In an extreme case of ignorance, a woman had received an abortion at home using heated iron chopsticks, and ended up losing her childbearing functions altogether, not to mention the ordeal from serious post-procedure complications.⁵²

The health problems of North Korean women during the food crisis were not confined to issues of malnutrition, pregnancy, childbirth and child-rearing as discussed above. Most North Korean women since the onset of the food crisis had to support their families as peddlers or vendors. However, the peddling environment was fraught with pitfalls and dangers, being very risky and mentally and physically demanding. There were pick-pockets and robbers everywhere. There were fears of human trafficking networks. The inspectors and soldiers were wielding their power in the marketplace, plus long hours of walking around under constant fear and hunger. All these factors together brought them to the point of physical exhaustion and mental despair. Their health was seriously deteriorating, while their psychological burden for the family increased. Since the onset of the food crisis, the number of North Korean women who were suffering from tuberculosis, cervical cancer, breast cancer

⁵² Interview with new settler Huh, April 16, 2004.

and diabetes has drastically increased. Additionally, many were suffering from venereal diseases as a result of sexual contact. However, they could not obtain proper treatment at hospitals, but had to treat themselves at home with the Chinese medicine they obtained from the marketplace.⁵³

Immediately after the 1989 Pyongyang Youth Festival, North Korea found its government finances seriously deteriorating. As a result, the supplies of medicine to various hospitals and provincial and county Hygiene Centers were drastically reduced. As the economic conditions worsened, hospital facilities and medical services had deteriorated further.⁵⁴ Except for a few special hospitals, most hospitals did not have any medicine to speak of and would require the patients to buy their own medicine. Heating and electricity were intermittent, so the patients had to heat their own room and bring their own meals. Moreover, due to insufficient disinfection and anti-epidemic measures, various contagious diseases such as paratyphoid, typhoid, cholera, tuberculosis and malaria, has appeared in many places since the mid-1990s. There were no clinics specializing in OB-GYN in North Korea, and only hospitals had GYN departments. Additionally, sanitary pads for women were not available, so most women had to handle monthly periods in a very unsanitary manner. Under these conditions of economic hardship, clothing supplies were also suspended. As a result, it was reported that the number of gynecological patients has drastically increased, because women could not replace their worn-out or unclean underwear in time.⁵⁵

⁵³ Interview with new settlers Huh and Choi, April 16, 2004.

⁵⁴ Testimony of new settler Chae (former doctor at 'Nampo Korea Hospital') (Seoul: Ministry of Unification data).

⁵⁵ Choi Myung-sook, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

The causes of this worsening health of North Korean women during the food crisis could also be traced to the women themselves, because their understanding of the importance of health was at a relatively basic level. In fact, they paid little attention to their health. According to the result of this author's personal interviews with women new settlers and the testimonies of defectors in China, most North Korean women generally did not pay attention to gynecological diseases, and their level of understanding about these diseases was also very basic. The result of personal interviews with them revealed that they had little knowledge or awareness about the names or causes of such diseases, not to mention the probabilities of contracting them. Moreover, they were not aware of the importance of early detection and treatment of cervical cancer or breast cancer. North Korean women did not and could not receive early or regular tests for female diseases; moreover the causes of deaths are not examined, which in turn would have contributed to the poor statistics on the causes of death of North Korean women. If the causes of death were not accurately determined, then it would be impossible to determine how many of the deaths were from gynecological causes. Another reason was that there had been insufficient education and campaigns concerning the health of women. For example, the only North Korean magazine for women is "The Chosun Women" published by the "Korean Democratic Women's League". The magazine carries some commonsense information on medical and hygienic issues involving women. However, it allocates relatively small amounts of space for these articles. Some of the contents included commonsense-level information concerning women's diseases and their prevention, pregnancy, childbirth, and the like. Some of the titles included the following: "Gynecological Diseases and Their Treatment", "A Few Things Pregnant Women Should Know",

“Dietary Methods to Prevent Repeated Abortions”, “Why Hulled millet is Good for an Infant’s Mother”, “To Prevent Breast-aches for Mothers of Newborns”, “Regarding Post- menopausal Syndrome”. The sex education at North Korean schools was also at an elementary level.⁵⁶

Looking at this issue from another angle, however, it would be possible to say that most North Korean women did not care to look after their own health this reflects North Korean women’s self-abasing tendencies and their own inherent adherence to the male-dominant belief system.

D. The Division of Gender Roles and the Solidification of Fixed Roles

Because each family had to meet their daily needs by themselves during the food crisis, there began to appear signs of change in North Korea’s “patriarchal” pattern of family life. For example, as the food crisis deepened and factories and enterprises stopped operating, husbands began to join wives in private trading or help out at home with various family chores like washing, cleaning, cooking and child-rearing, while their wives were out peddling or vending.

As women began to support the family livelihood after the food crisis, the voice (or, decision-making power) of women in the family began to grow, according to many testimonies. However, even though the voices of women were growing in the family and even though husbands were helping out with

⁵⁶ Good Friends Association, “The Story of North Korea as North Koreans Tell It” (Seoul: Jung-To Press, 2000), pp. 50-51.

various household chores, the “patriarchal, male-dominant” family structure has not changed fundamentally in North Korea, nor has the basic attitude toward the division of gender roles. In other words, women would bring in food and money for the family and husbands would help out with household chores, which was a superficial gender role-reversal compared with the traditional customs however, it did not necessarily mean that a fundamental change has occurred in the male-dominant family structure or in the attitudes toward their traditional roles and burdens. A study on this issue has shown that the strict role-plays and sharing of the workload between men and women in North Korean homes was breaking down, but the extent of change has not yet erased ideas about a “patriarchal” family structure. Moreover, these changes have not meant that most women would now deny the importance of the traditional family setup. Most women have abandoned their stereotypes gender about roles (like husbands as the sole breadwinners), but they still maintain a strong belief in the idea that women were more responsible for the family chores. North Korean women seem to believe that they do not have to serve and obey their husbands as before, but they also believe that they should not deny the status and authority of husbands as heads of the family.⁵⁷ Most North Korean women generally believe that the reason their husbands could not carry on their role as breadwinners is “not due to their inabilities but due to the national difficulties”. As for the husbands’ help around the house, they also seem to think that husbands were “generous helpers” who were doing those chores to alleviate the workload of wives who were out to support the family, not as part of

⁵⁷ Koo Soo-mi and Lee Mi-kyung, “The Life and Perceptions of North Korean Women in the 1990s” (Seoul: Paper presented at the Spring Conference of the Association of North Korean Studies, 2004), p. 95.

gender role-reversal or division of household labor. This type of patriarchal family culture is evident in many studies on North Korea. According to a survey, North Koreans are deeply convinced of the roles that each gender should play. The head of a family is the husband, woman should be subservient to the husband, and the roles of men and women should be different in the family as in the society. Some 80~94% of those surveyed positively responded to this line of thinking.⁵⁸ Another survey found that about 61% of North Korean women defectors living in China were supportive of the patriarchal family structure.⁵⁹ Yet another survey found that North Korean women believed an ideal woman should “be loved and respected by all family members including the seniors, and should help and render full support to the husband”. This result would indicate that the traditional image of a woman playing socially assigned roles was predominant in the minds of North Korean women.⁶⁰ From these survey results, it is clear that as women took on more responsibilities during the food crisis, their status and voice in the family appeared to be improving. However, in reality, the gender-assigned roles and workload which were founded in the traditional patriarchal patterns of thought, continued to prevail and remained strong in most North Korean homes.

According to personal interviews that this author has conducted

⁵⁸ Park Hyun-son, “A Study of the Family System in Modern North Korea” (Seoul: doctoral degree dissertation from Ewha Womans University, 1999), p. 84.

⁵⁹ Kim Young-ran and Kim Hei-young, “A Comparative Study of Social Attitudes of North Korean Women and Methods of Accommodation,” *The Asian Women Studies* (Seoul: Sookmyung Women’s Univ. Asian Women Studies Institute, 2000).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 236-238.

with new settlers women defectors, it was true that their voice, or decision-making power, as breadwinners of the family has grown. However, most of them still believed that they would not rock the patriarchal structure because supporting their husbands as heads of the family was the best means of maintaining family peace. In addition, they would not resist but accept and go along with the prevailing social atmosphere that would assign all household problems to women, including the maintenance of a livelihood.

Even though the breadwinning role of husbands was reduced as wives in practical terms took on this role, the idea about traditional roles and the patriarchal features continued to prevail and remained persistent in North Korean families. The fundamental reason for this phenomenon is the pervasive belief in the “male-superior, female-subservient” tradition. North Korea claims that the “male-superior, female-subservient” idea is a “reactionary ethic of exploitive societies” and a “vestige of the feudalistic Confucian thought”. Unlike such official positions, however, most North Koreans seem to retain a strong belief in such thoughts. Moreover, these outdated concepts, along with the patriarchal family tradition, continue to limit the lives of North Korean women.

According to interviews with women new settlers, most of them were aware of the pervasive “male-superior, female-subservient” tradition in North Korea. However, they generally did not seem to have any problems with it. In fact, they said they have never thought about the “male-superior, female-subservient” issue itself. In other words, they knew that gender equality was practiced only in terms of workload, and women’s lives at home and at work were always subservient to men

and never equal. However, they said they did not feel the need or have reasons to raise objections. They said they always thought it natural to regard “man is heaven” and as “husband to be served”. They also believed that family peace would be maintained only if they served their husbands well and respected their authority in the family. In this regard, one new settler said, “Only when the husband stands firm, the family is peaceful, the nation safe, and the society healthy. So, I believe we should respect his authority. This is not only a traditional social virtue, but also a policy of the Party”.⁶¹

⁶¹ Interview with new settler Yoo, April 29, 2004.

III. The Changing Roles and Attitudes of North Korean Women since the onset of the Food Crisis

1. The Changing Roles

A. The Growing Responsibility of Family Support

In their experience of the food crisis, which has produced an unknown number of starvation deaths, North Korean women had to take up the leading role for the livelihood of their family, rather than their traditional supporting role. This has added tremendously to their family support responsibilities.

Even the North Korean government has acknowledged the increase in women's family-support responsibilities. Since the late 1990s, even the KWP newspaper "Rodong Shinmun" has carried a number of articles lauding those women who took charge of family responsibilities.

One of the reasons women new settlers gave for men not going

out to work was because their wives were actively and diligently taking part in various activities in support of the family. Their attitude was aggressive and persistent. They would work so hard that people would sing a popular song entitled “Women Are Flowers” substituting a new title and lyrics of “Women Are Bulls”.⁶²

One of the major reasons why North Korean women had to assume greater family-support responsibilities was the prevailing social conventions that in family matters, such as preparing meals, were the realm of women. Most North Korean women themselves would think that it was basic and natural for women to get married, serve their husbands and rear children. Therefore, in hard times, they would feel a sense of responsibility for the family livelihood, and take part in economic activities like peddling, vending, or private trading. Furthermore, even though peddling or vending for most North Koreans was the only way to survive, most men would shy away from it and feel shameful to go into such business, leading to a heavier burden on women.

However, the more direct factor that increased the burdens on women was the stoppage of work at factories and enterprises due to the worsening levels of economic hardship. Even though work was suspended at factories and work places and even though no wages were paid, men still had to report to work under the strict rules of labor laws. Consequently, women had to take over the husbands’ role as breadwinners. Most North Korean women said they had to assume heavier burdens in supporting their family partly out of their sense of responsibility

⁶² Interview with new settlers Chung and Roh, April 14, 2004.

and partly based on their traditional spirit of sacrifice for the family welfare.

North Korean women had to engage in a wide variety of activities during the food crisis. However, the most common economic activities were peddling or private business. According to a survey, some 44.8% of pre-1993 defectors said they bought and sold goods to obtain food. However, the number jumped to 81.3% among those who defected after 1994.⁶³ Another survey indicated that over 70% of women defectors had been engaged in private trading. The exceptions were professional women like doctors, teachers and staff of national organizations.⁶⁴ Given the food crisis, most women had to cultivate some forms of crops on patches of land or make simple foods and sell them in the marketplace. Some would go to border areas and purchase items from “bag-carriers” from China and re-sell them back in town for profit. Others would roam around wide areas peddling the goods on their backs. Still others would sell off their furniture and home appliances, or borrow money from relatives to start a private business. Sometimes, they had to offer bribes to inspectors around the marketplace or on the trains.

Other economic activities included the “housewives’ work team”, “in-house welfare services”, raising domestic animals, and cultivating patch-lands.

According to the North Korean definition, the “housewives’ work team” was a type of production activity in which a group

⁶³ Park Hyun-son, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

⁶⁴ Choi Myung-sook, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

of unemployed housewives would receive semi-finished products or raw materials or even recyclable items from factories and turn them into finished products or merchandise.⁶⁵

Full-time workers at factories and “people’s classes” would also participate in the “housewives’ work team” activities for side-job income, but 70~80% of unemployed married women and senior citizens in each district would also be absorbed into this activity. The “housewives’ work team” would produce not only local specialties, but also other items needed in that region. In coal-mining towns, they would make safety hats and screening grates for the miners, and in the farm villages they would till the lands or raise chickens, pigs or goats, and produce foodstuffs like meat-products, tofu, string beans, and various vegetables. The “housewives’ work team” in the urban department stores and “general stores” would produce all kinds of daily necessities. The “housewives’ work teams” in the cooperatives and factories would turn out clothing, knitwear, everyday commodities, buttons and shoes, using leftover materials, recyclables and by-products.

For unemployed housewives, “housewives’ work team” work was very important as a source of income. The “housewives’ work team” work became so widely available that many women would voluntarily leave their regular jobs when they get married. Additionally, participation in the local “housewives’ work team” activities would exempt people from various rallies and mobilizations. Therefore, some would pay in a set amount

⁶⁵ The Social Science Publishers, “The Chosun Encyclopedia, I” (Pyongyang: Social Science Pub. 1995), p. 61. Also see, Kim Ae-sil, “The Economic Activities of Women,” and Sohn Bong-sook, et. al., “The Life of North Korean Women” (Seoul: Nanam Pub., 1991), pp. 211-215.

of money to the work team to get exemptions from various mobilizations, and go out to the marketplace to make more money.⁶⁶

The “in-house welfare service” is a part of the private sideline economy organized to provide additional income for housewives, senior citizens and welfare recipients from the convenience of their homes.⁶⁷ The type of service they provide would include “the manufacture and supply of sundry daily necessities and foodstuffs using leftover materials, agricultural produce and other recyclable materials, as well as repairing and refitting household items, hairdressing, and laundry”. Photographic services were also a part of in-house services.

While many women worked in the fields of “housewives’ work team” and “in-house welfare service” such as hairdressing, clothing repairs, and photographic services, other women would work as daily or hourly wageworkers. Still others would pick vegetables in the mountains or brew wine at home for sale, or sell household items they made at home. These activities were part of their endeavor to contribute to the family income.

North Korean women were very active in their efforts to support their families. They raised domestic animals like chickens, rabbits, goats and dogs. They would cultivate potatoes, corn, and vegetables on the small strips of patch-lands for family consumption or for sale at farmers’ markets. Foreign currency earning is another side-job. Some women join the foreign currency earning organizations, or individually travel to China, and make

⁶⁶ Koo Soo-mi and Lee Mi-kyung, *op. cit.*, pp. 98-99.

⁶⁷ The Encyclopedia Publishers, “The Great Korean Encyclopedia, I” (Pyongyang: Encyclopedia Pub., 1995), p. 62.

deals with Chinese merchants. Due to its geographical proximity, Shinuiju City offered easy business access to China. As the trading increased, many women would be mobilized for the harvesting of undersea products for foreign currency income. Unlike other regions, working for foreign currency earning was another source of income for women in the Shinuiju area.⁶⁸

Yet another way of supporting the family some North Korean women chose was prostitution. According to women defectors, prostitution in North Korea began from 1989, on the occasion of the 13th Pyongyang International Youth Festival.⁶⁹ One of the reasons that prostitution as a job began to spread in North Korea was that the attitude of society towards prostitution had become more forgiving as many women had to do almost anything to support their family during the food crisis. In fact, as the food crisis deepened, many North Korean women would even attempt theft, robbery and larceny to support their family. They would wait for the arrival of late trains, and often assisted by “gotchebbi” (homeless, child beggars) they would steal rice or coal. Some women would even join “organized gangs” and participate in major robberies or larceny.⁷⁰ In addition, as pointed out earlier, some prostitutes would steal the wallets of men for whom they had rendered services.

⁶⁸ Koo Soo-mi and Lee Mi-kyung, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

⁶⁹ Good Friends Association, “The Story of North Korea as North Koreans Tell It,” p. 46.

⁷⁰ Natsios, *trans. by Hwang, op. cit.*, p. 293.

B. The Growing Economic Independence

Most North Korean women would quit work when they get married. This was because of their husbands' preference, and the work places would not want married women to stay on the job. However, the most important reason was that the women themselves would not want to keep their jobs. Most women were known to prefer a good husband and a good family to a good job.

A researcher at China's Yanbian University reported that in the mid 1980s the rate of women workers was very high and most single women in North Korea had jobs. However, the rate of employment of married women had stood only at about 30~40%.⁷¹ Except for those working in technical and professional jobs and labor-intensive jobs, marriage and having children would mean unemployment for most women in the office, business, and service sector. The same researcher also indicated that one reason for this phenomenon was North Korea's heavy industry-oriented industrial structure, which offered relatively fewer job opportunities to women. However, more important was the traditional stereotype that the God-given role for married women was to serve their husbands and raise children.

As the food crisis deepened and as the production and distribution system failed to function properly, women had to assume greater burdens for the family, which forced them to

⁷¹ The grain ration would be cut off if a single woman quit her job, but a married woman could transfer the ration card to her husband's workplace for reasons of childrearing. (The amount of the grain rations would be 700grams for a working person and 300grams for the nonworking person.) Rim Keum-sook, op. cit., pp. 20-21.

engage in full-fledged economic activities. Most of their economic activities involved peddling, “housewives’ work team”, “in-house welfare services” like repairing, laundry, and hairdressing, as well as raising domestic animals and cultivating patches of land for farm products. Private trading business, in particular, helped improve women’s abilities in terms of economic independence. They may have started the business initially to support the family, but as business profits accumulated, the level of their economic independence also rose accordingly. The significance of the improving levels of economic independence of women may be summarized as follows. Firstly, as they acquired more experience in business transactions, most women came to accumulate business know-how. This would, for example, include how to make the best use of various official and unofficial contacts to facilitate their business, how to obtain needed capital, how to maximize profits, and what items to carry based on profit-loss estimates.

Secondly, part of the growth of their economic independence was that as their business know-how improved, they realized that diversifying their stock would bring greater profits and improving the quality of their products was better business.

Thirdly, their growing confidence in business allowed them to make bold business decisions because they knew they could achieve them through various contacts they had established all over North Korea and China in many cases. They were now well informed and more knowledgeable about the market trends in and out of North Korea, as they had to travel widely and had experienced contact with many foreigners.

One of the new settlers stated that, most men had been engaged

in the business of selling goods such as sundry commodities like recycled goods, machinery and bicycle parts in small local markets while women had traveled on vehicles to remote areas. Some women in Hyesan (an extreme northeastern city) would secretly sell copper products at night to the Chinese along the (Tuman) riverbanks, or illegally engage in “dollar exchange” businesses in front of foreign goods stores near rail stations.⁷²

The sources of economic independence for North Korea women also included “housewives’ work team”, “in-house welfare services”, as well as small-scale independent farming along the strips of patch-lands. However undesirable it may be, prostitution also served as a source of their economic independence given the prolonged economic hardship. Prostitution, after all, was unavoidable for some women, and the general perception of the society was becoming more lenient toward prostitution under the deteriorating economic conditions. Furthermore, it was an easier way for them to make money and become financially independent.

However, several points need to be made concerning the subject of the improving economic independence of North Korean women. Firstly, it would be hard to say that increases in women’s economic activities would by themselves indicate higher levels of financial independence for them. Secondly, the amount of economic activities would be important, but the nature and style of their business would be no less important. For example, jobs like prostitution and illegal or illicit profit-making activities in the process of trading would seriously distort and undermine the perspectives most North Korean women had maintained

⁷² Koo Soo-mi and Lee Mi-kyung, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

regarding work before the food crisis. Thirdly, peddling and private trading activities for most North Korean women involved only simple exchanges of daily necessities and agricultural produce. Other side-jobs also did not require professional knowledge or high-level skills. Therefore, these temporary side-jobs could lead to a deterioration of the professional capabilities that North Korean women had demonstrated over the years. Fourthly, the experience of overwork, sexual violence as well as the physical and mental suffering whilst undertaking informal supplementary work to support their families were too severe to characterize simply as their improving economic independence. Fifthly, North Korean women's economic activities in these unofficial areas of work basically started out from their burden of supporting the family, and was something that no North Korean women could have voluntarily discontinued on her own.

2. The Changes in Attitudes

A. Attitudes towards Self

North Korean women, like most North Korean people, have seen themselves as 'one in a collective' rather than as an 'independent person' leading one's own life. This is the result of uniform socialization the North Korean regime has intentionally imposed on them in the name of collectivism. Thinking of oneself "in terms of the collective" means that one exists for the society and country. To the individuals that exist only for the society and country, the state will demand only duties and responsibilities. When repeatedly reinforced, this type of attitude will result in fanatical trust in and blind devotion for the country or a cause. For this reason, North Korean women before the food crisis had tried to faithfully

carry out their duties. Rather than to demand individual rights for themselves, they tried to comply with the imperatives of the collective, society and country. As the lyrics of the song “Women Are Flowers” would have it, women in North Korea have been characterized and symbolized as “flowers of life, flowers of happiness, and flowers of the country”. Additionally, North Korean women accepted this type of treatment without any objections, protest or resistance. North Korea used to preach about the roles and duties of women in the family as follows:

A woman is a housewife in the family and a flower that makes healthy and warm atmosphere overflow in the family. She is the one who looks after the aging parents so they may enjoy the remaining days of their lives, and it is she who will help and support her husband in his revolutionary endeavors. It is women who will give birth to children and raise them, it is they who are the best teachers to prepare them as trustworthy successors of a great revolution.⁷³

As a matter of fact, most North Korean women have tried to justify their life in terms of sacrifice and devotion to their husbands and the success of their children. They indeed valued their life as a devoted wife and a loving mother. According to a study, North Korea made great efforts officially throughout the 1990s to build the image of mothers as a “mother of good earth”, “mother of self-sacrifice”, and “mother of loyalty and filial piety”.⁷⁴ In other words, the state was demanding all mothers to embrace everything like the good earth, lead a life

⁷³ Park Young-sook, “The Family Revolution and the Responsibilities of Women,” *The Chosun Women*, magazine, No. 3 (March 1999), p. 15.

⁷⁴ Chae Mi-hwa, “The Image of Women in North Korea’s Literary Works of the 1990s,” in “The Life of Korean Women in South and North Korea and China,” *op. cit.*, pp. 30-43.

of self-sacrifice, and render singular loyalty to the state. In view of this particular time frame of the 1990s, this policy would imply that the government wanted women to play wider roles in the family as well as in the society to overcome the economic hardship and food crisis. In short, the North Korean women's attitude toward their own life, indeed what the government wanted them to be, was to be a self of the collective, a self as a malleable object, and a self of sacrifice and devotion.

Since the food crisis in the 1990s, however, the attitude of North Korean women toward their own life has undergone significant changes. Gradually, the sense of self which they began to pursue was the self which was also the master of one's own life. Even as they continued to give top priority to their family, they would no longer unconditionally bury their lives in a life of sacrifice and devotion for the family. As discussed above (Chapter II, Section 2), the sources of this attitudinal change were the conditions of economic hardship, along with the food crisis, and the influx of foreign trends and information in the wake of the partial opening of the system. What accelerated this attitudinal change in women was their overriding need to support the family livelihood. As they began to make major contributions to the maintenance of their family, women gradually came to realize the meaning and value of life, as well as their own importance.

The changing attitude of North Korean women toward themselves was brought about as a result of growing responsibilities to support their family during the food crisis. However, these new realizations in life also resulted in a number of consequences, such as deserting the family, divorce, avoidance of pregnancy, refusal to rear children, preference for a single life, and so

on. Deserting the family usually occurred for two reasons: The continuous hunger, hard work and physical abuse of wives and the desire for a more comfortable life rather than one of sacrifices for the husband and children. If the former type was forced on them by external, involuntary and negative factors, the latter type was based on a voluntary and positive search motivated by self-interest. In this respect, only the latter type would qualify as representing the changing attitude of North Korean women toward themselves. However, even in the former case, deserting their family would be an expression of self-interest even though for negative and involuntary reasons.

In North Korea, divorce is possible only through court trials, and the process is very complicated. Additionally, the social bias against divorce and re-marriage is quite extreme. The woman would be blamed even if divorce occurred due to the misbehavior of the husband. Regardless of the reason, a woman's parents would regard it as a major shame and disgrace if their daughter were to get divorced. Nevertheless, the rate of divorce has greatly increased since the food crisis. In particular, numerous divorce petitions were filed during the "Arduous March" on account of the husbands' economic incompetence.

The reasons for filing for divorce by women would include wife beating, husbands' poor economic capability, and husbands' extra-marital affairs while wives were out on the road for business.

The changing self consciousness of North Korean women was also evident in the trend to avoid pregnancies and child rearing. As the birthrate sharply dropped due to hunger and malnutrition

during the food crisis, North Korea convened the Second Nationwide Mothers Rally in September of 1998, and tried to encourage childbirth.⁷⁵ However, women continued to avoid pregnancy and childbirth. Another phenomenon since the food crisis was the increase in “common law” marriage. The women in this situation would try to avoid pregnancies because their status was legally and socially unstable. In an extreme case, a woman gave birth to a child at home, but intentionally avoided care for over a week, and the newborn baby inevitably died.⁷⁶ Additionally, some women who could not fulfill their family support responsibilities would drive their children out onto the streets so they would find their own meals outside their homes.⁷⁷

Since the food crisis, a trend in preference of a single life spread rapidly among North Korean women. The major causes were the burdens of child rearing and family support. Another reason was the changing social perception of single women. Customarily, North Korean have looked down on women living alone, assuming that they were involved in some form of prostitution. However, once many women began to support their families through business and other means, people began to understand their situations.

B. Attitudes towards Sex

One of the changing attitudes of North Korean women since the food crisis was their attitude toward sex. In a nutshell,

⁷⁵ From 2002, mothers with three children would receive government grants, and mothers with five children would be awarded the title of “Heroine”. Interview with new settler Lee 3, April 29, 2004.

⁷⁶ Interview with new settlers Chung and Roh, April 14, 2004.

⁷⁷ Interview with new settler Kim 2, April 29, 2004.

the traditional attitudes to the virginity of women has been greatly diminished and an emerging new tendency was to take advantage of sex as a means of accumulating wealth and a comfortable life, if not to support one's own livelihood. This change is evident in the growing number of prostitutes and common law wives. In short, North Korean women came to accept sex as a means of maintaining their livelihood, thinking that the issue of eating and living was more important than keeping their virginity, given the worsening food crisis and the burden of supporting the family. Initially begun as a means of livelihood, prostitution gradually became a tool for the accumulation of wealth and a comfortable life. The tragic consequence was that a very distorted attitude toward sex was formed in the minds of many North Korean women.

In many cases, common law marriage and temporary cohabitation has increased rapidly since the food crisis and have occurred for reasons of convenience and/or sexual pleasure.⁷⁸

C. Attitudes towards Economic Issues

The attitudes toward economic issues of North Korean women have been changing as their economic activities in the unofficial sector increased since the food crisis. As they continued to engage in economic activities for their own survival, the negative beliefs relating to capitalism have also relaxed. One researcher at China's Yanbian University said:

Under decades of a planned economic system, people came to regard commerce as capitalism and thought businessmen

⁷⁸ Kwon Hyuk, op. cit.

or women were bad people regardless of who they were. However, this attitude has begun to change. For geographical reasons, there still exists a wide gap between the perceptions of the people living near the Chinese border and those living in inner regions of North Korea. However, the reality that forced the people to go into trading businesses has brought a new perception concerning commerce. Today, people in trading businesses are regarded as bright individuals.⁷⁹

The women new settlers this author interviewed did not criticize themselves as capitalists for their activities of peddling or trading. “We simply sold and bought things to survive”. As a matter of fact, the interviewees have a very poor understanding about capitalism, and their knowledge of it was ideologically biased. They had learnt at school and the process of social education that capitalism was a hostile and harmful ideology like imperialism and exploitative of classes. They, of course, did not have any objective or systematic understanding or assessment about capitalism. According to them, their perceptions of capitalism have not changed even after the government took the July 1 Economic Management Improvement Measures, which contained many capitalist elements in the economic field. They said they simply thought the government measures were unavoidable due to the deteriorating economy, rather than being a part of a capitalist reform.⁸⁰

In sum, in the minds of North Korean women, capitalism was known as a harmful element of imperialism and that business was a capitalist form of behavior. Under the pressures of the food crisis and the growing family responsibilities, North Korean women went into private business and trading, having set aside

⁷⁹ Rim Keum-sook, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁸⁰ Interview with new settler Kim 4, July 29, 2004.

all ideological considerations. However, their negative attitudes toward capitalism were gradually and imperceptibly relaxed as they concentrated on their primary concerns of business. North Korean women, then, naturally accommodated capitalism firsthand through their trading experiences, rather than through any ideological and objective understanding and acceptance.

The changing economic attitudes were also apparent in terms of money and private ownership of property. As is well known, private ownership of property is not allowed in North Korea. All assets belong to the public or the state. Additionally, all production and distribution is conducted under the state-centered system. Therefore, North Korean women were not very aware of the value of money or private property. Since the food and economic crises, however, they became acutely aware of the value of money and private property. This change came about as a result of allowing cultivation of strips of patchlands and the sale and purchase of homes and home appliances between individuals. Another factor was the large disparity in the price structure between the state-run stores and the marketplaces. In the marketplaces, all daily necessities including grains were available, but to purchase them one needed money, which made women realize the importance of money. The changing perception toward money was rapidly permeating in the minds of North Korean women in the face of rising prices, the appearance of “general markets” and the availability of daily necessities at the marketplaces since the July 1 Economic Management Improvement Measures of 2002.

IV. Conclusion

As a general rule, the primary victims of famine in the poverty-stricken areas are women.⁸¹ North Korea was not an exception to this rule. The primary victims of many years of the famine in North Korea were also women. The food crisis imposed the burdens of family-support on them, inflicting unspeakable ordeals such as worsening health, overwork and sexual violence. The situation even drove them to use their body as a means of maintaining their livelihood. In addition to their increased economic activities to obtain food and earn money for the family and the male-dominant, patriarchal social consciousness, most North Korean women had to take care of family chores as they had done before the crisis, a dual burden on them. Under the weight of the food crisis, economic hardship and desperate living conditions, they had to bear the burdens of being a breadwinner and a housewife amid a deteriorating

⁸¹ Bayliss and Steve Smith, eds., trans. by Ha Young-sun, et. al., “World Politics” (Seoul: Eulyoo Cultural Pub., 2004), p. 574.

quality of life. The other side of the coin, however, was that the food crisis had served to stimulate North Korean women to become conscious of the value of their self and their own life. It also brought changes to their understanding of commercial economics and political systems. Their economic activities in support of the family livelihood also served to improve their economic independence. Despite these changing perceptions and economic independence, however, the male- dominant, patriarchal social consciousness, deeply rooted in North Korean society, was forcing them to conform to existing gender roles as before and they had no other recourse but to comply, rather than resist. This phenomenon was in part due to their deep-seated belief in the male-dominant, patriarchal social consciousness. However, North Korean women have gradually been strengthening their economic independence. They were trying to lead their own lives independently, and burden sharing between genders inside the family was spreading more widely. Therefore, we might conclude that the male-dominant, patriarchal social consciousness tradition in North Korea would be weakened in the mid- to long term and the roles and status of North Korean women would be gradually enhanced.

This study has attempted to examine the impact of the food crisis on North Korean women and the changing attitudes the crisis has bought to their roles and perceptions, with conclusions as stated above. The results of the foregoing analysis, however, should not be generalized or applied universally to all North Korean women. The limitations of the data used for this study should discourage such a liberal generalization of our conclusions.

As stated in the introductory chapter, this study has relied on survey and interview materials compiled from the North Korean

women defectors living in South Korea and collections of testimonies collected overseas. Due to the inaccessibility of North Korean society itself, it was impossible to collect empirical data through on-site surveys and interviews. Therefore, this author conducted and analyzed intensive personal interviews with 10 women new settlers. Consequently, a study of this nature would inherently contain limitations of generalization. The women new settlers are limited in number. Their status in South Korea is unique. Their qualifications as samples are also questionable to some degree. For example, most of these women came out of the northeastern region of North Korea where the food crisis had been the worst in all of North Korea. Their living conditions were so bad as to make them decide to defect. Due to their unusual personal experiences in North Korea and in the process of defection, their testimonies should not be generalized as reflective of all women living in North Korea today. The limitations of generalizing these results also come from the fact that the impact of the food crisis was qualitatively different according to individuals' experience of it and by the conditions and the environment they lived under. The individual experiences of North Korean women, would have been divergent and varied. They would differ, depending on the area of their residence, profession, age, educational levels and family structure, as well as the available manpower in the family, the nature of social contacts outside the family, the level of family wealth and so on.

Despite these shortcomings, it is hoped that this study has made a useful contribution to a better understanding of the impact of the food crisis on North Korean women and their changing roles, attitudes and perceptions. It is also hoped that this study will contribute to a proper understanding of the changing realities of contemporary North Korean society.

