Hope Lies Ahead of Social Transformation in North Korea Led by Women

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The first International Symposium on North Korean Women and Society has dawned with the theme, "Changing North Korean Society: Women, Marketization, and Culture in North Korea." As the name of this event makes clear, our goal is to explore the changes sweeping across the North Korean society from women's perspective so as to understand better the internal dynamics and implications of those changes.

Over the last six years, the Center for Korean Women & Politics (CKWP) has interviewed over 60 men and women in their 20s through 50s who have migrated from North Korea. The main focus of these interviews was on North Korean people's livelihood and their market. Our target interviewees were those who had escaped North Korea no more than two years before the interviews. This insistence on recent migrants had two purposes: one, to give us the latest possible information on the North Korean society, and two, to minimize the risks of distortion in memory that staying far from home could cause. These interviews have been compiled into a six-volume series and published in both Korean and English.

Much of the keynote address I have prepared for today draws on the details provided by these interviews. Women and the market, of course, are only two of the many lenses through which we can explore the North Korean society. But these interviews make it clear that women's increasing participation in the growing market economy in North Korea is one of the chief factors behind the country's change. I am here today to talk about three things. Two involve the question of how the market has affected the lives of women in North Korea. The remaining topic is my wish for the role that women of both Koreas could play for the peace of the Korean Peninsula.

Feminization of Market and the Gendered Dual Economy

The so-called *jangmadang* and the private market economy that emerged amid the ruins left by the Arduous March of the 1990s (1995 to 2000) have led to the transformational change of North Koreans' daily lives. Two decades have passed, and North Korea led by Kim Jong-un today is unrecognizably different from the country under the leadership of his predecessors, Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il.

Women has been affected most dramatically by the growing market economy in North Korea. Over 70 percent of people working in the North Korean market economy are women. Women have been at the forefront of this new phenomenon since its beginnings. Gender has been a major factor regulating people's experiences with the market in North Korea, and the result is "feminization of market." This "feminization of market reflects the particularities of the North Korean regime.

One reason is that only married women can work as sellers on the market. That is because married women in North Korea are not bound by law to work in state-operated workplaces. Men and women in the country all have the duty to occupy their time with state-designated activities, first by joining the youth group and the Kim Il-sung Socialist Youth Alliance as students, and in workplaces and occupational unions as adults. Those who refuse to work are punished to serve

sentences in training or concentration camps. Workplaces are not just places of production in North Korea. They serve the vitally political purpose of ideologically training and controlling the population. This unique structure has translated into the gendered economy in North Korea, where husbands work in the socialist economy, and wives, in the market economy.

Further reinforcing this gendered economic bifurcation is the extreme income gap between the two economies. The wages workers, whether men or women, earn from the socialist economy are truly meager, amounting to "the price of a single block of bean curd, a bowl of noodles, or a kilo of rice on the market," as described by one interviewee. It is therefore impossible for a family to survive solely on the husband's income. Choice of profession in not a dream anyone can dream, in North Korea where people don't have the freedom to choose their jobs. Ultimately, the family's livelihood cannot be supported without the wife's economic activity. This situation has further instigated the feminization of market. As a result, the women who are wives have become the actual heads of household who assume responsibility for the family's welfare.

North Korean women's market activities are growing both in volume and scope. They are no longer uniformly sellers. They are becoming self-employed workers, employers, and investors. In the wake of the Arduous March, women struggled to raise their families by selling things they made or foods they cooked at home on the market. Then women began to travel to the countryside to sell local delicacies or rare manufactured goods. Women also increased their presence in smuggling, trade, and brokerage. Women expanded their businesses, at both the wholesale and retail levels, hiring workers to produce commodities. The growth of long-distance retail and trade has enabled more and more women to become *donju*, lending their own or Chinese investors' money to others like banks. Wives of state officials who are formally banned from merchandising join the market economy as investors.

Gender Division of labor of NK version and the *Jangmadang Women* Generation

How, then, has feminization of market affected their socioeconomic status? As women began to earn well and make greater contributions to family life, they naturally increased their say in family matters. With men participating more and more in housework, the traditional gender roles are now under increasing threats as well.

Yet the socioeconomic status of North Korean women has not changed much. If anything, a new form of gender division of work has arisen. In a patriarchal society, men are the main breadwinners, and it is this role that underlies the political, economic, and social privileges they enjoy outside their homes. This feeds the gender division of labor and hierarchy, with men continuing to earn income outside and women forced to take up housework.

The irony is that no ordinary man in North Korea can support his family with his income only. The socialist wage system has given rise to another form of gender division of work by forcing married women to go out into the market and engage in capitalist behavior to support their families. This, however, has not freed women from their primary responsibility for chores and raising children. Women's workload has simply multiplied.

Feminization of market, moreover, is exacerbating gender inequality as it has served to deny women opportunities of education and training. Because someone has to stay behind at home while both parents are away at work, North Korean parents are now reluctant to send girls to school. College education cannot guarantee sufficient income for family survival. Accordingly, even well-educated women are compelled to enter the market, and face few incentives to develop and harness their specialization.

Nevertheless, women's market activity is changing the consciousness of women in their 20s, the so-called *jangmadang* generation. Young North Korean women are increasingly critical of the continued exclusion of women from the privileges men take for granted. Men can continue to work irrespective of how much they earn, while women are compelled to slave away their lives on earning a living in the market. Young women today also resent the culture that praises self-sacrifices made by their mothers over the last two decades as virtues and norms, thereby hiding the flagrant discrimination and inequality inflicted on them. The growth of the market economy in the socialist state has tripled what is being demanded of women of the *jangmadang* generation, effectively forcing them to become Superwomen.

Going for Shopping in Pyongyang, Hot Springs in Yangdok…

Notwithstanding the differences in their politico-economic regimes, women of both Koreas suffer from widespread discrimination and inequality infusing the patriarchal order. We can emphasize the need for women to play more active roles in inter-Korean exchange in part by appealing to this shared experience of cultural injustice. Most importantly, however, the transformation of the lives of North Korean women has led them to emerge as new key players in inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation.

North Koreans' way of life will increasingly become oriented toward the market. This is not only because Kim Jong-un is hellbent on expanding the market's influence on the North Korean society and culture, but also because the new, market-familiar generation is growing. The post-Arduous March *jangmadang* generation grew up in marketplaces, unlike middle-aged North Koreans who relied on rationing for much of their lives. The *jangmadang* generation under the age of 29 made up 44 percent of the North Korean population as of 2015, and will make up more than 50 percent in just 10 years. The North Korea this new generation remembers is the country of Kim Jong-il, a system they are so desperate to escape. They do not have the nostalgia their parents have for the North Korea of the Kim Il-sung era. The *jangmadang* generation is unable to imagine a North Korean society without the market. The market they are about to enter as young adults is much more sophisticated than the one 10 or 20 years ago.

Extensive state control and struggles against capitalist culture and ideology are still part of North Koreans' daily lives, but the market is now a space of survival and success for the new generation. The internal transformation of the North Korean society will therefore inevitably depend upon the desires of the *jangmadang* generation, particularly women, who participate actively in the market and pioneer their own lifestyles. It is not easy to predict what kind of choice North Korean women will make in Kim Jong-un's North Korea that is rapidly making headways into the market economy. Although women in their 20s and 30s may not have much of a voice in North Korean politics, they

still have the potential to emerge as a new critical force, capable of challenging the structure of gender discrimination.

I sometimes imagine what it would be like for women of two Koreas if they could freely go for shopping in Kaesong or Pyongyang and mingle there. What if we organized a market for these women regularly, say, every 15 days? What if young South Korean women could go for shopping in Pyongyang, take a short train ride from there to nearby Yangdok and enjoy baths in hot springs there? What if young women of both Koreas could enjoy each other's favorite street foods in a 15-day market in Pyongyang and chat with each other? Wouldn't good things come about of such exchanges? Would you join me in this imagining?