

Sexuality and New-Generation Culture of North Korean Women¹

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1. Introduction

The economic crisis of North Korea in the mid-1990s, followed by the gradual marketization of the country's economy, has exerted a profound impact on the lives of North Korean women. Women were compelled to step up to the task of doing everything to support the survival of their families. Subsequent marketization has significantly enlarged women's role in the economy as well, generating changes in gender relations and perceptions. The change in the lives of women has manifested itself not only in the public realm of existence, such as work life and market activities, but also across the private realm, involving family relations, love and sexuality. Sexuality, in fact, is the area of life for many North Korean women in their 20s and 30s that is changing dramatically. Sexuality can be broadly understood as encompassing "all areas that define and produce definitions of gender roles, sexual behavior, gender sensitivity, sexual orientation, and sexual fantasy."² Sexuality, in other words, is "a social construct, operating within fields of power, not merely a set of biological promptings which either do or do not find direct release."³ As such, it is endlessly reconstructed amid changes in social conditions and gender politics. The recent wave of socioeconomic changes in North Korea is therefore reshaping North Korean women's sexuality.

The objective of this study is to explore how sexuality as experienced by young North Korean women is changing, particularly with respect to their romantic relationships, marriages, and sexual practices. This study draws upon in-depth interviews the authors held in 2019 with 22 women who had recently escaped from North Korea on their life histories. Seventeen of these were in their 20s and 30s, having been born between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s.⁴

2. 'Romantic Love' and Places for Intimacy

A. Romantic Songs, Movies, and 'Romantic Love'

Free love is on noticeable rise among young people in North Korea today. According to North Korean women's testimonies, free love is, notwithstanding regional variations, a popular phenomenon observed across the country.

The official discourse in North Korea depicts true love as "revolutionary brotherhood." Romance between young people, as portrayed in North Korean fiction, springs first out of compatriotic relations and the mutual affirmation of beliefs that conform to public morality rather

¹ This study is a revised summary of Chapter IV (Section 4) of Cho, Jeong-ah, Lee, Ji-sun, and Lee, Hee-yeong, *Daily Lives of North Korean Women and Gender Politics*, Seoul: KINU, 2019.

² Women's Culture Theory Institute, *Concepts in Feminism*, Paju: Dongnyeok, 2015, 162.

³ Giddens, Anthony, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1992, 23.

⁴ I have referred to this particular age cohort as the "new generation" in North Korea (Cho, Jeong-ah, Cho, Yeong-ju, Cho, Eun-hee, Choi, Eun-yeong, and Hong, Min, *The Birth of the New Generation: Generational Experiences and Characteristics of North Korean Youth*, Seoul: KINU, 2013).

than the exchange of intimate feelings.⁵ The stories of actual romantic relationships told by young North Korean women, however, is nothing like revolutionary brotherhood taken into the private sphere. Neither are they similar to the experiences of their mothers' generation. Stories of romance shared by these young women actually manifest the "romantic love" defined by Giddens.⁶

When asked which place was her favorite when she was in North Korea, one woman in her 20s who used to live in Pyongyang gave the following surprising answer.

Researcher: What was your favorite place in Pyongyang?

Interviewee: My favorite place was the home. It's because I wanted to enjoy dramas while relaxing there.

Researcher: Dramas? Like South Korean TV shows?

Interviewee: Yes, and I mean romantic dramas, nothing like *JSA* and *Descendants of the Sun*.

(Woman in her late 20s, who worked as a day laborer/market vendor in Pyongyang and fled from North Korea in 2017; interviewed on August 22, 2019).

The interview above suggests that romantic relationships portrayed in popular South Korean media are the kind of relationships coveted by young women in North Korea. The main channel via which North Korean women can gain glimpses into intimate and romantic relationships are movies, drama series and songs from the outside world.

One important result of the economic crisis in North Korea was the black-market spread of popular media content from the outside world, often in the forms of videotapes, CDs and DVDs, and MP3 files. The financial hardship led many North Koreans to trade actively with China across the border, and they would bring various products of the outside world with them on their return. These included bootlegged copies of Korean, Chinese, and American films, TV shows, and songs, and even digital devices intended for replaying these. These works of mass media quickly spread nationwide via a secret and extensive network of trade, exerting significant impacts on the thinking and practices of North Korean women. The world of romantic relationships in Korean TV shows, as envied by the interviewee, did not officially exist in the North Korean society, but is now being detected, talked about, and even actively pursued among young people today.

South Korean songs also affect young women's emotion and perception of love. Listening to South Korean songs is an offence liable to severe punishment. But North Koreans often perceive South Korean songs as songs by *joseonjok* Korean-Chinese or the pro-Pyongyang federation of Korean residents in Japanese. Young women in North Korea say South Korean pop music appeals to them because its lyrics "capture the psychology of real people well" and bear "resemblance to real life," whereas most sanctioned songs in North Korea carry lyrics like "Let's march forward to Mt. Baekdu." A woman in her early 20s from a rural village in South Hamgyeong Province says she opened her eyes to "the freedom of expressing feelings" while enjoying the lyrics of South Korean pop music that "seemed to understand how I felt." In fact, she learned from these songs that women, too, can express their love, and that there is a world and a way of life completely

⁵ Oh, Tae-ho, "A Study on the Discourse of Romantic Relationships as Portrayed in North Korean Short Fiction," *International Journal of Languages and Literature*, Vol. 58, 2013, 564.

⁶ "In romantic love, the absorption by the other typical of *amour passion* is integrated into the characteristic orientation of 'the quest'. The quest is an odyssey, in which self-identity awaits its validation from the discovery of the other. It has an active characteristic, and in respect modern romance contrasts with medieval tales, in which heroine usually is relatively passive." (Giddens, 45-46). "It is a world of sexual negotiation of 'relationships', in which new terminologies of 'commitment' and 'intimacy' have come th the fore." (Giddens, 8).

different from what she was familiar with in North Korea. Pop music from the outside world, in other words, has been transforming North Korean women's sexuality (by letting them know that they can be active initiators and pursuers in romantic relationships), feeding their curiosity and yearnings for a different way of life.

South Korean and Chinese movies and TV shows reproduce intimate feelings and romantic relationships, still avoided in public in North Korea, more directly for North Korean women. Young women find the archetype of romantic love in these videos, get engrossed in the details of relationships between the characters in love, and learn how romantic relationships in other societies differ from theirs. Although the censorship and punishment of South Korean videos has been reinforced under the Kim Jong-un regime, young women still watch Korean films and TV series away from state control and talk to their trusted friends about their viewing experiences. A woman in her mid-20s from the rural part of North Hamgyeong Province had been caught in 2016 while watching a South Korean TV drama, but evaded her punishment by bribing the official with three cartons of cigarettes. Watching *Invincible Lee Pyung Kang* (a 16-episode series on KBS, originally aired in 2009) opened her eyes to a "whole new world." The show was "so sweet and curiosity-piquing." Out of envy for the "bling-bling life of people" portrayed on the show, she decided to escape to China. The longing for material prosperity and the freedom of romantic relationship as portrayed on South Korean TV shows appears to be a common sentiment across young North Korean women, irrespective of their class or regional backgrounds. It is this sentiment that underlies their gender practices quite different from those of the earlier generations.

The way of communication and relationship portrayed in media contents eventually transformed the new generation – the "awaken" generation - to behave differently. Young North Korean women are especially gripped by how South Korean women openly defy men, and how South Korean men respect and care for women. Young North Korean women like to contrast these examples shown on South Korean media with the behavior of North Korean men, who "like to ignore and trample on" women.

Things are a little different for our generation, mainly because we now have access to a whole lot of these things to watch that come our way via China, like Chinese TV shows and bootlegged recordings. Almost all young people today watch these things. Watching these videos has awakened us. It has made things a little better for us. Even so, in the majority of cases, men completely control women, ignoring and trampling on them. (Woman in her mid-30s, who worked as a day laborer in a city in North Hamgyeong Province and fled North Korea in 2017; interviewed on August 13, 2019)

Women want to reproduce in their own lives the feelings and conduct of characters they saw on TV shows and movies. 'Romantic love' has gone beyond touching the hearts of individuals and permeated into the everyday lives of women and their generations. Through such force, 'romantic love' has converged with the marriage institution. According to Cho Eun-ju, support for romantic love and free marriage requires self-reflection, which is what enables the modern individual to make decisions free from the pressure of parents, family and relatives. Marriage as a result of free individuals' choice, in other words, stems from a completely different view of humans. The combination of love and marriage is possible only between responsible actors capable of recognizing and explaining their own conduct, and of planning, predicting, and negotiating their own lives rather than relying on tradition or convention.⁷

⁷ Cho, Eun-ju, *Family and Rule*, Seoul: Changbi, 2018, 229.

Whereas previous generations married through mediations focused on ‘conditions’ of one’s counterparts, younger generations connect ‘love’ with marriage. The interviewed women shared stories of dating their school friends, colleagues, patients, and strangers from trains or public events. Many of these women actually thought seriously about the prospects of marrying their boyfriends, and some indeed succeeded in getting married despite family objections. A significant number of young women in North Korea today associate romantic relationships with marriage and its life-changing significance as they navigate the future paths of their lives in an autonomous manner. Marriage as an outcome of love, and the happy married life afterward, are increasingly regarded as subjects of free decision-making by individuals.⁸

B. Places for Dating

Intimacy as a ‘sexual negotiation’ and ‘relationships’⁹ that is at the heart of romance is expressed specifically through dating. The dating behavior of couples varies by region and age. Whereas people of earlier generations had their furtive encounters in hidden corners of parks or under dim streetlighting, away from public views, younger generation’s dating has become much more open and diverse.¹⁰ Especially in Pyongyang and other large cities, dating takes place in various cultural spaces such as playgrounds, community service centers, roller-skater places, swimming pools, movie theaters, and karaoke bar. A woman in her late 20s from Pyongyang told the interviewer that she became romantically involved with a fellow student she met while attending a mandatory public event while she was attending university in Pyongyang, and that the two dated for three years. Dating is officially forbidden between students, but she had girlfriends who were similarly dating male students from other universities. The young couples would enjoy group dates at entertainment venues in Pyongyang or rent a car for day trips to beaches and forests.

On the countryside, however, there are no comparable dating spots. A woman in her late 20s who spent much of her life in a farming village in North Hamgyeong Province dated a colleague from work. He would regularly stop by her house, where she and her grandmother lived, to help them with chores like gathering firewood and repairing roof tiles. Visiting each other at home and helping out with work at hand was the only form of date the couple could enjoy. Another woman in her early 20s from a rural village in South Hamgyeong Province, relayed that couples walking in broad daylight holding their hands would certainly attract stares from villagers, and that when a young man and a young woman just struck a conversation, others would talk of them “dating.” Young people in love therefore often fled villagers’ watchful eyes by seeking hidden and unknown corners or even going into neighboring towns for a day in the parks.

The interviewee confirm that the growing influence of Chinese movies and Korean TV shows is also increasing bold public displays of affection. There are officially no places in North Korea where couples in love can express their intimacy. Many of the interviewed women stressed that there was no “lodging” facility in North Korea where young couples could check into. They either have to wait for their parents to go somewhere or ask available friends to “rent” their homes in order to have sexual intercourse. One interviewee thus commented:

⁸ Cho, 229.

⁹ Giddens, 8.

¹⁰ Cho, Jeong-ah and Choi, Eun-yeong, *Pyongyang and Hyesan: A Tale of Two Cities – Spaces of Life for North Koreans*, Seoul: KINU, 2017, 89.

Here in South Korea, there are motels and gynecologists' clinics women can freely visit and use. There is everything for dating here. Over there [in North Korea], there are no motels men and women can check into to sleep together. There is only one hospital in my region where women can obtain legal abortions, but that hospital is closed to unmarried women like me..... Young couples find it difficult to sleep together, unless they are well-off, they can afford to take trips together, or they can go out into towns. A typical young woman lives with her parents. She wakes up and goes to bed at the same hours as her parents, eating all her meals with her parents. How can she find the time and space to sleep with her boyfriend? You know what that means for dating? Dating is just all about walking while holding each other's hands, going to each other's place to help with chores, and that's it. (Woman in her mid-20s, who worked as a day laborer in North Hamgyeong Province, and escaped North Korea in 2016; interviewed on May 7, 2019)

Social perception of physical touches or premarital sexual intercourse varies across regions. In big cities like Pyongyang and those on the border with China, it is not difficult to see young couples strolling while holding their hands together or arm in arm. The same behavior, however, would be looked upon with scorn on the countryside. A woman from a rural village in North Hamgyeong Province says unlike "towners," "villagers" found couples holding hands or walking arm in arm as "indecent." Another woman in her 20s from a rural village reports that it was nearly impossible for young couples to walk in daylight while holding their hands together, and that those rare couples who engaged in public displays of affection were referred to as "flirt" not seen as "normal."

Premarital sex happens in North Korea, according to these interviewees, but mostly between men and women who are engaged. Women who date around is harshly criticized as "dirty" and promiscuous, while men doing the same are not so humiliated. Accordingly, the majority of women allow premarital sex only when they "are confident enough to dream of a future together" with the men they are dating.

It's so different from here. Here in South Korea, women can freely sleep with their boyfriends, without assuming that they have to marry their boyfriends. When others hear that the couples they know have broken up, they just don't think of anything beyond a normal breakup. In North Korea, if a woman is close to a man, people assume she must be living with him. She introduces the man to others as her "husband" instead of a friend or a boyfriend. She already treats him like her husband. Breakup taints couples, but women far more than men. If a woman has had about three boyfriends, people think she is "dirty," that she has been around "too much." In North Korea, when you are in a serious relationship, people around you will think that you might as well just have lived with that person.....[Men] are not so constrained by others' opinion and judgment as women. If a man sleeps around, people will think he is "a player," but still assume that it is in the normal range behavior expected of men. (Woman in her late 20s, who worked as a seller in a city in Ryanggang Province and escaped North Korea in 2017; interviewed on May 5, 2019)

3. Marriage

A. Trend in Marriage and Conditions of Eligibility

Romantic relationships may or may not culminate into marriages. A woman in her early 20s from a city in North Hamgyeong Province says she began to date a man after his strenuous pursuit, but gave up on the hopes of marrying him because he had a father who was a high-ranking official in the national government, while she came from “a completely common background.” On the other hand, a woman in her mid-30s from a city in Ryanggang Province dated a man she met in front of a train station after seeing her father off. After a six-year courtship, the two got married, despite the objection from the man’s family. The man’s mother wanted to marry him into a family with power and wealth through matchmaking, but couldn’t stop the man from leaving his family and starting to live with his girlfriend. Only after she gave birth to her first child did the man’s mother approve of their relationship. The two got engaged in five days, and had their wedding five days later. The interviewee continued to work until she was almost due. Although people “talked behind” her back about her boyfriend and premarital pregnancy, the gossiping eventually stopped as she got married and continued to live with her husband.

Interesting exceptions aside, arranged marriage through the matchmaking help of relatives, colleagues and neighbors is still far more common in North Korea. Arranged marriage values matches between families with similar backgrounds, and brings together “a raven with a raven, and a pigeon with a pigeon.” The respective ratios of free and arranged marriages appear to vary by region and class. Some of the interviewed women in her 20s say 60 to 70 percent of their similar-age acquaintances got married freely, while others say arranged marriage was slightly more common than free marriage. Some also say arranged marriage is still predominant.

Free marriages based on romantic love emphasize passion and self-discovery and validation above all else. Matchmaking, on the other hand, values what the two parties and their families can offer for the marriage. Although there are some variations, women exchange their family wealth or their own ability to earn income for men’s occupations, background or competence. Women value their husbands-to-be’s money, background, and potential for success. Men who come from money or who have well-paying jobs are prized on this marriage market, including those engaged in international trade, judges and magistrates, military offices, security service agents and other such “uniformed” servicemen and government officials. Men with jobs that earn significantly better than others, such as drivers and doctors, are also preferred. Family lineage and parents’ socioeconomic status still matter greatly. Possibility of further development means becoming a party member after serving in the military and being smart enough to graduate college if his spouse provides financial support or having graduated college already.

The desired conditions of eligibility men look for in their future wives vary depending on men’s class backgrounds. Men in government (or whose parents are in government) prefer graduates of prestigious universities. “Ordinary folks,” on the other hand, prefer women who can make money, treating women unable to earn income as “stupid.” Parents give their daughters starting money to start their own businesses after girls graduate from high schools. When a woman makes a name for herself as a shrewd businesswoman, she receives more matchmaking offers. Even “men with everything” need more money to rise to leadership positions in the government or succeed further, and therefore look for women with money for their “own success.” In Pyongyang, the demand is growing among men with money for women who have graduated from the foreign language university and are working in the tourism field because these women are “awake, work in elegant jobs, and have a decent style.” On the other hand, men from more common backgrounds prefer women who are “healthy and capable of raising family.”

B. Changes in the Institution of Marriage

While romance has come into vogue and marriage-as-exchange persists alongside it in North Korea, there is a growing number of young people who seek to break away from the convention of marriage. Even amidst the maternity discourse and the gender discourse that emphasizes “re-familyization in the Kim Jong Un era, marriage institutions that constitute and bond the cell family are breaking apart. One important way in which young North Koreans challenge the institution of marriage is by avoiding it. According to North Korean statistics, the percentages of women who had never been married, as of 2014, were 80.9 percent among those aged 20 to 24, 20.0 percent among those aged 25 to 29, and 2.8 percent among those aged 30 to 34.¹¹ These figures suggest that the majority of North Korean women get married between the ages of 25 and 29, and that there are extremely few (less than three percent) who remain unmarried in their 30s. The growing financial burden and the demand of housework on women, however, are turning more and more young women to opt out of marriage altogether. A woman in her early 30s from the urban part of Ryanggang Province says women in the past took these burdens as their “fate” to which they blindly conformed. She notices, however, that there are women who now delay or avoid marriage. A woman in her mid-20s explains the phenomenon as follows:

Looking at our generation, nobody wants to work at an office. We just want to go out to the society and sell stuff and make money. They don’t even think about getting married. Life is hard. My friends who got married and had children [...] they used to be really pretty, but they lose so much weight after getting married. Our parents say, “hey, if you are going to live that hard after getting married, you’d be better off living alone, run your business, and live off of what you make.” We don’t think about marriage much. It’s the same with men, too. Even if we were to get married, we haven’t saved up much for it anyway. We don’t even know how to make money. That’s why neither men nor women can get married. (Woman in her mid-20s, who worked as a day laborer/seller in rural North Hamgyeong Province and escaped North Korea in 2018; interviewed on May 9, 2019)

The statistics show that, as of 2014, the average age at which women aged 25 to 49 got married for the first time was 25.0 years old, compared to 28.0 years old among men.¹² The interviewees, however, confirm that the average age of marriage is rising among North Korean women. Although official statistics list 25.1 years old for urban women and 24.7 years old for rural women,¹³ the interviews say that educated women in big cities are delaying marriage. A woman in her late 20s from Pyongyang explains that these women are getting married late because they enroll themselves in the military after graduating from university with the ambition of becoming Party executives. Since the 2000s, however, having a military background is crucial to Party leadership. The fastest shortcut to joining the Party is therefore via the military.

Another woman in her 20s, from a rural village, offers a different explanation. “You get tempted to live with another person because you are happy now,” she says, but past a certain age, people develop their “own worldviews,” with which they try to forecast the future, finding the

¹¹ Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), *Socioeconomic Status and Health in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea 2014*, Pyongyang: CBS, 2015, 34.

¹² CBS 34.

¹³ CBS 34.

prospect of marriage less and less attractive. Women from ordinary backgrounds are reluctant to marry because of today's gender structure in North Korea, which unduly burdens women with the task of supporting their families financially. As the market economy grows, women, who have relatively greater freedom to quit their jobs at official establishments, are increasingly pressured into setting up their own businesses to earn additional or main income for the family. However, setting up their own shops in the market has not slightly reduced the amount of chores women have to do, while they are now subjected to additional stress from law enforcement out to catch illegal market activities, and from having to join organizations, such as women's alliances and a People's Unit.

The number of couples who live together before/without getting married and/or who refuse to register their marriage even after their wedding until they have their children continues to rise. This phenomenon is quickly making its way from towns on the border with China to inland cities. A woman in her mid-20s who comes from a city in South Pyongan Province says about 40 percent of newly married couples delay registering their marriage until they have their children. As late as a decade ago, the prevailing social view strictly forbade men and women from sleeping together before "engagement." Nowadays, more and more couples start to live together and get married later without worrying about others' opinion. A woman in her mid-30s from a city in Ryanggang Province finally married her husband after long years of courtship and objection from her in-laws, but did not hurry to register her marriage right after her wedding. Marriage registration would give her "neither money nor a house," so she felt no compulsion to get registered so soon.

In other words, more and more couples opt to live together rather than getting married officially because the official institution of registered marriage offers little gains. When the rationing system worked relatively well, families had to have breadwinners working in established workplaces in order to get their rations. This meant that women could not get their rations from the employers of their husbands unless their marriage was registered. The pre-economic crisis rationing system, so centered on male breadwinners, was the main mechanism that reinforced patriarchy within families and gendered social roles.¹⁴ However, with a broken rationing system, the current North Korean society continually experienced a mismatch between the social control system and the gender system. The weakening of the rationing system is bring about the decline of the marriage system based on national registration.

Moreover, there are certain gains of delaying marriage registration today. The North Korean law allows divorces, but a legal divorce still remains inaccessibly cumbersome and discriminatory for many women. Without registering their marriage, couples can afford to part their ways immediately without having to go through the court procedure.

It's now a trendy thing to do. If you report and register your marriage right away, getting a divorce can be nearly impossible. South Koreans can get a divorce when both sides agree. North Koreans don't have that convenience. In reality, many couples do part their ways after living together for a while. Because it's so hard to get a divorce, people are now afraid of registering their marriage. They go through the legal process only after having lived together for a couple of years and having their children.....That is now the trend. I think things have been like that for the last five years or so. (Woman in her early 30s, who was a housewife in a city in North Hamgyeong Province and escaped North Korea in 2018; interviewed on July 24, 2019)

¹⁴ Cho, Yeong-ju, " 'Making of the People' and Gender Politics in North Korea: Rationing and the *Songbun*-Party Privileges," *Korean Journal of Women's Studies*, 29(2), 2013, 123-124.

The growing tendency to delay or avoid marriage, and to delay marriage registration even after getting married, reflects the strategic gender practices of North Koreans who try to create lives their own by bypassing the rigidity of family institutions.

4. Sexual Self-Determination and Stylistic Autonomy

A. Sex Education and Acquisition of Sexual Knowledge

Although free love, sexual intercourse, and premarital cohabitation are emerging as new popular practices of sexuality among young North Koreans, little of this social change is ever addressed in the public sphere. The elementary and secondary school curricula in North Korea are almost silent on sex education. The “basic skills” subject mandatory for students in Year 2 at middle school requires that girls be taught how to maintain proper “feminine hygiene.”¹⁵ The textbook for this subject, however, lacks any mention of such matters. The majority of interviewed women report that they cannot recall receiving any formal sex education at school on menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth, sexual knowledge birth control. With the exception of one or two, interviewees in their 20s cannot recall receiving such education at schools at all. In other words, it appears that the official curricula require sex education, but such education is hardly provided at actual schools, with a few teachers providing only rudimentary instructions on the related topics for girls as afforded by their knowledge or ability. Furthermore, although the North Korean state protects the health of mothers and children by providing for maternity leaves and other such support measures under the law, women receive little education at school. The lack of official sex education makes first menstruation a scary and embarrassing experience for most women. A woman in her late 20s from Pyongyang describes her first menstruation as follows:

I don't think I ever learned [about menstruation]. When it first happened to me, I cried because I thought I was going to die. Mom told me everything was okay. When she said it, I didn't believe her. But when I talked to my friends about it, they said they all had the same experience. That's when I knew I wasn't sick. Mom said I was menstruating because now I was “an adult.” That didn't stop me from crying and going over to my friends to ask them, and they confirmed that they started months earlier. So that's when I said, “Oh yeah?” (Woman in her late 20s, who worked as a day laborer/seller in Pyongyang, and escaped North Korea in 2017; interviewed on August 22)

Since schools do not provide useful knowledge on matters of sexuality at all, North Korean women are left to resort to talk to women around them, such as their mothers, friends and neighbors, about sex, birth control, abortion, pregnancy, and childbirth. Mothers and women that age, however, tend to try to control young women's sexual autonomy, forbidding them from sleeping with men before marriage, instead of providing an education. Unmarried women eavesdrop the chatter between

¹⁵ The middle school curriculum in North Korea states the objective: “Students gain knowledge of feminine hygiene and Korean style of women's clothing, and are able to apply that knowledge.” Education Committee, *First Public Curriculum for 12 Years of Elementary and Secondary Education: Elementary-Middle Schools*, Pyongyang: Education Committee, 2013, 197.

their mothers and neighbor women about their experiences with their husbands and develop imaginations about what having sex is like.

The most useful source of information are young women a few years senior. The lack of sex education and the impossibility of accessing pornography keep a significant percentage of young girls in the complete dark about matters of sex, so much so that they think even holding hands with men could make them pregnant. Once they graduate high school and join “older sisters’ group,” they learn from other girls a few years older than them about sex, birth control, and abortion. The more active-minded of these girls also refer to textbooks on women’s health and medicine to gain reliable knowledge of sex.

B. Birth Control and Abortion

While married women’s use of birth control and abortion can be interpretable at the level of demographic control of state power, single women’s use of birth control and abortion is closely connected to sexual self-determination. Intrauterine devices (IUDs) were distributed nationwide in North Korea in the early 1980s with the state actively encouraging birth control. Fearful of unbridled population growth, Pyongyang officially sanctioned women’s abortions beginning in 1983.¹⁶ Yet these choices were offered to married women only, while the birth control and abortion of unmarried women are almost never acknowledged officially

As the young generation of North Koreans today are more open to romance and sexuality, premarital sex, birth control and abortion are major issues commanding attention from North Korean women. A woman in her late 30s comments:

Women in the past did not need birth control before they got married. The idea of being in such a relationship with a man before marriage was looked down upon. Few women ever thought of preventing pregnancy from happening through birth control. The ideal for pregnant women would be to live with the men who impregnated them. Imagine your husband finding out that you tried birth control with other men before you married him. No husband would like that.....I hear that young people today are awake and have sex before getting married. If they become pregnant, they seek practitioners who make house calls to perform secret abortions on them because they don’t want be gossiped about. (Woman in her late 30s, who worked as a seller in a rural village in Ryanggang Province and escaped North Korea in 2016; interviewed on July 21, 2019)

The woman who gave the above interview was in her late 30s and had been married for nearly a decade. She notes that unmarried women’s sexual behavior has changed since she got married. Although women’s tendency to have sex before marriage has grown stronger over the last decade, birth control remains the exclusive responsibility of women only. As schools provide no education on birth control, young women are left to rely on information from one another.

We know we get pregnant when we are stuck with a guy, and that we should get so pregnant, and that we should do birth control. This is a general knowledge without anyone teaching it. I often heard older girls talk about it. They would say something about their belly hurting. North Koreans call abortion curettage, and these older girls would keep

¹⁶ Kwon, Geum-sang, “Sexuality of North Korean Women: Focusing on the Dynamics between State Control and Women’s Autonomy,” master’s thesis, University of North Korean Studies, 2014, 99.

telling me over and over that this procedure, involving scraping the fetus out of the uterus, would hurt so much, so that we should be really thorough with birth control in order to avoid it. Once a baby is conceived, removing it would be so painful. They would emphasize it is women's duty to look after themselves. All these older girls I knew, including those from my neighborhood and others I was friends with, would tell me stories of abortions they saw their friends having, and the pain their friends suffered because of that. So they kept telling me I should start birth control as soon as I had a boyfriend. (Woman in her late 20s, who worked as a seller in a city in Ryanggang Province and escaped North Korea in 2017; interviewed on May 5, 2019).

The two popular forms of birth control in North Korea are oral contraceptives and the IUDs, commonly referred to as "loop". Few women have heard of, let alone use, condoms. Oral contraceptives can be purchased from local pharmacies, but only the well-to-do or those "fearful of being gossiped about" opt for this option, as these pills are a bit of a hassle to take regularly and can be costly. Most women choose the loop. As dating is popular today among girls as young as high school students, except those "living in farming or mountain villages," even considerably young women go for IUD insertions. A woman in her late 20s from an urban part of Ryanggang Province says that she, too, had an IUD inserted while she was dating before she got married. Terrified by the horror stories of abortions she heard from older girls, she went to a private doctor with a friend for the IUD. She could have gone to a public hospital, but did not do so because she was "ashamed" to go for the IUD as an unmarried woman.

Nevertheless, many unmarried women find it difficult to obtain IUD procedures, and some do end up getting pregnant out of wedlock. There is "no law in North Korea, either, that women should marry men who make them pregnant," unmarried women who want neither to marry nor to give birth to a child opt for an abortion. Abortions are mostly performed in private clinics or in women's homes by professionals who make house calls. They are medical professionals either currently licensed or formerly so. Unmarried women prefer getting abortions at home because it enables them to avoid spreading rumors and because they find it "more affordable and hygienic." Young women in North Korea engage in diverse sexual practices not acknowledged by the official society, exchanging information and tips among themselves. Birth control and abortions via unauthorized and informal channels are the only options these women have to protect at least a semblance of sexual autonomy. Yet the informal and hidden nature of birth control procedures and abortions carries risks of infection and medical injuries.

Not only is it a hassle to keep taking [birth control] pills on time, but how can we afford them when we can't even afford food? If you get unlucky, you can get pregnant about once a year. It's better to get an abortion once a year than staying on pills, even though abortions are worse on the body. (Woman in her mid-20s, who worked as a seller in a city in South Pyongan Province and escaped North Korea in 2017; interviewed on May 21, 2019).

North Korean women are practicing sexuality beyond the boundaries of public sexuality discourses and social norms, but these practices are not protected specifically because they are outside the public discourse.

C. Crackdowns on Appearance and the Pursuit of ‘Style’

Women’s appearance and attire are not means of self-expression, but are subjects of state control in North Korea. Women’s desire to make themselves look more appealing has been condemned as a product of “decadent foreign culture.” Since Kim Jong-un came to power, however, state control over women’s appearance has somewhat relaxed, while the country has pivoted toward light manufacturing, including cosmetics and apparel, catering to the growing demand for women’s beauty and fashion products. When asked how women’s lives in North Korea have changed under the Kim Jong-un regime, the most common answer that interviewees gave was that state control over women’s appearance has lessened. Now that the state allows married women to wear earrings and necklaces—something that had been forbidden in the past—even “women in rural villages who go out to the fields to work” wear earrings. However, as the state still prohibits the wearing of ostentatious jewelry, those who walk around with dangling earrings quickly take their jewelry off and hide them in their pockets when they spot the manner police in the streets. That is one way in which North Korean women have been fighting the authorities.

An interesting fact is that the public emergence of First Lady Ri Sol-ju has made an impact on the fashion and style of North Korean women. Ri accompanies Kim Jong-un on important official occasions in her lavish (by North Korean standards) garments, while the women musicians and members of state entertainment troupes like the Moranbong Band, the Samjiyon Band, and the Wangjaesan Light Music Band are regularly broadcast on the media in their eye-catching uniforms. This new fashion has been a refreshing shock to North Korean women who were used to seeing only traditional garments and neutral-colored plain clothes in the government propaganda.

A woman in her early 40s was so inspired by Ri’s appearance on TV that she decided one day to walk out into the streets wearing South Korean-made bell-bottoms and a fur-collared leather jacket. She was caught by the manner police, who reprimanded her for “looking not at all like a North Korean woman from head to toe.” Nevertheless, this encounter only emboldened her resolve “to keep wearing the clothes she wanted to wear, even if it meant being publicly caught and humiliated.” Watching Ri appear on public occasions in her mini-skirts, North Korean women wondered why they could not do the same, and began “to wear whatever they pleased,” whether or not they made efforts to flee the manner police.

The crack on state control over women’s appearance gave rise to young North Korean women’s interest in their bodies as means of self-expression. There have been *chuse*, or “trends” with certain styles of clothing and household items enjoying a surge in popularity from time to time.¹⁷ Whereas the *chuse* is about following the collective trend, North Korean women’s interest in appearance and fashion today is more inspired by the desire to express themselves. Instead of following what everyone else is wearing, women who “live freely” by wearing “eccentric clothes,” “tending” to their bodies,” and “pursuing their own unique style” have begun to appear.

The spread of South Korean pop culture has played a role in the emergence of these new women. North Korean women apply what they see and hear on the media to their daily lives in a variety of ways, and fashion is not an exception. A woman who attended a women’s university in Pyongyang in the early 2010s says it was a trend among young women in North Korea to make and wear garments that look exactly the same as those worn by characters on popular South Korean TV shows.

¹⁷ Kim, Seok-hyang, “Trends in North Koreans’ Consumption Since 1990,” *Journal of North Korean Studies*, 16(1), 2012, 193.

Since we are women, we can't help but notice fashion. We would watch these [Korean TV shows], such as *Stairway to Heaven*. What we girls would do the next day was to chatter about these shows. It's the same for college girls. We would keep talking about what clothes [worn by characters on the show] looked pretty. Exactly one week later, copies of those clothes would appear in the marketplaces. (Woman in her late 20s, who was a university student in Pyongyang and escaped North Korea in 2015; interviewed on April 17, 2019)

Another woman from Pyongyang around the same age as the above interviewee also shared stories of her high school friends who “went nuts” copying the styles of South Korean celebrities. These girls would “wear weird hair-dos,” dye their hair, and apply nail polish to their nails, which they worked hard to keep hidden from adults’ look. A woman from a city in Ryanggang Province said wearing mini-skirts, jeans, *jjongdae* pants and *tteotda* pants¹⁸ were “serious offences” that could make one write self-criticisms, but “no one could stop” the efforts of young women to look trendy and stylish. A woman in her mid-20s from the same region recalled that her friends made fun of her accent sounding “South Korean” because she had seen so many South Korean movies. She had to be extra careful to avoid being caught. North Korean women reenact their favorite South Korean movies and shows by copying celebrities’ styles, applying the interior styles of middle-class South Korean families to their own homes, and talking to their lovers in sweet Seoul dialect.¹⁹

5. Conclusions

Sexuality is a key area in which the new generation of North Korean women departs markedly from the earlier generations. Young women in North Korea today date their colleagues or strangers and even continue to date them over their parents’ objection. Although the official society surrounding them is silent on matters of sex, these women keep engaging in audacious sexual adventures, while sharing helpful knowledge and tips between themselves. They are also eager to develop their own style in fashion and spending. Some young women seriously question whether marriage should be included in their future, now more willing than ever to pursue independent livelihood instead of seeking completion in conventional marriage. Most of the women in their 20s who gave interviews came to South Korea without having been married in the North. They consciously chose to defect and settle in South Korea because they are determined to live differently from women of the older generations.

Young women of the new generation in North Korea today appear to have begun to assert themselves as “individuals,” concerned with competition and profitmaking, and holding hopes and expectations for material prosperity, individuality and a future, rather than passive members of the family and the state serving with devotion at the pleasure of the nation’s leader. These women grew up with few siblings as the economic crisis had cut the birth rates; have been exposed to TV shows and pop music from the external world since childhood; and were naturally initiated into technology—smartphones and computers—as part of their evolving learning environment. Coupled with the larger socioeconomic changes in North Korea, these particular conditions of growth that the new generation has had appear to have prepared young women to manifest themselves as independent individuals. Although the practices of North Korean women born in

¹⁸ *Jjongdae* pants are tight-fit pants akin to leggings. *Tteotda* pants refer to ankle pants that snug the calves.

¹⁹ Cho and Choi 189.

the 1990s still largely remain under the control of gender politics and hierarchy, young women continue to challenge these authorities, either in open defiance or by bypassing them. Now is the time for us to pay attention to the cracks created by young women's various practices to the North Korean society.

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