

## **Why Are North Korean Women More Likely to Defect than North Korean Men?**

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### **Abstract**

Until 2016, female ratio of North Korean defectors who had entered South Korea was roughly 70%. This study sought to answer the question “Why are female North Koreans more likely to defect than males?” We tried to identify the cause of the gender imbalance in North Koreans’ defections by examining government policies. First, the Military-First Policy, by conscripting more males and extending the duration of service, gave females a relative advantage in mobility, a necessary condition for defection. Second, by legalizing small private businesses and commodity markets, the government’s economic reforms created favorable conditions for women to accumulate capital—a sufficient condition. The interplay between male-targeted military draft system and female-dominated marketization led to the gender imbalance in North Korean defection. This research offers a systematic mechanism regarding the gendered defection of North Koreans, which is not provided by previous studies. In terms of policy implications, we suggest that the South Korean government should reinforce the policy of helping female defectors to settle as the gendered imbalance of defectors will likely be sustained as long as the North Korean government maintains its current military and economic policy.

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### **Key words**

gender imbalance in North Korean defections, male-targeted military draft system, female-dominated marketization, policy outcome of North Korean government

## **Introduction**

This work analyzes the causes of gender imbalance in North Korean defections. North Koreans’ migration from North to South Korea, which

is strictly banned by the North Korean government, has continued from the mid-1990s. In the last 15 years, the most notable statistical pattern of North Korean illegal migration is one of gender imbalance. In terms of the gender ratio of North Korean defectors, females definitely dominate. Female defectors constituted 80% of all North Korean defectors in 2016, although their proportion roughly equaled that of males in 2002. The gender dynamic generated by the North Korean defectors is evidently different than the migration pattern on the international level. Males dominated females in international migration until the 1970s, but the percentage of women has been continuously increasing since the 1980s (Lee, 2015). Recent statistics on international migration denote a balanced gender ratio: males at 52% and females at 48% in 2015 (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2018). Continuously increasing numbers of female migrants reduce the gender gap in international migration, and the feminization of migration is increasing globally. It is noteworthy when reviewing the gender dynamics of North Korean defections that the gender ratio has changed rapidly in a short period of time. We have focused on this unusual migration pattern among the North Korean defectors.

Recently, many studies have examined the causes of North Korean defection, but only a handful of them seek to answer the question “Why are female North Koreans more likely to defect than males?” Many studies on North Korean defection are established on the basis of either an individual-level or a social-level analysis. Both groups of studies help us understand the causes and effects of North Korean defection, but they rarely provide a systematic mechanism by which to explain the causes of gender imbalance in the illegal migration of North Koreans.

To address the gender-biased defections of North Koreans, we focused on the strict military draft system reinforced by the Military-First Policy and marketization, which is one of the economic reform measures resulting from the serious economic crisis in the mid-1990s. Although several recent studies account for North Korean defections within a gender framework (Ahn, 2016; Kim, 2013; Moon, Kim, & Lee, 2000; Park, 2012), they run into difficulties arriving at reliable conclusions on the feminization of North Koreans’ illegal migration, because their investigations rely on small, haphazard samples of North Korean defectors.

This study shows that gendered defection is an unexpected consequence of North Korean government policies that generate favorable conditions

for defection by North Korean females. The interplay between the strict military draft system targeting males and the marketization dominated by females facilitates North Korean women's mobility and allows them to amass capital. As a result, North Korean women have a greater opportunity to escape from the country than men do.

In the academic and policy arena, this work has several important implications. In terms of academic implications, this study provides a mechanism to help generate an explanation for gender imbalance in the North Koreans' defection. Rather than the gender dynamics developed by sending and receiving countries, a root cause of the feminized pattern lies in a "push force" on the social level and an opportunity on the individual level. The results of the analysis offer a clear direction to South Korean government policymakers. The gender imbalance in the North Korean defections will be reinforced as long as the North Korean government continues implementing the strict military draft system and marketization. Furthermore, a feminized defection network has its own impetus to operate by itself (Curran, Garip, Chung, & Tangchonlatip, 2005; Hoang, 2011; Massey & Espana, 1987). The South Korean government policies for helping new arrivals from North Korea should be guided by a feminized orientation.

### **Gendered Defection from North Korea**

The North Koreans' defection is gendered. The typical individual North Korean defector, based on a statistical overview, is a female in her 20s or 30s who belongs to the low-income class and resides in Hamgyong Province. In terms of age and social class, the typical defector is not particularly different from any other typical North Koreans. Those in their 20s and 30s predominate among people living in North Korea, and the low-income class accounts for more than half of the total population. However, the residential and gender statistics for North Korean defectors from 2002 to 2016 differ significantly from the demographic profile of North Koreans as a whole. North Korean defectors who resided in the Hamgyong Province comprise more than 70% of all North Korean defectors, although the proportion of residents in Hamgyong Province is very small compared to the total North Korean population. This discrepancy between defectors and North Koreans as a whole reflects an unequal distribution of geographical opportunities to defect. Hamgyong Province, located in the north-

east part of North Korea, shares a border with China; the border control in this area is more relaxed than elsewhere. Thus, an individual living in Hamgyong Province has a much better opportunity to migrate illegally.

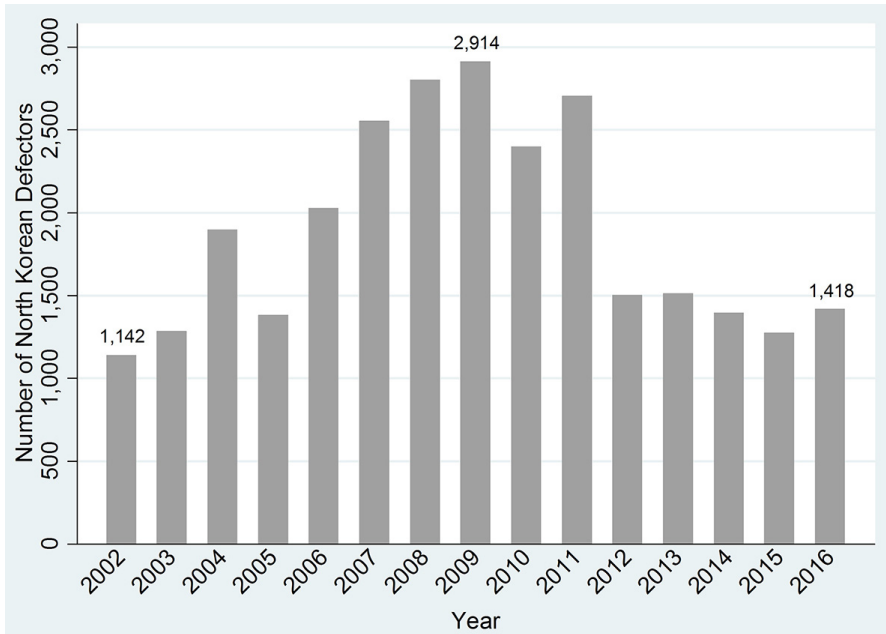


Figure 1. Yearly number of North Korean defectors entering South Korea. *Source.* Ministry of Unification, Republic of Korea ([www.eng.unikorea.go.kr](http://www.eng.unikorea.go.kr)).

Figure 1 displays the yearly number of North Korean defectors entering South Korea from 2002 to 2016. It shows that the number of North Korean defectors was 1,142 in 2002, and this number continuously increased until 2011, to more than 2,500. However, the number of defectors dropped dramatically in 2012 because the North Korean government tightened border controls (Korea Institute for National Unification, 2015). The inflow of defectors from North Korea is now at half the level of the one in 2009. Currently, in 2018, more than 30,000 North Korean defectors have settled in South Korea. The above figure indicates neither a stable increasing nor decreasing trend in terms of the yearly number of defectors. However, we can identify a consequence of the North Korean government's border control policy and of Sino-North Korea relations in 2012.

Figure 1 confirms that the increase in the annual number of defectors was abruptly halted by the enhanced border controls of the North Korean government, and by the Chinese government's policy on repatriation for North Korean defectors (Cohen, 2014; Kim, 2013). However, a substantial volume of defectors coming from North Korea was maintained even after border controls were intensified.

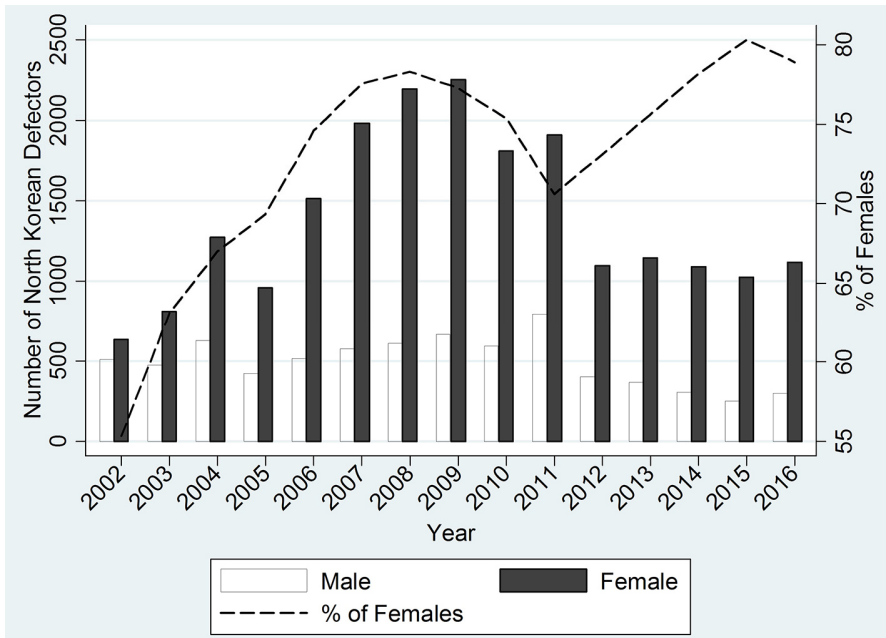


Figure 2. Yearly number of male and female North Korean defectors and % of females. Source: Ministry of Unification, Republic of Korea ([www.eng.unikorea.go.kr](http://www.eng.unikorea.go.kr)).

Figure 2 presents the yearly number of female and male defectors entering South Korea and the proportion of females among the yearly total of defectors from 2002 to 2016. While Figure 1 shows no particular pattern regarding the yearly number of defectors, Figure 2 shows a trend in the proportion of female defectors: the women entering South Korea clearly outnumber the men. In 2002, the number of female defectors entering South Korea matched that of male defectors with the proportion of women standing at roughly 50%. However, the proportion of women in the yearly total of North Korean defectors has increased, and female defectors

evidently outnumber male defectors. As Figure 2 shows, the proportion of female defectors reached about 80% in 2016. Surprisingly, the proportion of female defectors increased even in 2012, although the total number of defectors was rapidly decreasing that year. When taking gender into account, we find a clear pattern in the North Korean defections of an imbalanced gender ratio.

Figures 1 and 2 are based on a dataset provided by the Ministry of Unification of the Republic of Korea. Though the dataset covers all of the North Korean population that entered South Korea, it disregards the North Korean defectors staying illegally in China. No one can accurately estimate the total number of North Koreans in China, but many reports indicate that a considerable number of North Korean defectors remain there (Chang, 2006; Kim 2003; Lankov, 2009a). Also, many studies discuss pervasive human trafficking targeting North Korean women at the border area between North Korea and China (Ahn, 2016; Moon et al, 2000; Park, 2012). When considering illegal residents in China, the gender imbalance of the North Korean defectors is particularly evident.

### **Prior Studies: Individual and Social-Level Analyses**

The studies explaining the causes of North Korean defections have been based primarily on individual-level and social-level analyses. Previous studies developed on an individual level usually concentrated on an individual's willingness and opportunity to leave North Korea. They explored the factors that enhance an individual's willingness to defect and under what conditions an individual has an opportunity to defect. The studies advanced on a social level investigated the domestic and international forces that pull North Koreans toward a pathway of defection, and push them out of North Korea. The two groups of studies contribute to our understanding of North Korean defections, but they have numerous limitations in terms of explaining the gender imbalance in North Korean illegal migration.

#### **Individual-Level Analysis**

Studies developed according to an individual-level analysis tried to demonstrate the key determinants giving rise to an individual North Korean's willingness to defect and those that generate an opportunity to leave North

Korea. Individual willingness is attributed to economic and political factors (Haggard & Noland, 2010; Kim, 2003; Kim, 2010). The underlying assumption of this approach is that the most crucial factors determining an individual's living standards are economic and political. In terms of economic factors, an individual who can consistently earn a living from her/his workplace and can obtain sufficient food does not have a strong incentive to leave her/his own country. In terms of political factors, an individual who enjoys freedom and safety from government intrusion does not commit to abandoning her/his country. Thus, we can predict that the interplay between poverty, hunger, and political persecution will reinforce an individual North Korean's willingness to defect from her/his own country.

Not every individual who is willing to leave North Korea is able to do so. Those who attempt to defect are setting out on one of the most arduous journeys in the world (Chang, 2006; Kim, 2003; Lankov, 2006). Along with willingness, the individual-level opportunity to defect is a necessary condition for illegal migration from North Korea. One of the most influential determinants concerning the opportunity to defect is where an individual resides. According to an investigation by the South Korean government, about 70% of all North Korean defectors came from Yanggang or Hamgyong Province (Korean Ministry of Unification, 2017). These two provinces lie in the northeast part of North Korea, along the border with China. Additionally, border controls between North Korea and China are more relaxed than border controls between North Korea and South Korea. As a result, people who live in the two provinces along the Chinese border have a better opportunity to defect.

Besides the residential factor, several conditions enhancing opportunities to defect can be suggested. The first is overseas employment. More than 100,000 North Korean laborers are working abroad, and they have more opportunity to defect from North Korean government control than the individuals living in North Korea (Lee, 2016). The second factor is money. The individual needs to bribe North Korean border guards with considerable sums to cross the border between North Korea and China (Park, 2017). The final condition shaping a favorable opportunity to defect is a network of family members or friends in China and South Korea (Kang, 2017). The family members and friends outside North Korea provide the money required for defection and help the defectors to settle in South Korea.

Previous studies concentrating on individual-level willingness and opportunity contribute to understanding the causes of North Korean defection, but they rarely account for why illegal migration is dominated by female North Koreans. The studies examining the individual-level factors cannot generate an answer to the question of why women's willingness to defect is reinforced more than that of men. Moreover, the previous studies do not clearly explain why North Korean women have more opportunities to defect than men.

### **Social-Level Analysis**

One of the strengths of the explanations based on the structural level is that they take into consideration both the domestic circumstances of North Korea and the international environment. The main framework of social-level studies addressing the causes of North Korean defection consists of push and pull factors (Lee, 1966). The studies conducted with the sociopolitical lenses explore the domestic and international forces that push and pull the North Koreans toward one of the most dangerous pathways to defection.

One group of studies on the social level concentrates more on the forces that originate within North Korea and drive people out (Bidet, 2009; Chang, 2006). The catastrophic food shortages and economic crisis in the 1990s played an important role in pushing the North Koreans into China and South Korea. The economic downturn undermined the state's control over its population, and in turn, the weakening of state power made it easier for the North Korean population to commit to deviant acts, such as illegal migration.

Another group of studies with the social-level focused on the pulling forces that exist outside of North Korea (Chang, 2006; Lankov, 2004). If the defection did not offer better political and economic conditions, it would not likely to happen. Successful illegal migration allows the defectors to live in a better economic and political environment. The South Korean government helps the defectors get a job and supports them in settling down by providing a sizable supplementary living allowance. Furthermore, under South Korean rule, North Korean defectors are able to enjoy political freedom and need not be concerned about government intrusion. The better economic and political conditions outside of North Korea tend to



lure North Koreans away. An additional force mentioned as attractive to the North Korean population is the degree of commitment toward controlling the border between North Korea and China. Historically, North Korea and China have sustained a mutually favorable relationship and retained relatively relaxed border controls (Kim, 2010). Recently, the North Korean government took measures to strengthen the border control system. While strict controls on this border decrease the chances of successful defection, loose controls on the same border play an important role in pulling the North Korean population out of the country.

The social-level studies pay a special attention to the push and pull forces existing inside and outside of North Korea. While domestic difficulties engendered by a serious economic downturn and political repression serve to drive the North Korean population out of its own country, the better economic conditions beyond the border and the relaxed border regulations tend to pull people out of North Korea. Like the individual-level analysis, the studies adopting a social-level perspective have several limitations in terms of suggesting an adequate explanation for illegal migration that is dominated by female North Koreans. We are not arguing that discrimination and inequality involving gender are minor issues in North Korean society. The relatively static North Korean society, however, cannot be involved in the dynamic gender imbalance involved in the North Korean defections. Furthermore, it cannot be concluded that South Korean society is more attractive to female defectors than to male defectors (Bidet, 2009; Kim & Noh, 2014).

So far, we have reviewed the prior studies exploring the causes of North Korean defections. The studies based on individual-level and social-level analysis reasonably hypothesize about the causes of North Korean defections, and numerous empirical results confirm the propositions. However, previous studies cannot offer a clear answer as to why North Korean women are more likely to defect than North Korean men and why the gender imbalance of the North Korean defection has increased. The main purpose of this study is to provide an account on the systematic mechanism regarding the dynamics of gendered defection from North Koreans.

## Unintended Consequences of North Korean Government Actions: Gender Imbalances in Defection

To identify the causes of the gender imbalance in the North Korean defection and the acceleration in that imbalance, the North Korean government policies implemented to cope with the extreme food shortages and severe economic distress must be considered. Although several studies suggest causes from the great famine and economic crisis of the mid-1990s (Lankov, 2009a; Noland, Robinson, & Wang, 2001), in this work we focus more on the effect of the serious economic downturn. The economic crisis led to the collapse of the food rationing system and the malfunctioning of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP). Before the economic crisis, the totalitarian rule of the North Korean government had relied heavily on a public food-distribution system and a restrictive social monitoring scheme, like other communist states. The North Korean population depended on food rations and jobs offered by the government. Using the food and job distribution framework, the North Korean government was able to control people's residence, their movements, and their accumulation of capital. Moreover, the KWP exploited the public agenda, manipulating ideas and information to create a cult around the political leader's personality, and imposing restrictive social police under the authority of the KWP, who continuously monitored people's deviant behavior (Byman & Lind, 2010).

The serious economic downturn in the mid-1990s brought about the collapse of the public food-distribution system and weakened the state's capacity to control the population. The consequences of undesirable economic and political conditions undermined the communist social-control system and disturbed the social order. To revitalize social control and surmount the economic difficulties, the North Korean government implemented two audacious policies, the Military-First Policy and the Economic Management Improvement Measure. The two policies created unexpected outcomes whereby North Korean women gained mobility and were able to raise more capital than men could. Furthermore, the male-targeted military draft system stemming from the Military-First Policy, and the rise of female-dominated marketization—which is one measure of economic reform—boosted the gendered defection of the North Koreans.

## Male-Targeted Military Draft System Stemming from the Military-First Policy

One of the main functions of the KWP is to support the North Korean government's rule and secure the survival of the Kim regime. The economic crisis of the 1990s crippled the KWP. The North Korean government required an organization that would help the KWP restore social order and the political stability of Kim's autocratic rule. The Korean People's Army (KPA) was chosen by Kim Jong-Il to resolve the nationwide crisis. Thus, the North Korean government adopted the Military-First Policy (Woo, 2014).

As the armed forces of the KWP and the security detail of an autocratic political leader, the KPA was more committed to promoting the KWP's policy and preserving Kim's power than to defending the national interest (Korean Workers' Party Platform, Article 46). When the KWP was crippled by the serious economic downturn, Kim Jong-Il tried to restore his autocratic social order by utilizing this relatively well-disciplined organization. In addition to political functions, economic and social tasks were also imposed on the KPA. Under the Military-First Policy, the North Korean government, through the mass media, introduced military troops as the paragon of a unique North Korean ideology emphasizing self-reliance (*juche*), in pursuit of restoring social order. Furthermore, numerous military troops were dispatched to construction sites, collective farms, and industrial facilities to compensate for the labor shortage (Vorontrov, 2006). Historically, North Korea has maintained massive armed forces to maintain a military advantage against South Korea. Now the KPA began to require more military personnel because of the social and economic role it was assigned by the North Korean government conducting the Military-First Policy.

With enhanced social and economic missions to implement, the KPA now faced a troop shortage. The great famine in the mid-1990s resulted in a population decrease in those of an age to be drafted, and the cohort born from the mid-1980s to 2000 was physically weaker than that of older generations (Goodkind & West, 2001). To solve the shortage of eligible conscripts, the North Korean government drastically lowered the physical requirements for the draft and prolonged the duration of military service. The KPA lowered the minimum physical requirements in 1994 from a height of 4.9 feet and a weight of 106 pounds to a height of 4.6 feet and

a weight of 95 pounds. Furthermore, the North Korean government proclaimed a new military service act requiring 10 years duration of military service from every man drafted in 2003; previously it had been five to eight years (Institute for Unification Education, 2015). As a result, more young males in North Korea remained under the KPA's control for longer periods.

The reinforced military draft system of North Korea reduces men's mobility compared to that of women. More than 90% of North Korean males in their 20s are under the rigid control of the KPA, and their mobility is strictly regulated (Jung & Choi, 2007; Lee & Hong, 2011). Although the North Korean government promulgated a military draft law for female service in 2003, the duration of women's military service is reportedly shorter than men's and military service is not compulsory for every woman. For the time that North Korean males are under the KPA's control, females have the relative advantage of being able to move around more freely. Males' relative lack of mobility compared to females is not necessarily translated into the females' absolute advantage in mobility. It can be assumed that economic reforms implemented by the government created conditions sufficient for North Korean women with a relative advantage in mobility to defect.

### **Female-Dominated Marketization Advanced by Economic Reform**

The North Korean government's efforts to overcome the food shortage and economic downturn in the 1990s focused on two strategies. The first was to attract foreign investment capital in several special economic zones designated by the government (Lim & Lim, 2006). In the first years of the 21st century, the North Korean government designated two cities in which foreign capital was permitted to conduct profit-driven activities. Sinuiju, a northern city bordering China, was selected as a region where Chinese investments could be made. The Chinese government, however, opposed North Korean efforts to attract Chinese investment, and this economic project was abandoned in 2002. Kaesong, a North Korean city bordering South Korea, was also designated a special region where industrial facilities funded by the South Korean investment were permitted to operate. Although this joint project of North and South Korea made money for a time, the South Korean government cancelled it in response to North

Korean nuclear and missile tests in 2016.

While the first economic strategy of the North Korean government failed, the second strategy, utilizing capitalist market operations, is considered to be a success (Eberstadt, 2009; Lankov, 2009b; Yang, 2010). In 2002, the North Korean government relaxed the economic policy by which it regulates production and consumption on the national level and strictly prohibits businesses run by private owners. Small businesses producing and selling daily necessities were allowed and commodity markets were legalized by the “Economic Management Improvement Measure.” Even though excessive marketization—which ran counter to the central elements of a socialist economy—engendered a reversion to the previous planned economy and a reform of the currency, the North Korean government still sustains the policy that legalizes the commodity market and allows small private businesses.

North Korean females, previously regarded as “revolutionary mothers of the socialist state,” are playing a leading role in the process of marketization. Numerous studies argue that North Korean women suffer from gender inequality at home and in the workplace, and bear the dual burden imposed by the roles of mother and worker (Kang, 2013; Lee, 2005; Ryang, 2000). A long-standing Confucian tradition and a patriarchal social agenda politically manipulated by autocratic rule are highlighted as factors marginalizing North Korean females and bringing about pervasive sexual discrimination. Nonetheless, North Korean women have come to dominate the commodity market legalized by the government.

The considerable research into the North Korean commodity market reports that more than 70% of traders in the markets are female (Haggard & Noland, 2011; Lim, 2005; Park, 2011; Schwegendiek & Mercier, 2016). The increased presence of women in the process of marketization stems from a wage problem. North Korean females became victimized by the government’s industrial and labor policies, which were implemented to solve the problem of wages. When the economic downturn intensified in the 1990s, almost all state-owned enterprises stopped manufacturing, and the payment of wages was delayed. To resolve the crisis, the North Korean government took an action disadvantageous to women: selective shutdown of the industrial facilities (Ahn, 2001; Lee, 2004; Shim, 2006). While many heavy industries were able to avoid being shut down, almost all plants producing consumer products, such as daily necessities, were closed by the

government. The workforce in light industries consisted largely of females, and thus the government's policy of shutting down industrial facilities generated a mass gender-imbalanced dismissal. Moreover, North Korean women, rather than men became the main target of layoffs (Haggard & Noland, 2011; Hwang, 2000). The government, which wanted males to be the breadwinners in their families, was more reluctant to fire males than females, and it bolstered the propaganda emphasizing women's role in the family. Unexpectedly, the selective shutdown of industrial facilities and the government's desired roles for men gave women a better chance to play a leading role in the process of marketization in North Korea. While the men were expected to show up regularly in their workplaces, laid-off women came to trade in the market without workplace obligations.

Female dominance in North Korean markets makes conditions more favorable for women to defect than men. In the process of illegal migration from North Korea, considerable sums of money are reportedly required for bribing the border guards and paying the guide. Feminized marketization provides women with a better opportunity to defect, and the rise of marketization facilitates the gender imbalance in the number of North Korean defection.

### **Interplay of the Military Draft System and Marketization**

The necessary conditions of North Korean defection consist of mobility and capital; the absence of either of these elements significantly decreases the chances of successful defection. Even a North Korean who can move freely is not likely to reach safe haven in South Korea without possessing considerable capital. Moreover, a North Korean who possesses considerable capital is not likely to cross the border between North Korea and China without mobility. Only North Koreans, who can meet both conditions, are likely to cross the border and successfully settle in South Korea. Two policies prompted by the great famine and economic crisis in the 1990s brought about unexpected results that facilitated North Korean females' mobility and let them amass capital; eventually, the policies led to the gendered illegal migration to South Korea.

If only one of the two policies is implemented, the gender-imbalanced defection by the North Koreans would not occur. If the North Korean government reinforced only the male-targeted military draft system without

relaxing the socialist economic regulations, the feminization of marketization would not have occurred and females would not have found a better opportunity to accumulate capital. A strict military draft system targeting males makes North Korean females far more mobile than males, but we cannot conclude that this is the sole cause for the gendered North Korean defection. Crossing the border and entering South Korea reportedly requires substantial capital. Therefore, females with mobility but without capital are not likely to defect successfully. Moreover, the rise of marketization without an enhanced military draft system would never result in the feminization in defection. The economic reforms pursued by the North Korean government evidently provide many more opportunities to accrue profits in commodity markets. Although the number of individuals possessing considerable capital has increased, the gender imbalance in the number of the North Korean defection could not occur without a relative advantage in mobility. Furthermore, without an enhanced military draft system, North Korean males, rather than females, could be expected to play a leading role in marketization.

The gendered North Korean defection stems from the interplay between the male-targeted military draft system and female-dominated marketization. To cope with the great famine and economic crisis of the 1990s, the North Korean government adopted the Military-First Policy and economic reforms. The KPA was chosen to prop up the weakened KWP, and the government lowered the requirements for military conscripts. The collapse of the public food-distribution system forced the North Korean government to legalize small private businesses. The expanding conscription of male and the rise of marketization resulted in North Korean females' relative advantage in mobility and earning money, and consequently we encounter the phenomena of the gendered North Korean defection.

### **Conclusion**

This study sought to answer the question "Why are North Korean women more likely to defect than men?" While previous studies explained the causes of North Korean defections using well grounded theories and confirmed empirical results, they rarely suggested a systematic mechanism that precisely explained the process of gender imbalance in the number of North Korean defectors. We tried to show the causes of the gendered de-

fection of the North Koreans by looking at the government policies.

North Korea's catastrophic economic crisis in the 1990s prompted the government's measures—the Military-First Policy and economic reform—to revitalize the social order and restore the economy. The Military-First Policy, by conscripting more males and extending the duration of service, allowed females more mobility than males. The economic reform, by legalizing small private businesses and commodity markets, created favorable conditions for women to accumulate capital. The interplay between the male-targeted military draft and female-dominated marketization led to an unintentional consequence: gendered North Korean defections.

Even though the two government policies generated better conditions in terms of mobility and capital for North Korean females, it never eliminated the individual's incentive to defect. As we have mentioned previously, most of the defectors came from the low-income class and resided in the border area between North Korea and China. We argue that although it is evident that North Korean females are beginning to amass more capital from the market and are enjoying greater mobility than males, the two government measures never provide for comfortable life conditions. Politically marginalized females residing in border areas still have a strong incentive to defect despite having considerable capital and advanced mobility. This is because the capital and mobility granted by the interplay of the two policies shape better conditions to defect than to live comfortably in North Korea.

This study has several academic implications. First, we offered an explanation regarding the gender imbalance in North Korean migration, which is not suggested by theories developed by previous feminist scholars. In the 19th century, males were more susceptible to international migration, as they had incentives to economically support family members back in their own countries (Pedraza, 1991). Thus, the general pattern of international migration at that time was that males from underdeveloped countries moved to developed countries in search of better job opportunities. However, in the mid-20th century, females in Asia and Latin America began to play a leading role in international migration. This phenomenon of feminized international migration was a consequence of the changes in the industrial structure of sending and receiving countries, and the alterations to family structure (Grasmuck & Pessar, 1991). The gendered North Korean illegal migration, however, cannot be explained by the framework previously developed by feminist arguments. We suggested an analytical



tool consisting of two conditions required for North Korean women to pursue the dangerous path to South Korea. The gender imbalance in North Korean defection is an unintended outcome of the government's policies that helps to satisfy the necessary conditions.

Second, this study suggests that push factors are more relevant than pull factors in explaining the gender imbalance in North Koreans' defections at a social level. According to Chang's survey of North Korean refugees in China (2006), South Korea turned out to be the most preferred destination of ultimate domicile: 65% of respondents chose South Korea, 20% the U.S.A., and only 14% of respondents selected China. However, it is not clear that the world outside North Korea provides better conditions for female defectors than for male defectors; many studies report that female defectors even in South Korea are disadvantaged compared to male defectors in terms of income and job opportunities (Haggard & Noland, 2011; Kim, 2014; Yoon, 2007). We find that forces domestically generated by the North Korean government push North Korean females out of a country that never provided preferable conditions for females.

Third, in accounting for the gendered North Korean defections at the individual level, we showed that it is more accurate to concentrate on opportunity than on willingness. It cannot be concluded that the serious economic downturn makes only women more eager to defect. However, reinforcing the male-targeted draft system and female-dominated marketization could have provided women with more opportunities than men to defect.

Our work depends on macro or aggregated level data, and we have not discussed this issue at a micro or individual level. One of the best ways to fortify our argument is to confirm the mechanism with a supportive empirical test result grounded in individual-level survey data. To conduct an empirical test properly, information regarding mobility and capital should be collected from both the females who successfully defected and those who failed or never tried to defect. The North Korean government maintains a strict policy restricting surveys conducted by South Koreans, thus it is extremely difficult to collect an appropriate dataset on mobility and capital among North Korean residents. When it is possible to access a survey result on individuals in North Korea, this work will be confirmed by a supportive empirical test.

This paper suggests a clear policy direction for the South Korean

government. The South Korean government should reinforce the policy of helping female defectors to settle in South Korea. Gendered defections will likely be sustained as long as the North Korean government maintains its current military and economic policies. Moreover, the gender dynamics of the North Korean defections are likely to be bolstered by the gendered network of illegal migration. In response, the South Korean government should provide more job opportunities tailored to female defectors, and employ more women to support the North Korean defectors entering South Korea.

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