



The Geopolitics of Human Trafficking and Gendered North Korean Migration

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The migration of North Korean women has been a gendered process. International communities view human trafficking of North Korean women as the root cause behind the feminization of North Korean migration. While the frequency of human trafficking cases targeting North Korean women reached its heights during the late 1990s through the early 2000s, it declined following the mid-2000s. Nonetheless, until recently, most media and human rights organizations have associated North Korean female refugees with “sexual slavery” and strived to inform the international community of their lack of human rights. International human rights groups interviewed North Korean female refugees, published reports on their stories, and encouraged them to testify, bringing them under the limelight of international politics. However, how have the international community’s interest and efforts towards eradicating human trafficking of North Korean defectors actually affect the circumstances under which defectors living in China migrate? This commentary critically examines hegemonic discourses regarding human trafficking by looking into the impacts anti-human trafficking policies and practices have had on the migration of North Korean women over the last decades.

The Human Faces of Human Trafficking

Since the mid-1990s, North Koreans have unofficially crossed the North Korea–China border for their own survival in order to escape from extreme famine and severe economic deprivation. Higher demands for young single women in rural China and expanding global markets for brides have commodified North Korean women’s bodies, making them targets for human trafficking and forced marriages. In the early stage of North Korean migration in the 1990s and early 2000s, North Korean women were deceived in North Korea and sold after being transported into China. Traffickers recruited North Korean women by deception, coercion, or abduction. They often sought for impoverished and starved young women and tricked them into the “Chinese dream.”

According to my own in-depth interviews conducted with North Korean women in the North Korean Chinese borderland of Yanbian between 2003 and 2007, since about 2000, the North Korean government has publicly indicated the dangers of human trafficking. Consequently, the North Korean-Chinese border has been severely regulated. Nonetheless, there were North Korean women who chose to use trafficking as an escape route despite the dangers of trafficking; they are often left vulnerable to sexual violence. Given that North Korean women are unaware of the consequences and only have limited options to choose from, they used their femininity as a tool to cross the border. Full consent is largely absent during the process of trafficking, considering that they are often left with no choice but to defect to China due to the political and economic circumstances that pushed them away from their home country and the extraordinary circumstances North Korean women face in China. Additionally, even if North Korean women have willingly made the conscious decision to move abroad in hopes of bettering their lives and that of their families, they are unaware of the dangers behind the clandestine routes they must take to cross the border and the vulnerable status of North Korean women in China. Despite such dire circumstances in China, many trafficked North Korean women find their lives in their new destination better than that in North Korea, as they will most likely be faced with famine amidst severe economic struggle.

Humanitarianism, Human Rights, and the Imperial Response to Trafficking

Discourses surrounding and practices against the trafficking of North Korean women are fraught with geopolitical tensions. The line between trafficking and smuggling is blurry. However, those anxious to protect exploited women often illustrate trafficked women as innocent and powerless victims in need of rescue. Such depictions of North Korean women have been used by human rights agencies such as Human Rights Watch¹, Anti-Slavery International², Amnesty International³, and Korea Future Initiative⁴ and are evident in the North Korean Human Rights Act⁵ and the [U.S. Department Trafficking in Persons reports](#). The tendency to do so has resulted from the moral panic against prostitution in the Western society and the inclination to avoid the uncomfortable truth that many women, in fact, are willing to be trafficked for their own survival. Put in another way, while women who are categorized as powerless slaves often receive public sympathy and support, those who have been smuggled and are willing to be trafficked garner no such sympathy and are, instead, seen as agents of sexual immorality.

Most reports on the topic of North Korean migrant women focus on raising international

¹ Human Rights Watch. 2002. "The Invisible Exodus: North Koreans in the People's REPUBLIC OF China."

² Muico, Norma Kang. 2005. "An Absence of Choice: The sexual exploitation of North Korean women in China." London: Anti-Slavery International.

³ Amnesty International. 2009. "Democratic People's Republic of Korea Submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review Sixth session of the UPR Working Group of the Human Rights Council November - December 2009."

⁴ Yoon, Hee-soon. 2019. "Sex Slaves: The Prostitution, Cybersex & Forced Marriage of North Korean Women & Girls in China." London: Korea Future Initiative.

⁵ U.S. Congress. 2004. "H.R.4011 - 108th Congress (2003-2004): North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004." *Library of Congress*.

awareness of the human rights abuses that trafficked North Korean women face in China. Such reports emphasize the need for international cooperation to pressure the North Korean and Chinese governments and rescue and protect North Korean women. An imperialist understanding of human trafficking can be found in the [U.S. State Department's annual Trafficking in Persons Report](#). The U.S. government compiles information on more than 180 countries. Based on this data, the U.S. categorizes other nation-states into four groups (Tier 1, Tier 2, Tier 2 Watch List, or Tier 3) and announces that countries at Tier 3 — the least favorable rating among the categories — may be subject to certain sanctions imposed by the U.S. government, including the withholding of non-humanitarian, non-trade-related assistance funds. North Korea has been included in this annual report since 2003, rated annually as one of the worst offenders (Tier 3).

The Trafficking in Persons reports have been highly contentious, not only because of the authority assumed by the U.S. in categorizing states, but also because of ongoing concerns about the methodologies used to determine tier placement and compliance.⁶ The credibility of the data published in the Trafficking in Persons reports has often been in question; Kempadoo⁷ argues that categorization on the issue of trafficking is ideologically and politically motivated rather than rooted in facts. Furthermore, the reports generally avoid addressing the basic economic insecurities faced by trafficked women and the relationship between economic status and patterns of uneven development generated within a globalizing capitalist system. To counter these hegemonic and geopoliticized discourses on human trafficking, current debates and representations of human trafficking should incorporate the views, experiences, and perspectives of women of the Global South.

Anti-trafficking Practices and Changes in Gendered North Korean Migration

Based on in-depth interviews with North Korean migrants on the North Korea-China borderland and an extensive analysis of documents, I argue that placing a strategic spotlight on North Korean human trafficking has not actually led to positive changes in the political and juridical practices of North Koreans in China. As Sharma⁸ insists, anti-trafficking practices in the name of rescuing trafficked victims have legitimated immigration controls in repressive states. Specifically, the international society's efforts in exposing human rights abuses faced by North Korean migrants have been regarded as an unwelcomed political intervention by North Korea and China. They specifically state that the U.S. exploits the moral vocabulary of universal human rights for its own imperial geopolitical ends. Since 2000, China has tightened its border control and has more actively repatriated North Koreans, notwithstanding the fact that deported North Koreans receive harsh punishment in their home country. Crackdowns on undocumented North Korean migrants in China

⁶ Gallagher, Anne T. 2011. "Improving the effectiveness of the international law of human trafficking: A vision for the future of the US trafficking in persons reports." *Human Rights Review* 12, 3: 381-400.

⁷ Kempadoo, Kamala. 2016. "The war on humans: anti-trafficking in the Caribbean." *Social & Economic Studies* 65,4 : 5-32.

⁸ Sharma, Nandita. 2005. "Anti-Trafficking Rhetoric and the Making of a Global Apartheid." *NWSA Journal* 17, 3: 88-111.

peaked around the 2008 Beijing Olympic games.

North Koreans have become increasingly aware of China's strict repatriation campaign against North Korean defectors and the legal status guaranteed for defectors outside of North Korea and China. As a result, North Korean defectors in China migrated to third countries, including South Korea. According to the "Number of North Korean Defectors Entering South Korea" compiled by the Ministry of Unification, the number of defectors entering South Korea exceeded 1,000 for the first time in 2001. The number surged in the late 2000s, with 2,914 defectors entering the country in 2009. The numbers have been on the decline since 2011, with between 1,000 ~ 1,500 people, of which more than 70% are women, entering every year until 2019. As women, who have already long resided in China, have been migrating to South Korea, the entry of North Korean defectors has become a gendered.

Defection at the North Korea-China border, however, follows a different pattern. Since Kim Jong Un took power in 2011, circumstances have changed in North Korea. On one hand, North Korea was able to overcome the Arduous March through alleviating its economic struggles. On the other hand, border controls were strengthened under Kim Jong Un's rule, leading to a significant decrease in the number of people clandestinely crossing the border. Costs for the procedure to illegally enter China were exorbitantly high during this period. As a result, migration among people who are financially equipped to handle the costs of migration has increased, resulting in the stratification of migration on the North Korea-China border. Therefore, gendered characteristics of migration on the North Korea-China border have been largely absent. To sum, the international community's interest in North Korean human rights has provided the basis for North Korean defectors in China to migrate to South Korea or for North Korean defectors who have already settled in South Korea to apply for asylum to third countries and relocate again. However, it has made it more difficult for financially insecure North Korean women to migrate to China, despite undertaking measures such as human trafficking. In other words, the geopolitics surrounding North Korean human trafficking has made migration over the North Korea-China border more difficult, dangerous, and clandestine for deprived North Korean women. ■

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