

# Factors impeding the successful settlement of female adolescent immigrants from North Korea and measures to support them<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Despite the fact that about 70% of the rapidly surging number of North Korean refugees are made up of women and that about a third of the total are adolescents, the South Korean government's policy on North Korean refugees lacks both gender perspective and adolescent-focused policies. With this in mind, this research project conducted in-depth interviews with 30 female adolescent immigrants from North Korea and performed focus group interviews with 25 experts on adolescent North Korean refugees in order to examine the state of their lives and the difficulties they faced in their adjustment to South Korean society. According to this research, female North Korean adolescents have experienced a gendered process of escape from North Korea, threat of human rights impingement during the process, family disintegration and related family conflicts, emotional scars, and deprivation of educational opportunities and maladaptation to the South Korean school system. Based on these identified issues, this research suggests the establishment of a gender-sensitive support system for North Korean refugees, expansion of service for adolescents in local adaptation support centers, the strengthening of support for unaccompanied adolescent female refugees, and the introduction of an emergency intervention system for such at-risk North Korean refugees.

**Keywords:** Female adolescent immigrants from North Korea, North Korean female immigrants, In-depth interview, Gender-sensitive support system, Policies on immigrants from North Korea

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1 This paper is a summary of the Status of Adolescent North Korean Refugees by Gender and Measures to Support Young Female North Korean Refugees, a KWDI research paper published in 2012.

I. Introduction

Entering the 2000s, the influx of North Korean refugees to South Korea began a noticeable increase. With more than 2,000 North Koreans escaping to South Korea on an annual basis since 2006, the total number of North Koreans residing in South Korea surpassed 20,000 in November 2010. As of July 2012, the total number of North Korean refugees in South Korea stood at 24,010, with men numbering 7,427 and women 16,583. In terms of proportion, women amount to 69.1%.

One of the striking facts related to the increase is the rapidly rising proportion of women (Figure 1). The proportion of women, which contributed a meager 12.5% in 1998, surged to 46.0% in 2001 and has exceeded 50% since 2002. From 2006 until 2010, three quarters of the North Korean refugees arriving in South Korea were women. In 2011, the figure was 5 percentage points lower than the previous year at 70.1%.

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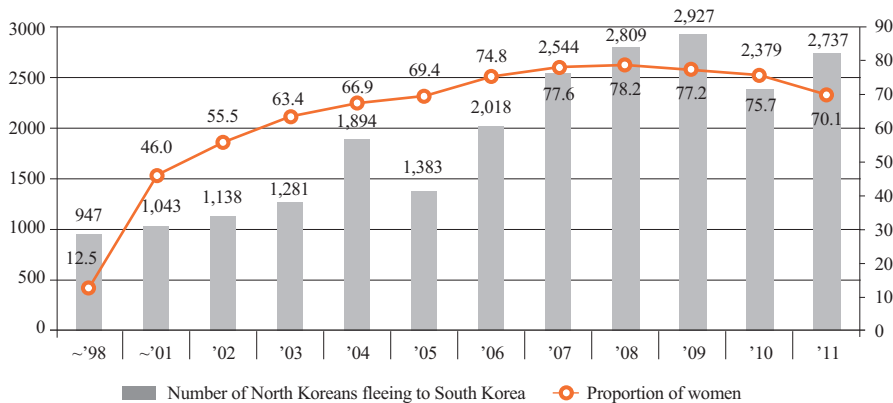


Figure 1. Gender distribution of North Korean refugees by year

Some of the reasons for the growth in the number of female refugees include that many women who pursue food or engage in commercial trade by crossing the border between North Korea and China end up trafficked and sold to rural Chinese farmers (National Assembly Budget Office, 2009). In the process of their escape, women are exposed to a number of dire experiences, including human trafficking, prostitution, and domestic violence, all of which result in psychological trauma. With lack of proper counseling and medical support catering to their needs, the difficulties in their efforts to settle in South Korean society are likely to be compounded (Park Sun-seong et al., 2009; National Assembly Budget Office, 2009). While this illustrates the need for North Korean refugee support policies designed not only based on their demographic characteristics, but also taking into account a gender-sensitive perspective as a means to resolve the issues faced by women in a patriarchal society, little research nor policy support has been focused on female refugees or the socioeconomic status and unique conditions in which they find themselves.

Adolescent refugees are also often found within blind spots in government support (Kang Jong-seok, 2011). With relevant government policies focused on adult refugees, assistance for adolescents has been left up to the goodwill of civic groups suffering insufficient resources (Lee Su-jeong, 2008; requoted from Kim Geong-jun and Lee Su-jeong et al., 2008). This is partly due to the relatively small number of children and young adults at the time of the inception of government support policies for North Korean refugees and the assumption that children would face less difficulty integrating into South Korean society. According to the preceding literature, however, a number of North Korean girls in their late teens and early 20s elect to start a family over pursuing education, which makes it difficult to resume education but easy to fall into the cycle of poverty (Lee Tae-ju, 2010). Female adolescents also experience confusion, conflict, and difficulties caused by the differences in the perception of gender roles and sex between the two Koreas (Lee Tae-ju et al., 2010:64-68; Lee Ki-yeong, 2001:207-210). Distinct from their male counterparts, North Korean young women are also exposed to sexual harassment and assault in their part-time jobs (Lee Tae-ju et al., 2010:63).

Despite these issues, government policies on North Korean adolescents fail to consider the gender distinctions in their socioeconomic circumstances and the events they faced from the time of their escape to their settlement in South Korea. This gender-blindness can be partly attributed to the fact that existing studies on North Korean adolescents were conducted from the perspective of adolescent policy. Currently, there is little data to shed light on the difficulties and needs of female North Koreans as they grow up in South Korea. Based on these research questions, this study attempts to investigate the individual and social contexts in which female North Korean adolescents are situated and identify the difficulties and obstacles they face in daily lives, as well as their needs for support in order to suggest proper measures for their assistance.

## II. Entry of female North Korean adolescents into South Korean society

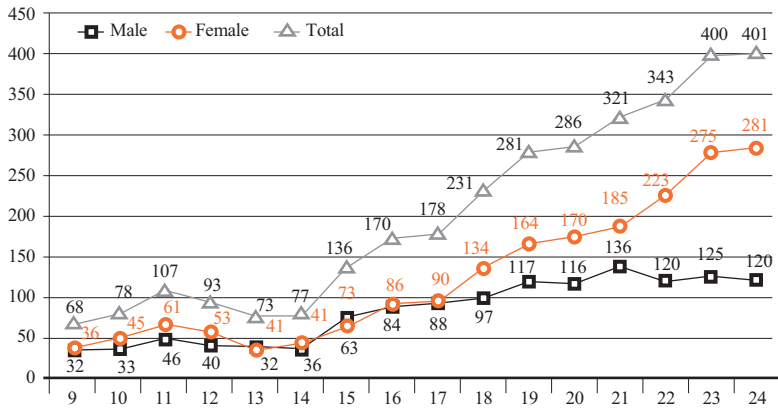
Based on age at the time of entry to South Korean territory, the number of those in the 0-24 age bracket reaches around 6,300 persons, or 27%, including 977 in the 0-9 age bracket, 2,753 in the 10-19 age bracket, and 6,424 in the 20-29 age bracket (Table 1). This means that three out of ten North Korean refugees arrive in South Korea as children or young adults.

**Table 1. Distribution of North Korean refugees by age at the time of entry to South Korean territory (accumulated data as of April 2012)**

	0-9 years old	10-19 years old	20-29 years old	30-39 years old	40-49 years old	50-59 years old	60 years old	Total
Total (persons)	977	2,753	6,424	7,258	3,804	1,184	1,075	23,475
Percentage (%)	4.2	11.7	27.4	30.9	16.2	5.0	4.6	100.0

Source: Ministry of Unification website

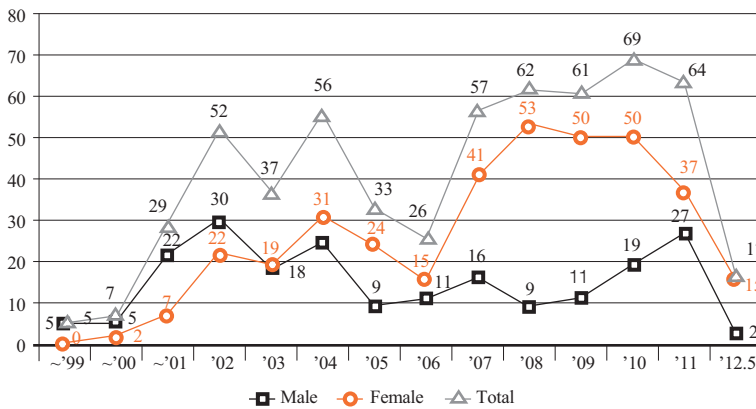
As of August 2011, 59.7% (1,937 persons) of the total 3,243 adolescent North Korean refugees (aged 9-24 years)<sup>2</sup> are female. Regarding the age distribution by gender as presented in Figure 2, there is little difference in the numbers of male and female refugees in the 9-17 year-old age bracket, but the number of females surges after 18 years of age to reach double the number of their male counterparts from 23 years of age and after.



**Figure 2. Age distribution of North Korean adolescents by gender (August 2011)**

2 This research follows the definition of adolescents used in the Basic Act on Adolescents.

The female proportion is even higher among unaccompanied adolescents<sup>3</sup>, who are especially vulnerable since they do not enjoy the benefits of family care. Among the 575 adolescents who defected alone to South Korea between 1999 and May 2012, 63.7% (366 persons) were female. In greater detail (Figure 3), the number of unaccompanied adolescents, which stood at a mere five persons in 1999, leapt to 52 in 2002. With some fluctuations, the number has stood around 60 every year since 2008. While the number of unaccompanied female adolescents was smaller than that of their male counterparts up to 2002, it began to exceed their number in 2003 to reach two to four times that of males after 2007. As of May 31, 2012 the Ministry of Unification reported the



Source: Major statistical data by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (2012)

**Figure 3. Number of unaccompanied adolescent North Korean refugees**

### III. Research methods

This research conducted in-depth interviews with adolescent female North Korean refugees and focus group interviews with experts in the field who provide them with support services, in addition to conducting a review of the previous literature on North Korean refugees in South Korea.

The subjects of the in-depth interviews included 30 female North Korean refugees aged between

<sup>3</sup> The Ministry of Unification categorizes as unaccompanied teenagers those who are living without family members and under 20 years old at the time of leaving Hanawon, a temporary shelter and adaptation support center for North Koreans who have recently defected to South Korea.

13 and 24 years old.<sup>4</sup> The subjects were contacted with the help of their schools, North Korean refugee support agencies including Hana Center and Mujigae Teenager Center, group homes, and professional counselors. The final interviewees were selected based on whether or not they had other family members in South Korea and on whether they were attending school. The questions used for the interviews centered on topics including demographics, life in North Korea, decision to defect and the process, life in South Korea, experience with support services, and remaining unmet needs.

With an aim to increase the understanding of female adolescent immigrants from North Korea, identify their assistance needs, and develop relevant policies, focus group interviews and individual interviews were carried out with 25 experienced field experts who have provided support services to adolescent North Korean refugees over an extended period of time. Focus group interviews were performed a total of six times with 23 experts and separate interviews were held with two other experts.

#### **IV. Obstacles in the settlement of female adolescent immigrants from North Korea**

Previous researchers note that South Koreans view North Korean refugees more as immigrants than as brethren from the North (Lee Tae-ju et al., 2010; Lee Geum-sun, 2006) and that North Koreans in South Korea share certain characteristics with immigrants (Kim Seon-hwa, 2009; Lee Hyang-gyu, 2007). They also point out that despite general expectations that ‘immigrant’ adolescents will be better able to adapt to a new environment compared to adults, the life of North Korean adolescents in South Korea is not easy. Young North Korean women experience no lesser degree of psycho-social issues than do older refugees: from the beginning of their escape process they face discrimination and disadvantages as both a woman and an adolescent, experience the issue of mal-adaptation to South Korean schools due to the education interruption caused by their escape process, and go through psychological and emotional hardships resulting from family disintegration.

Through in-depth interviews with female North Korean adolescents living in South Korea, this research examined their gendered experiences in a patriarchal social structure during the period

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4 Among the 30 total participants, there were three teens aged between 13-15 years old (middle school age), eleven between 16-18 years old (high school age), and sixteen aged 19 years old or older. At the time of interview, a total of 18 were students (eleven enrolled in middle school or high school, five in alternative schools, and two in tertiary education), three were preparing for national education qualification exams, and five were preparing for the college entrance exam.

lasting from their escape to their settlement in South Korea, together with the way gender operates as a principle of social construction.

## 1. Gendered process of escape

As an increasing number of North Koreans are coming to South Korea as family units, a more diverse range of North Korean refugees, including women, children, and seniors is being encountered. One of the most prominent changes is a surge in the number of women. The number of female refugees began to surpass that of their male counterparts in 2002 and currently makes up approximately 70% of all North Koreans defecting to South Korea on an annual basis. This upswell in the number of women is partly attributed to the patriarchal gender structure unique to North Korean society.

In North Korea, where the male-oriented social order remains intact, women are not only expected to be submissive to their husbands and take charge of housework and childcare, but also to assume the responsibilities of the livelihood of their families. In fact, the female adolescents participating in this research reported that they had been engaged in farming and street vending like their mothers in order to help ease the financial struggles of their families. One of their main motivations behind risking escape was to make money or to survive. Some of the youths decided to defect from the country as they were already making frequent trips to China as a means to earn a living.

(My father) worked at a coal mine as an official... my stepmother commuted to China as a vendor but got arrested one day... so they fired my father... we were very poor. I was living with my younger sibling and had to farm. (C-6)

My father was a communist party member... he went to a company workplace... he earned little.... A few kilograms of corn per month... but it wasn't even provided every month... my mother sold fruit and I helped her set up the stall. (C-7)

I took a train... to go to other provinces to buy things that were cheap there but expensive in our province. Things like pears and corn. I brought those to sell. Sometimes I took a boat... I was so hungry because I had just one meal per day. I had little to eat. Sometimes I ate just two potatoes... I also went to the mountains to chop firewood and use it to cook. (C-2)

After my parents died I had difficult times... I became a vendor for a living when I was 15 ... I smuggled things from China, sold stuff, and before I came here I also made money by locating people for South Korean contacts. (C-8)

Another manifest recent change is the increased number of “direct-route” adolescents who took only a brief time as they passed through a third country on their way to South Korea. “Direct-route” refers to when, unlike in the past when escapees remained hidden in China or stayed in Myanmar or Mongolia for an extended period prior to arriving to South Korea, they stay in a third country for ten days at the longest and transit directly to South Korea. As this direct route to South Korea requires greater preparation, including hiring a broker and making a prepayment, parents’ intentions to provide their children with better educational opportunities are often involved. According to Jeong Hae-suk (2012), among those taking the direct route the proportion of male adolescents (56.6%) is higher than that of females (49.4%). This is because parents who leave their children in North Korea tend to bring their sons to the south first before their daughters, which appears to be a telltale sign of the preference for sons instilled in patriarchal North Korean society.

(Q. Among those who take the direct route, which gender is prevalent? Girls or boys?) Boys. The day after tomorrow another batch of refugees will leave Hanawon and out of about ten kids, only one is a girl. The rest are boys. There are unaccompanied kids, too... I don’t know exactly what the percentage it is... but a significant number of them were brought here by their mother... (Employee at O support agency)

We have eight first-year students this year. In the past, North Korean kids came here for survival. But it’s different now. (Q. How many are girls?) Two. (Q. Did most of them take the direct route?) Yes, most of them. (K Middle School teacher)

Along with the gender-discriminative social structure which demands that women take on the responsibility for livelihood in extreme poverty or assume charge of housework, sexuality is a further factor that explains the great number of women among North Korean refugees. In the process of North Korean women crossing the border and hiding from law enforcement authorities in China and other third countries, their sexuality is often used as a resource for trade. A safe way to escape from North Korea without cost is to become subject to trafficking and allow traffickers to manage the work necessary to cross the North Korean border.

A safe way to escape from the country without money is to allow yourself to be sold... (Q. You mean trafficking?) Yes. You should offer yourself for trafficking. Then they will do everything for you and you don’t need money. I heard they hang out at the border and keep trying to talk North Korean women into it. Our students talk about that, too. The traffickers approach kids and tell them they can make money in China. That’s how they get trafficked. There are lots of cases like that. (Principle of P alternative school)



One woman escaped from the country at 19 using a broker, but she was sold to a guy in his late 50s. She lived with the guy for eight months and escaped again. Another woman got out of the North but ended up in the hands of a broker in China. She was sold to a disabled man. He couldn't speak and was intellectually challenged. She had a baby with the guy. I guess the guy thought that once she had a baby she wouldn't run away. She did. (R group home worker)

There was a woman who was sold by her parents. (Head of S support agency)

Case C-7, who participated in the in-depth interview for this research, said that she was almost "made married" to an ethnic Korean man in China but she resisted strongly. She was sold instead as a housemaid to take care of an elderly woman and two kids for one and a half years. Case C-2 was sold by the broker who brought her to China and his North Korean wife. She was 17 and the man who wanted her was eight years older. She was not immediately sold due to her strong resistance but she knew she would be eventually and decided to escape to South Korea.

As soon as I crossed the river, a car pulled over... He told me to hop in... So I did... I took the car at about 8 o'clock at night and was handed over to someone the next day at around seven in the morning. I was sold as a housemaid. (C-7)

I stayed (at the broker's house) for about eight days and was told that somebody was coming to get me. I didn't know what was going on at that time but a Chinese guy came to buy me. I was very embarrassed. I was so confused and didn't understand what was going on ... (deleted)... I thought I had to be totally submissive in that situation. I was very close with (the broker's wife). I thought they wouldn't do me any harm... (deleted)... It was like hell that I got married at 17. I really hated it... I couldn't believe that I was only 17 and rotting like that... I thought it would be better in South Korea than in China where I didn't speak the language and didn't even know what was going to happen the next day. (C-2)

There was a woman that I called auntie. She was not my real aunt but I called her auntie anyway. She got married and moved to China. I was taken to China to be sold to a son of one of her relatives. The person who sold me to auntie told her that I was 20. I told her that I was 17 and too young to get married. So I stayed at her house for about eight months... but I found out she tried to sell me again when she ran out of money... so I decided to come to South Korea. (C-3)

## 2. Family disintegration and gender discriminatory family culture

Families of female adolescent immigrants from North Korea pass through a number of changes in the process of their escape. Some families flee the country together, while others do it separately. As illegal residents in China, some of them experience repeated separations. A third of the 30 interviewees of this research witnessed their parents' divorce and remarriage in North Korea. Also, many were separated from their parents when they went to China or somewhere else to make money.<sup>5</sup> What is notable is that when one of their parents lost contact after leaving for China to earn money, the other parent often remarried without pursuing a legal divorce. In such cases, it seems that girls often took on their mother's role in the family or were exposed to a number of conflicts in the process of forming a new family.

... I guess they were nice because they were not financially struggling. My mom sent me some money, too. (Did you talk to your father or stepmother about that?) My stepmother didn't like it. She didn't want me to keep in touch with my mom and we had some conflicts because of that. (A-14)

With my dad, stepmother, and younger sibling... my dad fought with my stepmother a lot because of me. My stepmother asked me to do the dishes and stuff, saying that I needed to learn how. My dad thought she made me work. They fought a lot. (A-2)

When their parents left home for extended periods, the girls were required to do housework or make a living simply to acquire food. In other cases, they were sent to a relative's house. This experience of separation and family struggles left the girls with a sense of abandonment and with grievances against their parents. It sometimes became a cause of family conflict after they came to South Korea.

I used to hate my mom, believing that she deserted us when we were kids... so I didn't talk to her much and just answered yes or no to her questions... I didn't love her at all... it took a while for me to feel settled... (A-14)

It was good in North Korea when we met once per day. I didn't like it here that much. I didn't feel settled. I used to hate my mom because she left me, but it's fine now. (A-2)

The problem is that this family disintegration and reconstruction is repeated in South Korea.

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5 They leave home planning to return promptly. However, returning is not easy as unofficial visits to China are forbidden in North Korea.

While some are reunited with their family members after more than ten years of separation, others choose separation for reasons of work or education and children stay at a school dormitory or group home. In other cases, children are forced to deal with their parents' divorce or remarriage. While the need for relationships is one of the most important elements for children's healthy development (Chu Byeong-wan, 1998), it is sometimes impeded by the family conflict that some female teenagers face in the process of family disintegration and reconstruction.

Our school is a little different, but about 65% of the students live with a single parent. Another 20% are unaccompanied. When we took a survey, about 17% lived with family members other than their grandparents. Around half of their parents were remarried. Their families disintegrate and reassemble. (Manager at C alternative school)

I lived for one month with my mom after we left Hanawon... I've been away from my mom since then... I've seen her only twice... (deleted)... my mom remarried... to a Chinese guy ... they recently got married. (A-5)

I used to live with my dad... this stepfather is a new guy to me. It's not been even a year since we met and I don't feel so comfortable with calling him dad. I have my dad in the North but I have another dad here. Because I lived with my dad all the time, to me the one in the North is my real dad. So I don't feel that comfortable. (A-17)

Compounding the conflict caused by recurring family disintegration, female adolescents are required to do housework and/or to take care of younger siblings. Some parents do not send their daughters to school or to programs for North Korean refugees in order to make them perform housework.

There's one student whose mom got remarried and is living in Euijeongbu. She lives with her grandmother and has to take care of her younger siblings. She works like a housemaid. (Q. Even at her age?) Yeah. When I ask her to participate in a program, she says she needs to go home and take care of her siblings. (L middle school teacher)

Her mom got remarried and had a baby. And her mom didn't send her to school, asking her to take care of the baby. She is a really good kid. I met her at a supermarket. She was carrying the baby and doing the grocery shopping. I was so angry. You know, you saw that kind of thing only in the 60s. (Q. Was she a middle school student?) Yes. (L middle school teacher)

As far as I know, the problems of North Korean girls are like a reduced version of their moms' problems or women's problems. All the problems that they have experienced sacrificing under patriarchy persist here as well. I know one mother who doesn't send her 17-year-old daughter to school. She said she had to go out and make money and her daughter should take care of her younger siblings. They live in the same way that they did in the North. The kid is really in a blind spot. If we don't know about the existence of girls like her, she won't get any help, whether it be an alternative school or whatever we provide. (R support agency employee)

In such unstable family relationships, many female teenagers also suffer physical abuse from their parents. There are cases of girls who feel reluctant to go home fearing their father's abuse. Other girls consider marriage as a way to escape from the responsibilities of housework or sibling-care.

I see bruises on some kids. They were physically abused by their fathers. In a vulnerable family environment, many girls are exposed to physical assault by their parents. I see serious bruises. Students talk to me about that, too. When I was in charge of first-graders in elementary school in one year, one of the kids would not go home until 10 at night. She said she was afraid of her father. She just killed time at a playground and went home after her father fell asleep... when I see kids like her, I see how their mothers have very vulnerable positions in the family. (M high school teacher)

Many of the kids who came here with single parents are exposed to domestic violence. Their fathers work as manual laborers and don't have work in the winter. When they do work, sometimes they work for three consecutive months. It's better for them to be away. When they don't have work in winter they come home and beat and nag at their kids. (K middle school teacher)

The girls are expected to take care of younger siblings. They should act as the mother, they need to make money, they need to study. So I think they choose marriage to free themselves from such a situation. (K middle school teacher)

These realities indicate an urgent need for policy intervention to promote stability and gender equality among the families of North Korean refugees. Currently, there are few professional counselors or experts specializing in parental education designed to promote gender equality within a family. Little support is provided for female adolescents at risk due to family conflict. This is related to Okin's argument (Ponzanesi, 2007) that when a minority group has a gendered culture, multicultural policy approaches commonly fail to recognize the phenomenon

of gender inequality itself and overlook private factors such as the family, which is a major structural unit of culture.

### 3. Deprivation of educational opportunities and invisibility at school

For adolescent North Korean refugees, education plays a critical role in the re-socialization and re-culturalization necessary for them to successfully adapt themselves to their new environment. In addition, it serves as an essential tool for them to develop the human capital required in South Korean society, obtain social status, and lead a stable life. Previous studies on North Korean teenagers' academic adaptation and performance point out that the longer the period between their escape from the North and entry into South Korea, the more the students tend to struggle due to the extended period away from education and falling behind in basic academic skills (Han Man-gil et al., 2009; Lee Hyang-gyu, 2007). The findings of this research are similar. However, what is also important to note is that school life itself appears to pose a considerable challenge to them. Compared to boys, girls who attend regular schools show a much greater tendency to not come out as North Koreans. They are afraid to face the social prejudices and potential impact on their peer relationships if they reveal their identity. Some actually experienced difficulties in relationships after revealing their true identities.

People always talk behind your back. I can't imagine how much worse it would be if I told them I'm from North Korea. I really hate people talking behind me. Senior students also tend to look down on and avoid you if they know that you are from the North. (A-6)

I hope kids don't make fun of it... there was one kid and other kids somehow found out that she was from the North and after that she was bullied and avoided. I didn't tell that I was from the North too because I was afraid of being treated like that. (A-1)

The teachers gave me lots of unused reference books. I guess she (a classmate) was jealous of me. She said... 'you don't speak Korean well, why are you living here, go back to North Korea'. I was really angry and I cried. (A-15, third year student at a regular high school)

They seem very curious at first. They look like they have an interest in me but soon you find that you are left alone. They don't want to hang out with you anymore. They think we are a little different from them... they just carelessly spit out hurting words. (A-6, first year student at a regular school)

Those who choose not to reveal their identity tend to not talk much at school and to not participate in afterschool programs for teenage North Korean refugees in order to conceal their

identities. They cover up their maladaptation to school by opting to act as a passive bystander<sup>6</sup> who rarely interacts with peers and teachers. Different from male students whose internal conflict is frequently manifested in problematic behaviors, female students are likely to suffer internally, such as with depression.

As receiving a government subsidy and advancing to higher education is a much better option than entering an unstable labor market, tertiary education appears to hold great implications for female adolescents as part of the extended process of their efforts for official settlement in South Korean society and as a way to remove their “North Korean-ness”. With the academic nature of a college education notably different from that of secondary school, however, they frequently struggle to catch up with their studies. In addition, while a university education is important in South Korea in order to accumulate quality cultural capital and secure social capital through peer relationships (Park Seo-yeon, 2008), the creation of social relationships with peers appears to pose a considerable barrier to North Korean refugees as well.

There are so many difficult words. While there are many that are hard to understand, English is especially difficult. As we don't have much foundation in English, it's hard to understand and with no basis, it's tough to catch up. (A-14)

To memorize it, you need to understand it first. But there are many parts that I simply cannot understand. I've been here for only four years. Every single word sounds like a foreign language to me. That's the most difficult thing. (C-8)

I didn't tell them (that I'm from North Korea). I think I could say yes if they asked me (whether I'm from the North). But I don't feel the need to say it before anybody asks. I realized that in high school. So I didn't reveal where I'm from and I'm doing fine. (A-14)

They just answer my questions but I cannot chat with them. I want to, but I know nothing. (C-8)

In selecting their career paths, either college or vocational training, they exhibit a strong preference for traditional women's areas such as beauty, nursing, and fashion. Policy support is needed to secure equality in terms of educational opportunities for female adolescent North Koreans in the South.

There are so many vocational training institutions but usually boys choose trades such as welding and car-related jobs. (deleted) Girls tend to not go directly into vocational training. I had one student who wanted to go to a beauty-shop specializing high school and linked

her to a private institution where she could learn the skills. She had to make money to bring her family to South Korea. (Employee at S community adaptation support center)

Currently, there are no gender-segregated statistics to identify the degree to which educational opportunities are accessible to adolescent female North Korean refugees. Furthermore, as support programs for young North Korean refugees enrolled in regular schools are carried out by individual schools, they are of no use to female students who are attempting to keep their identity confidential.

#### 4. Vulnerable sexuality

A number of North Korean women experienced sexual abuse or resorted to using their sexuality as a means of survival in the process of their escape; female adolescents are no exception. Although not explicitly trafficked, some strategically elect to live with a man as they hide (Park Sun-seong, 2009). Sexuality serves as a tool for them to defect from the North and survive in a third country. The fact that the sexuality of female adolescents is traded in the process of escape is taken for granted in the North Korean refugee community. Men do not blame women for it and tend to easily engage with them sexually. North Korean female adolescents seem to have a low psychological barrier to sexual relations and not link love and sex.

Sexual issues in the process of escape need to be understood. (deleted) In fact, they have very loose standards related to sex... (deleted)... they face so much fear in the process and it must be overwhelming to a teenage girl. (Q. Because their survival is constantly threatened.) And they need it to survive. So I think they have sex with their peers as a strategic choice to overcome fear and such. (Principle of P alternative school)

Not only teenagers but also grown-ups as well... you know, in our society men would not visit a woman's house when she lives by herself even if they know each other well (without any sexual intentions). They meet somewhere outside. These people engage in sex very easily ... it's so natural to them. (Employee at O support agency)

Most North Korean refugee adolescents also have unfulfilled needs for closeness, as they grew up without sufficient emotional support from their parents due to family disintegration. They choose cohabitation or marriage as a way to ease the stress, tension, and loneliness they experience during the process of settlement in South Korean society.

They have very complicated family relationships. In some cases, they have both their blood mother and a stepmother in Seoul. Boys are usually OK, but girls tend to have serious sexual

problems. You know, they don't get the love they need from their family. They are heavily reliant on their boyfriends and come to have sexual problems (J middle school teacher)

She is 17. The problem is that she lived with a boy. The boy was South Korean and was wanted by police. They cannot help but associate with those kinds of kids. When I was talking with her I saw how desperate she was. She just wanted something to hold on to. She wanted someone to rely on. (H professional counselor)

This attitude toward sexuality places at greater risk those who need to send money to their families in the North or those who hope to bring remaining family members to the South. Unaccompanied adolescents, in particular, experience severe pressure to remit a significant amount of money to North Korea while at the same time saving to bring remaining family members to the South. While a number of North Korean refugee adolescents work at restaurants or convenience stores, through which they can make less than one million won per month, employment at a karaoke salon or other entertainment business entity, which offers greater compensation for the amount of labor required (2-3 million won), is highly attractive. As they do not have the education, skills, and cultural capital required in South Korean society, it is difficult for them to secure a desirable job, and if they do, they are commonly temporary jobs that do not provide long-term income. In this situation, sexuality is often the easiest resource for female teenagers to resort to in order to secure their financial independence and send money to their families in the North.

They are told that there is easy work to make money. But where could they go? They work so hard and make a meager one million won per month. If someone says they can make 2-3 million with easy work... they would do it because they need to send money to the North. (S professional counselor)

She ran away from home and lost touch. We asked around to find her. Then, the rumor went around that she was staying at an unaccompanied friend's house and engaging in prostitution. (Employee at W community adaptation support center)

Many kids who were trafficked were engaged in adult video chatting. I cannot generalize it but quite a few had that experience. Some kids think that they had to do it to survive in the North but should not do it here. But they do it again. They know they shouldn't, but they just cannot help themselves. (Employee at O community adaptation support center)

Such a sexual attitude brings about a number of negative consequences for girls: they face real-world problems that can be overwhelming to an adolescent, such as pregnancy, abortion,



adoption, or childcare and they drift away from educational opportunities. There appears to be a need for gender-sensitive sexuality education, given that such risks facing North Korean refugee girls cannot be resolved by simply offering them biological information on pregnancy and contraception.

## 5. Malnutrition and psychological/emotional scars

Adolescent North Korean refugees must deal with a number of physical and emotional hardships caused by their escape from the North. Even prior to their escape from the country, many suffered illness or starvation. The chronic food shortage in North Korea has prevented most adolescents from receiving sufficient nutrition as they grow up, resulting in developmental delays and malnutrition (Paek Hye-jeong, 2011). In actuality, many of them are relatively small in physical size, prone to illness, and suffer cerebral development challenges.

They are really all small. (deleted)... and they suffer from serious complexes related to their appearance. Girls and boys, both. Especially the boys are so small. (Employee at OH community adaptation support center)

Their health is really bad. As they were born during the North's extreme starvation period, it affected their cerebral development. While there is a gap in academic foundation between them and their South Korean peers, there is also an issue of cerebral development. They have problems in cognitive functions. (R group home worker)

Their cognitive ability is very low. They didn't get enough nutrition as they grew up, which affected their brain development. It's not because they don't try hard. They just fall behind intellectually and cognitively. (Employee at O support agency)

According to a survey of 885 female North Korean refugees regarding their experience of trauma in the process of escape (Kim Byeong-chang and Yu Si-eun, 2010), three out of ten women were forced to marry or were trafficked. A number of female teenagers, in particular, suffer from reproductive-related diseases due to lack of proper care after childbirth or abortion in China, not to mention the extreme adversity they endured in order to survive. As to those who gave birth in China, their sufferings are compounded by the psychological trauma caused by their longing for the children they left behind.

I heard I got ganglions in my ovaries. I may need surgery. I'm scheduled for CT scanning for that. (B-3)

Girls experienced so many rapes in the process of escape. They didn't get tied down, but you know, their lives were threatened. 'If you don't respond to me I'll turn you in' kind of threats. There was no other choice for them, as it was in exchange for their lives. (H professional counselor)

A young woman in her early 20s visited me with her parents. She looked very depressed and distressed. She escaped from the North 2-3 years before her parents and had a child in China. I think she gave birth in her teens. She is now 23... in a counseling session, she told me that she misses her baby very much. (S professional counselor)

In addition to physical pain, they also suffer from severe emotional and psychological scars. In a study measuring depression among adolescent North Korean refugees (Park Yeun-suk, 2006), girls demonstrated a higher degree of depression than did boys. They also showed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder in the early period of their lives in South Korea due to what they were forced to survive in the process of escape (Kim Byeong-chang and Yu Si-eun, 2010). Like most other North Korean refugees, female adolescents also had to take risks in attempts to escape from the country and experienced a serious level of psychological trauma after suffering from the constant physical/emotional violence and threats to their lives prior to reaching South Korean territory. Sometimes longing for their families and stress stemming from their struggle to adapt to a new environment are manifested in the form of physical symptoms.

The counselor called a hospital and told them that I'm at a serious level... (the counselor) said I had depression. She thought it was so serious that I needed to be treated at a bigger hospital. So I got hospitalized at Yongin Mental Hospital. (C-2)

My life is depressing... I don't know what to do... I don't know what I want to do... I just live passively... I thought if I think hard about what to do here I would be able to find something I can do. I thought things would be easy but they're not. Every day is a struggle to me. Now I realize I was wrong... I have no dreams. (B-1)

I wasn't sick at all in North Korea. But I get sick here. I thought I would learn things one by one but it didn't happen as I planned... I didn't have any illness before. (B-2)

Most kids suffer from PTSD when they first arrive in South Korea. In some cases, it fades. But it can be replaced by depression during the process of adaptation. Some kids suffer from both depression and PTSD. (Employee at H community adaptation support center)

In order to respond to these issues, the South Korean government is offering counselors and a

number of services designed to support them in all areas, ranging from mental health to employment, medical services, education, and welfare. The current counselor system, however, fails to provide adolescent refugees with professional counseling based on an understanding of the developmental characteristics of adolescents and expertise on adolescent-related issues. There is a call for the government to establish a professional counseling support system catered to the needs of female adolescents as part of their efforts to overcome the complicated issues with which they are confronted.

## V. Measures to support adolescent female North Korean refugees

Based on in-depth interviews with adolescent female North Korean refugees and field experts who provide them services, this research has explored the gendered experiences through which female adolescents pass through in the process of their escape and settlement in the South and how such experiences pose an obstacle to their adaptation to South Korean society. The following table presents a summary of the findings of the interviews and major policy challenges

**Table 2. Obstacles to the settlement of adolescent female North Korean refugees and major challenges**

Area	Problems related to gender issues	Obstacles to settlement	Major policy challenges
Family life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family disintegration that began in North Korea</li> <li>• Family conflict in the process of family reconstruction</li> <li>• Gender-discriminative family culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Running away from home</li> <li>• Being a “young mother” in charge of housework and care work</li> <li>• Restricted educational opportunities</li> </ul>	Promotion of family stability and gender equality in families
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Girls not sent to school</li> <li>• Concealing their identities</li> <li>• Being silent at school</li> <li>• Strong career preference for traditional women’s areas such as beauty, nursing, and fashion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potential for accumulated academic delays due to early maladaptation to school</li> <li>• Dropping-out</li> <li>• Gender-stereotyped career selection</li> </ul>	Securing equal educational opportunities for female adolescents
Social relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unaccompanied adolescents choose alternative schools where they can receive accommodation and meals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Failed development of balanced social relations</li> </ul>	Establishment of healthy social relations

Area	Problems related to gender issues	Obstacles to settlement	Major policy challenges
Mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experience of human trafficking and forced marriage in the process of escape</li> <li>• Unwanted pregnancy, abortion, and childbirth; sense of guilt and longing for the babies</li> <li>• Unfulfilled needs for closeness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Depression, anxiety, somatization, PTSD</li> <li>• Loneliness</li> <li>• Identity crisis</li> </ul>	Mental and emotional well-being
Sexuality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sexual abuse</li> <li>• Chastity ideology</li> <li>• Sexuality as a trade resource</li> <li>• Perception of sexuality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cohabitation as a way to overcome loneliness</li> <li>• Single parenting and abortion</li> <li>• Entering prostitution and sex industries</li> </ul>	Establishment of subjectivity as a woman

Defining female adolescent immigrants from North Korea as immigrants places an emphasis on the interpretation and impact of their experience as both adolescents and women in the context of migration rather than viewing them in a political context. Based on the discussions above, this research suggests policy directions and agenda for the government in its efforts to support the sound adaptation of female adolescent immigrants from North Korea to South Korean society.

First, a gender-sensitive support policy system needs to be established for North Korean refugees. The establishment is suggested of an Office of Women's Policy under the Ministry of Unification in order to promote gender sensitivity in the Ministry's policies and produce and compile gender-segregated statistical data on North Korean refugees. In addition, a gender-sensitive perspective needs to be introduced to the implementation of North Korean refugee support programs by using a gender impact assessment scheme.

Second, gender-sensitive services for adolescents at community adaptation support centers (Hana Centers) need to be expanded. Access should be improved for female adolescents while strategies to increase gender sensitivity among center employees need to be implemented. In addition, in cooperation with schools, North Korean refugee students need to be assisted in their early intensive education.

Third, support for unaccompanied female adolescents should be reinforced. Such measures may include lowering the criteria for support for unaccompanied teenagers and the development of competence-building programs through a special taskforce.

Fourth, a contingency intervention system is required for adolescent female North Korean refugees. Some of ideas may include the establishment of a contingency intervention team for North Korean female adolescents under the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family and Ministry of Unification; cultivation of professional counselors and supporting staff for contingency intervention; and the introduction of home-school liaisons as a means to heighten the educational opportunities available to adolescents who have discontinued their schooling.

Finally, a number of other policies are necessary, including enforcing psychological treatment and mental health support services for female students and parental education programs for gender equality in the family.

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