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Co-authoring Revolution: *"Superior Men, Inferior Women" in the History and Reality of North Korean Socialism*

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Abstract

The present study examines the origins and reformulation of namjon nyeobi *('superior men, inferior women') in North Korea. The persistence of* namjon nyeobi *despite the North Korean regime's promotion of gender equality should be understood as a consequence of collective male and female service to socialism rather than a product of feudalism, Confucianism, or patriarchy. Historical analyses and interviews with North Korean migrants show that* namjon nyeobi *was reinforced by communist education in the 1960s and reformulated as standard socialist ethics thereafter. In pre-crisis periods, women functioned as the main instruments of social transformation in their supporting roles as mothers, wives, and daughters-in-law. Such reinforcement of fixed gender roles strengthened through post-crisis times as the imperative of survival further heightened the will to preserve the family for women whose breadwinning duties were executed in close association with men. Socialist* namjon nyeobi *should be understood as the hierarchies and roles assigned to ordinary men and women within Juche socialism.*

Keywords: North Korea, superior men, inferior women, socialism, family, migrant, interviews

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Introduction

The division of the Korean Peninsula in 1945 produced two rival regimes bent on disproving the other's claim to independence and national representation. Beginning in 1946, the North Korean regime implemented a set of drastic "anti-imperialist, anti-feudal, democratic" reforms (Cumings 1981; S. Kim 2013; Scalapino et al. 1973; Seo 2005) which were designed to validate Pyongyang's self-proclaimed lead in achieving superior independence and modernity. In this transformation, the 1946 Gender Equality Law is presented in official history as one of the most illustrious accomplishments of Kim Il-sung's post-colonial reforms. The sudden leap towards gender equality created "*Joseon nyeoseong*" (Korean women) as the newly emerging identity of emancipated women on the Korean peninsula who have equal rights to men, participate in social labor, and commit to socialist construction.[1]

In North Korean parlance, the appellation "*Joseon nyeoseong*" was used to indicate their distinction from postliberation South Korean women who were still tied to the ideology of domesticity represented by the *hyeonmo yangcheo* (wise mother, good wife) ideal.[2] The contrast became starker as the women emancipated by "anti-feudal, anti-imperialist democratic" reforms entered the socialist work force in massive numbers after the Korean War (Y. Park 2017 283). North Korea has claimed that the race towards socialist construction in the postwar period, which enhanced the material base for

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Note on Romanization: The Revised Romanization system was used in principle throughout this article (including for names of North Korean authors whose preferences could not be ascertained). Exceptions were made for more commonly recognized names of historical figures and author's preferences for the sources in the list of references.

1. In reference to the women of North Korea, "*Joseon nyeoseong*" is placed in double quotation marks to differentiate it from the same term which appears in italicized form without quotes to refer to the official publication of the Central Committee of the North Korean Democratic Women's League.
2. *Hyeonmo yangcheo* refers to the widely held ideology of domesticity in postliberation South Korea that confined women's primary roles to fulltime housewives and mothers (E. Kim 2007, 140; Yun 2005). By contrast, the term *hyeonmo yangcheo* is not commonly used in North Korea (H. Park 2003, 147).

women's liberation, dismantled the traditional order of women's subordination. Known as *namjon nyeobi* ('superior men, inferior women'), it refers to "the ethical moral view of an exploitative society that defers men and disdains women" and is defined as a "remnant of feudal Confucian ideology that must be eradicated" (Lim 2006, 35). In official discourse, "*Joseon nyeoseong*" "gradually overcame the malaise of *namjon nyeobi*" by way of socialized labor in urban and rural settings (*Rodong sinmun* 1957). Therefore, *namjon nyeobi* generally refers to either a condition that no longer exists in North Korea due to the 1946 reforms *or* a characteristic of South Korea where feudalistic gender discrimination persists in various legal and cultural contexts (*Rodong sinmun*, March 8. 1959).

However, contrary to North Korean claims that socialist construction has made *namjon nyeobi* obsolete and irrelevant, it is commonly cited by both men and women as a routine feature of its society (C. Kang 2020, 23; S. Kim et al. 1992, 145; KINU 2021, 733; Lankov and Kim 2014, 87; M. Lee 2004, 391; Lim 2006, 32–41; Nam et al. 2017, 177; Y. Oh 2001, 92; H. Park 2003, 57–64; M. Park and Do 2020; Sul and Song 2018, 83), which is supported by convention and reinforced by prevailing economic/political realities. The appearance and weight of *namjon nyeobi* to this day, more than seventy years after the 1946 reforms, is one of the areas where the inconsistency between state policy and everyday reality is most visible. Previous studies have attributed the gap to such factors as North Korea's "state patriarchy" or socialist patriarchy (J. Kim 2015; Kang 2015; Nam et al. 2017; Oh 2001, 92; H. Park 2003), or indoctrination of motherhood ideology (M. Lee 2004; K. Park 2012, 370). In this connection, earlier works have argued that the postliberation policies for "gender equality" were rolled back in favor of pro-family policies starting with the National Mother's Conference (Jeonguk eomeoni daehoe) in November 1961 (S. Choi 2018; J. Kim 2015, 410; K. Kim et al. 2016; S. Kim 2005; Lankov and Kim, 2014, 73; H. Park 1988, 80; Y. Park 2017, 23; Sechiyama 2015, 217).

However, the fact that North Korean legislation and political campaigns never denounced tradition or domesticity (S. Kim 2013, 176), as was the case in the Soviet Union or China at different phases in their revolution, does not sufficiently explain why *namjon nyeobi* remains a pronounced

feature of its gender culture. The contradiction between strengthening and weakening the family (Ashwin 2000, 10; H. Park 2003, 47) was never fully resolved in socialist settings because the "attempt to eradicate inequalities privileged social unity through familial relations" (S. Kim 2010, 650). Most Marxist experiments have attempted to solve the women question without dealing with the feminist one (S. Kim 2013, 179) and adopted gender-homogenization strategies (Goven 2002, 6–8). Motherhood was politicized and rewarded as a service to the state (Issoupova 2000, 30; Lankov and Kim 2014, 71; Peri 2018, 62; Pindor 2013, 15; Wang 2016, 65). Indeed, the emphasis on motherhood and the resurgence of pro-family policies was neither Confucian nor traditional (S. Kim 2014, 260). Likewise, North Korea was not unique in leaving the social differentiation between men and women fundamentally unquestioned while fostering women's participation in the social, economic, and political arenas (S. Kim 2013, 179). Therefore, attributing *namjon nyeobi* to default conditions such as patriarchy or Confucianism can be analytically misleading.

To make better sense of the development, reproduction, and modification of *namjon nyeobi* within North Korea's specific historical and material context (K. Park 2012, 330), the present study considers it *namjon nyeobi* as a product of collective male and female service to North Korean socialism.[3] Socialist *namjon nyeobi* refers to the status assigned to men and women respectively as a result of their interaction and co-existence in public and private realms within the institution of Juche socialism. This socialist *namjon nyeobi* should be distinguished from pre-liberation feudal *namjon nyeobi* which was explicitly addressed in the 1946 Gender Equality Law (S.

3. As H. Park (2003) showed, it is necessary to recognize how the "logic of socialism penetrates in to the logic of the North Korean family" (23–25). North Korea's patriarchal features must be considered as a function of socialism rather than Confucian tradition (H. Park 1988, 44–48). Among feminist scholars, for example, Butler (1990) criticized the notion of universal patriarchy or male domination for "its failure to account for the workings of gender oppression in the concrete cultural contexts in which it exists" (5). The tendency to resort to the reductionist fallacy of two biological sexes and dichotomous perception of the ruler (men) and the subjugated (women) must be avoided (S. Choi 2018, 1).

Kim et al 1992, 128–129; J. Kim 2015; C. Kang 2020, 4–11). Since then, such feudal vices as polygamy, sale of women, licensed prostitution, private prostitution, and the *kisaeng* (female entertainer) system, were outlawed. The guarantee of rights to property and land, divorce, education, social insurance, equal pay, and worker's rights were no doubt revolutionary at the time (J. Kim 2015; H. Park 2003; Y. Park 2017).

Notwithstanding, the institutional requirements of socialist construction and regime consolidation—i.e., economic planning with priority on heavy industrialization (Y. Park 2017, 304–353), the principle of family consolidation, and the repeal of uncontested divorce in 1955 (H. Park 2003, 52–53; Jo 1958, 14–15; Kim et al. 1992, 140–144), public distribution which effectively favored male heads of household (Cho 2013, 124; Lankov and Kim 2014, 87)—placed men and women in hierarchies and roles that most effectively fulfilled the dictates of socialism. While *namjon nyeobi* is officially denied, the following historical analyses and interviews with North Korean defectors show that it was reinforced by communist education and reformulated as standard socialist ethics. Both imposed and uncontested in multiple manifestations, *namjon nyeobi* resulted from the "logic of socialism" (H. Park 2003, 23–25) penetrating the public and private interaction of ordinary men and women.

Analytical Framework and Methodology

In previous scholarship, the dichotomous lens of the Cold War and prevailing top-down perspectives cast North Korean women as either emancipated or oppressed; glorified or exploited; agents or pawns in the state's socialist program. However, *namjon nyeobi* involves contradictions, ambiguities, and complexities that are not fully captured by either the dichotomous or top-down perspectives. To complement them, the present research highlights popular attitudes and values in *namjon nyeobi*'s reformulation from antiquated feudal practice to standard socialist ethics. Historical analyses and in-depth interviews with North Korean migrants show that the story of *namjon nyeobi* has both male and female authors

operating under the dictates of Juche socialism. Rather than simply dismissing the North Korean gender situation as lagging behind that of the "developed West," this study sets a new direction for grasping the history and reality of socialist *namjon nyeobi* as a component of North Korea's Juche modernity and investigates its stabilizing qualities which allowed both women and men to accept the gap between the policy on gender equality and the reality of *namjon nyeobi.*

The prevalence of *namjon nyeobi* has been widely recognized in previous literature. The incorporation of female labor in the socialist workforce did not significantly change the popular perception of *namjon nyeobi* and the clear division of labor between spouses regarding housework (Kim et al. 1992, 145); *in our style* socialism placed further emphasis on the institution of the family (Kim et al. 1992, 145); old assumptions about *proper* male and female behavior and in-family gender roles have not collapsed despite the near reversal of economic gender roles (KINU 2021, 733; Lankov and Kim 2014, 87); still imposed are the ideals of proper "*Joseon nyeoseong*"-like behavior for women to take full responsibility for childcare, house chores, and observe the conventional gender order (KINU 2021, 324); *namjon nyeobi*, including preference for sons, is still dominant (Nam et al. 2017, 177); private patriarchy persists despite the participation of more fathers and husbands in house chores since the Arduous March (Nam et al. 2017, 195; H. Park 2003, 57–64; Sul and Song 2018, 83); women themselves to not reject patriarchy and do not question conventional gender roles regardless of their educational background (M. Lee 2004, 391; Y. Oh 2001, 92); North Korean women have not had the chance to learn about gender equality at home (Sul and Song 2018, 83); North Korean women have not had the chance to gain an understanding of universal notions of human rights or equality (C. Kang 2020, 23).

Instead of framing the problem as a balance sheet of losses and gains for women or in relation to the prescriptive capacities/ambitions of the state regarding gender relations, the present study relies on historical evidence and migrant interviews to examine how both male and female service to Juche socialism—rather than patriarchy or Confucianism—produced such complex, paradoxical, and unintended consequences. The story of *namjon*

nyeobi in North Korea involved multiple authors—the state and the people, men and women alike. Men and women had traditional and transitional views regarding *namjon nyeobi*. Based on these considerations, the study poses the following questions:

1. What is the cause and consequence of socialist *namjon nyeobi?*
2. What is the analytic lens through which to make sense of a contemporary gender culture in which frequent references to *namjon nyeobi* persist?
3. What specific conditions have generated the gap between state promotion of gender equality and the reality of *namjon nyeobi?*
4. What are the implications for women's economic empowerment since the Arduous March for effecting change in *namjon nyeobi?*

Historically, the origins of socialist *namjon nyeobi* can be found in the glorification of women who functioned as the main instruments of social transformation in their supporting roles as mothers, wives, and daughters-in-law modeled after the female revolutionaries who assisted Kim Il-sung's anti-Japanese armed struggle. This interpretative framework is supported by sources from North Korea's official publications, such as *Joseon nyeoseong* (Korean Women) and *Rodong sinmun*. *Joseon nyeoseong* is the mouthpiece of the Central Committee of the North Korean Democratic Women's League (hereafter, Women's League). Launched in on September 16, 1946, *Joseon nyeoseong* has served the ideological education and mobilization of women. The news analyses and essays, and speeches of leading Women's League officials, in *Joseon nyeoseong* are supplemented by articles in the *Rodong sinmun*, the daily newspaper of the Central Committee of the Korean Worker's Party (KWP).

The more proximate reality of socialist *namjon nyeobi* and its multiple manifestations in the lives of men and women are examined through semi-structured interviews with twenty North Koreans now resettled in South Korea conducted throughout the year 2020. The interviewees were found through personal networks and assistance groups supporting the resettlement of North Koreans in South Korea. For an even-handed coverage of socialist *namjon nyeobi* in North Korean gender culture, the interviewees

included men and women of widely varying age groups, marital status, occupations, and educational backgrounds. They were asked about: (1) the causes of *namjon nyeobi*; (2) the meaning of gender equality; (3) prospects for change in the gender culture dominated by *namjon nyeobi*.

Interviewing North Korean migrants raises concerns regarding confidentiality and sample bias (Cho 2004; B. Choi 2003, 312–321; Jeong 2005; J. Kang 2015). To address the first issue and ensure maximum reliability of interview data, the entire interview process observed the Bioethics and Safety Act which requires researchers to inform the interviewees about the specific terms of confidentiality in a letter of consent subject under the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the first author's employer institution. The letter of consent explicitly states that the video recordings and transcripts of the interviews are saved in encrypted USB or external hard drives and accessible only to the participants of the present research. The letter makes it clear that the interview results are not disclosed to anyone else outside the present research team, and that no personal information about the interviewees is disclosed upon the publication of the interview results in peer-reviewed journals.

The second issue regarding sample bias is further complicated due to the regional imbalance of North Korean defectors, who mostly come from the two provinces closest to the border with China, namely North Hamgyong and Ryanggang (Cho 2004; Jung and Dalton 2006; Lankov and Kim 2014, 71). These two provinces account for only around twelve percent of the North Korean population this rural-urban gap is much wider than in developed countries (Song and Denney 2019, 453). Furthermore, they do not "constitute a representative sample of North Korean society because they have chosen to leave, meaning that their opinions about politics are systematically biased" (Dukalskis and Lee 2020, 1055). The over-representation of the two northern provinces reflects the regional imbalance of the defector community, as in other studies on North Korean defectors (Lankov and Kim 2014, 71).

To mitigate these concerns, the authors tried to diversify the regional dispersion of the interviewees (B. Choi 2003, 330; Jeong 2005, 170), focus on "behaviors and processes that can be externally validated rather than on

political opinions" (Dukalskis and Lee 2020, 1055; Seo 1995), and cross-referenced the interview results against other published analyses of defector interviews (B. Choi 2004, 330). In fact, eight of the twenty interviewees were selected from provinces other than North Hamgyong and Ryanggang; the interview questions focused on the daily lives and popular sentiments of ordinary people to detach the research from political prejudice (Y. Cho 2004, 72); and the interview questions and results were cross-referenced against previous studies that demonstrated the pervasiveness of *namjon nyeobi* (C. Kang 2020, 23; Kim et al. 1992, 145; KINU 2021, 733; Lankov and Kim 2014, 87; M. Lee 2004, 391; Lim 2006, 32–41; Nam et al. 2017, 177; Y.

Table 1. Profile of Interviewees

Code	Age	Sex	Residence	Job in NK	Left NK	Entered SK	Date of interview
1	41	F	North Hamgyong	Laborer	2002	2010	Nov. 16, 2019
2	28	F	Ryanggang	Unemployed	2017	2017	Oct. 19, 2019
3	32	M	South Pyongan	Student	2017	2018	Nov. 16, 2019
4	27	F	South Hamgyong	Laborer	2007	2016	Nov.16, 2019
5	35	M	North Hamgyong	Laborer	2011	2012	Nov.16, 2019
6	57	M	Pyongyang	Researcher	2008	2008	Aug. 14, 2020
7	60	M	Pyongyang	Public official	2015	2015	July 17, 2020
8	51	F	Ryanggang	Construction worker	2008	2010	Sep. 19, 2020
9	56	M	Pyongyang	Party official	2011	2011	Dec. 12, 2020
10	48	F	Pyongyang	Soldier	2009	2014	Dec. 12, 2020
11	54	M	North Hamgyong	Laborer	2016	2016	April 8, 2021
12	54	F	Ryanggang	Laborer	2007	2008	April 8, 2021
13	45	F	Ryanggang	Housewife	2008	2010	April 8, 2021
14	63	M	South Hamgyong	Public official	2009	2009	May 1, 2021
15	57	M	Pyongyang	Public official	2009	2009	May 1, 2021
16	54	F	Hwanghae	Housewife	2013	2017	May 1, 2021
17	54	M	Ryanggang	Laborer	2011	2011	May 8, 2021
18	54	M	North Hamgyong	Laborer	2002	2006	May 8, 2021
19	50	F	North Hamgyong	Housewife	2018	2019	May 8, 2021
20	37	F	North Hamgyong	Laborer	2015	2017	May 8, 2021

Oh 2001, 92; H. Park 2003, 57–64; M. Park and Do 2020; Sul and Song 2018, 83). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Some information about their background is summarized in the following Table. To protect the identities of the migrants, we refer to them by code-number. All interviews were conducted by the first author in Seoul throughout 2019–2021.

Historical Origins of Socialist *Namjon nyeobi*

Previous studies have argued that the postliberation policies for "gender equality" were rolled back in favor of pro-family policies starting with the National Mother's Conference (Jeonguk eomeoni daehoe) in November 1961. However, since pro-family policies and motherhood as a service to the state were common across socialist countries, they do not sufficiently explain how socialist construction refashioned *namjon nyeobi*. The specific historical origin of socialist *namjon nyeobi* should be located in the elevation of Kim Il-sung's anti-Japanese armed struggle as the unitary revolutionary origin in the 1960s and the corresponding glorification of women at home who backed this movement. As the communist education in Juche spotlighted Kim Il-sung's anti-colonial nationalism of the 1930s, women were inserted in public narratives as the main instruments of social transformation in their supporting roles as mothers, wives, and daughters-in-law, i.e., "revolutionary *hyeonmo yangcheo*" (H. Park 2003, 139), modeled after the female revolutionaries who assisted Kim Il-sung's anti-Japanese armed struggle. Consequently, the communist education in Juche left the conventional gender hierarchy not only undisrupted but refashioned as an ideologically correct undertaking required to stabilize North Korean socialist construction. Within this formulation, the socialist Korean family became the very site of a woman's revolutionization and incubator of her communist identity rather than oppression.

Initially, *women's emancipation* began as a socialist undertaking which generally corresponded to the Sovietization of North Korea and the credit for the achievement *was not* centered exclusively on Kim Il-sung. However,

as the public promotion of Juche became full-fledged in the 1960s, "women's emancipation" became a socialist Korean agenda incorporated into the regime's indigenized revolutionary program. Consequently, the education of true communists now highlighted those women—in most cases, mothers—who rallied around Kim Il-sung's anti-colonial nationalism. "Women's emancipation" began to incorporate Koreanized attributes, which were not merely strict applications of Marxist-Leninist tenets but expanded on them.

> The real struggle for women's emancipation in Korea began when the Korean people's struggle for national liberation entered the stage of the anti-Japanese armed struggle organized under the leadership of Marshal Kim Il-sung. In 1932, Marshal Kim Il-sung organized the anti-Japanese partisan units, presented the exact line of the Korean Revolution, and at the same time *proclaimed the path ahead for women's emancipation*. For the emancipation of women, *not only the legal equality of women must be achieved as Marxism and Leninism teaches, but also the practical conditions for political, economic and social equality must be guaranteed* [italics added]. (*Joseon nyeoseong* 1960, 12)

From the 1960s, *women's emancipation* was indigenized parallel to communist education in Juche, which centered on Kim Il-sung's anti-Japanese armed struggle. Correspondingly, women who supported Kim's anti-colonial nationalism began to dominate the public depiction of women's class and national struggle. The militarized communist mother celebrated in the emerging public narratives centered on Kim Il-sung's anti-Japanese armed struggle were instrumental to the revolution in their auxiliary roles, i.e., by "supporting and protecting" (*wonhohada*) their family members as mothers and wives of male activists. Typically, their roles were depicted in maternalistic terms: "Our mothers and wives, who sent their beloved husbands and sons and daughters into the anti-Japanese partisan struggle, participated in various anti-Japanese organizations including women's associations, taking risks and making sacrifices, and committed all their strength and devotion to actively supporting the anti-Japanese partisan armies" (*Joseon nyeoseong* 1965, 50).

This formulation itself was not intended to compel women to observe *namjon nyeobi*. However, as Hyun Ok Park (1998) pointed out, "women were to be brought into the social struggle by family members, especially sons and husbands" (240). Therefore, the education of communist women proceeded in such a way that serving the revolution and serving the family was indistinguishable from each other. That is, mothers were militarized through the instruction and example of their husbands, who were *usually* (but not always) the first ones to submit to the *organizational leadership* of the Fatherland Liberation Association (Joguk gwangbokhoe) or Korean People's Revolutionary Army (Joseon inmin hyeongmyeonggun). Therefore, women were revolutionized to the extent that they assisted the primary partisan/labor activism of their husbands (or children) by childcare, housekeeping, practicing filial piety, and breadwinning. Except for earning a living, most of these were standard roles performed by women.

Women were educated to revolutionize themselves within the parameters inherited from tradition or Confucianism, which "no legislation, or political campaign ever denounced" because "the family and the home came to symbolize the Korean nation in the North Korean Revolution" (S. Kim 2010, 745). This is different from China where women were encouraged to use Mao Zedong's work to criticize domineering family members, such as parents, in-laws, or husbands (Salaff and Merkle 1970, 188), and femininity was subordinated to masculinity so that women were pressured to dress like men and act like men, but not vice versa (Yang and Yan 2017, 67). In North Korea, carrying a feminine demeanor and fulfilling her duties as a mother, wife, and daughter-in-law were key measures of a woman's revolutionization. In the 1960s, the pursuit of Juche in the struggle against revisionism and dogmatism further elevated the significance of traditional femininity in the construction of revolutionary womanhood.

In addition to these, communist mothers were subject to additional instructions about how to remain a true Korean woman while modernizing herself as a selfless public servant. This included, for example, the regime's instruction to women to don *joseonot* or *chimajeogori* (traditional Korean dress) (Do and Park. 2021; J. Lee 2019; E. Oh 2019). More tellingly, communist mothers were constantly told to carry on the will of their

husbands by respecting the parents-in-law (*sibumo*). Granted, filial piety was not imposed only on women—in principle, it was a virtue for everyone to follow and required no particular emphasis in communist education. What is noteworthy is the unique way in which it appeared as a critical element of a communist mother's obligation towards *her parents-in-law*, rather than parents in general. Filial piety towards the parents-in-law constituted a key requisite of a communist mother: "a self-effacing and polite woman, daughter-in-law (*myeoneuri*) whose filial piety is immeasurable, a wise and mature wife, and a benevolent mother" (*Rodong sinmun* 1965; italics added), the most exemplary of which was Gang Ban Seok (*Joseon nyeoseong* 1967, 6–8).

The foregoing indoctrination had the unintended effect of strengthening patrilineal heritage and thereby reinforcing *namjon nyeobi* despite the decline of the patriarchal family after the termination in 1946 of the colonial-era household registry system that required a male head of household. In everyday practice, the impact of weakening private patriarchy was somewhat cancelled out by the continued idealization of certain patriarchal customs as true Korean/correct communist virtue (Lim 2006; Cho 2013) or, for example, the abrogation of uncontested divorce in 1956 to buttress the principle of "consolidation of the family" (*gajeong gonggohwa*) (Jo 1958, 14–15).

Socialist *namjon nyeobi* in Post-Crisis Reality

The indispensable role of women in the survival of North Korea after the economic crisis of the 1990s has been well recognized and documented. Nonetheless, patriarchy is still cited by North Koreans as the most fundamental reason for the gap between the policy of gender equality and the reality of women's subordination. Under these circumstances, the implications of women's breadwinning role for gender equality are still unclear for several reasons: (1) marketization has added a new ingredient to the contradictory mixture of Koreanized radicalism and tradition; (2) throughout the crisis and afterwards, women's determination to preserve the

family strengthened, which had ambivalent consequences for gender equality (H. Park 2003, 143); and (3) male privilege and domination, which are built into the institution of socialism, cannot be contested in the peculiar political context of North Korea (Nam et al. 2017; Y. Oh 2001). The following interview findings provide the details necessary to understand the development, reproduction and modification of *namjon nyeobi* in North Korea's post-crisis reality.

Gap Between Rhetoric and Reality

Socialist *namjon nyeobi*, which contradicts the official promotion of gender equality, has been described by our interviewees as "very strong" (M9; F10; F13; F1), "reminiscent of the Joseon dynasty" (M11; M3; F13), "feudalistic" (M7; F1; F13), "fatal" (F13; F12; F4), "inevitable" (F8; F10), and "institutional" (M11; M15; F16).[4] The following are some examples of the experience and examples of *namjon nyeobi* from among our interviewees:

- In the average workplace, women usually arrive at the office thirty minutes before men to clean the office. (M9)
- If a woman is a superior in the military, subordinate male officers never salute first. This is how strong *namjon nyeobi* is in North Korea. (M9)
- North Korea is still feudal and women's human rights are pathetic. Women's human rights are ignored. Men get better treatment because they have to work for the state. This was the situation back in the 1980s and still is the same. (M7)
- The image of "*Joseon nyeoseong*" is one of innocence, simple-mindedness, and submissiveness. Due to the strength of *namjon nyeobi*, "*Joseon nyeoseong*" have the image of faithfully executing orders and obeying. (M6)
- In North Korea, men think they have to be superior to women; and it is okay for women to be ignored. Women are socially unequal to men—women do not receive social recognition to a great degree and cannot

4. The interviewees are identified by their sex and code number.

file a claim even if they are sexually harassed nor expect protection in such a case. (F13)

– Although gender equality is proclaimed, neither the state nor the family supports women's ambitions. If a woman strives to attain a certain degree of social success, her parents, not to mention the state, would be the first to oppose it, saying "Why should a woman like you have such aspirations? (F12; F2)
– Despite the education in gender equality, I have never even heard of such a thing as child support for a mother back in North Korea. (M14; F16)
– The discrepancy between the proclamation of gender equality and *namjon nyeobi* comes from the fact that North Korea is actually a feudal dynasty rather than a socialist system. Despite the policy emphasis, there is absolutely no such thing as gender equality. (M15)
– In security inspections, for example, it is customary for police officers to treat women much harsher, using swear words. As a general phenomenon, there are many cases where women are still disdained and looked down on. In this sense, the impact of *namjon nyeobi* is still very strong in North Korea today. (F19)

Mix of Traditional and Transitional Views

Based on their experience of *namjon nyeobi,* the interviewees were asked to think about the reasons for the huge gap between policy and reality. Both men and women thought that the state's enforcement of gender equality was basically perfunctory, intended to mobilize women for social labor. They did differ, however, on whether *namjon nyeobi* was a function of women's dependence on men, and how independent women could be in a male-oriented system. Interestingly, women did not think the loss of men's bread-winning capacity since the Arduous March as a reason to disregard a male presence in the family or the institution of marriage altogether (F8, F16, M15, M14). Even though husbands are called "*natjeondeung*" (a daytime lamp) to imply their uselessness as a breadwinner, women's market activities and family life still required male assistance and cooperation. In other

words, men maintained their status in *namjon nyeobi* not by their breadwinning capacity but by convention as well as the need of women to have a male presence in her private and public lives. The interviewees' testimonies demonstrated a mix of traditional and transitional views regarding the causes of *namjon nyeobi* and its future prospects.

Both men and women understood gender equality to be imposed as a formality, necessary to mobilize women's labor during the course of socialist construction and thereafter: "The intent of the Gender Equality Law socially is not to protect women legally but to indicate that women have been granted the right to work just as much as men. The Gender Equality Law was initiated to force women to work rather than to protect them" (M15). Similarly, another interviewee opined:

> What I understood gender equality to mean was that it meant ***equal obligations*** between men and women rather than equal rights. It meant that there is no difference between men and women in terms of ***loyalty to the state***. We were told in school that women could also become party cadres, join the army, and take up leadership positions in society. But not for once did I ever see it being realized because of ***male supremacy*** (*namseong uwoljuui*). Clearly, women suffer from discrimination. Gender equality was just rhetoric and does not include any right that has to do with women's rights [emphasis added]. (F13)

Gender equality was something that existed in legal terms or in school education, but it was "not experienced in real life" (F12). The reason for this, however, was not due to male domination or the inability of women to oppose it. Many interviewees described how they believed that the institution of socialism itself bred *namjon nyeobi.*

> *Namjon nyeobi*, which is slowly declining but still exists in North Korea today, derives from the institutional problems of North Korea. On the surface, the regime claims to care about gender equality, starting with the Gender Equality Law, and defines women as having equal partnership in the revolutionary drive, but *namjon nyeobi* is maintained because men's roles have much greater social and economic significance. Although

> *namjon nyeobi* is gradually disappearing, it will be difficult for the problem to be completely eradicated in a communist dictatorship such as North Korea where levels of economic and social development, as well as levels of scientific and technological development, lag far behind global standards. (M14)
>
> *Namjon nyeobi* persists due to the feudalism inherited from the past, which permeates the social atmosphere of North Korea. In addition, the North Korean economic structure is still made up of sectors that require the physical labor of men. So, the thinking in North Korea is that society cannot function smoothly without giving preferential treatment to men. (F13)

In addition to the weight of convention and politics in the persistence of socialist *namjon nyeobi* as cited above, the interviewees spoke at length about the mutually dependent dynamics between men and women for survival in the post-crisis economy of shortage. In this sense, socialist *namjon nyeobi* refers to the status assigned to men and women respectively as a result of their interaction and co-existence in public and private realms within the institution of Juche socialism. Although women are known to be the breadwinners of the family, social conditions and economic realities require that women carry out their duties in *close association with men*. This makes it necessary for women to preserve their families or at least maintain the semblance of a family even in unlikely circumstances. It is the conditions for daily survival, rather than women's resignation or men's coercion, that reinforce the hierarchies and roles prescribed by socialist *namjon nyeobi*.

> There are several reasons a woman needs a husband even if he is incapable of earning a living. First, a woman who lives alone after divorce, for example, is often subject to the danger of sexual harassment or assault. So even if her husband is deceased, for example, she tells her children to tell other people that dad went away on business. Second, the living conditions in North Korea are such that they require a man's physical labor, such as cutting firewood, delivering [coal] briquettes, fulfilling the mobilization duties required of people's units (*inminban dongwon*) or head of the household mobilization (*sedaeju dongwon*). These duties

> would make a women think it would be convenient to have a husband around. (M15)

The need for women to stay married despite the multi-layered burdens of family life in post-crisis reality is reinforced by the local conditions of the *jangmandang* (market):

> These days, women in the *jangmadang* need the helping hand of their husbands. Men help out by carrying heavy packages and goods and protect the wife's business from pickpockets. Having a husband comes in very handy for a woman. Every morning and at night the husbands shuttle back and forth carrying the goods for sale in the *jangamang*. The goods cannot be left in the *jangmadang* over night because they will be stolen. It seems women think there might be a synergy to be gained from being married. (M15)

Another condition that preserved the institution of marriage in North Korea was "the notion that domestic violence constitutes abuse does not exist in North Korea, and therefore it is not thought to be a reason to consider divorce even if a drunken husband beats his wife or children or swears at them" (F16).[5] Still, such abusive husbands constituted "a minority, and many more were willing to help their wives by preparing supper and the like" (F16). Since women become breadwinners in the first place for the sake of the family, their economic empowerment does not affect a fundamental change in power dynamics between the husband and wife. On this point, one interviewee stated the following:

> Even if women earn a living, they do not act in an arrogant manner or ignore men. Rather, women become breadwinners in order to save their families. They do not look down on their husbands for being unable to make a living. They understand that men are obligated to fulfill their duties to the state at the workplace. Women still hold patriarchal values to the point that they do whatever they can to save their families and do not

5. For more on this, see Nam et al. (2017) and C. Kang (2020).

> disregard their husbands even if they are unable to make a living. (M17)

As for the future of *namjon nyeobi*, the interviewees had diverging projections. Some of the reasons cited for its probable continuance in the future were as follows:

> *Namjon nyeobi* will continue in the future because men will not discard their patriarchal thinking. Men think that it is their superior right and prerogative and will not let it go. They think it works to their advantage to look down on women. While *namjon nyeobi* is considered *to be a flawed notion in South Korea, there is no comparable awareness in the North. Men do everything they can to hold on to it* [italics added]. (M11)

Still others thought that *namjon nyeobi* would persist because most people are not even aware that it is a problem (F16). It was a condition all are born into, or destined to live (F12). The state will not allow the superior position of men to unravel or let women to take up superior positions because North Korean society still runs based on male-dominated labor, such as in the factories, and there is more for men to do in society than women (F13). The emergence of breadwinning wives has not raised their social status—it has changed the economic status of men, but this does not mean that a woman's status has been elevated or that a man's status has been lowered (M18). One interviewee stated that women's tendency or desire to depend on men caused *namjon nyeobi* (M11).

Most interviewees agreed that while it will be difficult for *namjon nyeobi* to be completely eradicated, it will be reduced by economic and social development in the future (M11; M18; F12; F20). One interviewee noted how the increased presence of female cadres indicated an amelioration of gender discrimination: "Women have just as much right to party membership if they wish; since women are now making their own money, they can even bribe their way into party membership and there is nothing to stop them from doing so" (F20). Similarly, another interviewee projected the following:

> Even though *namjon nyeobi* will not likely disappear altogether, it will improve greatly if living conditions improve in the future. Catching up with just half the level of South Korean development will go a long way to improving *namjon nyeobi.* In the past, North Korean women could not walk past their husbands whose eyes were buried in the newspaper without lifting their heels to show respect. However, women have discarded such practice by now. As this example shows, *namjon nyeobi* is not so dominant anymore. (F12)

Conclusion

The reinforcement of fixed gender roles combined with the principle of family consolidation strengthened through post-crisis times as the imperative of survival further heightened the will to preserve the family for women whose breadwinning duties were executed in close association with men. Both imposed and uncontested in multiple manifestations, *namjon nyeobi* was not a function of men's domination of women but resulted from their interaction in public and private realms as they collectively served North Korean socialism.

In theoretical terms, women's emancipation in socialism everywhere was achieved by full submission to the vanguard party (Yurchak 2005, 11) which, in the context of North Korea's hyper-militarization and rivalry with the South, implemented policies that continued to sustain male privileges at home and work (Y. Park 2017, 273). A strict division of gender roles has been reproduced in the construction, consolidation, and revitalization of socialism spanning over seventy years. In this context, what education and employment of women, which are generally understood to be conducive to female empowerment (E. Kim 2017), can achieve for gender equality in North Korea is somewhat uncertain. This is because education in gender equality as a revolutionary feat already achieved by Kim Il-sung will mean more of the same kind of indoctrination in the anti-colonial, nationalist agenda, as opposed to a feminist or a human rights concern; state penetration in labor conditions and marketization are also heavily gendered;

due to the political environment, gender inequality cannot be contested collectively or openly (Y. Oh 2001, 97: Nam et al. 2017, 202).[6]

The strength of ideology and policy, however, does not preclude change in popular practice and sentiments. As described in the foregoing section, men and women exhibited both traditional as well as transitional outlooks regarding socialist *namjon nyeobi.* In the people's struggle for survival since the Arduous March, the appearance and weight of socialist *namjon nyeobi* began to vary progressively despite the continuity with which the regime has ideologically supported the conception of gender equality as primarily Kim Il-sung's political achievement. As Keong-Suk Park (2012) contended, the ability of the state to impose patriarchy became uneven due to the economic empowerment of women (331). The discrepancy between official discourse and reality demonstrates the need for future research to further scrutinize the conditions on the ground to grasp the specific characteristics of North Korean society.

Men or women, superior or inferior, liberated or oppressed, each person played his or her own designated part in the construction of socialism and its revitalization since the Arduous March. Each role was indispensable and executed invariably in close interaction with the other both in private and public realms. In this process, some were well rewarded; some barely managed; and some became disenchanted. These sentiments and consequences cut across status, region, class, and sex. Until direct conversations with North Koreans become more frequent and sustainable, scholars looking in from the outside can only hope to do at least a modicum of justice to the multitudes of experiences men and women have had as socialist Koreans and ordinary human beings.

6. With regard to the issue of education, some interviewees remarked that education for girls was not highly encouraged after the Arduous March. Some felt it was useless for girls to study in a country where *namjon nyeobi* was so strong (F1, F2, F4); after the spread of markets in North Korea, from age fifteen or sixteen girls were told to start up market activity rather than study (M3, M5). This has to be understood within the broader context of North Korea's economic and political circumstances rather than patriarchy *per se.*

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