

Her Escape: Unveiling the Gender Disparity among North Korean Escapee-Defectors through an analysis of Sex Trafficking in China and Labor Market Demands in South Korea

Hailee Youn

Abstract: Analyses of demographic data concerning escapee-defectors from North Korea reveal a pronounced trend of higher numbers of females than males. The puzzle surrounding the underlying reasons for this gender-skewed defection rate remains a question shrouded in limited insight. This study investigates the phenomenon by considering two potential explanations: 1) An illicit yet thriving Chinese market for wives and sex workers establishes an exclusive niche occupied by North Korean women, leading to a disproportionately higher number of female escapee-defectors; 2) The market demand functions of South Korea entail more job prospects for women, thereby contributing to a greater number of female escapes from North Korea in pursuit of economic autonomy. Upon examination of both explanations through a derivative of the 7-S McKinsey Framework—the Triad-S Framework—this study asserts that the second candidate explanation more aptly accounts for the higher proportion of female North Korean escapee-defectors. While acknowledging the prevalence of sex trafficking, the first candidate explanation can be interpreted as a stepping stone toward attaining the ultimate objective of financial stability in South Korea.

KeyWords: North Korea, Escape, Defection, Sex, Market Demand

I. Why Are There More Female Escapee-Defectors?

Sparked by the Arduous March in the mid-1990s—a period of economic collapse and mass starvation—many North Koreans sought better opportunities beyond its borders, most commonly in its neighboring country, China.¹ Given the proximity of the two countries and a history of flexibility in cross-border migration, China is often perceived as the most feasible avenue of escape.² Once in China, the North Korean escapees are labeled as economic migrants who have come to the country in search of work. While some choose to stay, find employment, and pursue Chinese citizenship, others move again to third countries such as South Korea and Japan, where they are seen as defectors and then citizens. According to South Korea's Ministry of Unification, approximately 33,000 North Korean escapee-defectors have entered South Korea in the last twenty years. Among this community of escapee-defectors, a remarkable gender disparity has emerged, with a significantly higher proportion of female escapees compared to their male counterparts. Of the estimated 33,000 escapees, an astounding 71.9% are women.

The questions of *why* a gender disparity exists and *what drives it* have piqued the interest of scholars and policymakers alike but remain an unsolved puzzle to this day. This research paper aims to investigate the potential influence of two candidate explanations: firstly, the practices of human trafficking and sexual

¹ Phillipp

² Smith

exploitation, which generate demand for female North Korean escapees and create a niche for them to occupy; and secondly, South Korea's labor market demand function, characterized by service roles tailored to female employees, thereby presenting more job prospects for women. Utilizing a derivative of the McKinsey 7-S Framework—the Triad-S Framework—this paper will critically examine both candidate explanations through the lens of North Koreans considering escape. This analysis aspires to discern the main motivations and circumstances that lead to more female escapees. Understanding the historical context and recent patterns of North Korean escapes is crucial for developing more informed strategies to support and empower North Korean escapee-defectors in their pursuit of freedom.

II. Sex Generates Revenue

The disproportionately higher rate of female escapees may be explained by the demand among Chinese men for women. This demand is particularly evident for the objectives of marriage and sexual exploitation, a trend that does not manifest to a comparable degree among North Korean men. When looking to escape from the DPRK, the most common route is to find initial refuge in China before escaping elsewhere. However, the gender ratio of the Chinese population is noteworthy as it skews heavily towards men—a pattern that has been recorded by Chinese census data for over forty years.³ The observed gender imbalance may be attributed to a multitude of factors. Firstly, China's cultural attitudes towards gender often prioritize having sons over daughters, leading to a history of sex-selected abortion. This issue was exacerbated by the passage of the One-Child Policy in 1980. With the imposed limitation of one child, families sought to ensure that their child was a son, leading to record highs in female infanticide.⁴ Due to social movements in recent decades and the phasing out of the One-Child Policy in 2016, China has recuperated greatly with a more gender-balanced population. However, the men born between the eighties and early two thousands are still experiencing that their generation comprises more men than women. Consequently, these men are reported to face significant difficulty in finding wives and starting families of their own.⁵ Chinese socio-cultural norms emphasize family and procreation, placing considerable pressure to fulfill these societal expectations.

The women coming into China from North Korea who are vulnerable, financially unstable, and unable to speak the language are highly susceptible to being manipulated. Common circumstances for women who escape into China include forced marriages, sexual exploitation, and human trafficking. Oftentimes, the female escapees are unaware of trafficking practices and are lured by people who approach them, offering job opportunities.⁶ The three prominent patterns that North Korean women fall prey to are “abduction, allurements, and volunteering.”⁷ Although abductions and deceptive assurances of employment are more common, instances also exist where individuals voluntarily marry Chinese men, propelled by desperation to escape their circumstances in North Korea. While understanding the abhorrence of these practices, it is important to recognize a distinction: women experience this conduit to escape from North Korea that men do not.

The prevalence of marriage and sexual relations between North Korean women and Chinese men is evident in the Ministry of the Interior of the People's Republic of China's document released in 1958 concerning inter-country relations. The document begins by demonstrating China's will to abide by North Korea's wish to enforce firm border control: “The [North] Korean government more strictly controls marriages between [North] Koreans and foreigners [and] our country must cooperate with [North] Korea on this policy.” However, the tone of the document shifts immediately thereafter by presenting clear loopholes and flexible measures for Chinese citizens interested in finding North Korean brides: “For current personnel who request to marry [North] Korean women, we should try to dissuade them. If dissuasion fails and they insist on marrying [North Korean women], then we allow them to proceed with the marriage.” Chinese efforts to present a facade

³ *World Bank Gender Data Portal*

⁴ Jimmerrman

⁵ Yameng et.al.

⁶ Davis

⁷ Park

of support to North Korea while prioritizing the needs of their citizens and continuing to facilitate North Korean-Chinese marriages are made clear by this quote. This document—published in response to the DPRK’s attempts to prevent escape—also reveals that the North Korean regime is highly familiar with this avenue towards freedom that many of its people—particularly women—pursue.

III. Proximate Agency Generates Revenue

While the reality of female sex trafficking in China is undeniable, another critical piece of the puzzle may be that the labor market of South Korea exhibits greater demand for female workers. In South Korea, there is a social stigma associated with being from North Korea. North Koreans are often treated with suspicion, as there are concerns that they pose threats to security and may engage in espionage and criminal activities, taking on labels like *gan-chub*, meaning “spy”.⁸ Due to such apprehensions harbored by South Koreans, there is often a reluctance to employ North Koreans. In fact, the unemployment rate among North Korean escapee-defectors is significantly higher than the South Korean national unemployment rate, exhibiting the broad challenges for escapee-defectors to integrate into South Korean society.⁹ Moreover, those who do acquire jobs often have “unsecured jobs” characterized by day-to-day temporary tasks that are not guaranteed avenues of employment in the long run.

Regarding the social fabric of South Korean workplaces, it is often criticized that patriarchal dynamics persist, causing female employees to be overlooked for promotions and leadership positions compared to male colleagues.¹⁰ However, high-paid office jobs are rarely pursued by North Korean escapee-defectors, who predominantly find employment in lower-paid positions within service industries. For these lower-paid jobs, gender preferences are reversed and women experience an upper hand in employment opportunities. Service industry tasks of cooking and cleaning are generally perceived to be “feminine,” “domestic,” and “motherly,” thus being more commonly associated with female workers. These service jobs that are sourced to North Korean women would otherwise have been occupied by South Korean women. When looking to replace South Korean female employees, restaurants and businesses look for the closest possible substitution. North Korean female escapees fit the necessary qualifications of speaking the language, being familiar with kitchen work, and posing fewer threats compared to male escapees. Therefore, these North Korean women are afforded increased opportunities due to their recognition as proximate agents, evoking a sense of compatibility with South Koreans and possessing attributes akin to those of their South Korean female counterparts.

Furthermore, the negative stereotypes associated with being from North Korea are typically less pronounced for female escapees. Perceptions of innocence and harmlessness surrounding women lead to more sympathy and willingness to hire on the part of South Korean business owners. Young women are typically tasked with serving food and cleaning up and then later transition to working as kitchen assistants.¹¹ While women encounter this relatively stable work trajectory, men do not experience the same level of assurance. Male escapee-defectors in their youth may find employment in the construction or manufacturing industries, which require intense manual labor with minimal compensation and no guarantee of continued employment as they age and their physical strength diminishes. The issue of limited job opportunities for North Korean escapee-defectors is highlighted by the statistic that “nearly 90% of defectors remain unemployed or work as day laborers when they arrive in the South.”¹² Faced with these financial challenges and limited avenues for growth, North Korean escapees—particularly men—turn to illicit activities. While some may achieve financial security, others get caught and perpetuate the negative stereotype that North Koreans are threats to society.

The South Korean market demand function is a notion that North Koreans are aware of and is a factor taken into consideration when determining whether or not to escape. In recent years, North Korea has been

⁸ Bluth

⁹ Bidet

¹⁰ Monk-Turner and Turner

¹¹ Williams

¹² Rowland and Hwang

undergoing a significant increase in the acquisition and adoption of technology and cellular devices. While this access to technology initially started with the elite minority, it is now reaching the common citizenry as well. According to satellite imagery, state media footage, and escapee testimonials, “nearly *all* North Koreans now live in an area with cellular network coverage.”¹³ Hence, communication between family members split by the 38th parallel became increasingly accessible and has allowed for constant updates about job prospects in South Korea. While women in North Korea may be incentivized to attempt an escape upon hearing of job openings, men are likely dissuaded by the limited employment prospects.

IV. Triad-S Framework of Analysis: Strategy, Structure, Skills

In assessing the validity of the two candidate explanations and determining which factor holds greater weight in accounting for the gender imbalance among escapee-defectors, a modified version of the McKinsey 7-S Framework will be applied. Formulated in the late 1970s by former McKinsey consultants Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, this framework serves as an organizational tool that evaluates the alignment of seven internal factors deemed crucial for a business’s success.¹⁴ The 7S’ can be categorized into hard elements (strategy, structure, and systems) and soft elements (shared values, skills, style, and staff). The seven elements reinforce each other and together, foster a well-organized and high-functioning firm.

While there are key similarities between the goals of business models and the mindset of prospective escapee-defectors, there are also notable differences, lending this analysis to adopt a modified rendition of the original framework. From the 7S’, the Triad-S Framework derives three critical components: strategy, structure, and skills. The remaining four S’—shared values, systems, style, and staff—were omitted for this research as they do not represent the capabilities of North Korean escapee-defectors nor do they reflect the circumstances that the North Koreans must navigate to successfully escape and acclimate abroad.

V. Application of the Triad-S Framework of Analysis

Individuals contemplating escape from North Korea, regardless of gender, must evaluate their personal capabilities alongside the broader international context and available resources. The interplay of internal and external factors can be explored through the Triad-S Framework, allowing the analyses from the two candidate explanations to be juxtaposed for a comprehensive comparative assessment.

Candidate Explanation #1

The first candidate explanation suggests that the phenomenon of sex trafficking in China, primarily driven by a substantial number of unmarried Chinese men in rural areas, generates a demand for female North Korean escapees. In terms of strategic considerations, men encounter limited tactical opportunities when approaching escape through the lens of human trafficking, as there is minimal demand to traffic North Korean men. Consequently, male escapees must exercise increased caution upon reaching China, as they possess limited leverage with Chinese authorities and are at a higher risk of immediate deportation. In contrast, women are the primary victims of sexual exploitation and trafficking. It is overly simplistic and insensitive to assert that women deliberately employ their sexuality as a strategic tool to secure freedom. Often, North Korean female escapees do not willingly engage in sexual relations with Chinese men; instead, they are deceived, manipulated, or coerced into such situations, or even sold off by their families. Once ensnared in these circumstances, however, women may strategically work to accumulate resources for a future escape from abusive relationships.

The socioeconomic structure of China offers limited employment prospects for North Korean male escapees. Men in search of work often start with low-paid entry-level positions, gradually building social and financial capital over time. Female escapees encounter even fewer employment opportunities in China and are typically relegated to domestic roles involving cooking, cleaning, and childcare within the family. Upon escaping to China, both men and women encounter challenges in establishing their own lives. Women often find

¹³ Reddy

¹⁴ *McKinsey & Company*

themselves trapped in marriages and burdened with domestic responsibilities, while men face different difficulties associated with having to navigate their path with self-reliance and living with extreme caution.

To maximize their chances of survival, men look to build up physical strength for manual labor jobs or develop skills in illicit activities. Some engage in facilitating the sex trade, acting as intermediaries between the vulnerable North Korean escapees and Chinese men looking for wives. Their proficiency in the Korean language renders them assets within Chinese trafficking operations. As previously noted, women face barriers to entry into the workforce in addition to barriers to escape from their husbands. Consequently, women most commonly stay at home, honing their domestic skills while discreetly saving up money that they steal from their husbands or accrue over long periods through meagerly compensated labor.

Candidate Explanation #2

The second candidate explanation posits that the labor market of South Korea demands more female workers, thus leading to the female-heavy gender imbalance among North Korean escapees in South Korea. Similar to the constraints faced by men in the first explanation, this viewpoint offers few options for male escapees. Scarce job availability leads men to pursue either low-paid, unsustainable jobs or resort to illegal activities. In this second candidate explanation, women, on the other hand, encounter notably enhanced financial and social prospects. Because South Korea offers more job opportunities to women, North Korean female escapees have a chance to secure stable employment, accumulate savings, and establish new lives. This phase of their journey fosters increased autonomy and successful escape from their previous husbands in China, resulting in fewer constraints than previously experienced.

The societal structure and cultural sentiments of South Korea extend greater empathy toward North Korean female escapees. While both genders must initiate their progress from foundational positions in the workforce, women find relatively easier access to these entry-level roles, making the process of building upward from the foundation more attainable.

In a similar vein, women who find employment can harness skills in service, amiability, and sociability, further perpetuating their upward trajectory. Among the minority of men who secure similar roles, comparable skills are cultivated. Conversely, the majority of men who grapple with unemployment resort to honing abilities in illicit undertakings.

VI. Implications and Conclusions

Both candidate explanations of sex trafficking in China and the labor market of South Korea cast North Korean male escapees into a realm of limited economic opportunities. Consequently, men—under the premises of both explanations—are often driven to adopt paths of illicit conduct in their pursuit of financial stability. Conversely, from the perspective of North Korean women, it becomes evident that employment opportunities in South Korea distinctly outweigh the alternatives of sexual exploitation and domestic abuse prevalent in China. When viewing the prospect of escaping from a North Korean woman's perspective, their overarching vision for the future entails enduring the challenges of abuse and sexual exploitation in China, followed by accumulating the necessary resources to seek refuge in South Korea. There, they aim to attain South Korean citizenship and establish themselves in service sector roles, thus embarking on a journey toward a new chapter in their lives.

Hence, upon scrutinizing these two explanations, a discerning verdict surfaces: the second explanation concerning the dynamics of the South Korean labor market emerges as a stronger rationale for the augmented count of female escapee-defectors. While the unsettling reality of sex trafficking undeniably persists and constitutes a widely shared experience among women pursuing escape, it is a stepping stone toward a broader objective of financial independence in South Korea. This aspiration, driven by economic autonomy, stands as the paramount impetus compelling North Korean women to embark on their journey of escape.

The culmination of this analysis, which lends greater weight to the explanation rooted in the South Korean labor market dynamics, bears profound implications for our understanding of North Korean escapees and potential avenues to support them. Recognizing the pivotal role of economic empowerment in motivating female escapees highlights the importance of tailored initiatives to continue supporting female escapees while

also creating more economic opportunities for male escapees in South Korea. Efforts aimed at facilitating their successful integration into South Korea can be channeled through programs focused on skill development and employment opportunities within the service sector. This informed perspective provides a framework for not only comprehending the gender disparity in escape patterns but also for fostering more effective strategies that empower North Korean women with the means to rebuild their lives in South Korea.

Works Consulted

- [1] Bidet, Eric. "Social Capital and Work Integration of Migrants: The Case of North Korean Defectors in South Korea." *Asian Perspective*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2009, pp. 151–179, <https://doi.org/10.1353/apr.2009.0021>.
- [2] Bluth, Christopher. "The North Korean Who Went Home: Many Defectors Struggle against Discrimination in the South." *The Conversation*, 8 June 2023, theconversation.com/the-north-korean-who-went-home-many-defectors-struggle-against-discrimination-in-the-south-174366.
- [3] "Enduring Ideas: The 7-S Framework." *McKinsey & Company*, 1 Mar. 2008, www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/enduring-ideas-the-7-s-framework.
- [4] Jimmerson, Julie. "Female Infanticide in China: An Examination of Cultural and Legal Norms." *UCLA Pacific Basin Law Journal*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1990, <https://doi.org/10.5070/p881021962>.
- [5] Monk-Turner, Elizabeth, and Charlie G. Turner. "South Korean Labor Market Discrimination against Women: Estimating Its Cost." *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, vol. 53, no. 4, 1994, pp. 433–42. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3487187>.
- [6] "Notification from the Ministry of Interior on Opinions Relating to Marriages between Chinese People and Korean Women", October 18, 1958, *Wilson Center Digital Archive, Hubei Provincial Archives*, SZ67-01-0540, 6-7. Obtained by Shen Zhihua and translated by Jeffrey Wang and Charles Kraus.
- [7] Park, Kyung-Ae. "Economic Crisis, Women's Changing Economic Roles, and Their Implications for Women's Status in North Korea." *The Pacific Review*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2011, pp. 159–177, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2011.566349>.
- [8] Philipp, Jennifer. "Life after Escape for North Korean Defectors ." *The Borgen Project*, 26 Aug. 2022, borgenproject.org/life-after-escape-for-north-korean-defectors/.
- [9] "Policy on North Korean Defector." *South Korean Ministry of Unification*, www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/.
- [10] Reddy, Shreyas. "Almost All North Koreans Now Have Access to Cellular Networks, Report Finds: NK News." *NK News - North Korea News*, 16 Nov. 2022, www.nknews.org/2022/11/almost-all-north-koreans-now-have-access-to-cellular-networks-report-finds/.
- [11] Rowland, Ashley, and Hwang, Hae-rym. "North Korean Defectors Struggle to Make It Work." *Stars and Stripes*, 26 July 2009, www.stripes.com/news/north-korean-defectors-struggle-to-make-it-work-1.93552.
- [12] Smith, Hazel. "Explaining North Korean Migration to China | Wilson Center." *Explaining North Korean Migration to China*, www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/explaining-north-korean-migration-to-china.
- [13] Williams, Sophie. "North Korean Defectors: What Happens When They Get to the South?" *BBC News*, 16 Feb. 2021, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49346262.
- [14] WorldBank. "China." *World Bank Gender Data Portal*, genderdata.worldbank.org/countries/china/.
- [15] Yameng, Lu, et al. *Single Rural Chinese Men Are Having a Hard Time to Find a Wife Due to Gender Imbalance*, 21 May 2021, www.globaltimes.cn/page/202105/1224091.shtml.