

North Korean Female Entrepreneurs in South Korea: Empowerment through Informality and Resilience in Post-Cold War Geopolitics

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This study examines how the post-Cold War geopolitical context penetrated through the struggles and empowerment of North Korean female defector entrepreneurs in South Korea. Reconceptualizing the notion of intersectionality, the study focuses on a grey area of informality and the resilience of these women. Based on in-depth interviews and participant observations, the findings indicate that these women leveraged geopolitical limits to develop their entrepreneurial assets. Informality developed through their involvement in *Jangmadang* and cross-border mobilities via informal brokerage. Through human-trafficked marriages, they stayed in China, learning the Chinese language and working in South Korean companies. The disadvantages of the job market and gender roles motivated them to start their businesses. The research emphasizes the complex ways in which agency, mobility, and geopolitics intersect.

Keywords post-Cold War geopolitics, North Korean women, migrant entrepreneurship, informality, empowerment, gender

Introduction

This study examines how the post-Cold War geopolitical context penetrated the struggles and empowerment of North Korean women who left North Korea, stayed in China for a while, settled down, and proactively ran their businesses or organizations in South Korea. By viewing North Korean defectors not as a monolithic victim group but as a population located at the intersection of suppression and opportunities, this research reconceptualizes the notion of intersectionality in the fluctuating geopolitical context of the Korean Peninsula and surrounding regions. It also examines how they came to be driven by and to utilize informality to both cope with the geopolitical limits in their lives and turn their experiences and networks into assets for their entrepreneurship and

empowerment. Entrepreneurship within the context of North Korean defectors includes small-scale businesses, with some exceptions of larger enterprises. The intention of this study is not to seek their success stories but to explore how geopolitics permeate their career paths. By exploring the intersection of their victimization and empowerment, this research contributes to a multifaceted and ambivalent understanding of agency and empowerment.

Previous studies on the geopolitics of the Korean Peninsula and North Korean defectors have focused on human rights issues (Kim 2023; Song 2021b) and life challenges that defectors endure (Kim and Jang 2007; Lee 2015; Park 2023). In particular, human trafficking and victimization of female defectors' (Song 2021b) have been discussed in terms of the intersectionality of different discriminations and oppressions as a major paradigm. Focusing on double discrimination, previous discussions have not paid enough attention to the formation of agency or the effect of empowerment. In recent years, North Korean defector groups have become diversified, and proactive groups have emerged (Song 2021a). Research on North Korean women's agency began considering cases of women trafficked for marriage (Choi 2014; Kim 2014; Kook 2018; Song 2013) and, later, diverse cases about their settlement (Shin 2022), motherhood (Kim 2020), activism (Lim 2023), art activities (Sands 2019), and fashion (Jung and Dalton 2022). Advancing the debates on gender, migration, and post-settlement economic activities, this study suggests a reconceptualization of intersectionality in the context of economic activities, marriage, and mobilities. This study examines the roles of informality in these areas, revealing how they contribute to an intersectionality that encompasses not only oppression and discrimination but also agency and empowerment among proactive groups of North Korean female defectors..

The subject group of this study is middle-aged female North Korean entrepreneurs. North Korean defectors¹ are an articulated example of how geopolitics and migrant's daily lives intersect and how individuals are driven by and utilize informality simultaneously. The subject group comprises women who experienced the 1994-1998 famine in North Korea, participated in *Jangmadang* (informal markets), crossed the border to make money through informal trade, were forced by human traffickers to marry Chinese men, worked in a South Korean company before arriving in South Korea, crossed the border to arrive in South Korea, and started their businesses after trying several jobs.

This study asks: How have these North Korean defector women come to establish their businesses or organizations in South Korea? How have they coped with geopolitical constraints and empowered themselves during their life course? Based on in-depth interviews, participant observations, and media and government documents, the results of this study demonstrate that the women leveraged geopolitical limits to turn them into business resources. They faced significant challenges in navigating the shifting geopolitical landscape both

within North Korea and in the wider region. The Cold War geopolitics, including the division of Korea, the related ideological confrontation, and the political and economic changes of the post-Cold War era, intersected and permeated the daily lives of those women. While the women were driven to be involved in informal activities, they also utilized informality as a way to increase their life opportunities in fluctuating situations. In doing so, the women empowered themselves by turning those experiences into entrepreneurial assets. Their struggles and empowerment are not only important, but they also have wider geopolitical implications.

To further elaborate on this argument, the remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section discusses theoretical debates on the intersectionality of multiple discriminations and the concept of informality as a product of geopolitical shifts. The research methods and the case of this study are then introduced. The first finding section discusses how North Korean women developed their insights out of their informal economic activities in North Korea and China. It also illustrates how their forced marriages led them to access business experiences and informal mobility in South Korea. The second finding section discusses how career barriers and discrimination led them to open their businesses in South Korea. The concluding section discusses the academic and practical implications of the results of the study.

Surviving Geopolitical Intersectionality through Informality

This section discusses how North Korean women's intersectionality is practiced in post-Cold War geopolitics and how ambiguity and deregulation in informality are entangled with the (geo)political context (Mielke 2023). There have been distinguished approaches to intersectionality and empowerment. On the one hand, previous discussions on migrant women have delved into the concept of intersectionality (Hopkins 2019), highlighting the compounded discrimination faced by migrants who are also women. This intersectionality manifests further in the convergence of gender inequality and racial/ethnic bias (ibid.). On the other hand, the discourse about empowerment, particularly concerning migrant women (Briones 2017; Krummel 2012; Pei, Chib and Ling 2022), has primarily centred around their proactive resistance and organizational endeavours. Central to these discussions is the concept of agency, which is a pivotal keyword within such contexts.

Despite differences, both approaches have commonly dismissed the notion that practical consequences are not necessarily the same as the phenomena of intersected discrimination. However, tracing the experiences of female migrants has unveiled the significant importance of focusing on consequences: their seemingly passive coping mechanisms in response to difficulties have

evolved into sources of empowerment. The intersection of various factors of discrimination, such as gender and nationality, does not necessarily determine disadvantageous consequences. Instead, it often leads to a diverse range of outcomes in the experiences of North Korean women in the context of migration and entrepreneurship. For example, the lack of a support system does not automatically lead to the defectors' failure to be integrated because the situation is mediated by their self-initiative and resourcefulness (Muhumad and Jaji 2023). Particularly in highly precarious circumstances, such as geopolitical turbulence, intersectionality provides not only constraints but also new opportunities. The informal avenues they navigate, along with their mobility, can engender both upward and downward social mobility, providing female migrants with opportunities for advancement (Ho and Ting 2021; Srivastava 2022).

It is essential to note that these post-Cold War geopolitical shifts provide particular limitations and opportunities in complicated ways (Shin 2022). The trajectory from precarity to empowerment is also not strictly linear; these women might engage in acts of resistance or simply exhibit resilience in survival (Sung 2023). However, these very experiences contribute to their eventual empowerment, signifying that their coping strategies within constricting circumstances can metamorphose into sources of strength (Shin 2022). The dynamics of these barrier-to-opportunity transitions are marked by their dramatic and context-sensitive nature.

An illustrative case of empowerment within the realm of geopolitics is exemplified by East German women's experiences of post-German reunification (Choi 2022). After reunification, young East German women actively sought opportunities in West Germany, a move that initially attracted criticism due to the perceived disparities in feminist advancement between the two regions. However, over the span of thirty years, the women began to outshine their West German counterparts, claiming around seventy percent of high-ranking roles in the economic, legal, academic, administrative, and political domains. The myth about East German women highlights their self-assuredness, work passion, autonomy, and career-focused orientation, which were all bolstered by state-supported childcare services (Born 2019; Corbin 2020).

This study brings forth new prospects and proposes an expansion of the concept of intersectionality in the face of evolving geopolitical dynamics. Rather than simplifying the group of North Korean women as a homogeneous group of victims of human rights violations, gender hierarchy, and commercialized sexuality, this study focuses on a particular group of actors who implement their own strategies of action in the context of intersecting oppression and opportunity. In the current ideological terrain, the complex contexts in which North Korean defectors live and the diverse strategies and agency they generate are obscured. The discourse can ultimately reinforce hierarchies of power between South Koreans and North Korean defectors. Although discrimination inherently

obstructs individual empowerment, instances arise in which proactive individuals showcase their resilience and capacity to wield power amidst adversity. As Nietzsche (1974) posited, challenges that do not prove fatal often contribute to inner strength.

The acknowledgement of informality as an integral facet of daily life has garnered increasing attention (Kudva 2009), with a particular focus on transnational migrants and refugees who have devised alternative modes of existence outside traditional institutional frameworks. Undocumented migrants have carved out sustainable lives through the creation of informal settlements (Samers 2003; Jones, Ram and Theodorakopoulos 2010; Porter et al. 2011; Pisani, Richardson and Patrick 2008) and the establishment of informal support networks and economic endeavours. Within migrants' lives, the boundary between formal and informal domains is blurred, and the domains are shaped by negotiation and transformation. Furthermore, informality serves as a strategic means of governance to cater to people's needs within the constraints of geopolitics and limited urban infrastructure (Innes, Connick and Booher 2007). The post-war geopolitical climate still exerts control over the movement of people between North Korea and China, as well as between South Korea and North Korea, concurrently giving rise to legal and illegal grey areas.

Previous studies focused on informal settlements and informal mobility, but the mechanisms have not received enough attention (Degli Uberti 2021) in terms of empowerment. As literature on migrants' and defectors' entrepreneurship and formal and informal networks (Jung 2022; Kim 2019; Shin 2021) demonstrates, migration has the capacity to develop its own logics, its own motivations, and its own trajectories. This occurs without political resistance, as noted by Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013, 184). In this vein, they (*ibid.*, 188) examined social transformations "sustained and nurtured silently through the everyday and seemingly non-political experiences and actions of people" (Darling 2017, 190). For example, although North Koreans' defections were not based on political intention but rather made in response to their circumstances, the informality of their mobility and settlement was turned into empowerment.

Migrants and refugees grapple with structural challenges through informality (Ruhs and Anderson 2010; Srivastava 2022), which they do by using existing informal channels such as intermediaries, navigating the complexities of human-trafficked marriages, and both utilizing and innovating informal approaches. The type of informality that displays heightened flexibility and resilience in confronting the obstacles presented by worldwide uncertainties and (post-) Cold War politics underlines both the necessity and risk inherent within informal practices.

The geopolitics of the Cold War continues to shape Korean migration both within and around the Korean Peninsula. North Korea's approach to border control differs from that of Western countries. Placing the geopolitics

of migration within the Korean context enhances our understanding of the connection between the Cold War and the post-Cold War international order, and how these political forces influence the lives of defectors (Choi 2014; Song 2013). This perspective involves examining communication networks (such as mobile phones), economic networks (such as remittances and smuggling) (Kim 2018; Shin 2022), and the mobility of broadcasting and media to analyze perceived permeability and revised transnationalism (Tsagarousianou and Retis 2019) across borders that may appear tightly regulated.

Research Design

In this study, mixed ethnographic methods were employed, utilizing personal narratives obtained through interviews and participant observations to delve into the lived experiences of individuals. The fieldwork was carried out between June 2021 and January 2023 with research ethics approval from the Institutional Review Board, Seoul National University (IRB 2305/004-010).

I conducted thirty-six in-depth interviews with twenty-six North Korean defector businesswomen and ten South Koreans. The North Korean interviewees were selected through snowball sampling; that is, by being introduced to me by organizations or acquaintances, and through liaisons that I established by attending various events and activities. I selected these South Koreans based on their roles in supporting North Korean entrepreneurs and their accessibility. They worked with various organizations, including the Korea Hana Foundation (North Korean Refugees Foundation), the Ministry of Unification, South Korean organizations that support North Korean entrepreneurs, business consultants, and a US-based organization that supports North Korean defectors. The North Korean defectors ran businesses that include restaurants, trade, manufacturing, matchmaking of North Korean women and South Korean men, online shopping, coffee shops, beauty salons, flower shops, kids' cafés, medical facilities, and brokerages. The interviews are summarized in Table 1.

Each interview lasted between one and a half and two hours, with a few extending up to four hours. The interviews were semi-structured around a roughly designed framework of questions. The interview questions for the North Korean interviewees focused on the jobs they had held chronologically, the motivations behind their job and business choices, and the factors that aided or hindered their career paths. The questions for South Korean interviewees centred on the nature of their work with North Korean defectors and the roles of their organizations.

I also conducted participant observations in various settings involving North Korean defector entrepreneurs. This included a two-day workshop with twenty-four defectors and three South Koreans, two year-end parties, events organized by

Table 1. Interviewees' Characteristics

South/ North Korean	Number (no.)	Place of origin	Business item/ organization	Interview date	Interview place
N	1	Hamkyungbuk-do	Restaurant	June 7, 2021	Office
N	2	Hamkyungbuk-do	Sign board	June 4, 2022	Office
N	3	Pyongyang	Media	April 14, 2022	Office
N	4	Pyongyang	Online shopping mall	April 29, 2022	Phone interview
N	5	Hamkyungbuk-do	Coffee production and coffee shops (big)	May 15, 2022	Workplace
N	6	Hamkyungbuk-do	Trade and organization	June 4, 2022	Office
N	7	Hamkyungbuk-do	Health facility manufacturing (big)	June 11, 2022	Office
N	8	Hamkyungbuk-do	Hair salon	June 23, 2022	Phone interview
N	9	Hamkyungbuk-do	Organization	July 3, 2022	Coffee shop
N	10	Ryanggang-do	Organization	July 3, 2022	House
N	11	Hamkyungbuk-do	Restaurant	July 4, 2022	Workplace
N	12	Pyongyang	Convenient store	July 13, 2022	Coffee shop
N	13	Hamkyungbuk-do	Trade, organization	July 13, 2022	House
N	14	Hamkyung-do	Restaurant	July 13, 2022	Coffee shop
N	15	Hamkyungbuk-do	Restaurant	July 15, 2022	Coffee shop
N	16	Pyonganbuk-do	Matchmaking company	November 8, 2022	Coffee Shop
N	17	Pyongyang	Matchmaking company	March 12, 2023	Coffee shop
N	18	Hamkyungbuk-do	Defection brokerage	March 22, June 9, 2023	Office
N	19	Hamgyungbuk-do	National security speaker	May 30, 2023	Coffee shop
N	20	Pyonganbuk-do	Restaurant	June 22, 2023	Restaurant
N	21	Hamgyungnam-do	Restaurant	June 25, 2023	Bakery cafe
N	22	Hamkyungbuk-do	Kids' café	August 5, 2023	Phone interview
N	23	Pyonganbuk-do	Chinese grocery market	October 14, 2023	The shop
N	24	Hamgyungbuk-do	Medical product trade	January 9, 2024	Coffee shop
N	25	Ryanggang-do	Flower shop, hair salon	January 18, 2024	Phone
N	26	Hwanghaedo	Organic baby clothes	January 19, 2024	Coffee shop
S	1		Hana Foundation	November 18, 2021	Office

Table 1. (continued)

South/ North Korean	Number (no.)	Place of origin	Business item/ organization	Interview date	Interview place
S	2		Ministry of Unification	November 3, 2021	Coffee shop
S	3, 4		US organization	May 8, 2023	Coffee shop
S	5		Business consultant	May 10, 2023	Office
S	6		Business consultant	October 14, 2023	Coffee shop
S	7, 8		South Korean organization for North Korean defectors	September 27, 2023	Coffee shop
S	9		North Korean career school	November 9, 2023	Coffee shop
S	10		Hana Center	Januray 23, 2024	Coffee shop

Source: Author.

supportive South Korean organizations, a business consulting meeting, informal gatherings, a wedding reception, and participation in an online community of these entrepreneurs. These observations offered insights into their daily activities, business-related concerns, and personal experiences. During the workshop, in particular, I was able to observe the participants' distinct North Korean characteristics, or "North Koreanness." For analysis, I repeatedly reviewed the interviews and fieldnotes to cross-check and interpret the results of the fieldwork.

Understanding this cultural background becomes more significant when the women's experiences are considered in the broader historical and geopolitical context. The post-Cold War era, marked by the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 and South Korea's establishment of diplomatic relations with Russia and China, significantly impacted the North Korean economy. As Joo (1996) notes, the collapse of North Korea's food distribution system led to the rise of the black market, or *Jangmadang*, across the country. People's mobility increased as they sought food (Kim 2020), and the once-rigid North Korean system began to show cracks. The black market system not only thrived but was eventually legitimized in 2002. During this period of confusion, border control between North Korea and China loosened. Concurrently, in South Korea, the reduction of political tensions with North Korea under the Kim Young Sam regime led to decreased financial support for North Korean defectors (Kim 2016). This backdrop provides a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities that I observed facing the North Korean defector entrepreneurs.

Finding 1: The Informality of Economic Activities and Mobility

This section discusses how these women's economic activity and mobility collide with the post-Cold War geopolitical context, how informality is produced in the geopolitical context, and what niches it embodies. The transition geopolitics emerged during the post-Cold War era, primarily driven by North Korea and China. It challenged the existing system and provided opportunities, especially for women, to have income from informal activities. This shift witnessed the involvement of various state actors, enabling North Korean defectors to achieve greater mobility. The normalization of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea further promoted informal routes to South Korea.

During these women's chronological life trajectories, different aspects of post-Cold War geopolitics provided particular limits and opportunities. These include: (1) the transition economy of North Korea; (2) porous border control between North Korea and China; (3) rapid urbanization of China; (4) strengthened relations between North Korea and China in the 2000s; and (5) the beginning of diplomatic relations between South Korea and China.

First, when the North Korean economy was severely challenged by natural disasters and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the shaking up of the national distribution system (especially for food) drove the women to explore alternative possibilities to survive. Because these women survived post-war geopolitics through the informality of their economic activities and mobilities, informality became a natural part of their lives during the turbulent era. Going through severe hunger during the Arduous March, most of these women became involved in informal entrepreneurship in Jangmadang.

Notably, the women's inferior positions allowed them to access informal ways to survive relatively easily. While men had to work and were paid officially as household heads, women were free to choose to work or not, and they could survive better. Regarding this irony, one interviewee (no. 15) in her 60s from Hamkyungbuk-do, who used to be an art teacher in North Korea and was running a restaurant in South Korea at the time of the interview, said that she survived the North Korean famine because she was both ordinary and a woman. She said that women were often mobilized to work for the community for free, while men were paid. She meant that women became familiar with various types of work rather than going to a single workplace. She explained her positioning in the crisis:

During the hardship march, the people who were most loyal to the [communist] party were the first to starve to death, and the reason for that was that they couldn't do [informal activities] because of their conscience and reputation. It was a big loss. Ordinary people like me would go to the market and sneakily sell whatever business

we were doing, and even if it were taken away from us, we would put an iron plate in our faces (author's interview with no. 15, July 15, 2022).

She meant that such informal activities developed among non-elite ordinary people. The Jangmadang businesses were considered illegal and informal, so elites and those conservative people who cared about their reputation did not participate. This also means that by participating in the capitalist market, these women had more opportunities to make money and develop their skills. She moved on to describe her business in the informal market:

I was a teacher, but I did hairdressing as a side job at home. I did it at home, and if they asked me, I travelled and did their hair. The job went well. Even *Kkotjebi*, homeless kids, would get their hair cut...I also made liquor and sold it, and made and sold tofu. I think I have some sense of business (author's interview with no. 15, July 15, 2022).

This interviewee described her innovative approaches with excitement. It was clear she was proud of her success with those businesses, which gave her confidence. A number of other interviewees spent much time enthusiastically talking about their successful achievements as business people during this period, while describing the general economic situation and starvation with frustration. A few resented that they were not able to participate in the market because their conservative parents stopped them.

Second, as the border control between North Korea and China loosened, the informal economic activities in Jangmadang drove the women to move to China to make money. Doing a business involved selling items that were smuggled from China. *Milsu* (smuggling) was one of the most frequently and comfortably spoken words during interviews with North Korean female defectors. The mobilities expanded as new escape routes and informal brokerage networks were developed in combination with globalization and the weakened economy of North Korea (Shin and Chun 2022). The available routes enabled these women to think about leaving North Korea for a while to make money. They found a method of crossing the border and exchanged North Korean vegetables, such as Schisandra, with Chinese items to sell in Jangmadang.

One interviewee (no. 9) in her 50s, who used to be a prestigious soldier, said that her desire to make money led her to defect against her intention to remain in North Korea. She said:

I went to China because I heard that I could make 10,000 won in North Korean money in a week. The first place where defections started was in North Hamgyeong Province, because there was no food, and it's right across the Tumen River from China (author's interview with no. 9, July 3, 2022).

This interviewee, a North Korean organizer, was even a member of the Communist Party. She tried to get a machine of soy meat from China so that she could produce soy meat, which was popular in Jangmadang. The stories highlight instances in which individuals actively sought opportunities for financial independence, leading them to engage in informal migration to neighbouring countries, such as China. The allure of substantial earnings in China may have been exaggerated and potentially perpetuated by brokers seeking to profit from such migration. This was the starting point for the majority of the interviewees who would eventually run from Chinese control and Chinese efforts to arrest North Korean defectors.

The woman (no. 9) stayed with her cousin, a *Joseonjok* (ethnic Korean born and raised in China), who told her that he could give her a stable life in China by forcing her to marry a Joseonjok man. She did not want the marriage, but she could not go back to North Korea because border control had been strengthened, and she had lost her mobility pass. Eventually, she ended up leaving North Korea permanently, contrary to her intentions to return. Moving to China similarly led many other women into informal marriages. Most interviewees heard that if they engaged in informal trade or worked in a field for a week in China, they could make a lot of money. Smuggling and human trafficking are interrelated in this context—the women went to China through brokerage where they faced human trafficking in the form of marriage.

Third, during the rapid urbanization of China since the 1990s, this trafficking of North Korean women developed in response to a demand from Chinese men who lived deep in the countryside where they had difficulty finding women to marry—brides who could have a child for them. North Korean women who visited China temporarily were easy targets. Interview subjects voluntarily brought up their stories of such experiences, despite the topic not being within the scope of the study. The women explained that these experiences were part of their answers to my question about how they came to establish their businesses. Marriages formulated through human trafficking articulate the intersectionality of suffering and opportunities.

Their experiences of these marriages and the effects they had on their businesses can be discussed from two perspectives. On the one hand, such unethical and human rights-violating marriages were based on the structured patriarchal violence inherent in the assumption that women could be bought and sold. The prevailing narrative of human trafficking often involves the portrayal of victims who are forcefully trafficked by malevolent perpetrators, made to endure unimaginable suffering, and coerced into involuntary marriages, only to eventually escape their captors. Many interviewees described their human trafficking experiences in China as painful. The shifting post-Cold War geopolitics that brought about the mechanisms through which trafficking served as a survival strategy for women reproduced structures of sexualized violence and

gendered oppression.

On the other hand, the forced marriages protected these women from arrest by the Chinese police. As they sought safety from the policing of defectors, these women were forced to agree to arranged marriages that involved an exchange of money. Focusing on the outcomes rather than the meaning of human-trafficked marriage, the interviewees explained that human-trafficked marriage was the only way to be safe from being sent back to North Korea. In fact, every one of the interviewees who raised the issue of such experiences made statements similar to the following: “Human trafficking indeed helped us. Although it was a difficult experience, it ultimately helped me in my career path” (author’s interview with no. 13, July 13, 2022). By this, the woman (no. 13) meant that the marriages were helpful in avoiding the Chinese anti-defecting policy.

Some of the interviewees acknowledged the potential risks inherent in their chosen paths, such as becoming victims of human trafficking. Trafficked marriage was considered a matter of luck because they were randomly partnered with a man, and yet it provided the women with a choice that decided the success of their future: stay in China or be sent back to North Korea. In light of the particular position of North Korean migrant women, including their illegal statuses and the extreme violence and human rights abuses they might experience if they were sent back, the interviews reveal that trafficking did not simply translate to “violence” or “crime.”

The narratives of the interviewed women demonstrate the intricate and multifaceted realities faced by individuals involved in human trafficking. Criticizing a monolithic approach to human trafficking, a North Korean who worked in a governmental agency said that his mother was a so-called human trafficking victim, but he observed that her marriage life was not very different from his marriage with a South Korean woman based on romance. As such, the lives of women in trafficked marriages varied.

Unlike the typical image of human trafficking, some women were given time to think about their choice and/or allowed to reject some men before making the choice of engaging in such marriages. One interview subject (no. 13), who ran a trade business and a North Korean organization in South Korea, used to be a nurse in North Korea. She ran away to China and was forced to marry a Chinese man. She ran away from her three arranged marriages and settled down with her fourth husband because the former three men were old. Although her husband remained in China, she kept in touch with him and called him “my boyfriend,” revealing the intimate nature of their relationship while not living as a married couple. Some of these women still maintained their marriages, bringing their husbands, who were either Joseonjok or Han Chinese, to South Korea. It is possible, however, that these interview subjects with successful marriages had more positive experiences than many others who were similarly pulled into human trafficking in this way.

Fourth, China and South Korea developed diplomatic relationships, promoting formal and informal trade that increased the entry of South Korean companies and various actors (churches and NGOs) into China. The shift enabled North Korean defectors to be exposed to South Koreans in China so they could learn about South Korean society. A notable finding was the presence of agency among survivors, as they exhibited resilience and resourcefulness in navigating their circumstances within geoeconomic and geopolitical shifts. One opportunity that the human-trafficked marriage provided was networking with South Korean entrepreneurs. One interviewee (no. 20) who was running a restaurant said:

After having a baby, my parents-in-law told me to go out to work in the city and that they would take care of the baby. So, I got a job in the city. I worked for a South Korean company. Because I worked very hard, everyone acknowledged me and introduced me to others. I learned how to run a business in Korean ways at that time (author's interview with no. 20, June 22, 2023).

This kind of experience was common among most of the interviewees. In Qingdao and Shimchun of China, for example, a number of Korean companies emerged that needed staff who could speak both Korean and Chinese. Some of the interviewees were protected and hired by South Korean bosses, while others pretended to be a Joseonjok, who have a similar accent with a North Korean one. Working in South Korean companies, they learned how to manage a company. Although the women found success with their own businesses in South Korea, they reported that their greatest business achievements were in China.

The skills of conducting business and speaking the language were crucial to the women's achievements. These women capitalized on their proficiency in Chinese and the encounters with South Korean entrepreneurs that they experienced while living in China. Their proficiency in Chinese and their experiences in China empowered them to view themselves as international actors and to engage in international trade or act as mediators between South Korea and China. South Korean business consultants noted that numerous North Korean entrepreneurs expressed a desire to be involved in businesses with Chinese partners or customers.

One interviewee (no. 11) and her brother had a difficult time with a Chinese family who, through human trafficking, bought them and their mother. This interviewee, who ran her own restaurant in South Korea, had lived in North Korea for the first fourteen or fifteen years of her life, in China for fourteen years, and in South Korea for ten years. Since her education stopped when she was a teenager, she worked in household work and restaurants for a long time. Her traumatic memory of discrimination and child labour was so severe that she and her brother never talked about their lives in China. She said, "I didn't want to even think about the hardship. Even now, I cannot sleep without pills. But I didn't

know that learning Chinese was so helpful” (author’s interview with no. 11, July 4, 2022).

She never went to school in China, but she gradually learned Chinese by working in restaurants and watching TV. Although her experience in China was very harsh, she discovered her passion and talents during this time. When she worked in a Korean restaurant in China, she was asked to interpret Chinese into Korean. She said that she felt like running away; she was so scared of being discovered to be a North Korean because, at the time, she was pretending to be a Joseonjok. Ironically, she said in her interview that she wants that kind of job. She explained that running a restaurant and interpreting are common service jobs based on helping people, and she shared that she was still passionate about interpreting Chinese.

Another interviewee became a partner of her former boss mainly because her Chinese was fluent. She went on a business trip to Hong Kong with her boss and her fluent Chinese was very helpful. Her boss was impressed, and he offered that she become independent and that they collaborate.

Finding 2: Turning Experiences into Entrepreneurial Assets

Continuing the discussion on the interactions between geopolitical contexts and North Korean defector businesswomen, this section focuses on their settlement and economic activities in South Korea. Cold War geopolitics between North Korea and China, and between North Korea and South Korea, continued to control people’s mobility across controlled borders while creating a grey area of informality and fostering their resilience in the post-Cold War era. In the process, the women’s experiences of limitations were transformed into entrepreneurial assets. Existing research on North Korean women’s difficult defection processes (Kook 2018; Song 2013) and on North Korean female defector entrepreneurs (Jung 2022; Kim 2019) misses this point about turning their experiences into entrepreneurial assets.

As the collaboration between China and North Korea was strengthened in the 2000s, not only were the police committed to arresting defectors, but residents also looked out for illegal North Korean migrants (Charny 2004). Most of the interviewees stayed in China with informal identifications, usually the identifications of unreported dead persons. As most of their economic activities went well, they could have continued to stay in China. However, as many interviewees agreed, the biggest fear during their stay in China was the constant vigilance required to evade detection by Chinese authorities. Some interviewees said that they always slept with their shoes beside their pillows so that they could run away if the police arrived in the middle of the night. In addition, there was suspicion and surveillance from their husbands and village neighbours, who

knew that a number of North Korean women ran away from their husbands in China. The recurring theme of escape highlighted both the ongoing challenges faced by these women and the precarious nature of their lives.

The fear of being caught and suspected was a factor that pushed these women away from China. The factor pulling them to South Korea, however, was not strong in that moment of their lives. These middle-aged North Korean women did not know much about South Korea, so they had no desire to go there; yet their solution to their precarious informal stay in China was informal mobility to South Korea. A pull factor was a brokerage developed for going to South Korea, as massive migration was made from China to South Korea. This brokerage made North Korean defectors' further mobility possible. The majority of the interviewees said that they chose living in subsidized housing with welfare over living illegally. This made North Korean women's stay in China a middle route on their way to South Korea. An interviewee who ran a matchmaking company mentioned that her relatively short stay in China (compared to others) made adapting to South Korean society more difficult. Others had the advantage of learning about South Korean products available in Chinese markets during their time in China.

Many of the interviewees agreed that their ability to move across borders led to significant changes in their lives. They recognized that their mobility could put their families left behind at risk. However, as time passed, they began to value new opportunities; although there were moments when they regretted their decision to come to South Korea. Interpreting the grey area of her mobility, one interviewee (no. 19), a national security speaker in her 40s, said:

I am actually the one who may have ruined my family in North Korea because I defected. But my father said, "Watch famous movies about our nation and destiny. Even though you seem to be betraying the country now, if you bring back money later, you can be buried in the Revolutionary Martyrs' Cemetery (author's interview with no. 19, May 30, 2023).

This interviewee felt conflicted about openly expressing her desire to go to South Korea due to the political climate in North Korea. When this interviewee subtly mentioned that she was considering going even farther away, her father immediately grasped her intentions and expressed his approval, deeming it a good idea. He inquired whether contemplating the future would not be safer and wiser, as opposed to enduring the risks of remaining in China and facing potential capture. She noted that his response greatly empowered her.

Mobility to South Korea empowered the women's decision-making as well as their ability to face the consequences of the move. They emphasized that they did not want to go to South Korea, correcting people's misunderstandings, as though they would be guilty if they had wanted to. It was clear, however, that

their mobility dramatically changed their lives and opened new opportunities. In response to my research question about the factors distinguishing successful North Korean businesswomen from those leading difficult lives, an interviewed broker summed it up in one word: mobility. She was a defector, and in helping her family and friends, she became a broker. Through networking with other brokers, she has assisted numerous North Koreans in China to relocate to South Korea.

As post-Cold War geopolitics resulted in less tension between North Korea and South Korea, North Korean defectors, paradoxically, faced less support from the South Korean government. They were no longer considered “brave defectors” (*gwisunyongsa*) but “defectors” (*bukanitaljumin* or *saeteomin*), and the administration of Kim Young Sam dramatically reduced financial support for North Korean defectors. The change motivated the defectors in this study to find an income source. Upon their arrival, they spent the first three months at Hanawon, a settlement education center. They referred to this place as their “school,” where they learned how to live and behave in South Korea. Hanawon also offered start-up training tailored to North Korean defectors, with a focus on specific types of work, such as art or service roles in restaurants.

In the South Korean job market, lower-income service jobs were more accessible than professional roles; although, they demanded polished communication, and differing accents were seen as potential sources of discomfort and stratified ethnicity (Choo 2006). The assimilation of the women in this study was especially complicated by their North Korean accent, which proved to be a significant barrier to their initial employment prospects. Many of the people I interviewed talked about being treated badly and unfairly because of how they spoke. These experiences actually made many of them quit their jobs and start working for themselves. In a meeting I observed as a participant, a group of North Korean entrepreneurs talked about the difficulties they faced because of their accents and how they were treated. Some said they did not mention that they were from North Korea because they were scared of being treated badly.

One interviewee (no. 16) who arrived in South Korea through a broker after residing in China for six months displayed ambition by actively applying for positions at supermarkets, hospitals, telemarketing firms, and marriage agencies. While at a telemarketing company, she faced criticism due to her North Korean accent, which was similar to that of Joseonjok individuals, leading customers to suspect that her calls were voice phishing attempts. She made earnest efforts to adjust her accent to blend into South Korean society. She expressed, “I just wish I could be ‘ordinary’ in South Korea” (author’s interview with no. 16, November 8, 2022). With the social skills she learned at the telemarketing company, she successfully ran a matchmaking company. The limitations they faced turned into more opportunities for these women to pursue their own careers. There was also an atmosphere of increasing start-up support in the 2000s, as the job market

reduced.

A big barrier was that, as entrepreneurs, these women needed to apply for governmental funding for small businesses and, in particular, for North Korean defectors' businesses by filling in an application form. The form requested written statements regarding business status and start-up items, technology suggestions, a business model, marketability, investment status, a distribution strategy, growth possibility, and others. The Hana Foundation supports defectors' applications by supporting business consultants. A South Korean business consultant said, "They don't understand why they need to do market research and therefore why they need a strategy. I thought that maybe these terms were not defined in their minds in the first place" (author's interview with South Korean no. 5, May 10, 2023). Thus, the so-called support for North Korean entrepreneurs did not work well due to their lack of knowledge needed for an application.

Their gender roles as mothers also challenged their employment, as many of them raised children in South Korea. An interviewee (no. 3), who used to be an engineer from Pyongyang, had two children while running a business. Regarding her motivation, she said, "I started my own business because it was really tough to find a job with my North Korean accent, and taking care of my child made it hard to work full time." Discussing her work with great passion and detail, she let out a sigh about her role as a woman, and with a desperation-filled expression, she said:

Every day, I receive many calls about my children and often need to go home. It's quite unfortunate. Just imagine how much better I could do if I could work like a male entrepreneur who can concentrate on their work without having to worry about their children (author's interview with no. 3, April 14, 2022).

Although their journey to their current positions might have been somewhat accidental, these accomplished women were truly dedicated to the success of their businesses. Simultaneously, their identities as women and North Koreans became valuable resources for their businesses. Their marriages to South Korean men and traditional gender roles sometimes led them to start their own businesses. Some began by assisting their husbands' businesses, and, surprisingly, they achieved much higher profits than their husbands. Gradually, their roles expanded, while the husbands often took on more passive roles, focusing on childcare.

Their characteristics influenced their responses to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their businesses, which was relatively less severe than for South Koreans. This was attributed to North Koreans' tendency to avoid relying heavily on bank loans and instead run family-oriented businesses. They downsized their operations during the pandemic. However, a positive outcome was the adoption of online training and meetings, which enabled easier participation in education and gatherings, even for those residing outside Seoul.

In other instances, their identity as North Koreans, their origin, and their unique experiences became the foundation for their work. Some interviewees worked as freelance speakers on national security matters, sharing their personal stories with students and organizations. Gaining attention from the media also played a positive role in boosting their businesses. One interviewee (no. 14) in her 60s, for instance, mentioned that because she had a background in performing on stages in North Korea, she took the opportunity to talk about North Korea on television. She believed it was a way to inform people about her home country. The show she appeared on, called *Eemangab*, was well-received, and as her fame grew, she received suggestions to open a restaurant. She skilfully utilized a government program designed to support the happiness and success of North Korean defectors. By utilizing funds and her own capabilities, she transitioned from that support to running her own restaurant.

The interviewees who led North Korean organizations were notably dedicated. Grateful for what they received from South Korean society, they felt a sense of responsibility to give back. They organized voluntary initiatives, such as visiting nursing homes. Some actively collaborated with fellow North Korean businesses, hiring fellow North Koreans. To them, their North Korean identity held an important sense of responsibility. Many emphasized their desire to be contributors rather than recipients of services, aware of criticism regarding free housing and other benefits South Koreans provide to North Koreans. Certain North Korean organizations were established to contribute to their local communities, consistently engaging in voluntary work to assist the elderly and the less fortunate. They also took the initiative to learn about accounting and management, recognizing the need for business management knowledge in a capitalist society, especially in South Korea.

Their experiences, shaped by the social environment and education in North Korea, along with their involvement in informal economic activities and mobility, provided them with a remarkable level of resilience and empowerment. One interviewee (no. 9), who is particularly passionate about organizing voluntary work, was asked why she does it. Her response was straightforward:

As human beings, it's what we're meant to do. Being involved with people's needs is ingrained in me. This was the same in North Korea, where even the tasks given by the Communist Party were related to serving the people. This principle holds true both in South Korea and North Korea (author's interview with no. 9, July 3, 2022).

This interviewee had a history of active participation in various types of organizational activities. She compared the seriousness of such activities in North and South Korea, noting that those who experienced organizational tasks in North Korea tended to approach them more earnestly.

Across the interviewees, a common sentiment emerged: if South Korea

and North Korea were to slightly open up, they would eagerly conduct business in their hometowns. The following statement by one interviewee was common among all the North Korean defector businesswomen: “I would undoubtedly return to my hometown if my safety were guaranteed. North Korea is an emerging market. I understand the demands and supply within North Korean society” (author’s interview with no.5, May 15, 2022). This statement indicates that they see new opportunities as entrepreneurs. They also expressed a sense of guilt for leaving their hometowns and yearned to be reunited with friends and family.

Conclusion

By highlighting the agency of North Korean female entrepreneurs, this study emphasizes the complex ways in which gender, mobility, and geopolitics intersect to shape their experiences and opportunities. The findings demonstrate that geopolitical shifts consistently gave these women a chance of adaptability and survival through informal economic activities and mobilities. Their adaptability and resilience have enabled them to not only survive uncertain situations but also flourish. Locating the women’s agency in the process requires an understanding of multifaceted aspects and circular effects. They leveraged informal mechanisms for their survival. There was a desensitization to trafficking as a survival resource or survival strategy that women in the most disadvantaged situations enacted.

The theoretical implications of these findings encompass the strength of a relational approach, which enabled the exploration of these women’s rich and multifaceted experiences and achievements. This study contributes to the multifaceted and ambivalent understanding of agency and empowerment. Without actively resisting or engaging in political activities, the women ended up inadvertently empowering themselves. Therefore, agency possesses a double-edged nature, encompassing traps and opportunities, victimization and empowerment. The narratives highlight survivors’ agency and the intricate dynamics they navigate within their circumstances.

This study does not argue that all North Korean female defectors survived as these businesswomen did. The subject group of the research exhibited considerable agency, but it is also important to recognize that their experiences represent a small part of the multi-layered outcomes of North Korean women’s experiences. A significant number have struggled with their complicated marriages, the education of their children in transnational families, and other difficulties caused by their Chinese husbands, and some have been caught up in the sex industry in South Korean society. These North Korean female defectors are less accessible and thus more invisible in empirical studies. However, by investigating the experiences and perspectives of the interviewees, this study

challenges the dominant narrative of North Korean defectors as monolithic and repressed victims and sheds light on how women's experiences and perspectives can enhance our understanding of geopolitical processes. The politicization of the single human rights paradigm about victims of trafficking should be questioned. The actual realities of human trafficking are much more intricate and diverse than initial assumptions suggest.

The findings also underscore the necessity for comprehensive awareness campaigns and educational initiatives to effectively combat human trafficking and provide support for survivors in rebuilding their lives. Further, within South Korea, it is necessary to analyze how both the South Korean government's post-Cold War geopolitics and the narratives of non-governmental and human rights organizations and the media understand and shape the lives of North Korean female defectors.

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Notes

1. This study uses the term "defectors," which refers to those who escaped from their homeland. "Refugees" refers to their status in the receiving country. As South Korea does not consider North Korea a country but an anti-governmental organization, those who escaped from North Korea are not considered refugees but as those who escaped from that organization. "Migrants" are people free to return to their home countries; North Koreans cannot do so.

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