Migration of North Korean Women to China and Human Security*

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes two questions: why there are more North Korean women defectors than men in China; and what gender-specific human security issues need to be raised from a feminist perspective. Argued in the paper are: First, The feminization of North Korean migration pattern is pushed by North Korea’s own internal situations (economic hardship, gender inequality in employment and women’s traditional gender roles as nurturer) and pulled by external factors (China’s growing sex/entertainment industry and the shortage of brides). Second, North Korean women defectors or forced repatriates experience gender-specific problems such as sex-trafficking, abusive marriage, or other types of sexual exploitation. And third, policies or programs on North Korean migrants need to pay specific attention to protecting women’s human security. The “Three P strategy” of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime suggests various tools to prevent and combat human trafficking and to protect victims. Both the Chinese and South Korean governments need to adopt these Three Ps strategies to protect North Korean women defectors. In adopting this strategy, China needs to approach North Korean women defectors’ problems as issues of sexual violence against women and gender discrimination, not as illegal economic migration issues. South Korean government needs to take positive, interventionist policies by separating women defectors’ gender-specific human security issues from the larger, North Korean defectors’ human rights issues.

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Key words: Human security, Feminization of Migration, North Korean women defectors, China, Sex trafficking

I. Introduction

Since the mid 1990s, North Koreans who crossed the border into China have received growing attention from human rights activists, international organizations, and the governments of South Korea, China, and the U.S. Despite a great disparity in the size of North Korean migrations into China (NGOs report that there are 300,000 whereas South Korea’s Ministry of Unification reports between 10,000 and 30,000),\(^1\) the number of North Koreans arriving in China has substantially increased, peaking in 1998 and 1999. This sudden surge of North Koreans crossing the border into China is primarily caused by the calamitous condition of the North Korean economy troubles by North Korea’s international isolation, mismanagement, and the adverse effects of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Cold War system. The situation worsened in the mid 1990s when droughts and floods hit the country causing a severe famine that cost millions of North Korean lives.

Despite the large number, and the continuous human flow of North Koreans to China over the decade, academic debate on this issue is largely missing. The linkage among NGOs, academic community, and policy-makers has been very weak. Of particular interest to this study is the so-called feminization of the North Koreans who crossed the border. Various reports indicate that about 70% of defectors from North Korea are women, and many of them became victims of sex trafficking: Out of 7,687 North Koreans who entered South Korea for permanent settlement between 1989 and 2005, women constitute 55.4% (4,263 women), and since 2002, women outnumbered males (in 2005, 69.5% of them were women).\(^2\)

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