

Restructuring Resettlement Focus: Female Defectors' Mental Health

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Though an increasing number of North Korean women successfully escape the constrictive regime, a path to resettlement can be rocky due to lack of focus placed on their mental health. North Korean women are increasingly becoming agents of their own escape; statistics show that since 2006, more than 70 percent of North Korean defectors consisted of women.¹ However, in their efforts to find better lives, these women often face merciless barriers to freedom, such as battling mental illnesses even after their settlement. Many female defectors make the journey physically, but cannot escape their stressors mentally. It is essential that these female North Korean defectors are properly diagnosed and treated, in order to assure a thorough resettlement process.

Individual Experiences

Resettlement mental health needs to take into account that each female defector experience is unique and compounded by various factors, such as slavery and sexual assault experienced while escaping. More female North Korean defectors are beginning to share their stories in order to advocate for future women who might experience the same circumstances.² A defector surnamed Kim made the decision to find work opportunities in China after watching her brother die from malnutrition. A broker tricked Kim and she was trafficked to Shandong, China. After arriving in China, she was traded across various trafficking rings and sold into a slave marriage.² Kim eventually managed to escape after facing severe beatings from the family that bought her. Another story details the account of defector Mrs. L who trekked to China to make a better income and be able to provide her little sister regular meals. However, she was sold to an old bachelor in the “hinterlands of China,” quickly separated from her little sister.³ Finally, a defector Ms. G, was sold to a Chinese family and forced to have sex with the father and his four sons. After eight months of grueling torture that lasted regardless if she was sick or on her period, Ms. G managed to escape by repeatedly begging one of the sons.³

While similar themes run throughout these narratives, what truly becomes the focus in terms of mental health is individual perspective and experience. These women, on the surface level, have experienced somewhat similar journeys and transitions on their way out. On the other hand, how these experiences affect and leave an impact on each individual is completely different. Therefore, the trauma and how it is treated becomes variable on a case by case basis

¹ Kim2013

² Kim2015

³ Hong2015

due to unique perspective. A focus on mental wellness is not only imperative for individual health but informative in establishing precedents to handle resettlement processes for future female defectors.

Why are there more Female Defectors?

Given that there is a need to focus on experience and what each woman has gone through, knowing what pushed these women to take such risks can add to a deeper understanding of individual perspective. New factors are now arising that depict a shift in familial responsibility. The act of state sanctioned extortion is creating a workforce where men now bring back little to no income for their households.^{4*} This results in “redrawn gender roles, forcing women to become breadwinners.”⁴ The rise of *jangmadang* (black markets), provide women with an economic opportunity of involvement in private trading.⁴ Although this can quickly become the sole source of income, the burden of financial responsibility forces North Korean females to look for other means of survival. This desperation can cause women to turn to outside resources in China or South Korea without a second thought. In addition, women hold less social requirements whereas North Korean men are held strongly accountable.¹ For example, North Korean men are expected to always be present at jobs, military service, and in particular political gatherings where their sole presence accounts for that of the whole family. If a man doesn’t “go to work, [he goes] to prison.”⁴ On the other hand, North Korean women are not bound by these roles and can take risks in order to achieve a secure future through freedom.

Focusing on Mental Health

Regardless of the feats accomplished by women who defect from North Korea, they are often assigned negative labels of “trafficked brides” or “smuggled refugees,” once arriving in South Korea or China.⁵ These negative perceptions of female defectors punish these women and the passing of these physical traumas leave permanent mental scars behind. A study conducted by Shin and Lee, researchers at the Red Cross College of Nursing in Seoul, South Korea, observed occurrences of PTSD in settled North Korean defectors of South Korea (2015). The levels of PTSD found among female defectors were higher than the average found in South Korea.⁶ Furthermore, rehabilitation processes that these women went through further increased stress and risk of mental illness. Research concluded that female defectors experience not only

⁴ Lim2012

*State sanctioned extortion-many North Korean men that depend on daily wages experience time frames where their positions have no available work. At these times these workers are expected to pay around 20 times their salary for the privilege of not working.

⁵ Song2013

⁶ Shin&Lee2015

higher levels of mental illness compared to male counterparts, but experience a broad spectrum of illnesses and symptoms due to individual experience with human rights violation.

The findings established by such studies coupled with accounts provided by previous female defectors should be utilized to establish “effective intervention programs...that alleviate psychological stress.”⁶ Whereas mental health has been a component of resettlement before, with new information, it can become a more tailored process towards the individual female defector. It is not practical to put all North Korean female defectors in a box and provide generalized rehabilitation and health treatment. The highlighting of variation in perspective alone will allow the resettlement process to become more sensitive to specific needs. New and improved mental health initiatives within resettlement can provide these women the ability to adapt to “social norms and functions in a resettled environment in a less stressful way.”⁶

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