THE PATRIARCHAL STATE and WOMEN’S STATUS in SOCIALIST NORTH KOREA

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THIS STUDY aims to outline the historical changes in women’s status under the patriarchal socialist state in North Korea. Until now, the question of women in state socialism has been one of critical interest to political scientists, historians, and feminists. Yet, gender politics in North Korea has not been satisfactorily explored due to difficulties in the access to data and to lack of an appropriate theoretical framework. Generally, the studies of gender and women’s social status have been concerned with various mechanisms of power relations that socially and culturally structure the reproduction of sexual inequality in the institutionalized practices of society.¹ In this regard, gender politics is based upon an existing social patriarchal order and system and the state is gendered by enforcing gendered policies and ideologies. Modern communist states were not an exception in structuring the mechanism of reproduction of gender inequality in the family and social patriarchal systems. In the case of North Korea, which has a peculiar political culture and an Asian Confucian tradition, gender politics created and recreated by gendered state power has been a profound dominating ideology enabling the regime’s maintenance and social mobilization.

Since North Korea was liberated from Japan’s colonial rule in 1945, the North Korean regime has often been characterized by contradictory goals in its policies toward women. For example, it argued for women’s emancipation through ‘women’s revolutionization,’ but it actually aimed at women’s economic mobilization using various socialist slogans. In the name of gender equality and women’s emancipation, it enforced gendered policies and ideologies, structured the patriarchal family and social systems through the reproduction of the mechanism of sexual discrimination, and tamed women as passive, gendered socialist fighters. Thus, North Korean gender politics created a development contradictory to the state’s original socialist ideals of woman question. Diverging from the initial socialist reforms, socialist politics of women’s emancipation contributed to women’s social labor for nation-building and economic mobilization rather than to women’s liberation itself. On the surface, women’s economic participation was egalitarian. However, this meant another type of discrimination and exploitation, as women suffered the double burden of family and social work. This was the way in which the patriarchal state mobilized society through gender construction. In this process, women’s status in family and society was subordinated to the gendered tradition politically recreated by the so-called ‘patriarchal socialist state.’ However, after the economic crisis, the patriarchal foundations of the socialist state were threatened and women’s status...
could improve to some extent. Nevertheless, North Korean women’s status did not go beyond the patriarchal structure of the socialist state.

This article longitudinally examines the historical features of North Korean women’s status influenced by socialist gender politics in chronological order, following the periods of 1945 - 1953 (early socialist reform in women’s policies), 1954 - the 1970s (the contradictory development of women’s liberation policy), the 1970s - the 1990s (the backwardness of women’s liberation policy under the patriarchal socialist state), and the 1990s - the present (the change of sex roles and sexual division of labor during the food crisis). Existing studies have touched on North Korean women’s policy and social status, but most of the studies either focused on a broad woman question or did not extend into a longitudinal approach including recent changes. Hence, this article offers a historical, sociological explanation of how the North Korean state’s gender politics have influenced women’s status in family and society historically over a long term, including recent changes. From this perspective, primary documents published in North Korea along with interview data from North Korean defectors will be critically reviewed.

Theoretical Backgrounds: The Patriarchal Socialist State and Women’s Status

Early on, Engels argued that sexual inequality is caused by the material history of private property, and in this social structure the proletariat woman is exploited by the bourgeois man. For Engels, the emancipation of the proletariat with the abolition of private property was essential for women’s emancipation. Parallel to Engels, Lenin strongly advocated the theory of socialist women’s liberation, which essentially argued that one cannot engage in communist construction without women, and that socialist revolution and the proletarian dictatorship should provide them with complete equality of rights with men in the family, the state, and society. However, as is well known, the reality of women’s status in socialist societies was different from what socialist theorists and activists argued for. On a substantive level, women’s status and gender construction in state socialism have not been regarded as very different from those in capitalist societies, even though there has been some differentiation of their various details. This is because socialist ideal policies and ideologies could not go beyond the obstacles of the family and social patriarchal order and systems that were already in place. North Korea is a rare socialist state that has longevity and has experienced many historical transformations in the interaction between state reform and women’s status. In the case of North Korea, the patriarchal foundations of the socialist state became a key for understanding the relationship between socialist gender politics and gender construction.

Such patriarchal foundations have been outlined by feminists centering around the analyses of liberal capitalist societies. According to Hartmann, who analyzed the relationship between job segregation by sex and patriarchy in capitalism, ‘patriarchy’ was defined as a ‘set of social relations which has material base and in which there are hierarchical relations between men and solidarity among them, which enable them to control women.’ In short, it was viewed as the system where men oppress women. The feminist sociologist Sylvia Walby also saw patriarchy as a ‘system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women.’ What’s more, she suggested a more elaborate approach, classifying patriarchy in two forms: ‘public patriarchy’ and ‘private patriarchy.’ Private patriarchy is concerned
with a ‘system in which a patriarch controls women individually and directly in the private sphere of the home,’ while public patriarchy accounts for a ‘system in which the expropriation of women is performed collectively by the gendered state rather than individually by patriarchs in both public and private arenas.’ In her study, the transition in patriarchy from its ‘private’ to ‘public’ mode and the interaction between both modes provide an explanation for theoretical and empirical variations of patriarchy. However, what roles the state specifically plays on gender construction under the patriarchal structure and in the interaction between these two modes is not clear. Walby emphasized that the state represents patriarchal as well as capitalistic interests and furthers them in its actions. Nevertheless, this argument offers no way of grasping how the state created a resource for sexual politics. In particular, the role of the state in socialist patriarchal structure needs to be further highlighted.

In relation to the state and patriarchy, radical feminists see the state as an inherently patriarchal power structure, criticizing the liberal feminists who view the state as representing the interests of a dominant group. Also, socialist feminists assume that limited political-economic opportunities reproduce patriarchal domination and they focus on the ways in which state politics affects women’s status. Seen in socialist feminists’ arguments, socialist states manipulated gender construction in both the public and private spheres through gendered policies and ideologies. However, the relationship between the patriarchal structure and the state varies historically, and this variation influences women’s status in different ways. What is more, the long-term approach of the historical changes in state patriarchy and women’s status in socialist societies, especially in North Korea, requires a more elaborative non-reductionist analysis. In this vein, Connell argues that ‘the state is not essentially patriarchal, but is historically patriarchal.’ Connell’s notion of a ‘historically patriarchal state’ is important in that it problematizes gender interests by depicting them as historically contingent outcomes of social struggles. Connell’s view helps to explain the long-term changes of the state’s gendered policy and women’s status in North Korea. As Connell points out, the pattern of state patriarchy changes. Historically, the most favorable historical circumstance for progressive sexual politics appears to be the early days of socialist states, but the later bureaucratization of these states is devastating. In this view, North Korean women’s status has been influenced by a historically patriarchal socialist state. Their human rights, social position, and gender equality in family, work, society, and state discourse have been overwhelmed by a series of great social transformations such as national liberation, socialist reform, the shift to conservative rule, and the recent economic crisis. At the same time, the patriarchal socialist state and women’s status sometimes varied according to the interaction between the state, family, and women along with the external factors. In this respect, historically, patriarchy under state socialism took on a persistent yet flexible nature. Based on this theoretical framework and historical background, this article focuses on how the North Korean state’s gender politics has affected women’s status and how the patriarchal socialist state has been transformed in this historical process.
Early Socialist Reform: Socialist Ideal and Reality of Women’s Liberation (1945 - 1953)

Historically, the Chosŏn dynasty adopted a neo-Confucian orthodoxy that controlled the entire patterns of people’s living, influenced their social values, and supplied the social background for pre-modern Korean political theories and institutions. The neo-Confucian principles of ‘virtuous conduct’ such as the ‘wife serving the husband’ and the ‘manners between husband and wife’ put tight restrictions on women’s freedom and activities in domestic and social life. All family and social systems were based upon the male lineage and patriarchal logic. For instance, the family registry was based on the male lineage, and women were not allowed to own and inherit property. They did not have the freedom to choose their spouses in marriage, and a widow was not allowed to remarry. They were even prohibited from taking part in social activities without special permission from their husbands or the heads of the households. Traditional Confucian culture based upon the family and social patriarchal systems forced women to be subordinate to their husbands, parents-in-law, and sons.

Yet, the North Korean socialist revolution after Japanese colonial rule and national liberation brought about radical changes in the nature of society and culture. Since national liberation in 1945, North Korea has embarked on various policies towards women’s emancipation with a series of socialist reforms, such as land reform and nationalization of major industries and private enterprises. Through the promulgation of the Law on Land Reform on March 5, 1946, North Korean female peasants could improve their social status by becoming landowners, just as male peasants could, because land redistribution was based upon ‘labor ability’ regardless of sex (Article 15, Detailed Regulations in the Law on Land Reform). The North Korean regime confiscated land and properties possessed by pre-modern kinship institutions and clans, thus eradicating their economic base and weakening the pre-modern patriarchal system. With this land reform, on June 24, 1946, the Labor Law provided women with the legal legitimacy of equal rights in terms of social labor. Article 7 in the Labor Law stipulated the equal right of pay without sex discrimination, and Articles 14 through 17 stipulated the rights of pregnant women, including maternity leave with full pay and a prohibition against overtime or night work for pregnant women. According to American reporter Anna Louise Strong’s eye-witness report, the overall sex equality in pay and the social welfare system appears to have worked well to some degree during this period.

The most remarkable change was the Law on Sex Equality promulgated on July 30, 1946. The socialist regime provided women with a legal, institutional basis for their life, welfare, and equal rights. This law, intended to abolish pre-modern relations of the sexes and Japanese residuals and to encourage women to participate in social, economic activities, stipulated general equal rights (Article 1), an equal right to vote (Article 2), equal rights of labor, pay, and education (Article 3), and free marriage and divorce (Article 4 and 5). It likewise abolished marriage by force, the sale of women, polygamy, concubinage, and the extraction of money or gifts in connection with marriage, thereby ending ‘feudal’ traditions in the issues of women’s marriage and domestic life (Article 7). Particularly, as Article 8 protected their equal inheritance right in properties and land, the economic base of the traditional patriarchal system was significantly undermined. What’s more, in 1946,
the Democratic Women’s Union of North Korea was established to organize the women’s movement, and their social and economic participation was ideologically encouraged. From national liberation to the Korean War, the socialist regime destroyed some important elements of the patriarchal system such as the family registry, genealogical record, and patrilineal clan system. Therefore, legally and institutionally, there was potential for sexual equality and women’s rights to be improved to a significant degree. According to the former South Korean public prosecutor Sang-sup Um, who experienced North Korea’s socialist reform during its occupation of Seoul, its reform was more radical and the tradition of the patriarch’s authority and women’s subordination was strictly restrained; those guilty of subordinating women were criticized as enemies of the state.18

However, although the North Korean socialist reform called for the abolition of pre-modern familial institutions and ideologies, it did not directly challenge the basic family system or revolutionize the ideological roots of Confucianism. Unlike the radical Chinese Cultural Revolution, which tried to eradicate the roots of Confucianism with feudal residuals, the North Korean revolution never tried to break up the family unit and the basic patriarchal order - even though it did attempt to weaken the value of traditional family and abolish cultural resistance to socialist idealism.19 The economic production system was still based upon a family-centered unit and the family and social patriarchal systems and culture did not change fundamentally. A male informant who was born in Dŏkch’ŏn County of South P’yŏng-an Province and defected in 1950 claimed, “Women’s social activities and the improvement of their social status were tremendous social revolutions, but equality in domestic life was not realized. It was almost the same as before.” Kim Il Sung’s address also implied the social reality of those days as follows:

> By the enactment of the Law on Sex Equality, Korean women came to have equal rights in all areas of politics, economy, culture, and social life... Of course, the enactment of this law does not guarantee women’s emancipation completely. We have still many things to do for women’s substantive equal rights.20

As shown above, official legal actions led by the state reform could not bring about fundamental social changes, especially those related to the patriarchal structure in family relations, sexual equality, and gender roles. Within this limitation, the North Korean regime urged women’s participation through social labor ultimately for state making and economic construction. Enlarging the Women’s Union, on May 9, 1946, Kim emphasized:

> We must step up the struggle to wipe out the feudal conventions of binding women to the home and other remnants of the old habits so that all of them will not only help their husbands who are participating in nation-building endeavors, bring up their children well and run their homes thriftily, but also directly contribute to the nation-building work by their own labor efforts.21

Eventually, the primary goal of the policies of pre-war women’s emancipation in North Korea became women’s social labor for nation-building and economic mobilization. This implied that over time North Korean women’s actual familial and
social status would be influenced by the regime’s ideological mobilization. From national liberation through the Korean War, North Korean women’s liberation policy was revolutionary and it tried to shift society qualitatively. However, despite radical reform work, the reality of women’s status did not change significantly. Rather, their life would serve as an ideological machine for socio-economic mobilization. Thus, the post-war women’s liberation policy in North Korea would reveal a contradictory development when it diverged from its original ideals.

The Contradictory Development of Women’s Liberation Policy (1954 - the 1970s)
From the Korean War to the 1970s, the North Korean regime began to construct a stable state system and emphasize the policy of substantial women’s liberation on the surface. However, the state’s policy of women’s emancipation showed an ambivalent aspect when the state’s dominating ideology was based upon gender construction against socialist deals.

After the Korean War, as a result of pre-war land reform and subsequent post-war agricultural collectivization as well as the Ch’ŏllima movement, the traditional kinship system and its economic foundation collapsed completely, and the family and social patriarchal systems were superficially influenced by this change. In particular, as agricultural collectivization defined the state ownership of land and land products by doing away with a family-centered production unit, the state could eliminate all capitalist economic elements and establish a monolithic socialist system to dominate atomized individuals. These reform works went hand in hand with the domestic revolution policy for women’s ‘revolutionization’ and ‘proletarianization.’ The policy and ideal of ‘domestic revolution’ or ‘family revolution’ had already been practiced in an indirect way with other socialist reforms since 1946 as shown in pre-war women’s liberation policies. In the Modern Korean Dictionary, the term ‘domestic revolution’ was defined as a ‘socialist revolution to which every family should dedicate its whole body to become a fighting revolutionary and communist for the party, Suryŏng (the great leader), the fatherland and people.’ Its mechanism for social integration allowed for ideological mobilization of the whole country along with the metaphorical use of the family and family ideology. In this sense, the notions of an ‘organism’ and the metaphor of the family as one ‘cell’ used in the domestic revolution policy became the dominating socialist discourse of North Korea as shown in the 1972 Constitution (Provision 63), which states, ‘Those who are married and families receive protection from the State. It is strongly affirmed that families are the cells of society and shall be well taken care of by the State.’ These organic metaphors of the state and family could reinforce the beliefs that family members of the state have common interests even though they are not equal, and that they keep the common patriarchal order and values embodied in both the state and family.

Through this logic of the state ideology, the domestic revolution with a slogan of women’s revolutionization and proletarianization focused on the political, economic mobilization of families and women rather than on the pure socialist ideals of the domestic revolution and women’s liberation. At the Third Congress of the Korean Democratic Women’s Union, Kim Il Sung characterized the Women’s Union as a ‘transmission belt’ while inducing women’s social labor and their extensive enlistment in economic construction. At first, women’s economic mobilization
began officially from the government’s 84th regulation toward the ‘enlistment of women’s labor force in each sector of national economy’ in 1958. To mobilize them outside the family, supporting socialization of housework, Kim emphasized ‘freeing women from the double heavy burden of household chores and social work’ at the Fifth Congress of the Korean Workers’ Party in November 1970. He related ‘women’s revolutionization and proletarianization’ with the ‘domestic revolution’ to the ‘entire society’s revolution.’26 From this background, through the 1976 Law on the Nursing and Upbringing of Children and the 1978 Socialist Labor Law, North Korea established 60,000 nursery schools and kindergartens; these institutions could accommodate 3.5 million children to allow for women’s social labor in 1978.27 Due to the state’s strong policies and institutional reform of socialization of housework, women’s proportion of economic activities continued to increase until the late 1970s. Compared to men’s proportion of economic activities, North Korean women came to make up 45.5 percent of the work force in the industrial sector and 60 percent of the agricultural sector in 1971, and 48 percent of the total labor force in 1976.28 Specifically, they made up 70 percent of the work force in light industry, 15 percent in heavy industry, 30 percent in forestry, and 20 percent in mining and some heavy labor. In this respect, women’s proportion of economic activities in the late 1970s was almost equal to men’s, seemingly showing gender equality. However, according to a study of job segregation by sex and wage, many North Korean women had low-wage jobs; they made up 70 percent of the work force in light labor in industries such as textile, fiber, leather, spinning, and apparel and 80 percent of primary school teachers, nurses, and nursery school teachers.29 More importantly, even though many women worked as managers or supervisors in ‘woman preferred’ areas, the proportion of women in high-level positions was very low.30

The gender inequality shown in job segregation by sex reveals that the external equality of women’s economic participation did not guarantee their actual equality in social activities. This gender inequality was intensified in women’s political participation. North Korean women’s political participation was approximately 21 percent in the 1977 Sixth Supreme People’s Assembly.31 This was a relatively low proportion, considering that in the Soviet Union the proportion of women’s political participation in the Supreme People’s Assembly in 1975 was 31.4 percent.32 Furthermore, women’s proportion in the Central Committee from the First Party Congress through the Fifth Party Congress was 4.5 percent on average.33 All of these facts show that the power women gain at one level may be used to gain power at a higher level, but because of male dominance at the higher level, women’s power at such levels is not highly valued. In this respect, as Fodor emphasizes, patriarchal structure in state socialism manifests the gender differentiation and male bias embedded in the concept of the ideal communist subjects as well as in women’s incorporation through group membership.34 During the post-war period, North Korean women showed major advances in obtaining part of the institutional power of ‘property,’ yet the substantive social power of ‘position’ and ‘force’ were monopolized by men.35

The social gender inequality shown in women’s economic and political participation that is contradictory to socialist ideals of gender equality can be more obviously found in women’s familial life. Despite socialist slogans about active women’s social and economic participation and freeing them from the heavy burden
of housework, gender equality was hardly reflected in reality. This fact can be found in an interview with the representatives of the Korean Democratic Women’s Union conducted by Jon Halliday. In this interview, the representatives argued that formally and substantively sexual equality was guaranteed in North Korea, but paradoxically, the representatives took family work done on a voluntary basis by women for granted.\textsuperscript{36} In North Korea, most work in the home was presented as ‘women’s work’ and there was an unmistakable emphasis in official and unofficial culture on ‘femininity’ in everything from dress to attitudes towards smoking and drinking.\textsuperscript{37} The traditional family and social patriarchal systems that were seemingly weakened by the state’s institutional reform work remained strong in interfamilial relationships and the actual social mentality. A South Korean-born male defector (Lee), who was drafted as a soldier of the voluntary army during the Korean War in 1950 and defected from the North in 2005, explained the disparity between the institutional gender equality and the actual familial, socio-cultural gender inequality:

The concept of gender equality in North Korea is different from that in a capitalist society such as South Korea. In North Korea, institutional gender equality was guaranteed, but gender equality in family life and social culture was not, both officially and unofficially.

As seen in Lee’s account, the North Korean state accepted institutional gender equality for social mobilization while disregarding actual social, cultural, and familial gender equality. Thus, despite external claims of egalitarianism of gender, gender discrimination persisted both socially and culturally. Accordingly, North Korean women’s status during this period was represented in a type of ‘pseudo-egalitarianism,’ which refers to “elements of latency in present-day sex differentiation as well as to certain mechanisms of covert or latent sex differentiation.”\textsuperscript{38} In this context, unequal gender construction, including unequal gender roles and sexual division of labor in the family and social patriarchal systems, would be further strengthened when it came to the crisis of socialism with the backwardness of women’s liberation policy after the 1970s.

The Backwardness of Women’s Liberation Policy under the Patriarchal Socialist State (the 1970s - the 1990s)
From the 1970s through the 1990s, women’s liberation policy in North Korea revealed a backward aspect, as the socialist state’s patriarchal system was strengthened and women’s status was significantly influenced by social gender construction.

First, the changes of the patriarchal state system and women’s status were influenced by international and domestic political-economic shifts. Politically, North Korea established a stable dictatorship by the early 1970s, preparing for the transfer of political power from Kim Il Sung to his son Kim Jong Il.\textsuperscript{39} However, since that time, the North Korean economy began to take a downturn. This reality was contrary to Kim Il Sung’s promise, as he had often said that in the near future North Korean people could lead rich lives, living in tile-roofed houses, eating rice and meat, and wearing fine clothes. Worse, after the collapse of the Soviet communism and its satellites in the late 1980s, North Korea had to find its own means of survival, and
this led North Korea to construct the Hermit Kingdom by closing its doors to outside influences.

Facing economic difficulty after the 1970s, the regime began to emphasize mass production of consumer goods centering around light industries, further putting the emphasis on the ‘revolution of technology’ for the increase of economic production. It likewise proposed the 8.3 Movement for Increasing the Production of People’s Consumer Goods in 1984, and declared 1989 the ‘year of light industries.’ Under such circumstances, women were the state’s major target for social mobilization, and they had to be mobilized in the ‘household production system’ organized by the people’s associations in addition to work and social organizations. With the economic difficulty, women’s political and economic mobilization was reinforced two-fold and three-fold, and women’s liberation policy did not make any progress. In fact, since the 1970s, there were no substantial policies to improve women’s status while their economic burden and suffering were aggravated. Furthermore, even at the official speeches in Kim Il Sung Works beginning in the 1980s, Kim Il Sung rarely mentioned the women’s liberation from household work and substantial women’s rights which he had argued for enthusiastically before. Eventually, women’s liberation policy revealed a backward aspect in this respect.

The backwardness of the women’s liberation policy can also be seen in the transformed process of the regime’s ideological mobilization that stressed a traditional woman rather than a socialist woman as an ideal model. For example, in the mid-1970s, North Korea began to emphasize the slogan ‘Let’s learn from Ban Suk Kang (Kim Il Sung’s mother) and Jong Suk Kim (Kim Il Sung’s first wife).’ From the 1980s, the propaganda also proposed an additional slogan: ‘Let’s learn from the example of hidden heroes.’ These women’s movements swept all over North Korea and women had to be further mobilized ideologically. As shown in the episodes of Chosŏn Yŏsŏng (Korean Women), a North Korean periodical magazine of women question, the examples of Ban Suk Kang, Jong Suk Kim, and hidden heroines as ideal types of socialist women were suggested and emphasized by the regime. Yet these images represented a traditional woman who is contradictory to socialist idealism. Under superficial slogans, an ideal North Korean woman fit a traditional woman’s image as a ‘mother educating children well,’ a ‘wife serving a husband well,’ and a ‘daughter-in-law serving parents-in-law well.’

The mother of revolution, Lady Jong Suk Kim, was devoted to educating her son, a communist revolutionary who was gifted with knowledge, virtue, and body and had multi-faced knowledge.

Lady Kim educated women that they should be well-mannered, get along in their neighborhoods, be respectful to their parents-in-law, be neat and tidy in their dress, and be good at housekeeping.

As shown in the above quotations, Jong Suk Kim was especially propagandized as a good homemaker for the Kim family and a great mother for her son Kim Jong Il. The emphasis on a female revolutionary who has equal rights with a male revolutionary was replaced with the emphasis on a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law who supports her husband, sons, and family. Therefore, during this period,
the ideal-type of a socialist woman as a ‘communist mother and wife’ suggested in the domestic revolution from the 1950s through the 1970s was substantially transformed into a traditional model of a ‘wise mother and good wife.’ As Ryang claims, women’s status was significantly overwhelmed by traditional patriarchal values along with the logic of economic exploitation and gender differentiation in post-war gender politics which replaced the ‘socialist woman question’ with the ‘mother-worker question.’

With the backwardness of the policy of women’s liberation, the revival of tradition reflected the patriarchal political culture of those days. After the consolidation of the juche idea in the 1970s, Kim Il Sung became a supreme leader as the state’s Father. The political power personified as ‘Ŏbŏi Suryŏng’ (The Father Leader) and the ‘Mother Party’ justified a stable patriarchal political system governed by a paternalistic leader. The Confucian political order inevitably presupposed and developed the gendered order and structure in the state and society. After the 1980s, Kim Jong II, who substantively inherited Kim Il Sung’s supreme political power, tried to justify his own absolute power and advocate a new patriarchal form of socialism. North Korean people took the revival and strengthening of tradition in family and society for granted as they internalized traditional values and culture under the rule of the patriarchal socialist state. Yŏng-sun Kim was a famous woman defector and friend of Kim Jong II’s second wife, Hyerim Sŏng. Kim defected from Yodŏk camp in North Korea in 2001 and stated that

At that time, all women respected and complied with the heads of the households because they believed that economic wealth and social success would only be possible through them. The political status and economic wealth of a family were decided by the background of the patriarch.

As shown in the emphasis of the ‘head of the household’ as a male patriarch, the substantive authority of the patriarch in family and society was not significantly different from that in pre-revolutionary society. More importantly, Kim claimed, ‘The patriarchal political system and culture overtly and covertly reinforced the role and status of the patriarch, substantively weakening women’s status in family and society.’ Eventually, the initial socialist ideals of women’s emancipation became superficial rhetoric when the ideals of socialism were replaced with the reality of state patriarchy. In this sense, post-war North Korean socialism characterized a patriarchal socialist state represented in the political rhetoric of ‘state patriarchy.’ However, the patriarchal state system and social order were challenged by the economic crisis from the mid-1990s and some changes in women’s status began to occur.

The Crisis of the Patriarchal Socialist State: The Change of the Sex Role and Sexual Division of Labor during the Food Crisis (the 1990s - the present)
From the 1990s, the patriarchal socialist state faced a tremendous economic crisis that brought about the crisis of the regime and this state crisis began to undermine the patriarchal system of the state and society along with political and economic changes.
Since the death of the ‘great leader’ Kim Il Sung in 1994, North Korea has faced a tremendous food crisis. It is known that especially during the mid-1990s, hundreds of thousands of North Korean people starved to death because of widespread famine, drought, and chronic economic depression. To overcome this crisis, North Korea declared a new slogan of an ‘arduous march’ and placed further responsibility on women for supporting their families financially. In particular, in the Family Law promulgated on October 24, 1990, Articles 1 and 3 emphasized the importance of the ‘socialist extended family,’ which intended the integration of state and society centering on family groups. This meant that facing economic difficulty, the state intended to pass the economic burden of supporting individuals to the family groups (Articles 35 and 36). In this situation, women had to be responsible for the economic burden of supporting their families when many men as the head of their households lost the ability to support their families.

In the predicament of the state and family stemming from the economic crisis, women’s status was double-edged; on the one hand, when the social patriarchal order was weakening under the crisis of the patriarchal state, there was potential for women’s status to improve. On the other hand, women’s life was aggravated due to the disintegration of family and the increase of economic burden. In spite of these antithetic phenomena, some change in gender roles and sexual division of labor began to stand out. Unlike other socialist societies, North Korea had a high percentage of housewives among its married women. Since the 1980s, the shift from work to home became pronounced, with 60-70 percent of married women quitting their jobs after marriage. Therefore, North Korean women remained the main performers of domestic tasks, implying strong patriarchal social system. According to all 15 women defectors interviewed by the author, their husbands rarely helped them with household work before the economic crisis. Sex roles and sexual division of labor in family and work before the food crisis were strictly fixed. However, the situation changed with the food crisis. With the end of food rationing, men’s capacity for economic support deteriorated, and many women had to work as breadwinners or family supporters in place of their husbands. After the late 1990s, most North Korean people except for high-level officials began to earn a living by engaging in a small-size trade or business, or by making foreign exchange through border trade.

According to an empirical study of North Korean urban women’s life in the cities of Ch’ŏngin, Sinŭiju, and Hyesan, during the food crisis, all but one among the 44 North Korean women respondents were responsible for economic support of their households by themselves or with their husbands; 16 of the respondents shared the housework with their husbands. More importantly, over two thirds of the total respondents in this survey disagreed with traditional values such as ‘serving their husband as God’ and ‘strict gender roles in the housework,’ revealing their changed consciousness of the traditional gender roles and sexual division of labor.

This change led to the new antithetic phenomena of the ‘disintegration’ and ‘integration’ of the family, which means the partial destruction of the traditional social order and of gender inequality in labor. On the one hand, women’s frequent absence due to trade or business and the increasing number of dual-earner couples caused disharmony in married life and many problems in bringing up children. Almost all North Korean women defectors interviewed by the author agreed that one of the most surprising phenomena they witness when living in the South is the
relatively free domestic and social life of South Korean women. It is not surprising that most married women defectors have experienced frequent quarrels with their spouse and difficulty in maintaining their marital status in the South; 20 percent of defectors reaching South Korea experienced a family breakdown.\textsuperscript{49} In North Korea, during the food crisis, some women would not comply with their husbands and the number of divorce cases caused by family problems increased.\textsuperscript{50} The fact that North Korean men are sardonically called ‘môngmông-i’ (house dog) reflects this changed social reality. On the other hand, men began to enthusiastically help their wives with household work and to work together for their living. With regard to this, 10 women defectors interviewed by the author stated that many men helped their wives with household work such as cleaning, washing, and preparation of meals, and they did not feel ashamed of such behaviors. Compared to the past, signs of a slight weakening of the patriarchal system alongside the change of sex roles and sexual division of labor could be found.

Seen this way, during the food crisis, North Korean women became active players in the new economic transition and family life, thus creating new opportunities for themselves and a new challenge to the patriarchal social system.\textsuperscript{51} However, this change does not represent a fundamental wavering of the basic patriarchal system. The strict traditional gender roles and sexual division of labor were weakened, but this change could be seen mainly in the lower and middle classes.\textsuperscript{52} Furthermore, even women in the lower and middle classes did not deny the authority of the patriarch as the head of family and the basic order of the patriarchal system. Hence, some changes of strict gender roles and sexual division of labor did not significantly undermine the consolidated patriarchal system in North Korea, as exemplified by two women defectors:

Although they did a lot of work including household work and a business, women did not look down on their husbands. They thought that it is mandatory and natural that they should do such work by themselves. They frequently quarreled with their husbands, but most of them did not challenge their husband’s superior status.\textsuperscript{53}

Although today, women’s power has become stronger than before and men’s authority especially in family has been weakened, husbands’ status and role in family and society is still respected. It is true that some women have stood up to their husbands or that the cases of divorce have increased compared to the past, but I do believe that many women respect their husband’s authority and status. A woman is only a woman and a wife is only a wife.\textsuperscript{54}

Taken together, even in changed situation, most North Korean women still respected the superiority and authority of their husbands. Their lives were still swayed by their husbands’ social position and status. During the food crisis, North Korean women’s overall status in family and society showed a limited scope of change under the strong patriarchal structure. Accordingly, North Korean women’s social and economic activities during the economic crisis were not for self-realization, but rather for economic livelihood. North Korean women’s status in family and society today still reflects gendered subordination and inequality in the patriarchal family and social life. At the same time, it shows that the unequal treatment that they
previously endured has been tamed by the patriarchal socialist state over a half of a century.

The Future of Women’s Status in North Korea
I have focused on how the North Korean state’s gender politics has affected women’s status and how a patriarchal socialist state has been transformed in this process. In early socialist reform after North Korea was liberated from Japan’s colonial rule, actual socio-cultural gender equality from below was not realized despite institutionalized gender equality from above. In fact, this early socialist reform of the woman question may be viewed as the strongest, considering the history of socialist reform of woman question and the present status of North Korean women. The problem, however, is that both prewar and postwar socialist policies of women’s emancipation aimed at women’s social labor for nation-building and economic mobilization rather than at women’s liberation itself. As a result, ‘women’s revolutionization’ through the ‘domestic revolution policy’ became a political rhetoric represented in ‘pseudo-egalitarianism,’ and women’s liberation policy regressed in this process. Despite some recent improvement of women’s status shown in gender roles and sexual division of labor during the food crisis, women’s status neither went beyond the gendered subordination and inequality in the patriarchal family and social systems nor threatened the consolidated patriarchal socialist state significantly.

Today, drawn into the vortex of the economic crisis through the aggravation of the food situation and the political crisis of the nuclear issue, the North Korean regime is mobilizing women as the last instrument of regime maintenance, suggesting state ideologies of an ‘arduous march,’ ‘military-first politics,’ and a ‘powerful and prosperous nation.’ In these state discourses, women should be wise mothers and good wives, socialist fighters, suffering family supporters, and militant female soldiers. This reflects the present social status of North Korean women. Indeed, many North Korean women suffer from the triple heavy burden of household chores, social requirements and difficult family support under the intensified political and economic crisis. In fact, in the name of socialist women’s emancipation, their lives have been tamed in a gendered way by the patriarchal authoritarian state. At the same time, nevertheless, North Korean women are contributing to supporting their family and creating a new social order and value. Therefore, an era of national reunification in future would create possibility for free and equal women’s status. In the future, the woman question in North Korea will become a profound social issue of national reunification and social integration for both the North and the South.
NOTES


3 Methodologically, I draw on interview data as well as archival data. I collected in-depth interviews with 32 North Korean refugees living in Seoul from summer research in 2005 and 2006. In particular, the primary documents published in North Korea along with interview data from North Korean defectors will be critically reviewed in this article. Demographically, of 32 North defectors living in Seoul, 17 were men and 15 were women. As of 2008, the distribution of interviewees’ ages shows 7 persons in their 40s, 6 in their 50s, 9 in their 60s, 9 in their 70s, and 1 in his 80s. For an interview method, I used an informal, semi-structured one-on-one in-depth interview strategy. For security reason, I promised interview subjects anonymity to encourage them to speak freely and frankly. For this reason, I used aliases when interviewee subjects were unwilling to reveal any of their information. What is more, I investigated the North Korean government’s periodical publications such as newspapers, journals, magazines, and memoirs. I will relate this archival data to interview data and use other defectors’ published essays, memoirs, and interviews as well.


9 Ibid.

10 R. W. Connell, ibid., p. 163.

11 Ibid., p. 163.


14 Refer to Anna Louise Strong, Inside North Korea (Montrose, C. A., 1949).

15 Ibid., pp. 36-7.

16 However, on March 8, 1956, by the government’s 24th regulation, North Korea replaced divorce by mutual agreement with divorce by a lawsuit in order to prevent the weakening or breakdown of family. See Il-ho Cho, Some Questions concerning the Law of the Development of the North Korean Family Law (Pyongyang: Academy of Science Press, 1957).

17 Similarly, People’s Republic of China enforced the Marriage Law, the Labor and Land legislation in the early 1950s, but these reform works could not be successful completely with a failure of ultra-leftist reform during the Cultural Revolution. Unlike North Korea, agricultural collectivization in China failed due to strong tradition of a peasant family economy, and this influenced subsequent reform and


39 Refer to Charles Armstrong, *North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003). As a matter of fact, following the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese communist regime led the Anti-Confucian Campaign, beginning roughly at the end of 1973 and continuing through 1975. This campaign recoded as the ultra-leftist ideology with the Cultural Revolution aimed at the ideological, economic socialist centralization and institutionalization through the denial of the tradition. However, even this ultra-leftist reform could not revolutionize traditional values and orders. See A. James Gregor and Maria Hsia Chang, “Anti-Confucianism: Mao’s Last Campaign,” *Asian Survey* 19:11 (1979).


42 The word ‘Ch’ollima’ (thousand-mile flying horse) refers to a mythical horse that was able to travel a thousand miles in a single day. The Ch’ollima movement was a massive campaign aimed at constructing a socialist economy at a ‘blindingly quick pace;’ hence, the name of the movement. It embodied North Korea’s style of approach to economic policies: planned, slogan-oriented, and heavily reliant on mobilization. Like the Great Leap Forward in China, Kim Il Sung had an expectation that mass movements should lead to leaps forward in social, economic development. In 1958, Kim formulated the Ch’ollima Movement for the systematic mobilization of labor for economic development in addition to socialist ideological mobilization. The Ch’ollima movement as the general line of North Korean socialist construction was replaced with the Three Revolution Movement after the 1970s.


48 Ibid., pp. 193-4.


50 Ibid., p. 203

51 Tae-yŏng Lee, ibid., p. 154.


53 Mi-ryang Yun, ibid., p. 192.

54 Eva Fodor, ibid., p. 243.

55 Kyung Ae Park, ibid., p. 542.


44 The *juche* idea is the official state ideology of North Korea. The doctrine is a component part of Kimilsungism, the North Korean term for Kim Il-sung’s regime. Juche literally means ‘main body’ or ‘subject’; it has also been translated in North Korean sources as ‘independent stand’ and the ‘spirit of self-reliance.’

45 Masayuki Suzuki, ibid., p. 160.


48 Ibid., p. 177.


52 Mi-kyŏng Lee and Su-mi Ku, ibid., pp. 176-8.

53 Hyŏn-sŏn Pak, ibid., pp. 240-1.

54 This is female defector Sun-ŭm Yu’s testimony.