
Special report:
The Koreas

A life of drudgery

In the north, as in the south, women hold up more than half the sky

Oct 26th 2013 | From the print edition

KOREA IS A “difficult country to write upon”, discovered Isabella Bird Bishop, a British travel writer*, after four visits to the country in the 1890s. The position of Korean women was especially hard to describe. Under a centuries-old custom, upper-class

women were first secluded in their father’s home, then shut away in their husband’s. The peasant woman, on the other hand, was “nothing but a drudge...At 30 she looks 50, and at 40 is frequently toothless.”



Women’s work

North Korea remains a difficult country to write upon. Thousands of foreigners now visit as tourists, but most of what is known about daily life in North Korea comes from defectors, and most of these are women, who make up almost 70% of the 25,600 defectors living in South Korea.

Kim Il Sung’s communist regime made a good start in outlawing the traditions that shocked Bird, passing a gender-equality law two years before it enacted a constitution. In 1965 almost 55% of the labour force were women, thanks in part to the carnage of the Korean war in the early 1950s. But Sonia Ryang, an anthropologist at the University of Iowa, points out that the formal commitment to gender equality, transplanted from the Soviets, did not take root. Kim was soon urging women to carry the double burden of production and reproduction, fulfilling their output quotas and also raising “the successors to our revolutions and the reserves of communist builders”. Visitors noted that at home the typical North Korean male did not lift a

finger to help.

The breakdown of North Korea's planned economy in the mid-1990s thrust women into a new role. Men had to show up at their assigned work units, but the state turned a blind eye to women who did not report for duty. This allowed women to build the informal market economy that partially replaced the collapsing planned economy. Women became retailers, petty traders and pedlars. In a survey of North Korean defectors by Marcus Noland and Stephan Haggard of the Peterson Institute for International Economics, 76% of the women had been involved in trading before they left, compared with 63% of the men. Almost half the women said they had got all their income from the market.

Those who engage in these markets still run risks. The government has criminalised a range of market activities. Those convicted face up to two years in a so-called "labour-training" facility, which are grim but less harsh than the political prison camps for which North Korea is famous. Of the women who left after 2005, 95% report paying bribes to stay out of trouble.

Women's lives have become less regimented but no less arduous. They are now often the breadwinners, and men are doing more housework, says Hazel Smith of Cranfield University in her forthcoming book on North Korea. But as the market economy has grown, she finds, the biggest cut has gone to the Chinese trading networks that span the border, and to the wholesalers with connections in North Korea's regime. Messrs Noland and Haggard note that as the state has thrust women into the market, "the increasingly male-dominated state preys on the increasingly female-dominated market."

More than a century after Bird's visit, drudgery remains the lot of many of North Korea's women. But some things have changed. In Bird's day, girls were so hidden away that "the brightness which girl life contributes to social existence [was] unknown in the country." But since women have abandoned their state posts in nursery schools and child care in recent years, children now live a less supervised life. Ms Smith says that when she returned to Pyongyang in 2011 after a gap of eight years, the most striking change was much less "regimentation of children, hundreds of whom could be observed playing and moving freely" on the streets.

* **Correction:** This article had misstated Isabella Bird Bishop's nationality. She was British, not American. Apologies.

From the print edition: Special report