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North Korean Women and Victimhood: Selling Legitimacy and Shaping Advocacy

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Abstract

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This thesis investigates the victim narrative as it is utilized by the organizations Liberty in North Korea, the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, Crossing Borders, and Helping Hands Korea to depict North Korean refugee women as valid sufferers unable to exercise their agency. This project analyzes how and why the aforementioned organizations are using this victim trope to craft a marketable and legitimate recipient that deserves recognition and aid from their audiences. It questions how the use of this convention is informed by institutional need and debates regarding trafficking and sex work by scrutinizing the use of key phrases and words in films, reports, campaigns, and websites and relating the findings to relevant literature. Through this line of questioning, this thesis is able to argue that the widespread use of the victim narrative is not coincidental, but an advantageous strategy employed by organizations working with North Korean women to navigate polarized opinions and help ensure institutional survival.

Chapter 1: Literature Review



1

Introduction

About halfway through Liberty in North Korea's documentary, *The People's Crisis*, the CEO speaks to the camera and explains that up to ninety percent of North Korean women who flee to China end up trafficked into forced marriages or different sectors of the sex industry. As she mentions brothels, karaoke bars, and sex-chatting industries, video clips of these places and the obscured faces of multiple North Korean women play across the screen. Thereafter, a young North Korean woman named Yoon-hui speaks to the camera and describes her abusive, involuntary marriage with an unnamed Chinese

¹ Downer, Ryan, *The People's Crisis*, Documentary (Liberty in North Korea), accessed May 3, 2018,

man. She sits silhouetted in a dark room and describes her struggles to the audience, her face hidden in order to conceal her identity.²

Organizations like Liberty in North Korea, the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, Crossing Borders, and Helping Hands Korea attempt to aid, rescue, and resettle North Korean refugees and are working to raise awareness about North Korean women in China. Using mediums such as films, academic and institutional reports, and various print and media campaigns, such organizations seek to turn the attention of their audiences in the direction of these seldom-mentioned women. Of particular interest to this paper are the strategies employed by these actors to depict the North Korean women in China as valid, deserving victims as well as how these tactics are influenced by debates surrounding sex work and trafficking. Non-governmental human rights organizations regularly paint North Korean women as guiltless sufferers trapped in scenarios in which they cannot exercise their agency. A few titles of reports and literature addressing these women include evocative and deliberate phrases such as “lives for sale”³, “absence of choice”⁴, and “beyond safe haven.”⁵ Why were these particular words chosen and what perspective do these choices reflect?

There is not often space in these victim narratives for discussion of these women as resourceful, agentive actors who are capable of making key decisions about their marriages and work. This project will analyze how and why the aforementioned organizations are using this victim trope to craft a marketable and legitimate recipient

² Ibid.

³ Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, “Lives for Sale: Personal Accounts of Women Fleeing North Korea to China” (Washington, DC., 2009).

⁴ Norma Kang Muico, “An Absence of Choice: The Sexual Exploitation of North Korean Women in China” (Anti-Slavery International, 2005).

⁵ Ju Hui Judy Han, “Beyond Safe Haven,” *Critical Asian Studies* 45, no. 4 (n.d.): 533–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2013.851153>.

that deserves aid from their audiences. It will question how the use of this convention is connected to institutional survival and debates regarding trafficking by scrutinizing the use of key phrases and words in reports and promotional and educational materials. Through this line of questioning, this thesis will argue that the widespread use of this victim narrative is not coincidental.

To date, no significant work has been done to understand what frameworks and stories are utilized by the few NGOs working with North Korean women in China. This paper seeks to shed light on those frameworks and turn a critical eye on the particular narratives that are being implemented to shape advocacy and structure the terms of aid for this population. NGOs are not formed or operated without viewpoints, and it is prudent to examine through what lenses these women are being viewed and projected. This project seeks to illustrate that the non-agentive victim story is frequently used because it can craft a palatable image that is effective in sustaining organizations by drawing compassion and engagement from audiences without alienating certain groups of potential supporters.

It is important to make the distinction that this paper does not aim to make any claims about the morality of the NGOs based on the tactics that they choose to use. There will be no judgment on whether or not depicting North Korean women using the victim narrative is ethical. It is also not this project's intent to suggest that North Korean women are not victims of trafficking or that they do not face hardships and traumas. Personal accounts provide examples of women who confirm they were trafficked and confined in abusive marriages or involuntary sex work. However, this study will not examine North Korean women's relationships to or understanding of their marriages, sex work, or

victimhood. At this time, the thinness of currently available data and limited access to the population in question would make it difficult to produce a reliable study of these topics. Instead this paper will focus on the tools and stereotypes used by the organizations that are assisting these women. These tools are emblematic of values, political ideologies, social ideologies, agendas and associations and by studying them it may be possible to determine why they are being used.

In order to orient these arguments, this paper will begin by providing a literature review on previous research on the North Korean refugee crisis, institutional survival, and feminist debates on human trafficking. The topic of this paper is still new and largely unexplored, partly due to the difficulties accessing North Koreans in China. Thus, no literature exists covering the specific questions being asked by this project. As such, it was necessary for the literature review to compile research from a number of fields related to this thesis. In the following chapters there will be an explanation of the methodology used, presentation of the data collected, an analysis of the narratives and organizations, and finally, the main arguments.

Literature Review

North Korean Refugees

The North Korean refugee crisis is one of the least accessible and least discussed refugee crises in the world. North Korean women have fled their home country for various economic, political and personal reasons over the past few decades. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (henceforth North Korea) is recognized as one of the world's most repressive totalitarian governments. The flow of North Koreans into China was originally triggered by the disastrous 1995 famine, which lasted for three years

and resulted in the deaths of more than two million people.⁶ During the famine, the government's control over its citizens and borders weakened, and desperate North Koreans seeking money and food made their way to China.⁷ Although the famine has officially ended, chronic food shortages and malnutrition still plague the nation and compel citizens to continue to cross into China for resources and opportunities.⁸

Hunger continues to be one of the major factors contributing to individual decisions to leave, but it is aggravated by other factors such as “loss of status, frustration over lack of opportunities, political persecution due to family history, and a wish to live in similar conditions as those of North Koreans who live outside of North Korea.”⁹ North Korean people routinely have their rights violated by the state including their freedom of movement, information, speech, thought, religion, and association.¹⁰ The only legally available news, radio, and television outlets in the country are those operated by the government. Any other media and information has likely been smuggled illegally into the country. Forced adulteration of the leadership, public executions, collective and intergenerational punishment, a political apartheid system called the Songbun system, and political prison camps are all part of the systematic totalitarian regime that brutally governs and abuses its citizens.¹¹ The severe political and social repression and the lack of economic opportunities continue to motivate individuals to flee their country.

⁶ Kang Muico, “An Absence of Choice: The Sexual Exploitation of North Korean Women in China.” 1.

⁷ Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, “Lives for Sale,” 2.

⁸ Yoonok Chang, Stephan Haggard, and Marcus Noland, “Migration Experiences of North Korean Refugees: Survey Evidence from China,” Working Paper (Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2008), 2.

⁹ Chang, Haggard, Noland, “Migration Experiences,” 5.

¹⁰ Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, “Lives for Sale: Personal Accounts of Women Fleeing North Korea to China.” 13.

¹¹ “The People’s Challenges,” Liberty In North Korea, accessed May 27, 2018, www.libertyinnorthkorea./learn-nk-challenges/

North Koreans seeking to escape their country cross the Tumen or Yalu River into the northeast region of China. This region is referred to as the "Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, where 854,000 ethnic Koreans with Chinese citizenship reside."¹² This district in Northeast China is a "bustling hub of diasporic and transnational Korean business and personal networks" comprised of ethnic Koreans with Chinese nationality, ethnic Koreans with Japanese nationality, South Koreans, Korean-Americans, and North Korean migrants.¹³ This ethnic composition creates an environment in which newly arrived North Koreans, many of whom do not speak the local language, can find sympathetic and ethnically similar individuals and households willing to provide aid. Often, North Koreans enter the country having already been advised to seek out these populations. These Koreans may be willing to provide clothing, shelter, food, and advice on how to proceed.¹⁴ This route is also considered the best option as the border with South Korea is exceedingly difficult to cross. The Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) is the world's most heavily militarized border and anyone attempting to cross the zone would have to navigate land mines, barbed wire, watchtower, fences and armed soldiers.¹⁵

Once in China, North Koreans are a particularly vulnerable population due to China's refusal to acknowledge them as legitimate refugees despite being a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention.¹⁶ China is a signatory to the 1951 Convention and the following 1967 Protocol, but it does not uphold its duties to protect refugees as expected by international customary law. China and North Korea previously reached agreements in

¹² Joel R. Charny, "Acts of Betrayal: The Challenge of Protecting North Koreans in China," *Refugee International*, April 2005, 5.

¹³ Han, "Beyond Safe Haven," 534.

¹⁴ Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, *Lives for Sale*, 17.

¹⁵ Melanie Kirkpatrick, *Escape from North Korea: The Untold Story of Asia's Underground Railroad* (New York: Encounter Books, 2014), 15.

¹⁶ US General Assembly, "Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees," Treaty Series (United Nations, n.d.), <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3be01b964.html>.

the early 1960s and 1986 that have shaped a policy of repatriation and a climate of fear and uncertainty for refugees.¹⁷ Arguing that North Koreans who flee into China are illegal economic migrants, China does not allow them to seek aid from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and also does not allow the UNHCR access to refugees to assess if their claims are legitimate.¹⁸ Chinese authorities will act against the principle of non-refoulement and seek out, detain, and forcibly repatriate North Koreans.¹⁹

There are several notable reasons for the Chinese government's current policies. The first, as previously mentioned, are the political ties it has with North Korea. Second, if the state chose to recognize the refugees' claims to asylum, the state would then also be obligated to provide resources such as legal or financial aid, space, and food.²⁰ Third, the state fears that if they are welcoming to refugees, many more will be encouraged to try to cross into their borders.²¹ This also fuels the connected security concern that the resulting exodus could destabilize the North Korean regime and the surrounding region. According to one survey, only 14 percent of refugees currently consider settling in China their final goal.²² Most reported they would prefer to utilize China a rest stop of sorts where they can get their bearings and gather information and resources before continuing their journey. It is difficult to be certain if this attitude is due to China's current policies, but given China's proximity to North Korea where 90 percent of the refugees surveyed still have family, it is possible that a change in policy could result in the country becoming a

¹⁷ Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, *Lives for Sale*, 15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 58

¹⁹ UN General Assembly, Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, p. 3

²⁰ Andrei Lankov, "North Korean Refugees in Northeast China," *Asian Survey* 44, no. 6 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2004.44.6.856>, 867.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 867.

²² Chang, Haggard, Noland, "Migration Experiences," " 8.

more attractive final destination.²³ This is a potential path that the Chinese government does not want to venture down and are actively working to discourage.

Despite China's insistence that all North Koreans entering the country are economic migrants, it is widely agreed by other governments and organizations that the label does not do justice to their situations and that they do indeed have a legitimate claim to refugee status. Refugee status is granted to individuals who have a "well-founded fear of being persecuted...for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion," and there is an argument to be made that North Koreans have a well-founded fear even if that fear developed after their departure.²⁴ The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea argues that a North Korean who did not initially flee from personal persecution is still "a refugee sur place; that is, '[a] person who was not a refugee when he left his country, but who becomes a refugee at a later date.'...The persecution and punishment to which the North Koreans will be subject should they return or be returned make the North Koreans, in the view of leading experts, refugees sur place."²⁵ It is important to note that many North Koreans develop opinions and foster relationships while in China that are considered punishable by imprisonment, torture, or even death by the North Korean state. For example, a refugee may encounter missionaries and convert to Christianity or become pregnant with a Chinese citizen; following repatriation, North Korean officials treat both of these developments as crimes.

²³ Ibid., 12-13.

²⁴ UNHCR, Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status Under the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees (Geneva: 1979), para. 30. available online at http://www.aedh.eu/IMG/pdf/handbook_20on_20the_20procedures_20for_20determining_20refugee_20status.pdf.

²⁵ Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, *Lives for Sale*, 49.

North Korea's 2004 penal code differentiates treatment between those that fled for what the state considers economic versus political motivations. Those considered to have defected for economic reasons are given what might be considered a more lenient sentence of up to two years of labor reeducation at short-term detention centers.²⁶ These short-term detention centers are still brutal and many die due to the frequency and intensity of the forced labor, inadequate food, and torture.²⁷ However, if it is determined that a person defected with political motivations, that individual can be charged with treason and sent to a political prison camp or sentenced to death.²⁸ Refugee interviews "suggest that such judicial proceedings are often skipped, torture remains prevalent in detention facilities, and death rates in incarceration remain high."²⁹ The North Korean government will also practice forced abortion on women who are accused of being pregnant by Chinese men with little to no regard for the danger such procedures inflict on the women. Women have reported being forced to run laps until they collapsed in exhaustion and suffered miscarriages. The state also often refuses to accept children that are the result of marriages in China and separates the women from their children.³⁰

As China is currently unwelcoming, many of the refugees attempt to journey to a more accommodating third country such as Thailand where they can claim refugee status.³¹ Most refugees utilize what is being called Asia's Underground Railroad to make this journey.³² NGOs, Chinese brokers, humanitarians, churches, and other individuals work loosely together to operate the Underground Railroad. Individual rescuers are

²⁶ Chang, Haggard, Noland, "Migration Experiences," 6.

²⁷ Kirkpatrick, *Escape from North Korea*, 157.

²⁸ Chang, Haggard, Noland, "Migration Experiences," 6.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 6

³⁰ Chang, Yoonok; Haggard, Stephan; Noland, Marcus 6

³¹ Kirkpatrick, *Escape from North Korea*, 10.

³² *Ibid.*, 11.

unlikely to know the details of the rest of the route to keep the operation safe in case of an arrest.³³ The exact route of the Railroad is not fixed and changes depending on factors such as reports of increased policing, the weather, accessible transportation, and the availability of brokers. Depending on the circumstances, the refugees and their guides will travel using trains, buses, cars, airplanes, boats, and by foot. Often, walking is the simplest solution to avoid detection by border guards.³⁴ Kirkpatrick posits, "No North Korean can survive long in China without assistance, and no North Korean can get out of China on his own. Similarly, no conductor on the new Underground Railroad, whether he is a humanitarian worker or a broker, can operate independently. He requires a network of people to support him and the North Koreans in his care."³⁵ Along the way, those involved may provide documents, transportation, housing, or meals. Some Chinese guards and other authorities are aware of the Railroad, but turn a blind eye to its operations. While some provide this form of aid for free, others require payment.

The costs and duration of an entire journey vary, and it is difficult to be certain of the average cost of a journey. However, some general numbers have been provided by Liberty in North Korea. LiNK states that it costs \$3,000 to fund one refugee rescue along what is roughly a 3,000-mile journey.³⁶ \$250 is allocated to basic needs such as clothing, food, and other necessities. \$500 is set aside for the cost of transportation. \$100 goes towards accommodations. \$1,350 goes to fees for brokers and partners as well as bribes for officials. \$300 is set aside as an emergency fund. The remaining \$500 is used by the organization to help the North Koreans refugee once they have resettled. This

³³ Ibid., 10.

³⁴ Ibid., 174.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ "Refugee Rescues," Liberty In North Korea, accessed May 27, 2018, www.libertyinnorthkorea.org/rescue-refugees/.

resettlement fund helps provide one-on-one resettlement counseling, health care, community building, and emergency financial assistance.³⁷ Again, these numbers are not exact costs, but the numbers can be useful to get a general idea. As most North Koreans in China live in poverty and do not possess the paperwork necessary to work legally, it can be difficult for most refugees to fund the journey themselves. Many often have to save for years before they can attempt to leave. Some refugees have relatives in South Korea or other countries who are willing to pay the costs of the journey, but for those without these connections or the charitable aid of organizations such as LiNK, the financial aspects of their journey are challenging.

While in China, refugees must circumvent the politically inhospitably circumstances by living in hiding. Women seek their livelihoods in the black market, are commonly sold as brides to Chinese men, or engage in sex work.³⁸ Estimates from different sources vary, but LiNK shares that upwards of 70-90 percent of women who cross the border end up being trafficked.³⁹ It is difficult to obtain accurate numbers on exactly how many North Koreans are in China because most are living in hiding, and organizations such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees are not allowed access to the population. A common approximation suggests there are between one and three hundred thousand refugees.⁴⁰ Other available estimations suggest there are up to four hundred thousand refugees, the majority of whom are women.⁴¹

LiNK's director of research and strategy, Sokeel Park, shared that in the past three years

³⁷ "Impact Reports," Liberty In North Korea, accessed May 27, 2018, <https://www.libertyinnorthkorea.org/impact/resettlement-assistance/>

³⁸ Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, *Lives for Sale*.

³⁹ Downer, Ryan, *The People's Crisis*.

⁴⁰ Charny, "Acts of Betrayal," 5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

four out of five refugees have been women.⁴² Women have the ‘advantage’ of being marketable as brides or sex workers, which could offer a means of income or housing.⁴³ Many of these women meet traffickers who sell them as brides to Chinese men for between roughly eighty and three hundred dollars.⁴⁴ In some cases, the women feel they must marry Chinese men as their illegal status makes obtaining work visas and finding legal employment impossible. In light of this, marriage may represent their best chance to secure their survival.⁴⁵

The situation in China is only a portion of the complex circumstances that North Korean women and the organizations aiding them are navigating. They must also traverse the social and political terrain layering the dispute concerning sex work and trafficking.

Trafficking and Sex Work

Even though there is considerable literature on trafficking, there is currently no consensus on an exact definition of trafficking or how to fight it. Similarly, different scholars and sources have provided varying opinions on the nature of sex work and sex workers. The UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women defined trafficking as:

the recruitment, transportation, purchase, sale, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons: by threat or use of violence, abduction, force, fraud, deception or coercion (including the abuse of authority) or debt bondage, for the purpose of

⁴² Sylvia Yu, “Trafficked North Korean ‘Bride’ Reveals Her Desperate Flight from China,” *South China Morning Post*, September 9, 2017, International edition, sec. Politics, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2110256/trafficked-north-korea-bride-one-woman-reveals-her>.

⁴³ Kirkpatrick, *Escape from North Korea*, 55.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴⁵ Lankov, “North Korean Refugees,” 860.

placing or holding such person, whether for pay or not, in forced labour of slavery like practices...⁴⁶

Debates surrounding sex work and trafficking reveal a divide in ideology that may betray why Liberty in North Korea and the other organizations lean on the image of passive victims for women subjected to trafficking and forced marriages while excluding the narratives of former sex workers, particularly if they considered themselves agentive. On one side of the debate stand the neo-regulationists and on the other of the debate, neo-abolitionists. While neo-regulationists work to build recognition for sex worker's agency and neo-abolitionists push the image of the helpless victim, both groups shape their arguments using concepts of autonomy, agency, legal rights, and consent- all trademark features of the liberal individual. Neo-regulationists assert that it is ineffective and actually detrimental to sex workers to treat trafficking and sex work as one and the same. They argue that women can enter sex work and also preserve their autonomy. Women can choose to utilize their bodies for revenue, and sex work should be considered legitimate labor. Trafficking, they contend, involves force, coercion, deception, and mistreatment.⁴⁷ Neo-regulationists refute the opinion that women cannot consent to sexual interactions and exchanges for income by arguing that such a stance threatens women's status as agentive actors with sexual autonomy. This problematic view has been accused of being a serious step back for women's rights and of aligning with anti-feminist perspectives regarding female sexuality.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Coomaraswamy Radhika, "Integration of the Human Rights of Women and the Gender Perspective: Violence against Women, Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Its Causes and Consequences" (United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2000).

⁴⁷ Annie George, U. Vindhya, and Sawnya Ray, "Sex Trafficking and Sex Work: Definitions, Debates and Dynamics — A Review of Literature," *Economic and Political Weekly* 45, no. 17 (2010), 67.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

According to neo-abolitionists, trafficking and prostitution are the same problem and are similarly considered forms of gender-based violence and violations of women's human rights.⁴⁹ Neo-abolitionist feminists believe that the sex industry and sex work in its many forms should be completely eradicated, regardless of consent. In fact, they believe it is not possible to consent to sex work. Women who claim to choose sex work are in actuality demonstrating that they are unable to make agentic choices and are "deluded victims of the patriarchy even, in fact especially, when they claim not to be victims."⁵⁰ In their view, all sex work contributes to the oppression, exploitation, and objectification of women. It is fundamentally an establishment of male domination and can and should never be considered legitimate labor. They argue that both trafficking and sex work are institutions that reap profit from violence against women and girls and benefit from the vulnerability produced by poverty. Predators benefit from both, and victims of trafficking and sex work suffer in the same way.⁵¹

One of the main problems with abolitionist-backed state policing and criminalization of trafficking and sex work is that these measures often lead to increased police harassment of already overly policed populations. Anti-trafficking campaigns in the United States have resulted more in the criminalization of marginalized populations and stricter border control than in any discernable benefits to trafficking victims.⁵² Furthermore, the criminalization of sex workers results in less protection as they are

⁴⁹ Ibid., 66.

⁵⁰ Anna Szörényi, "Rethinking the Boundaries: Towards a Butlerian Ethics of Vulnerability in Sex Trafficking Debates," *Feminist Review* 107 (2014): 26.

⁵¹ George, Vindhya, and Ray, "Sex Trafficking and Sex Work," 66.

⁵² Elizabeth Bernstein, "Militarized Humanitarianism Meets Carceral Feminism: The Politics of Sex, Rights, and Freedom in Contemporary Anti-Trafficking Campaigns," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *Feminist Theorize International Political Economy*, 36, no. 1 (2010), 58.

forced underground where it is difficult to access resources such as physical and mental health services and where they more likely to be exploited.⁵³

Neo-abolitionists maintain that the legalization of sex work will eliminate the social and moral barricades to treating women as sexual commodities. To strengthen their agenda, neo-abolitionists have tried to align sex politics with state interests to elevate trafficking and sex work to a position of political, legal, and cultural importance.⁵⁴ On the other hand, neo-regulationists and pro-sex work researchers contend that the legalization of sex work will help prevent trafficking and better protect sex workers' rights. Through regulation measures such as licensing, zoning, and mandatory check-ups, legalization can help decrease trafficking through heightened government regulation.⁵⁵

These polarized arguments have resulted in overly simplified stereotypes on both sides. Women are depicted as either powerless victims in need of liberation or agentive sex workers acting out their autonomy. There is little to no room for the nuanced lives and experiences that exist in between. Previous work has shown that in practice, it can be challenging to distinguish between forced and voluntary sex work. A woman might enter sex work by choice, but be unaware of its exploitative nature. After the fact, she may be unable to leave due to factors such as coercion or debt bondage. Alternatively, a woman who was initially trafficking may come to decide that sex work is a lucrative occupation and choose to continue even if presented with other options.⁵⁶ These hazy distinctions and the limited access to information about these women makes it difficult to distinguish between what is and is not exploitation.

⁵³ George, Vindhya, and Ray, "Sex Trafficking and Sex Work," 67.

⁵⁴ Berstein. "Militarized Humanitarianism Meets Carceral Feminism," 51.

⁵⁵ George, Vindhya, and Ray, "Sex Trafficking and Sex Work," 67.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

As the North Korean refugee crisis is currently disproportionately affecting women, many of whom have come in contact with sex work and/or trafficking, work in that area may catch the eye of those with an interest in women's rights and/or trafficking issues. If that is the case then organizations will have to strategize a way to present North Korean to different groups with potentially opposing opinions while also keeping the general public in mind. Even if the audience is not aware of neo-regulationists and neo-abolitionists or does not actively identify with one of these feminist groups, the stances from these debates have circulated through the public and colored many people's opinions.

NGOs and Victim Building

This project will align itself with recent academic works that look at nongovernmental organizations not as unbiased and purely altruistic bodies in pursuit of justice, but as strategic actors with agendas and perspectives that work to market their causes to international audiences and possible donors.⁵⁷ There is no shortage of populations in need of assistance or causes in need of champions and "the ubiquity of conflict worldwide creates fierce competition for international support."⁵⁸ This suggests that not all organizations and causes will be able to garner the attention and resources they need to reach their goals. With new causes and injustices forming and coming to light in the world, organizations must also adapt and reinvent themselves to keep the attention of their audiences. Scholars such as Clifford Bob state that the "global civil society is not an open forum marked by altruism, but a Darwinian marketplace where

⁵⁷ Clifford Bob, "Merchants of Morality" 129 (2002): 36–45, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3183388>.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

legions of groups vie for scarce attention, sympathy, and money."⁵⁹ The international community of NGOs does not operate on a level playing field. Hierarchies of authority, repute, and influence exist, and they must be shrewdly traversed.

In such an environment, small NGOs such as LiNK and Crossing Borders must, to some extent, conform their campaigns and messaging to meet the interests and sensibilities of potential allies and donors. Organizations are entities that shape their narratives and their approach to their missions in a decided fashion. When addressing audiences accustomed to western liberal human rights principles that emphasize individual agency, an organization is most likely to gain sympathy if working with a victim population that lacks this agency. This partially explains the use of western liberal concepts like agency and legal rights in the arguments of neo-abolitionists and neo-regulationists. However, this unfortunately leaves little room for those who do not fit neatly into that populace. Miriam Ticktin wrote “humanitarianism often requires the suffering person to be represented in the passivity of their suffering, not in the action they take to confront and escape it.”⁶⁰ She argued that such frameworks “set suffering bodies against explicitly rational, enterprising, political beings” and leave no room for protection for anyone in between.⁶¹

This project will investigate this classification of the passive sufferer as it is used to outline North Korean women and examine the feminist and human rights theories that inform this category. In a rather black and white world of classifications of sex work and victimhood, many North Korean women’s complex experiences settle them in the

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Miriam Ticktin, *Casualties of Care: Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism in France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 218.

⁶¹ Ibid.

seldom-discussed grey area. It will become apparent that the organizations' portrayals of women's experiences with sex work and trafficking are simplified or edited to maintain a consistent and palatable idea of legitimate, passive victimhood. While this may be partially attributed to a need for clarity or continuity between refugee accounts, it is also likely linked to organizations' need to sustain their narrative.

It is time to return to considering why and how the four organizations working with North Korean women use the narratives and language that they do. How prevalent is the victim narrative? How exactly is the victim narrative used and with what type of words? How often are these words used? What type of language is excluded in their narratives? Do all of the organizations in question utilize the victim narrative? In order to examine these questions, it was necessary to scrutinize the organizations and their materials to collect relevant research. The following chapter will detail the methodology and data behind the following analysis and conclusions. It will examine the key words, phrases, and associations presented by organizations through their websites, campaigns, reports, as well as other materials.

Chapter 2: Research and Data

Methodology and Data

A central objective of this research was to inspect certain perceptions, perspectives and trends in non-governmental organizations' representation of North Korean women. To address these topics and explore the questions posed in the previous chapter, this thesis employed a qualitative methodology. A qualitative approach was most appropriate for the project as it best facilitated searching for and interpreting indications of victimhood. Some quantitative data was gathered, such as the number of times certain phrases appeared in a source, but the overarching methodology remained qualitative.

This dissertation looked to sources such as websites, online campaigns, reports, and documentaries from the organizations Liberty in North Korea, the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, Helping Hands Korea, and Crossing Borders and followed these observations with qualitative analysis. In order to investigate the use of the victim narrative in relation to larger conversations concerning sex work and trafficking and institutional survival, this project endeavored to inspect the frequency and manner of the use of specific words, phrases, and general use of the victim narrative by these organizations. The following sections will detail the data produced by these inspections. Further analysis of the observations, central arguments, and conclusions will be explored in the subsequent and final chapter.

Indicators

In order to determine that a source had utilized the victim narrative, this project assigned the use of certain words and phrases as indicators. The following words and any

reasonable synonyms, phrases, or combination of these words and phrases were taken as a marker.

Indicators of the victim narrative⁶²

- Victim
- Helpless
- Vulnerable
- Abuse
- Innocent
- Exploit
- Suffer
- Lack of choice
- Sold
- Forced
- Trafficking
- Sold as a bride

At this point, it is prudent to note once again that the purpose of this research is not to suggest that these organizations are falsely depicting women as trafficking victims or to imply that these women do not identify as victims in their situations. There is no moral weight being assigned to the use of the victim narrative. The goal is to study how the victim narrative is being used by nongovernmental organizations and to investigate how this narrative might be orienting the organizations in relevant debates and contributing to institutional survival.

Liberty in North Korea

Based in California and founded 2004 as Liberation in North Korea, Liberty in North Korea is arguably the largest NGO working full-time on the North Korean refugee crisis. Their objectives are to "rescue refugees [in China] without cost or condition, and ensure their safety and dignity on their journey to freedom" while raising awareness and

⁶² Synonyms and derivatives not listed.

"working to change the way the world sees North Korea, so the people get the international support they deserve."⁶³ To date, the organization has rescued 939 refugees from China, and 263 of those rescues were funded by volunteer chapters or "Rescue Teams."⁶⁴ According to their website, one refugee rescue costs about \$3,000 to cover basic needs, transportation, accommodation, emergency costs, and funds for resettlement assistance.⁶⁵ LiNK centers much of their campaigning and branding around focusing on individual stories and making the human rights struggles of North Koreans relatable and emotionally appealing. According to LiNK:

We create documentaries, short videos, presentations, online content, campaigns, and other creative communication materials to educate the global community on the challenges facing the North Korean people and their potential to drive change. The goals of the media we create are to change the narrative on North Korea and to engage people with tangible opportunities to stand with the North Korean people and help bring forward change.⁶⁶

One of their campaign phrases is "people over politics," and they highlight the stories of many of the North Korean men, women, and children they have helped leave China and resettle elsewhere. Through video interviews and photos, the organization attempts to make their messaging human, sympathetic, believable, and optimistic.

⁶³ "Refugee Rescues," Liberty In North Korea, accessed May 27, 2018, www.libertyinnorthkorea.org/rescue-refugees/.

⁶⁴ "Refugee Teams," Liberty In North Korea, accessed May 28, 2018, <https://www.libertyinnorthkorea.org/rescue-teams/>.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ "Changing the Narrative," Liberty In North Korea, accessed May 28, 2018, <https://www.libertyinnorthkorea.org/changing-the-narrative/>.

LiNK has produced several shorts films including *Bridge to North Korea* and *Danny from North Korea*.⁶⁷ These films were used as educational and campaign materials and are available on their website. LiNK has also produced a feature-length documentary, *The People's Crisis*. This documentary educates the viewers on North Korea's history, human rights violations, current political climate, refugees, and LiNK's work while also following an actual refugee rescue in China. The documentary offers insight into what planning and executing a rescue mission entails, from working with brokers to unexpected complications with weather, transportation, authorities, and communication. The audience is also given a look into the mental and emotional state of some of the refugees that LiNK and their field officers assist. Roughly halfway through the documentary, Hannah Song (CEO) speaks solemnly to the camera about trafficking and the abuse of North Korean women. She gravely states,

“...one of the main issues [is] a result of China's One Child Policy, is this lack of women. These North Korean women...have become trafficked. I've [spoken to] so many of these women who have been trafficked. Some of them have been trafficked across the border, some have been sold repeatedly...To hear what they've been through...to the challenges and journey across the border to being sold and then having to endure marriages to these men that are sometimes 30, 40 years older them, to men who sometimes handcuff them or lock them inside...They estimate that 70-90 of North Korean women that have fled into China end up being trafficked. They end up being forced into these marriages.

⁶⁷ “All Videos,” Liberty In North Korea, accessed May 28, 2018, <https://www.libertyinnorthkorea.org/videos/>.

They end up working in these karaoke bars and these bars and these sex chatting industries.”⁶⁸

As mentioned at the opening of this paper, the documentary then cuts to an interview with a young woman who is introduced as Yoon-hui.⁶⁹ Her face is obscured to protect her identity as she describes her involuntary marriage to a Chinese man and the child she subsequently had with her husband. She describes the physical and emotional abuse and neglect she experienced in her relationship as well the affection she has for her daughter. Yoon-hui explains that she feels helpless and unable to provide for her daughter when her husband disappears for periods of time as the language barrier and her status make it impossible to support herself.

In 2017, LiNK also released a short video titled *Sleep Well, My Baby*. The video begins with the introduction⁷⁰, “Every year, thousands of North Koreans risk their lives to escape their country. They must journey through China where many are *captured and exploited* along the way. Women are often *trafficked and sold* numerous times as wives to Chinese men.”⁷¹ Based on the true story of a refugee rescued by LiNK, the video portrays the life of a North Korean woman named Eunmi who was sold multiple times to abusive and neglectful husbands after fleeing from North Korea. She speaks of Heeyoung, her daughter with her first husband, a poor farmer in rural China. Eunmi is separated from infant Heeyoung when her husband eventually sells her to another man. The video depicts the sexual and physical abuse she experienced in both of her marriages, as well as

⁶⁸ Downer, Ryan, *The People’s Crisis*.

⁶⁹ Her name was likely changed to protect her identity.

⁷⁰ Markers of the victim narrative have been emphasized.

⁷¹ “Sleep Well, My Baby,” Liberty in North Korea, YouTube video, 00:25, Posted [October 2017], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vs-7ufYdcJs>.

her eventual escape to South Korea where she had a son and hopes to be reunited with Heeyoung. In the video, Eunmi narrates:

I tell her there are things in life as a North Korean refugee that we *don't get the freedom to choose*. Like if we get caught trying to escape to a different country or if *we are sold* to a Chinese man like a dog or a pig. We *don't get to decide* how we are treated but we can choose to stand up for ourselves...The first time I was *sold*, they *stole my identity*. The second time, they stole my joy. Everyday, I think about Heeyoung. I wonder if she hates me. I tell myself...I deserve to live like a human being. One day, I will see my Hee-Young again. One day, we will both be free. Together.⁷²

LiNK's website features numerous stories of women that have been assisted by the organization. On the Refugee Rescue page, 34 posts featured women rescued by LiNK.⁷³ Some of these posts were the stories of their escape while others were updates on their lives post resettlement. The following are examples of these women and excerpts of the narratives used to describe them. Words and phrases that are indicative of the victim narrative have been marked.

- **Yoon-Ha:** “In the car, I started getting scared. The only thing I knew was that I was going to live with a Chinese man I had never met, and I was just hoping that my life would somehow get better through the marriage. After driving for a while, we arrived in a small city in China. There I met some Chinese people who turned out to be family members of the man I would marry. I saw one of them give money to the couple who had brought me there. It was then that I realized *that I*

⁷² “Sleep Well, My Baby,” Liberty in North Korea, YouTube video, 00:25.

⁷³ 21 stories were unable to load due to a website glitch at the time. These may contain more accounts of women.

had been sold... But it didn't feel good to be *sold like an object*. Even to this day, there are so many North Korean women being *trafficked* like I was. This kind of *trafficking* is now an industry... His family didn't treat me well. They made me do all sorts of hard work on the farm and they would say bad things about me. Sometimes I even *got hit*... I soon discovered that it would cost me a lot of money to find people who could take me to South Korea. I had no money, so I ended up getting *sold to another Chinese man in order to survive*. Living with the second Chinese man was even worse than with the first one."⁷⁴

- **Bo Ram:** "Bo Ram left North Korea at the age of 18 because she believed she would be treated like a human being in neighboring China. What she didn't know at the time is that she would be *sold* to a much older Chinese man and have two children with him. She had planned on making a new life for herself by working hard and saving up money in China, but nothing went as planned... During the first year in China, she constantly tried to escape from the man who had purchased her but was unable to because his relatives lived throughout their village. After *failed attempts to escape*, working until her body felt broken, being accused of infidelity, and one near arrest, she finally decided that she needed to leave China and make a life for herself in South Korea."⁷⁵
- **Joo Ri:** "...she was successfully able to sneak through the border into China. Immediately after crossing, she had to go into hiding for months before eventually being *sold as a bride to a Chinese man*. Unable to let her guard down, she lived in

⁷⁴ "North Korean Refugee Stories: Meet Yoon Ha," Liberty In North Korea, accessed June 2018, <https://www.libertyinnorthkorea.org/meet-yoon-ha/>.

⁷⁵ "North Korean Refugee Stories: Meet Bo Ram," Liberty in North Korea, accessed June 2018, <https://www.libertyinnorthkorea.org/meet-bo-ram/>.

constant fear and anxiety, restricted to her home, until one day...she was caught, detained, and immediately repatriated to North Korea.”⁷⁶

- **Ae Ra:** “Life in China was difficult for Ae Ra. Soon after entering the country, she was *sold as a bride* to a Chinese man with whom she could not communicate and lived in conditions that were worse than those she had fled. It seemed that Ae Ra – now pregnant with her captor’s baby – would have no choice but to spend the rest of her life *held against her will* in China.”⁷⁷
- **Sae Won:** “She didn’t know it until she made it to China, but the person she had asked to help her was a *trafficker*, and *she was sold* as soon as she crossed. After escaping from her *captor*, Sae Won missed her family so much she went back into North Korea, only to be *caught* and sent to prison where she was *tortured and beaten*... The *inhumane treatment* that Sae Won endured couldn’t dampen her spirit.”⁷⁸
- **Yoon Suk:** “Once she arrived, alone in a foreign country where she didn’t speak the language, Yoon Suk was *sold to a Chinese man as his bride*. China’s lack of marriageable women, particularly in rural areas of the northeast, creates high demand for female North Korean refugees like Yoon Suk. Without legal status and no protection from the authorities, these women are often *kidnapped by sex*

⁷⁶ “North Korean Refugee Stories: Meet Joo Ri,” Liberty in North Korea, accessed June 2018, <https://www.libertyinnorthkorea.org/meet-joo-ri/>.

⁷⁷ “North Korean Refugee Stories: Meet Ae Ra,” Liberty in North Korea, accessed June 2018, <https://www.libertyinnorthkorea.org/meet-ae-ra/>.

⁷⁸ “North Korean Refugee Stories: Meet Sae Won,” Liberty in North Korea, accessed June 2018, <https://www.libertyinnorthkorea.org/north-korean-refugee-stories-meet-sae-won/>.

- traffickers and sold*, sometimes for as little as \$200...She was *sold off* three times by *traffickers*, under the pretense that was going to be given work.”⁷⁹
- **Joon Hee:** “After successfully reaching [China]..., Joon Hee and her companion were captured and given a choice: *work in the bars or be sold as a bride*. The other woman chose to work in the bars; Joon Hee chose *forced marriage*. She was *sold as a bride* within a week for about \$1300 and that is how she spent the next 17 years of her life...Though she lived in China for many years, she never completely got used to life there. Her heart would seize with fear whenever she heard sirens, thinking the police were coming for her. She also couldn’t develop a wide social circle because of her illegal status.”⁸⁰
 - **Ae Chan:** “After Ae Chan’s mother escaped North Korea, she was *sold as a bride* to a Chinese-Korean man.”⁸¹
 - **Jung Ha:** “After escaping from North Korea, Jung Ha’s mother was *sold off three times* as a bride under the pretense that was going to be given a job.”⁸²
 - **Min Hee:** “She escaped into China looking forward to working a regular job and earning a decent wage. But that never happened. *Sold as a bride* to a Chinese man after months of resisting and being *held against her will*, Min Hee faced many

⁷⁹ “North Korean Refugee Stories: Meet Yoon Suk,” Liberty in North Korea, accessed June 2018, <https://www.libertyinnorthkorea.org/north-korean-refugee-stories-meet-yoon-suk/>.

⁸⁰ “North Korean Refugee Stories: Meet Joon Hee,” Liberty in North Korea, accessed June 2018, <https://www.libertyinnorthkorea.org/north-korean-refugee-stories-meet-joon-hee/>.

⁸¹ “North Korean Refugee Stories: Meet Ae Chan,” Liberty in North Korea, accessed June 2018, <https://www.libertyinnorthkorea.org/north-korean-refugee-stories-meet-ae-chan/>.

⁸² “North Korean Refugee Stories: Meet Jung Ha,” Liberty in North Korea, accessed June 2018, <https://www.libertyinnorthkorea.org/n-stories-jung-ha/>.

- difficulties because of the language barrier. She was *not treated well* by her husband and was not even allowed to leave the house for the first 2-3 months.”⁸³
- **Ji Young:** “Ji Young set out for China with high hopes of working and making money only to learn soon after arriving that the woman who had given her food had arranged for her to be *sold*. She was handed off to brokers who threatened to kill her if she didn’t agree to being *sold into marriage*. She tearfully agreed and was *sold to a Chinese man* for an unknown amount and eventually had a child with him.”⁸⁴
 - **Kyung Min:** “Kyung Min was *sold to a man* who regularly threatened to turn her over to police. She lived in fear for 10 years. Though it had been hard to survive in North Korea, life in China wasn’t much better.”⁸⁵
 - **Joy:** “With no hope of living a better life in North Korea, Joy decided to go to China to make money for her family. However, shortly after crossing the Tumen River, she faced a similar fate to so many North Korean women living in China and was *sold into marriage*. Despite considering herself “lucky” for having been *sold to a “good husband,”* she always sought freedom.”⁸⁶

The majority of these narratives tell the stories of women who were unwilling victims of forced marriages. The organization does highlight the resourcefulness, entrepreneurial spirit, and resilience of women in North Korea by providing accounts of women who supported themselves and their families by taking part in North Korea’s growing informal

⁸³ “North Korean Refugee Stories: Meet Min Hee,” Liberty in North Korea, accessed June 2018, <https://www.libertyinnorthkorea.org/meet-min-hee/>.

⁸⁴ “North Korean Refugee Stories: Meet Ji Young,” Liberty in North Korea, accessed June 2018, <https://www.libertyinnorthkorea.org/meet-ji-young/>.

⁸⁵ “North Korean Refugee Stories: Meet Kyung Min,” Liberty in North Korea, accessed June 2018, <https://www.libertyinnorthkorea.org/meet-kyung-min/>.

⁸⁶ “North Korean Refugee Stories: Meet Joy,” Liberty in North Korea, accessed June 2018, <https://www.libertyinnorthkorea.org/meet-joy/>.

market.⁸⁷ The videos and images of these woman almost always have an upbeat and optimistic tone. Yet, there is minimal mention of such agency exercised elsewhere. It is also worth noting that even though LiNK reports that a sizeable percentage of North Korean women in China are trafficked into different sectors of the sex industry, it does not have the personal stories of any former sex workers on their website. It seems highly unlikely that of the nearly one-thousand refugee rescues LiNK has completed, not a single one of them put the organization in contact with a sex worker. One might argue they are being excluded for personal or security reasons, but most of the refugees featured on LiNK's website have their identities and names hidden or changed. The same could be done for sex workers, if they were concerned. The following chapter will argue that these trends are not coincidences, but the products of the organization's need to operate in a certain manner and present 'valid' victims.

The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea

Established in 2001 by a group of human rights and foreign policy experts, the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK) is a non-partisan organization that raises international awareness and promotes human rights in North Korea through research and reports. It seeks to close down North Korean prison camps, improve the treatment of refugees in China, provide information and media to North Koreans, promote access to North Korea for organizations and media, and deliver food aid.⁸⁸

The organization has released an extensive number of reports. These reports range in topics from the state of political prison camps to the detriments of the social

⁸⁷ "Refugee Stories," Liberty in North Korea, accessed June 2018, <https://www.libertyinnorthkorea.org/blog/category/refugee-stories/>.

⁸⁸ "About HRNK," The Committee for Human rights in North korea, accessed June 2018, <https://www.hrnk.org/about/about-hrnk.php>.

classification system. The report most relevant to this thesis was published in 2009. Titled *Lives for Sale: Personal Accounts of Women Fleeing North Korea to China*, the report focuses on “the suffering of North Korean women who have become the victims of trafficking and forced marriages after escaping their country to seek a new life in China.⁸⁹” The report is based off of 53 personal accounts gathered from 77 and is meant to “provide insight into the scope of the challenges they have endured and the new problems that have emerged for them at every turn.”⁹⁰ Access to refugees in China is severely limited by previously mentioned factors such as the political climate. Thus, the window and insight that this report offers into the lives and experiences of North Korean women is rather significant. Such a resource has the potential to be influential and to color the perspectives of its readers. This makes it all the more interesting to critically explore the way women are presented in the report. This project investigated just how frequently the victim narrative was employed to get a grasp on the general tone of report and the overarching depiction of the interviewees. The following data reveals the findings.

In this sixty-four page report, the word *victim* is used in relation to women 42 times.⁹¹ Examples include:

- “This report calls the world’s attention to the suffering of North Korean women who have be- come the *victims* of trafficking and forced marriage...”⁹²

⁸⁹ “HRNK Publications,” The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, accessed June 2018, <https://www.hrnk.org/publications/hrnk-publications.php?page=4>.

⁹⁰ Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, *Lives for Sale*, 10.

⁹¹ Includes derivatives such as victims, victimize, victimizing

⁹² Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, *Lives for Sale*, 7.

- “When these hapless victims leave North Korea, however, the problems they face are the result of China’s policies. China insists these victims of trafficking are illegal migrants... They remain the victims of trafficking in China because they do not have the security, judicial protection, and material benefits they would have if they... determined to be refugees...”⁹³
- “...they instead became *victims* of traffickers and victims of men in China who paid traffickers...”⁹⁴
- “...there has been little effort to protect the victims of trafficking, in particular North Koreans.”⁹⁵
- “Traffickers seek out the hapless *victims* of the North Korean regime’s neglect and entrap them into abuse and exploitation in China.”⁹⁶
- “To ameliorate their human rights situation, they must be recognized as *victims* of trafficking...”⁹⁷

The word *vulnerable* appears 11 times. Examples include:

- “North Korean women, even in the land of their asylum, are extremely *vulnerable*...”⁹⁸
- “...due to their extremely *vulnerable* position and lack of knowledge about Chinese society...”⁹⁹
- “Without effective legal protection, they are *vulnerable* to abuse...”¹⁰⁰

⁹³ Ibid., 61.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 54.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 51.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 52.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

- "...a combination of policy and practices on both sides of the border has created an ever widening web of exploitation and degradation of *vulnerable* women and their children."¹⁰¹
- "Women were particularly *vulnerable*."¹⁰²

The word *trafficking* is used 140 times.¹⁰³ Examples include:

- "The foregoing personal accounts provide distressing insights into the plight of North Korean women victimized by *trafficking*."¹⁰⁴
- "*Traffickers* often prey upon the North Korean women near the border areas, and then sell them farther away..."¹⁰⁵
- "...they clearly suffer abuse at the hand of the *traffickers* who sell them to Chinese men."¹⁰⁶
- "As women are a commodity with a high price, they fall prey to *traffickers*..."
- "They were also easily targeted by *traffickers* or were susceptible to pressure from the people around them, forcing them into unwanted marriages."¹⁰⁷
- "They would be unlikely to see the people they 'help' as victims of *trafficking* or see themselves as *traffickers*; they certainly do not see themselves as violating international standards of human rights."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., 9.

¹⁰³ Includes derivatives such as trafficker, trafficked.

¹⁰⁴ Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, *Lives for Sale*, 50.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 19.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 52.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 22.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 19.

The word *exploit* is used 38 times.¹⁰⁹ Examples include:

- “All these facts suggest that the cover of “marriage” tends to hide its true nature—‘sexual *exploitation*’ and in some cases even ‘slavery.’”¹¹⁰
- North Korean women, even in the land of their asylum, are extremely vulnerable to *exploitation*.”¹¹¹
- “...they must bear *exploitation* and insecurity in China so as to avoid forced repatriation and punishment.”¹¹²
- “Their *exploitation* in China is almost guaranteed...”¹¹³
- “If they can avoid repatriation, they can expect further *exploitation* and insecurity in China.”¹¹⁴
- “HRNK offers this information to scholars and human rights activists as a means of shedding new light on a very dark corner—the *exploitation* and human trafficking of North Korean women in China.”¹¹⁵
- “*Exploitation*...[is all an all too common occurrence] in this environment.”¹¹⁶

The word *abuse* is used 15 times. Examples include:

- “...they clearly suffer *abuse* at the hand of the traffickers who sell them to Chinese men.”¹¹⁷

¹⁰⁹ Includes derivatives such as exploited and exploitation.

¹¹⁰ Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, *Lives for Sale*, 53.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

- “There can be no doubt that ‘*abuse* of power or of a position of vulnerability’ applies in these cases.”¹¹⁸
- “When they attempt to re-build their lives with Chinese ‘husbands,’ they can end up secluded and *abused*. Without effective legal protection, they are vulnerable to *abuse* and are aware that they can be turned over to authorities and sent back to North Korea.”¹¹⁹

On the other hand, indicators of women’s agency are far scarcer. Minimal as they are, they are present. The words *choice* and *decision* are used in reference to women in a positive light a total of six times. However half of these instances are discussing the choice to leave North Korea and not referring to events in China.

- “The interviews in this report make clear the difficult *choices* facing North Korean women who describe in their own words what has happened to them.”¹²⁰
- “The *decision* to flee North Korea is not a trivial one, particularly given the harsh penalties on both sides of the border.”¹²¹

In the recommendations section, HRNK points to certain instances in which women elect to remain in China instead of attempting to flee their situations. These recommendations implies that HRNK has reason to believe women in China have had reason and desire to choose to remain in their marriages. HRNK recommended that China:

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 9.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 7.

¹²¹ Ibid., 13.

- “Implement a system that recognizes the marital status of North Korean women who have been married to Chinese nationals and who freely state their *choice* to remain in their marriages.”
- “Implement a system that grants legal residency status to North Korean women who have resided in China for a period of time, may have married and raised children, and who freely state their *choice* to seek residency status.”¹²²

Much like LiNK, HRNK made significant use of the victim narrative. The overall purpose of their report was indeed to depict the women they interviewed as victims and to share their experiences with exploitation and trafficking. And also like LiNK, HRNK very infrequently associated North Korean women (especially sex workers) with agency or opportunity.

Crossing Borders

Crossing Borders is a faith-based, Christian organization “dedicated to helping North Korean refugees who cross the border into China for food and medical assistance.”¹²³ The organization has two main operational focuses: refugee care and orphan care. Both of these focuses have respective donation funds: the Refugee Rescue Fund and the Orphan Growth Fund. Refugee Care entails “[ensuring] North Korean refugees’ safety, [providing] spiritual counseling, medical care and [issuing] micro loans.” Another portion of their website states that the Refugee Care program aims to “provide safety, medicine, financial support and training and Christian counseling to the North Korea refugees... With a network extending throughout various regions of the

¹²² Ibid., 63.

¹²³ “Crossing Borders,” Crossing Borders, accessed July 2018, <https://www.crossingbordersnk.org/>.

country, Crossing Borders has begun new projects communities and churches...

[Refugees] are given medical care and necessary pharmaceuticals while [being] provided with counseling with on-field staff.”¹²⁴ Crossing Borders engages with the Underground Railroad and claims to have “sent many refugees through the Underground Railroad to freedom in South Korea and the U.S.”¹²⁵

The Orphan Care Program is in place to “support children whose North Korean mothers have been sent back to North Korea” to “provide a means for these children to come self-sufficient adults.”¹²⁶ According to Crossing Borders, the program has “established three central locations in China where these children can have their essential needs met. Through group homes, local staff and an orphanage established on the field, Crossing Borders has supported children from elementary education through to the beginning of vocational training programs. Short-term mission teams are sent to the field each year to provide counseling and ministry support.”¹²⁷

Crossing Borders’s website includes both education and anecdotal pages focused on women refugees in China. The following references are from a number of those pages in which the indicators are used.

- “Seventy percent of all North Korean refugees are women and 80 percent of those women have been *sold*...”¹²⁸

¹²⁴ “Mission,” Crossing Borders, accessed July 2018, <https://www.crossingbordersnk.org/crossing-borders-mission/>.

¹²⁵ “Crossing Borders FAQ,” Crossing Borders, accessed July 2018, <https://www.crossingbordersnk.org/faqs>.

¹²⁶ “Crossing Borders,” Crossing Borders.

¹²⁷ “Mission,” Crossing Borders.

¹²⁸ “Trafficked North Korean Refugees,” Crossing Borders, accessed July 2018, <https://www.crossingbordersnk.org/trafficked-north-korean-refugees/>

- “When she finally made it across the border, she knew she had been deceived. She was not going to a tailoring factory. Ok-seo was being *sold*. Ok-seo had heard stories of North Korean women being *sold* to Chinese men with disabilities so she cried and pleaded with her *captors* to sell her to a man with no physical defects.”¹²⁹
- “When things got particularly desperate for the family, Ok-seo’s husband would *sell* her into prostitution. Her husband’s family would also physically and verbally *abuse* her and, as a result, she had terrible headaches.”¹³⁰
- “...some of these women are still in *bondage* if their husbands do not allow them freedom of movement and freedom to work.”¹³¹
- “North Korean women were *trafficked* en masse when they flooded into China in the wake of the famine. They were given no human rights and if caught, they were immediately sent back to a North Korean gulag. So they couldn’t call the police and tell them they were being *trafficked*. They were *stuck*.”¹³²
- “The family who *purchased* Michelle was cruel. They treated her like a *slave* and made her work their farm all day and all night. As a result, she has severe back pain and an injured hip... Michelle fled her family but was caught again by a human *trafficker* and *sold* to another man, with whom she lives today. Her current husband is good to her, she told us.”¹³³

¹²⁹“A North Korean Refugee Story,” Crossing Borders, accessed July 2018, <https://www.crossingbordersnk.org/ok-seos-story>

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² “Michelle’s Time for Healing,” Crossing Borders, accessed July 2018, <https://www.crossingbordersnk.org/blog/michelles-time-for-healing/2018/8/1>

¹³³ Ibid.

Crossing Borders shares that part of their work includes helping women become self-sufficient in China if that is what they desire. This is significant as Crossing Borders does recognize that North Korean women can and do choose to stay in China and the organization is working to support these decisions when they occur.¹³⁴ However this acknowledgement of self determination did not extend to women's engagement in sex work and, as shown, the victim narrative was present throughout their website. Again, the following analysis will argue that these trends are not accidental.

Helping Hands Korea

Helping Hands Korea (HHK) is a small Christian organization that "endeavors to assist North Koreans in crisis by providing famine relief to the northeastern portion of the impoverished nation as well as assisting North Korean refugees in China." They are not as extensive an organization as Liberty in North Korea, and their website and publicly available resources are rather limited. This may be explained by the fact that raising awareness or engaging with the public is not own of their main goals.¹³⁵ Regardless of the organization's size, the fact remains that HHK is one of the very few organizations working directly with North Korean women in China. Thus, it remains worthwhile to examine how they depicted those women as well as if and how they use the victim narrative.

Since being founded in Seoul in 1990 by Tim Peters, HHK has worked with local and global partners to develop hunger-relief programs. In 1998, the group expanded their

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ "Confronting the NK Crisis," Helping Hands Korea, accessed July 2018, <http://www.helpinghandskorea.org/confronting-the-nk-crisis/>.

focus to include aiding North Koreans living in "dire circumstances while hiding in China."¹³⁶ The organization states that the chief activities that operate on outside donations are "providing secret foster homes in China for stateless children of North Korean refugee mothers who have been forcibly repatriated...or have fled abusive domestic situations..., assisting North Korean refugees at extreme risk of detention, torture or even summary execution [and] sending already prepared food to hungry orphans and schoolchildren inside North Korea."¹³⁷

The site does not explicitly highlight women in North Korea or in China as a focus for their work, but they do have contact with them. HHK states that they attempt to "provide shelter, food, very basic health and hygiene assistance to North Korean refugees in China." They also selectively support the Underground Railroad for cases that they deem to have "particularly dangerous and life-threatening consequences if arrested in China and repatriated to North Korea [such as]... forced abortions in the case of [women carrying babies fathered by Chinese men.]"¹³⁸ As previously stated, the majority of refugees in China are women so it may not be a stretch to suppose a sizeable portion of the individuals HHK assists in this way are women.

Since 2010, HHK has published 109 posts of varying topics. Some are original content while others were pulled from outside sources such as Foreign Policy or the Korea Herald. North Korean women refugees are subjects in 18 of these articles. 12 of those 18 articles utilize phrasing that depicts women as victims in some manner. Included below are excerpts of these articles.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

- “Highly *vulnerable* to human *traffickers*, a great number of these women have been ‘*sold*’ to Chinese men and given birth to tens of thousands of children in the past 15 years.”¹³⁹
- “North Korean refugee women who have been ‘*sold*’ into marriage to Chinese men, then forcibly repatriated to the North when their presence is discovered by Chinese police.”¹⁴⁰
- “About 70 percent of the women are *forced* into prostitution...”¹⁴¹
- “[These women] want to sacrifice themselves to get that amount of money. In their point of view, they need to save their family members and they have *no other choice* other than their body.”¹⁴²
- “‘I am sad to say that around 80 percent of North Korean women leaving their county fall prey to *human traffickers* in China,’ Peters explained.”¹⁴³
- “...the rampant *trafficking* of North Korean women in China...”¹⁴⁴
- “Many live a precarious existence in China, as stateless refugees in hiding, as orphaned or abandoned children, or as *trafficked* women.”¹⁴⁵

¹³⁹ “Adrift and Stateless: Korea’s Forgotten Children,” Helping Hands Korea, accessed July 2018, <https://www.helpinghandskorea.org/2010/08/21/adrift-statelesskoreas-forgotten-children-ras-lecture-8-24-10/>.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ “What is Disneyland? Out of North Korea, into the Real World,” Helping Hands Korea, accessed July 2018, <https://www.helpinghandskorea.org/2010/10/04/independent-ukwhat-is-disneyland-out-of-north-korea-into-the-real-world/>.

¹⁴² “North Korean Defectors Take Bigger Role in Helping Others,” Helping Hands Korea, accessed July 2018, <https://www.helpinghandskorea.org/2010/12/30/voa-north-korean-defectors-take-bigger-role-in-helping-others-with-insights-from-hhk-founder/>.

¹⁴³ “Charity Founder Calls for More Help,” Helping Hands Korea, accessed July 2018, <https://www.helpinghandskorea.org/2011/10/30/charity-founder-calls-for-more-help-for-%E2%80%98second-wave%E2%80%99-of-orphans-in-china-korea-herald-daily-newspaper/>.

¹⁴⁴ “Canadian National Broadcasting Interviews Tim,” Helping Hands Korea, accessed July 2018, <https://www.helpinghandskorea.org/2012/05/19/canadian-national-broadcasting-interviews-tim-on-hhks-care-of-children-of-north-korean-refugee-women-in-china/>.

¹⁴⁵ “Forced Repatriation of NK Refugees,” Helping Hands Korea, accessed July 2018, <https://www.helpinghandskorea.org/2012/06/15/forced-repatriation-of-nk-refugees-discussed-by-tim->

- “Women defectors are highly *vulnerable* to sex *trafficking*. ‘It is rampant,’ says Tim Peters, founder of the aid group Helping Hands Korea. ‘North Korean women are so *helpless* — they cannot speak the language. They are without documents. There is the lack of a criminal-justice system in China, and the *traffickers* run wild. If the women aren’t *sold to the sex trade*, they are, equally as dangerously, *sold as brides* to Chinese men.’”¹⁴⁶
- “China has forcibly repatriated North Korean refugees to the DPRK with full awareness that refoulement will result in certain incarceration, torture in some cases, and even forced abortion of some refugee women who, as *human traffic victims* in the PRC, have been impregnated by Chinese men.”¹⁴⁷

Just as with the previous three organizations, HHK frequently made use of the victim narrative. Meanwhile, there again exists little to no mention of women making agentic decisions other than those to leave North Korea in these articles. When the subject of women’s choices is broached, it is with the assumption that their choices are being severely confined to the boundaries of their political and economic circumstances, which is reminiscent of neo-abolitionist sentiments.

peters-at-the-invitation-of-the-henry-jackson-society-all-party-parliamentary-group-on-north-korea-and-csw-in-london/.

¹⁴⁶ “HHK Director Tim Peters Sounds Off,” Helping Hands Korea, accessed July 2018, <https://www.helpinghandskorea.org/2014/01/12/hhk-director-tim-peters-sounds-off-in-the-new-york-post-on-the-worsening- plight-of-north-koreans-and-defectors-under-kim-jong-un/>.

¹⁴⁷ “Financial Times follows HHK’s Christian rescue work of North Korean refugees in Northeast Asia,” Helping Hands Korea, accessed July 2018, <https://www.helpinghandskorea.org/2017/06/26/financial-times-follows-hhks-christian-rescue-work-of-north-korean-refugees-in-northeast-asia/>

Summary

The data collected from LiNK, HRNK, Crossing Borders and HHK, and shared in this chapter reveals several prominent trends in the presentation of North Korean women by these nongovernmental organizations. First, the victim narrative was prominently used by each of these groups and indicator words and phrases revealed themselves across organizations and mediums. In comparison, discussion of choice and agency was minimal throughout. When it was addressed, such agency was limited to certain portions of the refugee experience such as the decision to leave North Korea or the decision to remain in China. Mentions of agentive North Korean sex workers remained elusive. Finally, women who had been trafficked and sold as brides were common subjects across mediums and organizations while women who had been trafficked into the sex industry were much less visible. The following chapter will investigate the underlying reasons for these trends. The analysis will relate the findings of this chapter and the trends in question to the literature review from the previous chapter. Subsequent arguments will relate the data to the discourses regarding victimhood, trafficking and institutional survival.

Chapter 3: Analysis and Argument

Analysis and Argument

The previous two chapters have focused on building a convincing platform on which to present this project's main arguments. The first chapter provided a literature review on the North Korean refugee crisis, trafficking and sex work, and institutional survival. A combination of several topics had to be reviewed, as there is no currently available work on the specific interests of this project and because the questions at the heart of this study lay at the intersection of various subjects. The subsequent chapter presented the original research and data collected for this thesis. It detailed the usage of the victim narrative and the presentation of North Korean women by the non-governmental organizations Liberty in North Korea, Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, Helping Hands Korea, and Crossing Borders. The data revealed that the victim narrative was used by all of the organizations to describe North Korean women in China while examples of agency and stories of former sex workers were minimal or non-existent in the materials.

This final chapter will integrate the aforementioned work into an analysis of how these organizations' usage of the victim narrative is informed by and related to institutional survival and trafficking. It will also explore the ways that current contentious deliberations on sex work and trafficking have informed what can even be considered a legitimate victim. In the process, it will argue that this victim narrative as used to orient North Korean women is not objective, but shaped by both environment and need. Ultimately, it seems that organizations sustain their work and maintain supporters by

frequently exercising the non-agentive victim model to present a digestible and non-alienating victim figure for their audiences.

While making these arguemnts, this thesis does not intend to judge the ethical soundness of the organizations or their strategies. Whether or not the use of the victim narrative is indicative of a moral strength or failing is beyond the scope of this study. As previously stated, this critical look at the narrative does not mean to imply that North Korean women are not victims of exploitation. Women have provided numerous first-hand accounts of their experiences being trafficked, abused, and sold. Nevertheless, this study is not designed to scrutinize these women's personal experiences with domestic abuse, sex work, or trafficking. At this time there is not enough access to refugees in China and or reliable data to produce a satisfactory study, and the interest of this thesis is solidly centered on the victim narrative.

The research detailed in the previous chapter revealed just how pervasive the victim narrative is throughout the websites and materials presented by the organizations in question. The study was able to determine that every organization that was evaluated used keywords and phrases that served as indicators of the narrative. Marker words such as victim, helpless, forced, trafficking, vulnerable, and innocent, along with their reasonable synonyms and derivatives demonstrated that not only was the victim model present, but it was also the most common method of representing North Korean women in China. The main endeavor of this chapter is to question why this is the case. It may be acceptable to argue that the narrative is so common because it reflects the reality of these women's situations. While there may be truth in such an argument, this thesis will

contend that there are other, less obvious, but equally important contributing factors: institutional survival and the polarized opinions surrounding sex work and trafficking.

Institutional Survival and the Victim Narrative

The first of the factors to be explored is the need to maintain institutional survival. Each of the organizations provides varying levels of access to information on their finances and operations. To ascertain a better of understanding of the relationship between institutional survival and the use of the victim trope, it is crucial to examine these available materials, even if they are limited.

HHK, HRNK, and Crossing Borders do not provide any extensive information regarding donations or general finances. However, they do still take some measures to be perceived as financially responsible and trustworthy to possible donors because they rely on donations to run their operations. HHK's "How to Help" page offers different tax-deductible ways to donate to their work, but the organization does not expand on their finances beyond that.¹⁴⁸ HRNK provides a bit more insight into their funding. It is a non-partisan organization that specifies that their "funding comes primarily from foundations and individual donors. When the organization accepts funding from government, it will be to further the mission of HRNK and not for any other purpose."¹⁴⁹ They also have a dedicated donation page where their supporters can donate and aid in their "efforts to end crimes against humanity in North Korea."¹⁵⁰ Crossing Borders takes measures to assure

¹⁴⁸ "How to Help," Helping Hands Korea, accessed September 19, 2018, <http://www.helpinghandskorea.org/how-to-help/>.

¹⁴⁹ "About HRNK," Human Rights in North Korea, accessed September 20, 2018, <https://www.hrnk.org/about/about-hrnk.php>.

¹⁵⁰ "Donate Now," Human Rights in North Korea, accessed September 20, 2018, <https://donatenow.networkforgood.org/HRNK>.

their audience of their trustworthiness and their financial responsibility. They explain that a board of directors meet quarterly to “review [their] financial situation and to keep our top executives accountable.”¹⁵¹ Furthermore, Crossing Borders is a member of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA), a group that enhances public trust through required annual financial reviews by independent accountants.¹⁵² They also have a page where supporters can choose between one-time or monthly donations that “go directly to help North Korean refugees and North Korean orphans.”¹⁵³ In these ways, all three organizations make grassroots fundraising a part of their work and engagement.

LiNK has the most the robust compilation of publicly available information on their funding and spending with a full page dedicated to several years of financial documentation that they encourage visitors to explore. There, LiNK has made many of their financial forms publically accessible. The page clearly states “100% of each donation you make funds our programs and contributes to our collective impact. The goal of this page is to provide complete transparency on HOW your donations impact our programs.”¹⁵⁴ Visitors will find that LiNK has provided their annual IRS 990 forms since 2010, audited financials since 2014, and their annual reports since 2016. In 2016, LiNK raised a total of \$2,244,689. 67.5% of this was ‘program revenue’ which came from special events revenue, recurring contributions, foundation grants, awareness product sales, support fundraising, and non-recurring contributions.¹⁵⁵ The other 32.5% was

¹⁵¹ “ECFA,” Crossing Borders North Korea, accessed September 20, 2018, <https://www.crossingbordersnk.org/ecfa>.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ “Donate,” Crossing Borders North Korea, accessed September 20, 2018, <https://www.crossingbordersnk.org/donate>.

¹⁵⁴ “Financials,” Liberty in North Korea, accessed September 19, 2018, <https://www.libertyinnorthkorea.org/financials/>.

¹⁵⁵ “2016 Annual Report,” Liberty in North Korea, accessed September 19, 2018, <https://www.libertyinnorthkorea.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/AR-2016-V2.pdf>.

‘vision revenue’ which comes from a specific group of people called Vision Donors. The Vision Donors are "long-term partners and other like-minded philanthropists [who] have committed to over all of [LiNK’s] operational expenses so that 100% of all other donations [go] straight to [their] programs."¹⁵⁶ In 2017, LiNK raised a total of \$3,467,273. 68% of this revenue was used for program expenses such as refugee rescues, research and strategy, and post-resettlement support. The remaining 32%, which was once again donated by the Vision Donors, covered non-program expenses such as fundraising and management.¹⁵⁷

These financial reports reveal just how heavily LiNK relies on donations to consistently fuel the full scale of their operations. Without aid from both their Vision Donors and other supporters, LiNK likely would not be able to continue their programs to raise awareness or rescue refugees. Even though the other three organizations did not provide nearly as much financial transparency, as nonprofit organizations it is probable that outside donations also play a role in funding their operations.

The literature review in the first chapter introduced the argument that nongovernmental human rights organizations are not simply charitable entities driven by good-will. Organizations must be strategic and purposeful if they are to secure the funding needed to pursue their missions and successfully compete for exposure, legitimacy, and support in an environment in which causes and populations in need of attention seem endless. As such, they tailor their messaging, imagery, and stories to some degree to catch and maintain the interest of potential and current donors. This is where the victim narrative proves itself a useful tool. Individuals and populations are more

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ "2017 Annual Report," Liberty in North Korea, accessed September 19, 2018, <https://www.libertyinnorthkorea.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/AR-2016-V2.pdf>.

likely to be deemed as needing and deserving aid when they lack some resource or agency, or when they are under some form of oppression or abuse.

As discussed earlier in this project, humanitarianism has often demanded passive suffering as a prerequisite for being considered a sincere sufferer. Any action such individuals may take to challenge or escape their oppression or pain does not necessarily help their case or make audiences more sympathetic.¹⁵⁸ Even though feminist and human rights theories are never explicitly discussed by the organizations studied here, these theories inform the cataloguing of the North Korean women as passive sufferers. It is very possible that portrayals of these women's experiences with marriage and trafficking are simplified or edited to maintain this classification. The previous chapter revealed that there were almost no accounts of agency or voluntary sex work, and this could also be explained by the desire to maintain the image of a passive victim.

These trends may be partially attributed to a need for clarity or continuity between refugee accounts, but it is also likely linked to organizations' need to sustain a well-defined narrative. Such an unforgiving expectation of innocent victimhood complicates advocacy when one unpacks the complex nature of sex work and trafficking and the definitions and debate surrounding these issues.

Trafficking and Sex Work

When studying the usage of the victim narrative, it was interesting to observe how frequently it was used in relation to trafficking. Brokers, traffickers, and women sold as brides are commonly mentioned words and phrases. The majority of the narratives shared by LiNK and HRNK tell the stories of women who were unwilling victims of forced

¹⁵⁸ Ticktin, *Casualties*, 218.

marriages. The organizations, particularly LiNK, do highlight the potential and strength of North Korean women and their decisions to leave China or to attempt to escape from China. Yet, there is minimal mention of such agency exercised elsewhere. It is also worth noting that even though many organizations have reported that a large percentage of North Korean women in China are trafficked into different sectors of the sex industry, none of the organizations examined had the personal stories of any former sex workers on their websites or in their materials. While this may seem a forgettable detail, this paper will argue that this trend is not coincidence, but the products of the organizations' need to present 'valid' victims in the midst of a polarized debate regarding trafficking.

To summarize the previous literature review on the subject, neo-abolitionists consider trafficking and prostitution to be the same issue. Neo-abolitionists believe both represent forms of gender-based violence and violations of women's human rights.¹⁵⁹ Members of this group state that both trafficking and sex work benefit predators and lead to violence against women and girls. They argue that it is not possible for sex work to be voluntary and argue that workers who claim to be agentive are "deluded victims of the patriarchy even, in fact especially, when they claim not to be victims."¹⁶⁰ Thus, neo-abolitionist feminists advocate for the complete extermination of the sex industry. According to their philosophy, all sex work fuel the subjugation, abuse, and objectification of women and should never be viewed as a legitimate form of labor. On the other hand, neo-regulationists advocate for sex workers' rights and the acceptance of sex work as a valid industry that people can voluntarily take part in. They argue for the recognition of sex worker's agency and distinguish between coerced trafficking and sex

¹⁵⁹ George, Vindhya, and Ray, "Sex Trafficking and Sex Work," 66.

¹⁶⁰ Szörényi, "Rethinking the Boundaries," 26.

work. Neo-regulationists believe that the policing of sex work without legalization only further alienates sex workers from protection and resources.

Both sides tend to argue using simplified versions of the reality of sex work and trafficking. Neo-abolitionists and anti-sex work groups generally attribute women with traits like victimhood while blaming the patriarchy, traffickers, and the political economy. Pro-sex work groups argue against denying women sexual agency, and call for recognition of sex worker legitimacy and autonomy.¹⁶¹ Women must either fill the role of helpless victims in need of emancipation or agentive sex workers acting out their autonomy, and there is little room in between. Echoing the black and white standards placed on innocent, passive sufferers, there is minimal space for nuance or individualized circumstances. Neither of these depictions reflects the complicated reality and relationships many women have with trafficking, forced marriages, and sex work. These arguments leave little chance to consider sex work or forced marriages in a way that women's vulnerability is not opposed to their agency.

Ethnographies have provided more nuanced pictures that include consideration of "global and local structures of inequalities that engender marginalization and violence, as well as women's creative responses to their subordination."¹⁶² When applied to North Korean women in China, these one-note considerations of feminists debates can unfortunately only offer incomplete stories of their complex longings and decisions as well as the different stations and identities these women navigate in relation to trafficking, forced marriages, and sex work.¹⁶³ Understanding trafficking and sex work is

¹⁶¹ George, Vindhye, and Ray, "Sex Trafficking and Sex Work," 67.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁶³ Rutvica Andrijasevic, "Beautiful Dead Bodies: Gender, Migration and Representation in Anti-Trafficking Campaigns," *Feminist Review*, no. 86 (2007): 25.

further complicated by the fact that perspectives on suffering and victimhood may tell more about those perceiving than those who are experiencing. Devising distinctions between those who have or have not been trafficked and those who are voluntary versus forced sex workers based on opinions informed by liberal, legal frameworks produces a specific and subjective standard.¹⁶⁴ Such a standard may never be equipped to adequately understand the North Korea women at the heart of this study.

Circumstances and individual experiences can make it difficult to distinguish between forced and voluntary sex work. A North Korean woman might arrive in China and choose to work in the sex industry instead of marrying, uninformed of its abusive nature. After the fact, she may feel unable to leave due to fear of being discovered by authorities or the need to support herself or perhaps her family. Alternatively, a woman who was initially trafficked at the border may come to feel that sex work is a profitable occupation and decide to continue the work even if it is not ideal. Another North Korean woman may also become a sex worker for money to pay her way along the Underground Railroad, but become trapped or sold. Yet another North Korean woman may be trafficked, but decide that it is profitable for her to continue sex work for security against repatriation or to make money while she waits for family members to join her in China. These unclear distinctions and the limited access to information about these women makes it challenging to distinguish between what is and is not exploitation. Attempting to streamline such varied and complicated stories for presentation as a cohesive and digestible message to potential donors would be a task. The previously discussed views are much simpler and clearer even though they are lacking in many ways.

¹⁶⁴ Rutvica Andrijasevic and Bridget Anderson, "Anti-Trafficking Campaigns: Decent? Honest? Truthful?" *Feminist Review*, no. 92 (2009): 154.

All of these considerations shed light on why organizations like LiNK utilize the tactics that they do. Why does Liberty in North Korea and HRNK largely exclude the narratives of former sex workers and favor the stories of women who were brides and can be portrayed as passive and legitimate victims? As previously stated, these are all organizations that rely on public support and donations to aid refugees and run their operations. By using the trope of the innocent victim, organizations attempt to do justice to the stories of individual North Korean women while also hoping to craft a generalized and consumer-friendly image of a trafficking victim to reach as wide an audience as possible. To attempt to achieve these goals, the organizations that do share personal stories like LiNK and HRNK have chosen to highlight the stories of women who have described themselves as unwilling victims of forced marriages while only offering general information about involuntary sex work.

This manner of positioning may allow these organizations to appeal to the compassion of allies and donors without taking an obvious stance on sex work or estranging neo-abolitionists or neo-regulationists. It would not sit well with neo-abolitionists and may potentially break from the innocent victim narrative if the organization used the stories of agentive sex workers. On the other hand it would perturb neo-regulationists to only highlight former sex workers as trafficking victims without mentioning voluntary sex work. Some may argue that it is beyond the scope of the organizations' goals and responsibilities to advocate for sex workers or to comment on the complexities of sex work and trafficking in China. This may be true, and there is no way to know if doing so would be beneficial to their work. It may even detract or distract

from their mission. Yet the nature of their work and institutional survival dictate that they still need to carefully navigate the landscape of this debate.

Conclusions

Liberty in North Korea, Crossing Borders, Helping Hands Korea, and Human Rights in North Korea's strategic approach to shaping North Korean women as marketable victims is influenced by institutional necessity and the larger conversations at hand regarding trafficking, sex work, legal rights, agency, and law. While it may be more nuanced and accurate to discuss the gray areas of victimhood and make room for the enmeshment of vulnerability and autonomy, it may not be as profitable. In fact, complicating the narrative may drive away or confuse portions of their audience. For organizations such as Liberty in North Korea that would mean they may be less able to secure donors and reach and rescue the refugees that want and need their aid. The victim narrative acts as a tool for organizations to share the stories of some of North Korean women while allowing them to groom an image that will best enable them to navigate polarized debates and continue their work aiding refugees.

Perhaps one day there will be space in discussion and advocacy to deliberate the stories of complex victimhood and agency and consider the ways that trafficked women's agency operates. Indeed, those considered victims can be vulnerable because of their relationships to their husbands, traffickers, employers, and clients. But as Szörényi shares, "their decisions show their awareness that it is by opening themselves to such relationships that they can best manage that vulnerability and turn it into a liveable, grievable and hopefully less precarious life. It might be possible to say that their pathway

into liberal individualist subjectivity and self-making is one that takes place through bodily exposure and vulnerability."¹⁶⁵ One can hope the time will come when there will be space for the North Korean women to share the multifaceted and shifting relationships they have with their marriages, relationships, sex work, and sexuality without risking their status as legitimate recipients of aid. Until that time, the complicated North Korean women in China who are seeking support from organizations like the ones analyzed for this project may be served best by a simpler story.

¹⁶⁵ Szörényi, "Rethinking the Boundaries," 21.

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