

This is a transcript of The Conversation Weekly podcast ‘North Korean women are now the breadwinners – and shifting this deeply patriarchal society towards a matriarchy,’ published on March 7, 2024.

NOTE: Transcripts may contain errors. Please check the corresponding audio before quoting in print.

Gemma Ware: High heels, lace and handbags: It’s not how you might typically picture a woman from North Korea, but in recent decades there’s been a huge shift in the role of women there, and the choices that they’re able to make. In this episode, we hear how North Korean women are driving a new form of grassroots capitalism and changing the country in the process.

I’m Gemma Ware and you’re listening to The Conversation Weekly, the world explained by experts.

To start off this episode, I’m joined by Justin Bergman, the international affairs editor at The Conversation in Australia. Welcome to the podcast, Justin, great to have you on.

Justin Bergman: Thanks for having me.

Gemma Ware: So recently you were approached by some researchers with a really unusual story to tell about a very secretive place in North Korea. Tell me what struck you about it.

Justin Bergman: Yeah, it was a great story. So the lead author, Bronwen Dalton, approached me with the idea, and she was going to be publishing a book about the lives of women inside North Korea, which obviously is something that we don’t normally receive much information about. So immediately I was struck by this idea and when they started telling me more about what they discovered, I thought we really need to tell this story. So basically what they looked at specifically was the ideas of women’s empowerment in North Korea and how they’re driving change

through entrepreneurship and businesses, and making choices for their own lives, when it comes to sexual liberation, reproductive health, and even fashion. And these were just things that I've never really connected with North Korea before myself because usually everything that we publish here, that has to do with the country, is about the missile programs or the threats that North Korea poses to its neighbors and that sort of thing. And they had the research that was based largely on interviews with defectors and they interviewed more than 50 who had already left the country, and were living in South Korea.

Her co-author, Kyungja Jung, also did fieldwork in Northeast China in the province just across the border from North Korea. And this is in Jilin province. And here, she was also able to meet defectors, and they really developed relationships with these women and heard their stories on many different occasions and were able to really get deep down into what their lives were like.

In addition to that though, Bronwen had traveled to North Korea herself. And during these trips, she was able to make observations on the country that really helped to inform her book and her research.

Gemma Ware: And I know it's difficult to do it on a podcast, but there are some fantastic photos that go with their research. Can you describe a couple of them for us?

Justin Bergman: Absolutely, the photos were just incredible. Their third co-author was named Lesley Parker, and she was the photographer for the story. And she was in North Korea, again, on a tour group herself. So what she took were pictures that looked like they were taken furtively. You know, they were snapped on the street, and some of the women's backs are to the cameras. And in particular, I was really drawn to a couple of them that showed, I think, how the fashion is changing and what women are doing to emulate their peers in South Korea and China as well.

And so the two pictures I really loved were of women who were wearing all of this bling, for lack of a better word, carrying a handbag in one and a big umbrella in another. And then there's a close-up shot of two women in just the tops of their dresses, and you can see lapel pins. And on one woman is a Chanel logo that she's

wearing very prominently. And on the woman to her side is a pin of the North Korean flag with what looks like Kim Jong Un's face on top of it.

So, this juxtaposition between the new, the modern, the changing, and then the traditional and the very political vision that we have of the country is still very real there.

Gemma Ware: Thanks, Justin, for this introduction. At your suggestion, I reached out to Bronwen Dalton and Kyungja Jung to ask them more about how the lives of women in North Korea are changing.

Bronwen Dalton: I think anyone interested in the human condition and the possibilities of the human spirit will be inspired by studying North Korea.

Gemma Ware: Today, Bronwen Dalton is the head of the Department of Management at the University of Technology Sydney in Australia. But back in the mid-1980s, when she was 17, Bronwen spent a year living in South Korea, learning Korean. A few years later, in 1992, she visited North Korea for the first time.

Bronwen Dalton: The first trip was quite a rare opportunity. It was negotiating access to a free trade zone and I went as the group's translator.

Gemma Ware: Very few foreigners were allowed into the country, particularly young Western women in their 20s.

Bronwen Dalton: So I was invited to parties with the young, entitled, "princelings." They secretly put a note under my door. In fact, we were on the top of a hotel dancing around a little Walkman to Michael Jackson, and they were all speaking French to me because back in the day, some of the French-speaking parts of Africa were the few places that the elite could go and study. I had an amazing, fun, partying time with the elite children of North Korea.

Gemma Ware: It was more than 20 years before Bronwen returned, on two trips in 2015 and 2017. She went at the invitation of the North Korean government, which was trying to develop tourism to the country. And on her last visit, she decided to take along her two children.

Bronwen Dalton: Henry was 9, Alice was 12, and I made them read *1984* before they went, but they were feted, because there's no young white children that visit. The amazing connections you can make, because North Koreans are beautiful people, they love their kids. And they just doted on them and took them everywhere and bought them things, but it was such a great entree.

Gemma Ware: Their movements were closely monitored by the state, which, let's not forget, is a brutal and repressive dictatorship. But while many North Koreans struggle to make ends meet, the country's elite find ways to enjoy life, in secret.

Bronwen Dalton: As the main department store that's only for the elite, but underneath is a complete, subterranean set of entertaining rooms and geisha-style, geesing, sort of interactions with important generals, this sort of thing. All in different rooms, karaoke rooms that went for miles because the elite have to hide the fact that they are living 'high on the hog', while everybody else is starving or struggling to survive.

Gemma Ware: Bronwen went there with her children.

Bronwen Dalton: My lad ran out and I had to go through each room to find him and eventually I found him, and there was a queue of hardworking girls, each taking a selfie with Henry.

Gemma Ware: Bronwen's colleague, Kyungja Jung, is a professor of social and political sciences at the University of Technology, Sydney. She's from South Korea, but she's never been to the North. Kyungja has been at the forefront of women's activism in South Korea. She founded the country's first rape crisis center in Seoul, in the early 1990s, and she's gone on to research women's activism and feminism in the country. In 1995, she moved to Australia.

Kyungja Jung: And then maybe, first time I got exposure to how the so-called West view North Koreans, I wasn't very happy with news headlines. They are focused on North Korean nuclear ambitions and political leadership, like ridiculing of Kim Jong Un's hairstyle and high heels.

Gemma Ware: The same obsessions were true for academic research into North Korea.

Kyungja Jung: On power, hegemony, conflict, weapon development and global security and so on.

Gemma Ware: Kyungja Jung felt that much about the lives of everyday North Koreans and women in particular, was being missed by this endless focus on the size of the North Korean missile arsenal and the state of mind of the current leader. In 2023, Bronwen and Kyungja decided to address this imbalance head-on. They teamed up to publish a book on how women are changing North Korean society. It drew from Bronwen's trips to the country, as well as interviews that she and Kyungja did with 52 different North Korean defectors, living in both South Korea and in China.

Kyungja Jung: I visited Jilin and Dandong, the border towns between North Korea and China.

Gemma Ware: Kyungja found that the best way to meet North Korean defectors was to participate in activities run by NGOs, churches, and other cultural groups.

Kyungja Jung: I joined South-North Korean choir and also leadership training program and I gave some workshops. Some North Korean defectors, they have like a dream. They really want to live overseas like Australia, so I just explained what is life in Australia.

Gemma Ware: How ready were they to talk to you about their former lives in North Korea?

Kyungja Jung: They just say that, "I'm just a mere factory worker. I'm only 20 years old and I just crossed the border. Why are you interested?" I just explained that your voice is not heard, your voice is very significant.

Gemma Ware: Traditionally, both North and South Korea are deeply patriarchal societies. Women were typically defined by two words, mother and wife. When North Korea's founder, Kim Il-sung, established the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1948, women were at the center of the state's communist propaganda machinery.

Bronwen Dalton: They were to be the mothers of the next generation of revolutionaries, while in law and technically in the rhetoric women were all equal, they still held on to those traditional beliefs of the role of women to have your first child as a son and maintain the family line, which can only be continued through the male line. And unlike a lot of other socialist societies, there was always a very high proportion of housewives.

Gemma Ware: That began to change in the mid-1990s, when famine hit North Korea, causing a deep rupture that's still being felt today.

Bronwen Dalton: And it broke the contract between the socialist regime and the people that they would provide. So before, there was a public distribution system that gave at least the minimal amount of food to survive, there was a job, your clothing. Everything about your future trajectory depended on you demonstrating loyalty to the regime. After the famine, everything changed, and your whole life trajectory depended on your capacity to make money.

Gemma Ware: The government's rationing system became unreliable and many families were starving. Men were expected to turn up for work in factory jobs, even if those factories were hardly operating, and they could be punished if they didn't show up.

Bronwen Dalton: Because it was a deeply patriarchal regime, it devoted all of its resources to ensure that the apparatus monitored the movement of men and they didn't even think that women would get up to anything. Meanwhile, the women were stuck home with starving children and they got to work, so it's a salutary lesson to all patriarchies: You shouldn't take your eye off the women.

Gemma Ware: Women began to set up market stalls. They sold what they could to make enough money to feed their families. Bronwen shared the story of one North Korean defector that she and Kyungja interviewed. They're calling her Kang to protect her anonymity.

Bronwen Dalton: And she was originally, when she was 20 years old, a potato researcher. Then she subsequently, in the 90s during the famine, started to trade in rice. That's your entry good. Then she stepped up to trading in metal and then petroleum. Then she made the shift to money exchange, but eventually, she went into drugs, in particular ice, methamphetamine, which is the main drug traded and people-smuggling. And drugs and people-smuggling are two of the most lucrative and risky activities.

Kang said, "What was most rewarding about the work was the money. I could pay for my younger sister's university tuition, as well as my stepchildren's. I could even buy party membership for my husband, eventually making him a party secretary. I felt myself maturing through business, and that was rewarding. I could educate my sister and my children and clothe them as well. It was as if we were like party officials providing for their children. I could make that all possible with the money I earned."

Gemma Ware: We'll hear a few quotes like this from Bronwen and Kyungja's research in this episode, and they pointed out to me that it's important to understand that these are defectors, people who left North Korea.

Bronwen Dalton: It's a huge self-selection bias here, so we absolutely have to own the limitations of this research. We've got some great insights, but I never want to be emphatic about what really goes on.

Gemma Ware: Some of the markets where women set up stores are legal, some illegal. All require some sort of regular bribery of local state officials, who are themselves struggling to survive.

Kyungja Jung: North Korean authorities condemn marketization, but on the other side, they want to control female traders. They know that through market activities,

they're exposed to outside information and also that they spread the capitalist culture and capitalist way of thinking.

Gemma Ware: The state has tried many different ways of controlling these women entrepreneurs, for example, with a rule that only married women could trade at the markets. But unmarried women found ways to get around it.

Kyungja Jung: They faked their wedding photos, they pretended they were married.

Gemma Ware: Bronwen and Kyungja argue that as women set themselves up as entrepreneurs in markets, they became the driving force for a sort of grassroots capitalism, hidden in plain sight in communist North Korea.

Bronwen Dalton: By the mid-1990s, any income from the market constituted 80% of household income. And with this shift came a whole new lexicon just amongst women that was derogatory around men because the economic power had shifted. Women are the breadwinners in a very tight economic time, and they were another mouth to feed.

I'll read you what Hong, who was being successful in the market, said about her husband and men in general. She said, "Men don't make any money. So, men have the nickname 'dogs,' a dog guarding the home. Or they're a 'light bulb turned on during the daytime' "or an 'October fly'. In October, there's so many flies because it's so cold in October. The flies don't leave the house no matter how much you try to chase them out. We called our husbands 'October flies,' because they wouldn't leave the house even if we kicked them out."

Gemma Ware: North Korean statistics are notoriously unreliable, so finding official evidence to confirm how many women are working, what they're earning, wasn't possible. But Kyungja has been struck by the shifting view of gender roles that emerged in her conversations with North Korean defectors.

Kyungja Jung: I was very interested in when they used the term ‘era of matriarchy.’ They just say that many women now, they firmly claim that we are the foundation or center of the household.

Gemma Ware: She related a conversation with one North Korean defector in her fifties.

Kyungja Jung: She just stated that women often say that patriarchy has fallen in favor of the matriarchy. They use the term ‘matriarchy’ and if women were once under their husband’s thumbs, men are now afraid they will be kicked out of their homes by their wives. And there is a saying that, If a man is divorced from his wife, he will be the one that leaves empty-handed with no house and no money. As women are in charge of all economic activities, after divorce, the women will become better off, and men will be beggars.”

Gemma Ware: You’ve noticed, as well as this real shift in, from a patriarchal society to a much more matriarchal society, the sexual revolution that’s been going on. What have you been hearing from the women you’ve been speaking to about that element of the change that’s happening?

Bronwen Dalton: We found a great deal more variation in arrangements in the household, from single mothers to higher rates of divorce, some strategic sort of marriages where an older woman would marry a younger man, because that would give him some access to the income from the markets, then we had the more elite in Pyongyang adopting some of the kind of, dating culture of South Korea because they’re now exposed to the illicitly smuggled-in recordings of Korean dramas, to the extent that they’re reporting about doing dates, holding hands and even using the term ‘upba’, which is the slang word in South Korea for ‘boyfriend’.

Gemma Ware: And is this all permitted by the state, this kind of relaxation, say, of attitudes to dating and relationships?

Kyungja Jung: So, this is quite intimate relations. So I guess that is not easy to regulate but because they know how especially younger people are contaminated by Western culture or South Korean culture, so they really harsh penalty if

someone got caught watching South Korean dramas or K-pop. And so in that way, they can try to stop spreading overall capitalist culture including liberal sexual norms and like, romantic relations.

Gemma Ware: The last, kind of, main thing that you draw out from your research is how the conceptions of what it means to be a woman are changing and are becoming more hyper-feminine. Tell me what's happening about that, about fashion choices, about how women are conceiving themselves and their role in society?

Bronwen Dalton: North Korean women will do anything to obtain a pair of high heels. They're not stilettos, but imagine, kind of, a 1980s look with a lot of paste jewelry, a lot of bling, hairpins, lace, very embroidered parasols. So, it's not a contemporary fashion look, it's still modest, but interestingly, it was the same phenomenon that researchers saw in post-Soviet societies and other post-communist societies. Before, no one cared what you wore and it was whether your husband was a party member and whether you had the right pedigree as one of the loyal class. Now, it's how much money you have. This is the way women are using their fashion choices as a way to negotiate the two most desirable outcomes for them, which is a white-collar job and a good marriage.

Kyungja Jung: Women say that this enhanced feminine capital, like good clothes and like half of women done double eyelid surgery and also permanent tattooing their eyebrows. But they say what they've done because they want protection when they're doing trading. Even one woman say that, "who could buy my vegetables if I'm, like, bare skin and dull looking?" And also, they say this is very critical for successful marriage and even class mobility.

Gemma Ware: And you spoke about this traditional idea of the role of the mother in North Korean society. How has your research shown what's changing around that and what nowadays, what the regime's view of the ideal woman in North Korea is?

Bronwen Dalton: The North Korean regime has survived by seeing what's happening in society and somehow incorporating it into its narrative to twist it,

always for the sole one purpose, which is to legitimize the ruling of the Kims, and at this point Kim Jong Un. So for the first time, we are seeing the first lady of North Korea, who we didn't ever see the wives of Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il. His sister and his daughter are appearing a lot more in propaganda. Sure, he goes to a lot of missile launches, but he seems to have a penchant, the dear leader, for opening cosmetic factories.

They're subtle ways that they're trying to acknowledge the shift and try to control it as well. It's quite a balancing act and now through propaganda, they have tried to combine the old, traditional views of motherhood with this more modern North Korean woman. And it's really obvious the shift in propaganda and the presentation of senior women in the leadership. Ri Sol-ju, his wife, appears in Prada, Christian Dior, and Chanel. So they know they can't put the genie back in the bottle. What they're trying to do is co-op the current social trends in a way that still maintains his legitimacy as the ultimate ruler.

Gemma Ware: But Kyungja says that at the same time, North Korea's leadership is worried about how far removed women have become from that traditional role of mother and wife.

Kyungja Jung: North Korean authorities also realized that they can't control women. So one of the clear evidence is that fertility rate.

Gemma Ware: Going down?

Kyungja Jung: Yeah, yeah, very much. Because of the triple burden, the mother, wife, now traders or businesswomen, many women avoid having children, even in marriage. Because of that, they really emphasize there, how important you marry, you raise your child.

Gemma Ware: And in one of the most significant changes that Kyungja and Bronwen have noticed, when women do decide to have a baby, they'd rather have a girl than a boy.

Kyungja Jung: Many interviews, they say North Korea now they have a daughter fever instead of a son preference.

Gemma Ware: Kyungja recounted what she heard from one woman in her family.

Kyungja Jung: She just said that, “We North Koreans, say that a son is like an appendix and a daughter is like a heart in the body. So we cannot live without a heart, but we can live without an appendix. So we prefer daughters to sons. And one daughter is better than having 10 sons.”

Gemma Ware: Thank you so much, both of you, for coming on to talk about your research. It’s been fascinating.

Bronwen Dalton: Thank you, Gemma.

Kyungja Jung: Thank you, Gemma.

Gemma Ware: That’s it for this week’s episode. Thank you to Bronwen Dalton and Kyungja Jung for speaking with us about their research, and to our colleague Justin Bergman at The Conversation in Australia. We’ll pop a link in our show notes to a story that Bronwen and Kyungja wrote for The Conversation, which has got some of those great photographs that Justin mentioned, of women in North Korea.

This episode was written and produced by Gemma Ware and Mend Mariwany, with production assistance from Katie Flood. Sound design was by Eloise Stevens, and our theme music is by Neeta Sarl. Stephen Khan is our global executive editor, Alice Mason runs our social media, and Soraya Nandy does our transcripts.

Do connect with us on Instagram, [@theconversationdotcom](https://www.instagram.com/theconversationdotcom), or email us directly at podcast@theconversation.com. You can sign up for The Conversation’s free daily newsletter by clicking on the link in our show notes. If you like what we do, please support our podcast and The Conversation more broadly by going to donate.theconversation.com. And please rate and review the show wherever you listen and tell your friends about us please too. It helps us reach a wider audience

and spread academic research just that little bit further. Thanks very much for listening.