

# Women's Rights in North Korea: Reputational Defense or Labor Mobilization?

Written by Yesun Kim

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YESUN KIM, MAR 22 2024

While North Korea is notorious for one of the world's worst human rights abuses, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) often makes political statements and laws that seemingly emphasize women's rights.<sup>[1]</sup> Starting even in the 1930s, the first North Korean leader, Kim Il-sung, who was then a member of the Korean guerilla faction, addressed the issue of gender equality at the Party of the People's Revolutionary Government and outlined the need to respect and liberate women in the Ten Codes of the Joguk Kwangbok Association.<sup>[2]</sup> His successor, Kim Jong-il, also emphasized the role of women in pushing "one of the two wheels of the revolutionary chariot" for the state's socialist reforms.<sup>[3]</sup> Kim Jong-un, the current North Korean leader, has also put more women at the forefront and has implemented more women-oriented policies.<sup>[4]</sup> Such a focus on women's rights becomes more apparent in North Korea's laws. For instance, the Law on Sex Equality (1946), the Socialist Constitution (1972), and the Criminal Law (2012) purportedly protect women's social, educational, and political rights, as well as punish sexual violence.<sup>[5]</sup> The Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Women (2010) stipulates that international treaties, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), should be enforced as domestic law.<sup>[6]</sup>

However, the reality of North Korean women's lives hardly reflects the ideals of these declarations and laws. North Korean women suffer from a serious lack of basic healthcare, sanitation, and nutrition.<sup>[7]</sup> Women in political prisons are especially vulnerable to sexual exploitation by prison guards.<sup>[8]</sup> Moreover, the North Korean regime often forces infanticide on pregnant women if they are repatriated from China or raped by the guards or government officials.<sup>[9]</sup> Being members of a strictly patriarchal society, North Korean women also bear "a double burden of social economic activity, which renders them inferior to men, as well as housework and childcare."<sup>[10]</sup> Furthermore, cases of forced marriage are common in spite of laws such as the Family Law (2009) that guarantee women's freedom of marriage.<sup>[11]</sup> Regarding women's political activities, the female deputies in the Supreme People's Assembly face difficulties in setting women-related agendas since most discuss and praise the assembly's budget and settlement policies.<sup>[12]</sup>

Given its long record of blatant failures to uphold women's rights, it is rather puzzling that North Korea continues to place a political and legal emphasis on women's empowerment. Based on the assumption that the DPRK does not aim to improve women's rights through its policies genuinely, this paper seeks to analyze the driving factors of the regime's apparent interest in women's issues. Two competing explanations could provide insights into the Kim regime's motivations. The first argues that North Korea creates women-oriented laws and institutions to pacify international criticisms over its human rights violations and thereby defend its reputation. The second explains that the Kim regime employs the rhetoric of women's empowerment to justify and further its mobilization of women's labor for building a socialist economy. After testing the two explanations, this article will conclude by choosing the more plausible explanation and analyzing its implications for North Korean society and the international community.

### Explanation One: Reputational Defense

In an increasingly globalized world, states tend to respond sensitively to international criticisms,<sup>[13]</sup> and North Korea is no exception. The DPRK has often demonstrated its sensitivity to other states' censure of its human rights abuses,

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sometimes even responding with the boycott of talks on nuclear weapons.<sup>[14]</sup> Regardless of whether North Korea denies or acknowledges these charges, the state's past behavior suggests that its desire for reputational defense lies central to its sensitive response to international opprobrium.

In the past, North Korea has often pushed for authoritarian image management efforts to promote an image of legitimacy and cultivate diplomatic ties beyond the communist world.<sup>[15]</sup> For example, beginning in the early 1970s, the DPRK sent gymnastic advisors to developing countries such as Somalia and Uganda without charge, which helped build relations with these countries and strengthen its national image in its competition against South Korea.<sup>[16]</sup> Moreover, through setting up foreign friendship associations such as the Nigerian Committee for the Study of Juche Idea and the Korean Friendship Association (KFA) in Spain, North Korea has sought to improve its reputation and address anti-DPRK biases in global media.<sup>[17]</sup> Furthermore, as part of its repatriation efforts, North Korea has tried to present its positive image toward Koreans in Japan via propaganda campaigns of Chongryon, its de facto embassy in Japan.<sup>[18]</sup>

North Korea thus makes concrete efforts to manage its image for specific objectives, and this also applies to the issue of gender equality and human rights as Pyongyang presents its women-oriented policies and rhetoric to the international audience, specifically the United Nations (UN). Despite its egregious human rights violations, the DPRK tries to promote a positive image of legitimacy and defend its reputation in largely three ways: 1) claiming that it has sufficient legal mechanisms corresponding to the UN human rights treaties, 2) rejecting or making counter-accusations to international criticism, and 3) conceding to the pressure and requests from the UN, albeit sporadically.

Starting in 1981, North Korea began to ratify major UN human rights treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).<sup>[19]</sup> To show its obligation to the CEDAW, the DPRK presented its own laws, such as the Law of Sex Equality (1946) and the Socialist Constitution (1972), especially Articles 65 and 77, which grant women equal social status and rights as men.<sup>[20]</sup> Moreover, Pyongyang established the National Committee for Implementing International Human Rights Treaties in 2015 to ensure that the CEDAW is integrated into its state policies.<sup>[21]</sup> It is doubtful, however, that these laws and institutions were created for actual implementation. Many observers note that the National Committee was set up simply to evade criticism and demonstrate to international society that it has adequate mechanisms for guaranteeing human rights.<sup>[22]</sup> In fact, the DPRK delegations at the CEDAW sessions often deliver vague official government statements to avoid international censure instead of clearly communicating the relevant subject matter on the National Committee.<sup>[23]</sup> Thus, North Korea may be creating and presenting unimplemented laws and institutions to manage its external image.

North Korea not only claims it has legal mechanisms for guaranteeing women's rights, but it also rejects criticisms made by the UN or other states to guard its reputation. When the CEDAW report of concluding observations addressed North Korea's lack of legal protection and punitive measures against human trafficking and sex trafficking in 2017, North Korea denied such concerns by saying, "Human trafficking is inconceivable in the DPRK."<sup>[24]</sup> This statement directly runs counter to the fact that sex trafficking is rampant and commercialized in places like *jangmadang* (informal markets in North Korea), especially since the severe famine in the 1990s.<sup>[25]</sup> Furthermore, Pyongyang often dismisses the annual resolutions issued by the UN General Assembly that condemn its human rights abuses and insists they are political plots to topple its *juche*-based socialist regime.<sup>[26]</sup> More broadly, Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il have often denounced the Western ideas of humanitarianism, framing them as "hypocritical ideas concocted by the capitalist class in order to paralyze the working class."<sup>[27]</sup> Taken together, North Korea tries to defend its state ideologies and reputation by dismissing these criticisms as false or politically motivated.

To further uphold its image against the criticisms, the DPRK also accuses the UN and its member states of committing human rights violations and infringing upon its rights to national sovereignty. For instance, in light of the anti-racism protests in the United States starting in 2020, North Korea has castigated the U.S. for violating human rights, trying to delegitimize the U.S. authority to condemn its human rights abuses.<sup>[28]</sup> Moreover, the DPRK has frequently objected to the resolutions put forth by the UN Commission on Human Rights, such as Resolution 1997/3,

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"Situation of Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," claiming that the UN clearly violated its sovereignty.<sup>[29]</sup> In fact, North Korea uses these allegations and the logic of *Urisik Ingwollon* (our style of human rights) to justify its non-compliance with the UN resolutions.<sup>[30]</sup> According to its collectivist ideologies, individuals' human rights cannot exist apart from national sovereignty, nor can there be natural rights that apply universally to all countries; based on this understanding, North Korea stresses its need to strengthen its military via *songun* (military-first) policies to protect national sovereignty and human rights of its own definition, while blaming the international community for infringing on its sovereignty by raising universal human rights issues.<sup>[31]</sup> Pyongyang firmly maintains this stance in its official statements to the UN and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) sessions, asserting that the politicized, double standards of the UN Human Rights Council present major obstacles to its promotion of human rights.<sup>[32]</sup> All these counter-accusations are part of North Korea's attempt to undermine the legitimacy of other states or organizations that criticize its human rights abuses and damage its reputation.

Lastly, while North Korea often rejects international criticism, there are times when it complies with the requests made by the UN due to intense international pressure and its economic concerns tied to image management. The DPRK has selectively adopted international human rights norms by amending its domestic laws. In 1998, the North Korean government added a clause that guarantees the freedom of residence and travel in Article 75 of its national constitution after the UN Sub-commission on Human Rights requested North Korea in 1997 to ensure the freedom of movement.<sup>[33]</sup> Moreover, in 2010, Pyongyang established the Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Women (LPPRW) to enforce the CEDAW and specify the preceding regulations in response to the criticisms and suggestions by the women's organizations within the UN.<sup>[34]</sup>

Besides the international pressure, some of North Korea's accepting responses might have been motivated by its need for foreign investments and economic cooperation since the conditions for such transactions often require respect for human rights.<sup>[35]</sup> This becomes more evident when considering China's legal modifications regarding human rights during its market reform and their impact on North Korea. For instance, Beijing amended its constitution in 2004 to include human rights-related laws as part of its economic reform of opening up to foreign markets, the example of which influenced Pyongyang to revise its constitution in 2009 by stipulating Article 8 to protect the rights of laborers.<sup>[36]</sup> Like China's case, the DPRK often attempts to create a conducive environment for international investments by changing its domestic laws according to the international demands for human rights protection.

While North Korea's complex response to international criticism is dependent on various factors and difficult to categorize narrowly, its overall patterns could be understood as a mix of reputational defense based on its already-existing laws, denial of and counter-accusations to the criticisms, and partial adoption of the UN resolutions. In these three kinds of behavior, the DPRK consistently shows its sensitivity to international censure and efforts to bolster its image on the international stage. This leads to several questions: what is North Korea ultimately trying to achieve through defending its reputation? How does its interest in image management explain the discrepancy between its rhetoric on women's empowerment and the reality of the plight of North Korean women?

North Korea became a state party to some of the UN human rights treaties even before South Korea did, but its ratifications were most likely made with the political aim of distinguishing itself from South Korea, which was then under authoritarian leadership, rather than actively safeguarding human rights.<sup>[37]</sup> It is also possible that the DPRK submitted national reports on the implementation of these treaties to pacify international criticism and propagate its external image of upholding human rights, including women's rights.<sup>[38]</sup> Additionally, aspiring for international prestige, North Korea, under leader Kim Jong-un, has sent various women's delegations to Europe and East Asia to follow the global trends or the "rhythms of globalization," albeit far limited in actual influence over women staying in North Korea.<sup>[39]</sup> In sum, the DPRK holds an interest in promoting women's rights with objectives such as building its reputation in the context of inter-Korean competition,<sup>[40]</sup> mitigating international censure over its human rights abuses, and cultivating a positive image for international investments. Since the North Korean regime is only concerned with image management regarding gender equality, the majority of its policies for women go unkept,<sup>[41]</sup> lacking practical measures for implementation.

This hypothesis of reputational defense, however, fails to account for several exceptions or confounding variables. While the DPRK tries to defend its reputation by either acknowledging or dismissing international criticism, it is

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questionable whether its offensive counter-accusations help with image management because they present an unfavorable image of North Korea to the countries targeted for its accusations. In other words, since Pyongyang's efforts to bolster its image via counter-accusations also come with reputational costs, this explanation seems self-contradictory. It is, therefore, difficult to conclude that the DPRK's struggle for legitimacy is the main underlying factor behind its diverse responses to international censure. Furthermore, the hypothesis does not exclusively address the North Korean women's rights but rather the human rights issues as a whole. Thus, it remains unanswered why the Kim regime specifically emphasizes the role of women in society.

## Explanation Two: Labor Mobilization

While the previous explanation on reputational defense examines North Korea's rhetoric on women empowerment toward the international audience, the hypothesis concerning labor mobilization analyzes how such rhetoric is directed toward its domestic audience, namely North Korean women. In launching various campaigns and instituting laws for gender equality, the DPRK essentially uses its rhetoric on women's rights to justify its mass mobilization of women's labor for building a prosperous socialist economy. The Kim regime's veiled interest in the economic value of the women's workforce accounts for the wide gap between its policies and the difficulties North Korean women face in their daily lives.

The DPRK's political and legal emphasis on gender equality derives its source from the communist ideologies previously set forth and practiced by the Soviet Union and China. According to the socialist theories articulated by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, when it comes to the struggle for gender equality, it is more complicated to apply the theories of class struggle due to men's deep biases towards women; they thus propose that women seek their liberation through participating in the society's labor and production.<sup>[42]</sup> Based on this ideological logic, the Soviet Union and China have extensively mobilized women in their industries according to their economic planning, which then set the roadmap for North Korea to follow.<sup>[43]</sup>

In the early stages of North Korea as a new nation, Kim Il-sung explicitly stated two reasons for supporting women's organizations: to unite women in contributing to nation-building efforts and to realize social emancipation via implementing government policies.<sup>[44]</sup> In line with these goals, Pyongyang established the Democratic Women's Union of North Korea in 1945 to direct women's political and economic activities within the state's socialist movements rather than to address the needs of and challenges faced by women.<sup>[45]</sup> The Kim regime's goal of mobilizing women's labor is clearly articulated in Kim Il-sung's speech at the Fourth Congress of the Women's Union in 1971, where he stated that women should not be buried in family life upon graduation but should instead work longer for the party and socialist revolutions, even if their marriage may be delayed.<sup>[46]</sup> His speech reveals the extent to which the North Korean government sought to mobilize the female workforce in its socialist reforms, even as women composed half of its population. Moreover, in order to guarantee women's full participation in the five-year economic plan, North Korea began to provide social services and wage "an all-out assault on former "backward lifestyles" (*staryi byt'*), targeting sexual exploitation and physical abuse of women and children."<sup>[47]</sup> At the Fifth Congress of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) in 1972, Kim Il-sung also declared that women would be liberated from heavy household duties so as to secure their availability to work at state-run factories and agricultural operations.<sup>[48]</sup>

It was under these economic objectives that North Korea initially drafted and even enforced policies for women's rights. Against this background, the DPRK's formulation and implementation of women's policies began to unfold and change over different periods, shaping North Korean women's socioeconomic roles and lifestyles. Table 1 below provides a simplified overview of the changes in the DPRK's women-oriented policies and laws, as well as the Women's Union's activities across the five time periods.

The overall developments in Table 1 reveal that North Korea has set up many laws and reforms to consistently mobilize women's labor. First, to specify the types of women's labor in addition to the Women's Union's activities listed above, the North Korean state launched various mobilization campaigns: the Campaign to Win the Tree Revolution Red Flag, Shock Troops Recovery Campaign, Cheongsan-ri Campaign, Chollima Movement, the Daesan Enterprise Management System, and the 1980s Speed Creation Movement.<sup>[49]</sup> Most of these movements were

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organized to elicit more significant participation in the state-run operations. To elaborate, as part of the state-led organizational life, North Korean women were obligated to work in diverse sectors, such as rural agricultural labor, railroad construction, maintenance of historical sites, administrative work for public offices or *inminban* (neighborhood watch units), and provision of supplies to the Korean People's Army (KPA).<sup>[50]</sup>

With the aim of mobilizing women in these various sectors, North Korea promotes its rhetoric and laws for gender equality to forge identities or concepts of "female revolutionaries" and "women's liberation."<sup>[51]</sup> As shown in Table 1, the establishment of laws regarding the recruitment of female workers and the working hours of working mothers correlates with the increased mobilization of women's labor, especially in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th time periods. All these legal provisions and campaigns project women's identity as indispensable workers, reinforcing their sense of need to work hard for the North Korean state. This can be compared with the concept of *dagongmei* (the working daughter) in contemporary China, which serves as a sense of identity or a tool of "self-subjectivization" for young rural girls working at global factories that rely on their labor to generate private and transnational capital.<sup>[52]</sup> Similarly, the DPRK's promotion of women's rights and social roles "forcefully weave[s] the people into a North Korean state that posits itself as protector and provider" that the clear dissonance between reality and rhetoric does not "force a fundamental rethinking of the individual's place within the society and culture."<sup>[53]</sup>

Another observable trend in Table 1 is the increasing prioritization of women's domestic role as housewives, especially over the 4th and 5th time periods. After the severe famine and economic recessions in the 1990s, also known as the Arduous March, the Kim regime emphasized women's housekeeping duties. North Korean women, however, also had to work for the state's operations and participate in informal market activities for survival, which resulted in their double or triple burdens of work.<sup>[54]</sup> The socialist gender equality policy of the 1980s, therefore, regressed by strengthening the traditional roles and patriarchal structure of North Korean families; such shifts in the women's policies became evident during difficult times such as the Arduous March, the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994, and a series of natural disasters which forced women to return to their domestic duties.<sup>[55]</sup> Additionally, the wage gap between men and women widened when Pyongyang implemented the Economic Management Improvement Measures in 2002 to raise wages for the heavy and chemical sectors while relegating women to light industries and service sectors with the lowest average wages.<sup>[56]</sup> Since North Korea's rhetoric on women's empowerment initially hinged upon its need for economic development rather than for actual improvements, it is unsurprising that the DPRK would revise or disregard its previous policies of gender equality upon changed circumstances such as the economic crises.

During and after the economic recessions of the 1990s, however, due to the DPRK's failed food distribution system and lack of protection for women's rights, North Korean women were tasked with multiple burdens which profoundly changed the family dynamics and were also left more vulnerable to perpetrators of human rights. Since North Korean men were bound to their official jobs for the state with little to no pay,<sup>[57]</sup> their wives had to lift their families off the ground for literal survival. Ordinary North Korean women usually work from dawn to dusk at informal markets such as *jangmadang* to secure food and basic needs.<sup>[58]</sup> In fact, women's market activities mostly sustain their families, even as informal commerce accounts for over 70 percent of total household income in North Korea.<sup>[59]</sup> To further provide for their families, many North Korean women engage in cross-border trades near China and often leave permanently, with estimates showing that around 70 percent of North Korean refugees residing in China are women.<sup>[60]</sup>

While the North Korean government tolerates these informal market activities to an extent, the illegality of such activities still leaves North Korean women physically vulnerable to exploitation by the market officials, who are mostly men.<sup>[61]</sup> During the periods of "strict supervision," some women have traveled miles through the hills on foot to avoid being caught.<sup>[62]</sup> Moreover, North Korean women involved in cross-border trades near the Chinese border are highly vulnerable to sex trafficking, kidnapping, cybersex industries, and forced marriages.<sup>[63]</sup> Furthermore, it is equally, if not more, devastating for them to be repatriated back to the DPRK since they are often sent to detention centers where they face severe mistreatment and harassment.<sup>[64]</sup> Such flagrant violations of women's rights sharply contrast with Pyongyang's rhetoric on women's empowerment, which was mostly stated for the purposes of labor mobilization.

Besides women's role as workers for their country and breadwinners for their families, North Korean women were

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also burdened with heavy domestic duties. In light of these changes in women's circumstances, the Kim regime has begun promoting images of motherhood and role models such as Kim Jong-suk and Kang Pan-sok, as mentioned in Table 1. Kim Jong-suk, the wife of Kim Il-sung, has often been hailed in North Korean textbooks as "the mother of the revolution" and a well-rounded female hero with multiple accomplishments such as fighting the anti-Japanese wars, gathering military information at underground organizations, doing household chores for her husband, and educating her son Kim Jong-il.<sup>[65]</sup> Furthermore, in 2014, upon the 68th anniversary of the Law of Sex Equality (1946), Kim Jong-un emphasized the need for women to live "the life of a pioneer and a superwoman" who excels in both domestic and social labor.<sup>[66]</sup> North Korea's images of ideal motherhood and womanhood thus attempt to brainwash North Korean women to fulfill their obligations to both their families and their nation. As the Kim regime imposes such ideals upon women along with other efforts of indoctrination, many North Korean women are largely uncritical or even unaware of the reality of their double burden and the unimplemented policies for women's rights.<sup>[67]</sup> However, more recent trends reveal that North Korean women are becoming exhausted with multiple burdens and no longer want to have children.<sup>[68]</sup> All these findings only go to show that the Kim regime's interest in exploiting women's labor lies underneath its disguised rhetoric on women's rights, resulting in the wide gap between the stated policy and reality.

## Comparative Analysis

The two competing explanations can be weighed against each other when examining both the confirming and disconfirming evidence corresponding to each theoretical explanation. First, regarding North Korea's reputational defense, there exist exceptions where evidence does not support the hypothesis. As previously argued, it is unclear if the DPRK's various responses to international criticism are all caused by its efforts for external image control. In fact, research on North Korea's rhetoric suggests that Pyongyang signals messages toward its domestic audience more frequently than toward the international audience since the latter entails more risks or costs of reputation.<sup>[69]</sup> Moreover, it is difficult to pin down North Korea's intentions for addressing the UN human rights resolutions since the state's responses are interspersed with selective concessions and dismissals.<sup>[70]</sup> It is also uncertain whether the DPRK's declarations and policies on women's rights are directly connected to image management. Regardless of Pyongyang's rhetoric, international observers are well aware of North Korea's blatant violations of women's rights through the reports by the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI), interviews with North Korean defectors conducted by human rights organizations, satellite imagery,<sup>[71]</sup> and other data points. Given the level of their understanding, the claim that North Korea presents these women-oriented statements and laws for reputational defense, therefore, seems weak since the state's rhetoric could easily be disproven.<sup>[72]</sup> It is much less clear what the DPRK tries to achieve by promoting women's rights, not just human rights.

The second explanation of labor mobilization, on the other hand, may offer more accurate insights into the articulation of North Korea's political statements and laws regarding women. While this argument is not without exceptions, it provides a more fundamental understanding of how North Korea perceives and promotes women's rights, along with clear empirical support and consistent patterns across different time periods. While the first hypothesis of reputational defense partly rests on assumptions and correlation between the UN reports and the DPRK's domestic legislation, the second argument presents the North Korean leaders' statements explicitly mentioning the state's goals of mobilizing women's labor. Such objectives for labor mobilization are also reflected in the increase of North Korean women's labor force participation in the late 1990s, as quantified by the International Labor Organization (ILO).<sup>[73]</sup> Furthermore, the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the trends of Pyongyang's rhetoric reveals that the state's mobilization of women underlies its declarations and policies of gender equality. According to a study of the DPRK's women discourse in *Rodong Sinmun*, an official North Korean newspaper, from 1998 to 2007, the Kim regime continuously highlighted women's role in labor and protection for the *Suryeong* (the supreme leader of North Korea), without reflecting the significant changes in women's socioeconomic status and perspectives since the Arduous March.<sup>[74]</sup> Such findings could be attributed to the regime's view of women as subjects that must perform all kinds of duties for the state.<sup>[75]</sup>

However, there are flaws in the logic outlined in the second explanation. The argument posits the DPRK's predominant focus on mobilizing women's labor as an explanation for the state's puzzling rhetoric on women's empowerment despite its egregious violations of women's rights. However, some North Korean analysts observe that women's increased economic participation has rather reinforced their social identity or status. For instance, women

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who garnered extensive experience at marketplaces have cultivated “a strong sense of identity” and have become “active in demanding separations or divorces.”<sup>[76]</sup> Furthermore, due to the rise of the grassroots market economy and women's increased participation in the market, North Korean women were endowed with “privileged access to more profitable kinds of economic activities.”<sup>[77]</sup> Such observations could imply that the gap between North Korea's rhetoric and the reality of women's rights is gradually narrowing precisely because of labor mobilization.

While these recent developments do disconfirm the second explanation in part, nonetheless, the analysis of the Kim regime's exploitation of women's labor seems more plausible than other explanations for the aforementioned gap. While the DPRK initially established women-oriented policies to increase women's social and economic participation, it has done so mostly to utilize their workforce rather than to liberate them from the gender struggle, as its ideologies suggest.<sup>[78]</sup> The fact that North Korea later encouraged women to take on more traditional roles despite its previous promises of freeing them from housekeeping duties confirms that the Kim regime is primarily motivated by its political interests. The North Korean government continues its feudal-patriarchal system at the national level, and the Confucian norms of patriarchy are still deeply entrenched in North Korea's leadership and society as a whole, governing their fundamental views and treatment toward women.<sup>[79]</sup> One of the clearest examples of the discrepancy between rhetoric and reality is the double or triple burden that North Korean women have to bear, and this can only be explained by the DPRK's focus on labor mobilization and lack of genuine interest in addressing the harmful norms and practices toward women. The COVID-19 pandemic further unveils the Kim regime's disinterest in the conditions of North Korean women as its draconian border lockdowns restrict their market activities and subjugate them to even more exploitation by the state.<sup>[80]</sup>

In summation, based on the comparative analysis of the two arguments, this paper concludes that the second explanation of labor mobilization is more plausible. Whereas the first hypothesis yields varying outcomes depending on different types of North Korea's response to international criticism, the second argument fits North Korea's political ideology and has more consistent empirical support specifically tied to the DPRK's women-oriented laws.

## Conclusion

Based on such analysis, North Korea's aim of mobilizing the female workforce explains the regime's puzzling interest in women's issues. This conclusion entails significant implications because shedding light on the Kim regime's motivations could be helpful in finding more effective ways that foreign governments, the UN, and NGOs can guide, pressure, or incentivize the regime toward improving conditions for women. The findings of the second explanation of labor mobilization highlight the need to empower North Korean women by improving their economic opportunities and raising their awareness of international human rights norms.

Given how the increased economic activities of North Korean women have partly improved their social status, encouraging the DPRK to lead economic reforms or even mobilization initiatives for women along with educational programs on women's rights could be a creative strategy to better their conditions. For example, some scholars recommend that foreign embassies in North Korea launch outreach programs that promote safer labor standards for North Korean women, as well as organize UN-sponsored seminars for Chinese and North Korean officials to address issues of sex trafficking.<sup>[81]</sup> While the possibility of holding such events is contingent upon the ongoing pandemic, it would still be useful to start planning ahead or even consider hosting virtual conferences that could expose North Korean women to the international norms of women's rights. The U.S. and South Korea can also push for more vigorous efforts to provide international information to North Korean citizens via radio broadcasting.<sup>[82]</sup> It would also be helpful for the South Korean government further to prioritize the issue of North Korean human rights and continue humanitarian efforts such as family reunions.<sup>[83]</sup> Additionally, NGOs can look into ways to empower female entrepreneurs in the DPRK by providing technical equipment and training programs in the fields of science and engineering.<sup>[84]</sup>

The plight of North Korean women is more than evident in the Kim regime's exploitation of their labor and lack of protection for their rights despite its rhetoric. With a better understanding of the regime's motivations, however, it may be possible for international organizations and foreign governments to take concrete steps toward reaching North Korean women via economic and educational programs and help improve their conditions.

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**Table 1. Historical Overview of North Korea's Women's Policies**. This table was organized by combining charts and analyses from various sources. For the first column on North Korea's policies for women, see Sooh Lee, "Bukhan-yeoseong Jeongchaeg-ui Byeonhwa: Gabujangjeog".

Focus areas	Periods	Women's Policies	Women-related Legislation	Democratic Women's Union of North Korea
1) The Anti- Imperialist, Anti- Feudal Democratic Revolution (1945-1946)	Efforts to advance women's economic and sociopolitical status	The Law of Sex Equality (July 30th, 1946)	The Labor Law for Laborers and Office Workers (July 1947)	- Mobilizing women for the construction of a socialist state
		- Laying a foundation for women's participation in production sectors		
		- Launching initiatives for eradicating illiteracy and educating about state ideologies	2) Preparing for the Socialist Revolution (1947-1950)	Women's participation in the construction of a socialist economy and the establishment of the Women's Union
		Regulations for the <i>tagaso</i> (nurseries or daycare centers) (December 23rd, 1948)		
		Regulations for the <i>sanwon</i> (maternity hospitals) (October 28th, 1949)	3) The War and Postwar Recovery (1950-1960)	The mobilization of women's labor and the promotion of their economic independence
		The directive concerning the divorce procedure (March 8th, 1956)		
		The directive regarding the recruitment of women in each sector of the people's economy (July 1956)	4) The Construction of Socialism (1961-1971)	Women's housekeeping duties as mothers and social laborers
		Regulations on the Working Hours of Working Mothers (September 27th, 1966)		
		The directive of strengthening the material foundation of <i>tagaso</i> and kindergartens (July 3rd, 1971)	Socialist Revolutionization of Women (1965-1982):	
		- Revolutionizing women and families and instituting the class line		
		- Organizing classes on the <i>juche</i> ideology and Lady Kang Pan-sok (Kim Il-sung's mother) to encourage women's dedication to labor and spirit of collectivism		

Transition to the Era of Kim Jong-il (1983-1997):

- Mobilizing and managing women's workforce amidst the exacerbated economic situation

The Realization of Songun Politics (1998-):

- Realizing the goals of 'gunstock families' and 'motherhood heroes'

- Emphasizing women's traditional role of bearing, raising, and educating many children

5) The Development of Socialism (1972-)

Integration of the *juche* ideology into the policies and the revolutionization of three areas of women's labor

The DPRK Inheritance Act (March 13th, 2002)

The DPRK Criminal Act: Regulations on the Punishment of Prostitution (April 29th, 2004)

The DPRK Women's Rights Act (December 22nd, 2010)

## Notes

[1] The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) defines "women's rights" as the right of women to be free from gender discrimination and to have equal access and opportunities in terms of political participation, public life, education, employment, and health. See *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, New York: United Nations, 1979, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/cedaw.pdf>.

[2] The Joguk Kwangbok Association or "Association for the Korean Liberation" was established by Kim Il-sung in 1936 as the first Korean organization to promote the anti-Japanese unification front during the Japanese colonial rule. Kim drafted the Ten Codes for the association, the 7th of which mentions the need for gender equality. After the Korean liberation in 1945, the codes played an essential role in North Korea's development of political lines and communist revolution towards the embodiment of Kim's *juche* (self-reliance) ideologies. See Dong-ahn Yang, "Juche Ideology (Juche-ideology)," *Encyclopedia of Korean Culture*, Academy of Korean Studies, 2009, <http://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Contents/Item/E0066737>. For more historical details, see also Mi-ryang Yoon, *Bukhan-ui Yeoseongjeongchaeg* [North Korea's Women Policy] (Seoul: Hanul, 1991), 58-64.



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[3] Cited in Darcie Draudt, "Co-opting the Narrative: How Changing Women's Roles Provide Legitimacy to Kim Jong Un," *38 North*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.38north.org/2020/07/ddraudt073020/>.

[4] According to the interview of the former professional North Korean woman, the administrative body under Kim Jong-un directed that 30% of the high-ranking positions, such as heads of institutions, secretaries, and other officials, be filled by women. In the Kim Jong-un era, there have also been many policies on women such as the extension of maternity leave in the Socialist Labor Law. See Jeong-ah Cho, Ji Sun Yee, and Hee Young Yi, *Daily Lives of North Korean Women and Gender Politics* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2020): 15-16, 31-32, <https://www.kinu.or.kr/www/jsp/prg/api/dlVE.jsp?menuIdx=646&category=73&thisPage=1&searchField=&searchText=&bibliolId=1538418>.

[5] Jina Yang, "Women's Rights in the DPRK: Discrepancies Between International and Domestic Legal Instruments in Promoting Women's Rights and the Reality Reflected by North Korean Defectors," *Cornell International Law Journal* 51, no. 1 (2018): 223-225, <https://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/cilj/vol51/iss1/6>.

[6] Yang, "Women's Rights in the DPRK," 224.

[7] Sea Young Kim and Leif-Eric Easley, "The Neglected North Korean Crisis: Women's Rights," *Ethics & International Affairs* 35, no. 1 (2021): 22, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679421000010>.

[8] For North Korean defectors' testimonies, see David Hawk, *The Hidden Gulag: The Lives and Voices of "Those Who are Sent to the Mountains"* (Washington, DC: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2012).

[9] U.S. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, U.S. Department of State, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/north-korea/> (accessed Jan 24, 2021). Forced infanticide is common at holding centers (*jipkyulso*) in North Korea. For more details, see also Jinwook Choi, *White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea 2016* (Seoul: Korea Institute of National Unification, 2016): 118.

[10] Won-hong Kim, "Women of North Korea: A closer look at everyday life," Ministry of Unification, Institute for Unification Education (2014): 20, <https://www.kinu.or.kr/brd/board/726/L/menu/382?brdType=R&thisPage=21&bbldx=57160&searchField=&searchText=>.

[11] Yang, "Women's Rights in the DPRK," 233-234.

[12] Kim, "Women of North Korea," 57.

[13] Research on 'naming and shaming' finds that autocracies tend to be more sensitive to international shaming than democracies and hybrid regimes do. See Cullen S. Hendrix and Wendy H. Wong, "When Is the Pen Truly Mighty? Regime Type and the Efficacy of Naming and Shaming in Curbing Human Rights Abuses," *British Journal of Political Science* 43, no. 3 (2013): 651-672, doi:10.1017/S0007123412000488.

[14] U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *North Korean Refugees in China and Human Rights Issues: International Response and U.S. Policy Options*, by Rhoda Margesson, Emma Chanlett-Avery, and Andorra Bruno, RL34189 (2007), 30.

[15] Alexander Dukalskis, *Making the World Safe for Dictatorship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 162.

[16] These gymnastic trainers helped these states organize the Mass Games in a North Korean style. See Dukalskis, *Making the World Safe for Dictatorship*, 162.

[17] Dukalskis notes that while these friendship groups do not change international discourse significantly, still their

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pro-North Korean statements could be found in times when the country faces international criticisms over its nuclear weapons tests. See Dukalskis, *Making the World Safe for Dictatorship*, 178-181.

[18] One way Chongryon has promoted propaganda was by juxtaposing their conditions with that of Japan, pointing to low employment prospects, limitations to political rights, and the lack of support by the Japanese government. See Dukalskis, *Making the World Safe for Dictatorship*, 169.

[19] "Ratification Status for Democratic People's Republic of Korea," Treaty Body Database, accessed January 28, 2022, [https://tbinetinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=47&Lang=EN](https://tbinetinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=47&Lang=EN).

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[21] Yang, "Women's Rights in the DPRK," 241.

[22] Yang, "Women's Rights in the DPRK," 241. The paper cites the interview with the former staff of North Korea's foreign affairs department. Some experts also consider the possibility that it might have been created just for submission of the CEDAW reports in 2016. See Daye Gang and Joanna Hosaniak, *"They only claim that things have changed..." Discrimination against women in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea* (Seoul: Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights (NKHR), 2018), 14.

[23] Ben Willis, "Scrutinizing North Korea's Record on Civil and Political rights: The New ICCPR Reporting Cycle," *38 North*. September 2, 2021. <https://www.38north.org/2021/09/scrutinizing-north-koreas-record-on-civil-and-political-rights-the-new-iccpr-reporting-cycle/>.

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[30] Min, "The Viewpoints and Responses of North Korea," 118-120.

[31] Min, "The Viewpoints and Responses of North Korea," 119.

[32] United Nations, General Assembly, *National report submitted in accordance with paragraph 5 of the annex to Human Rights Council resolution 16/21, A/HRC/WG.6/33/PRK/1* (20 February 2019), para 86., available from <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3798135?ln=en>.

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[33] Min, "The Viewpoints and Responses of North Korea," 125.

[34] Min, "The Viewpoints and Responses of North Korea," 127-128. While the actual implementation of such laws remains doubtful, these legal modifications reflect the ways the international pressure induced minor changes in North Korea's behavior towards international human rights organizations and regulations. See Joanna Hosaniak, "NGOs experiences in utilizing a nexus between States, NGOs and the United Nations to promote women's rights in North Korea" in *2016 International Symposium on North Korean Human Rights: Protecting and promoting women's rights in North Korea with a focus on the UN human rights protection mechanisms*, Seoul, 2016, 71-80, Seoul: National Human Rights Commission of Korea.

[35] Min, "The Viewpoints and Responses of North Korea toward UN Human Rights Law," 124.

[36] Kyung-Bae Min, "Gaehyeoggaebang-e ttaleun Jung-gug Ingwonbeobje-ui Byeonhwawa Bukhan-e daehan Sisajeom" [Changes in China's Human Rights Legislation Following Economic Reform and Opening-up and Implications for North Korea], *Bukhan-ingwon Ihaeui Saeloun Jipyeong* [New Horizons for Understanding North Korean Human Rights] 1, ch. 8 (2012): 402, <https://www.kinu.or.kr/www/jsp/prg/api/dlV.jsp?menuIdx=334&category=35&thisPage=1&biid=1453731>.

[37] Min, "The Viewpoints and Responses of North Korea," 123.

[38] Min, "The Viewpoints and Responses of North Korea," 123.

[39] Chae Yeon Kang, "Economic Meaning and Human Rights of North Korean Women's Labor: Focusing on Social Participation Policy and Influence," *The Journal of Asian Women* 59, no. 2 (2020): 37, doi: 10.14431/jaw.2020.08.59.2.7.

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[43] Yoon, *North Korea's Women Policy*, 124, 194-95.

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[45] Cited in Sunwook Kim, Wonhong Kim, Younghye Kim, and Dongryeong Kim, *Bukhan-yeoseong-ui Jiwie gwanhan Yeongu : Yeoseong-gwanlyeon Beob mich Jeongchaeg-eul Jungsim-eulo* [A Study on the Status of North Korean Women: Focusing on Women-Related Laws and Policies] (Seoul: Hangug-Yeoseong-Gaebal-won [Korea Women's Development Institute], 1992), 200.

[46] Kim, Kim, Kim, and Kim, *Bukhan-yeoseong-ui Jiwie gwanhan Yeongu*, 142.

[47] Suzy Kim, *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution: 1945-1950* (New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 2013), 29.

[48] Park, "Women and Revolution in North Korea," 747.

[49] Kim, "Women of North Korea," 13-16.

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[50] Kang, "Economic Meaning and Human Rights," 26, 30.

[51] Kang, "Economic Meaning and Human Rights," 8.

[52] Ngai Pun, "Ch 4. Becoming Dagongmei: Politics of Identities and Differences," in *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (North Carolina: Duke Univ. Press, 2005), 109-132.

[53] David C. Kang, "Review: They Think They're Normal: Enduring Questions and New Research on North Korea—A Review Essay," by Patrick McEachern, Stephen Haggard, Marcus Noland, and Suk-Young Kim, *International Security* 36, no. 3 (2011): 164, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41428112>.

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[57] While it is often thought that North Korean men who are ordinary laborers work almost for free, there is a set wage, officially set as 3,000 won. However, this is not enough to buy even a kilogram of rice, and even this payment is not readily made, which makes them heavily reliant on their wives for income. See Sunyoung Choi, "Families under North Korean socialism, labor policy, and the crack of cellular families: Reconstructing of gender roles and marital conflict," Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB), (2020): 74, <https://nkdb.org/researchreport/?q=YToxOntzOjEyOiJrZXI3b3JkX3R5cGUiO3M6MzoiYWxsljt9&bmode=view&idx=8012197&t=board>.

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