



Women in The Shadow of Ideology: Women's Rights in North Korea

İdeolojinin Gölgesinde Kadın: Kuzey Kore'de Kadın Hakları

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Abstract

Described as a 'closed box' in the international system, North Korea is characterized by a governing ideology that penetrates every aspect of life: Juche. Conceived as a philosophy of self-sufficiency, Juche helps North Korea maintain its authoritarian system. In this authoritarian and closed society, women are probably the most disadvantaged group. Indeed, North Korea is one of the world's worst human rights violators. The position of North Korean women, who were shaped as political actors, representatives of the revolution, and founding elements during the founding period of the country, has evolved in a completely different direction today. In the official discourse, women and mothers are used synonymously, but it is often stated that women should devote themselves entirely to the ideology and the leader's guidance. In addition to ideology, the hierarchical order of the Confucian system of thought that has influenced East Asian societies is also behind this idea. In these societies, a woman is obliged to obey her husband and is a mother. While the international community is preoccupied with the threat of North Korea becoming a nuclear power, the rights of North Korean women are ignored. The fact that the majority of North

Öz

Uluslararası sistemde 'kapalı bir kutu' olarak nitelendirilen Kuzey Kore'de hayatın her alanına sirayet eden bir yönetim ideolojisi hakimdir: Juche (주체). Bir kendine yeterlik felsefesi olarak kurgulanan Juche, Kuzey Kore'nin otoriter sistemini muhafaza etmesine destek olmaktadır. Bu otoriter ve kapalı toplum yapısında muhtemelen en dezavantajlı grubu kadınlar oluşturmaktadır. Nitekim, Kuzey Kore dünyanın en ağır insan hakları ihlallerinin gerçekleştiği ülkelerden biridir. Ülkenin kuruluş döneminde bir siyasi aktör, devrim temsilcisi ve kurucu unsur olarak şekillenen Kuzey Kore kadınının konumu, günümüzde bambaşka bir yöne evrilmiştir. Resmi söylemde kadın ve anne özdeş olarak kullanılmakla birlikte, kadınların kendilerini tümüyle ideolojinin ve liderin yönlendirmelerine adanması gerektiği sıklıkla ifade edilmektedir. Muhtemelen bu düşüncenin arka planında ideolojinin yanı sıra, Doğu Asya toplumlarını etkisi altına alan Konfüçyüsçü düşünce sisteminin hiyerarşik düzeninin de etkisi vardır. Zira, bu toplumlarda kadın, eşine itaat etmekle mükellef ve bir anne olarak varlık kazanmaktadır. Uluslararası toplum Kuzey Kore'nin nükleer güç sahibi olması tehdidiyle meşgulken, Kuzey Koreli kadınların hakları göz ardı edilmektedir. Günümüzde

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Koreans who defect today are women reveals the seriousness of the situation. This study examines how women's rights in North Korea are shaped within the framework of the Juche ideology. The study will focus on evaluating the discrepancy between the rights officially granted to women and how these rights are implemented in practice, while also analyzing the status of women under the influence of ideology. It aims to uncover the struggle of North Korean women, who are portrayed as integral to the socialist system, in their fight against oppression.

Keywords: Women, Women's Rights, Human Rights, Juche Ideology, North Korea.

iltica eden Kuzey Korelilerin büyük bir kısmının kadın olması, durumun ciddiye-tini gözler önüne sermektedir. Bu çalış-mada, Kuzey Kore'de kadın haklarının Juche ideolojisi çerçevesinde nasıl şekil-lendiği incelenmektedir. Bilhassa kadınlara resmi olarak sağlanan haklar ile pra-tikteki uygulamaların farklılaşması ve ideoloji kaskacında kadının statüsü değ er-lendirilerek, sosyalist yapının bir parçası olarak sunulan Kuzey Koreli kadınların baskılarla mücadelesi ortaya konmaya çalışılacaktır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Kadın, Kadın Hakla-rı, İnsan Hakları, Juche İdeolojisi, Kuzey Kore.

Introduction

If there is one geography in the world that has not moved away from the ideological struggle, it is probably North Korea. North Korea is often identified by the international media as a closed society with human rights violations, repression, and censorship. In recent years, the isolated country on the Korean peninsula, where it is difficult to obtain news, has tried to use 21st-century propaganda tools. In this respect, although access to information about North Korea is limited and shaped within the framework of Western/South Korean sources, it is now possible to access propaganda content regarding the internal dynamics of the country on the web and social media. One issue emerges from evaluating these contents: The uniformed women of the country. In the context of the struggle for human rights and the rights of women, the uniformed women of North Korea, deprived of ideology, are subjected to serious human rights violations. Information on this issue is accessed via the United Nations, Human Rights Organizations, and North Korean refugees.

Juche ideology, which affects every aspect of life, represents an ideology that does not exist in any other country. Based on Marxism-Leninism, focused on building socialism, and influenced by Korean nationalism and Confucianism, this ideology has drastically changed the lives of North Korean women. The traumas of the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945) and the use of Korean women as "comfort women" in the Second World War had not yet subsided. Respectively, the use of women as a tool for the realization of socialist ideals and the oppression of housewife/motherhood roles instrumentalized the position of women in North Korea.

This study sets out to examine the current state of women's rights in North Korea within the framework of Juche ideology. There is an increasing literature that recognizes the importance of addressing human rights violations and oppressive policies against women to promote gender equality, social justice, and sustainable development in North Korea (Spezza, 2013; Yang, 2018; Cho et. al., 2020, Kim W.H., 2024). Nevertheless, this study plays a significant role in finding that human rights violations against women, the current state, and the future of women's rights are shaped under the influence of Juche ideology. In this respect, the study aims to fill the gap in literature. The limitation of the study is the difficulty in accessing sources regarding North Korea. To increase the diversity of sources, North Korean propaganda websites using “.kp” domain names in Korean and English, as well as sources on those websites, have also been analyzed. In addition, since access to the website of the North Korean Central News Agency (kcna.watch.kp) can be problematic, the South Korea-based “kcnawatch.org” website, which publishes news from this website simultaneously, was wielded.

This study uses document analysis (document scanning method) as a primary research method. Due to limited access to first-hand data from North Korea, the study relies on secondary sources such as academic articles, policy reports, government publications, and news reports. In addition, it incorporates available North Korean official sources (e.g., Rodong Sinmun, KCNA) to disclose the regime's stance on women's rights. Nevertheless, document analysis has some limitations. As North Korea is a closed regime, available sources may reflect ideological biases, making empirical data difficult to access. In this context, this study attempts to analyze the impact of Juche's transformation on the development of women's rights through the available sources.

The central section of this paper seeks to provide an in-depth analysis of the concept of Juche and its connection with human rights. The second section highlights the historical development and interpretation of women's rights in North Korea from a Juche perspective. In the last section of the study, women's rights under the current leader, Kim Jong Un, and future scenarios will be evaluated in the context of Juche.

Juche Ideology and Human Rights

The Juche ideology serves as the foundational governing philosophy in North Korea, influencing virtually every aspect of life within the country. Often described as an “ideology of self-sufficiency,” Juche is rooted in synthesizing two Chinese characters: Ju, signifying human, subject, or actor, and Che, representing an object or thing (Helgesen, 1991: 188–189). The theory posits that humanity is not merely a component of the natural world but its sovereign ruler, advancing a worldview centered

on human agency and environmental control (Kim, 1982: 74–75). In this context, Juche underscores the belief that the Korean people are the ultimate architects of their destiny, emphasizing autonomy and self-reliance as core principles.

Juche is, in this sense, considered to be the creative application of the principles of Marxism-Leninism by the founding leader Kim Il Sung to modern political realities in North Korea (Li, 1972: 157). Stalin's cult of personality and Mao's mobilization of the masses also contributed to the development of Juche. On the other hand, the foundations of Juche were solidified in conjunction with Korean nationalism and the influences of Confucian thought. Nonetheless, the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s and the eventual dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 led North Korea to turn more intensely to Juche. In 1992, references to Marxism-Leninism were removed from the constitution and replaced with the principle of Juche (Song, 2011: 127).

The priority of Juche is the principle of songun (선군), or 'military first'. The Songun policy was produced to demonstrate Kim Jong Il's commitment to ensuring national security against external threats (Pinkston, 2006: 3). Emerging to establish Korea's national sovereignty and advance the process of socialist construction, Songun aims to establish a distinct political model by prioritizing the military (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2008). The military is regarded as the permanent guardian of the country, which must be protected and never allowed to be vulnerable. The military also serves as the construct that provides legitimacy to all government institutions and articulates and implements policy objectives (Park, 2007: 1).

In addition to the importance of the military, the attempt to build a revolution guided by the suryeong (수령-leader) and the hereditary transmission of power are determinants of a monolithic system unique to North Korea. The term Suryeong reflects a system that aims to maintain the leader's guidance through hereditary succession (Takashi, 2016: 1). The goal is to protect the suryeong and mobilize the whole society for suryeong. In this respect, the cult of personality and exaggerated praise for the leader's genius and achievements is built and stories are produced and disseminated via the media and education (Park Y.S., 2014: 5-6). It is crucial to examine the historical legacy behind this idea. Throughout history, the Korean Peninsula has been in the grips of great powers and has gained geopolitical importance due to its geography on a transit route. Being surrounded by powerful states such as Russia, China, and Japan has shaped the fate of the Peninsula.

Throughout history, Chinese civilization has had a lasting and transformative impact on Korea's domestic politics, social structure, and many other states. This system, built around common norms and values, has been called the "tribute system" and has shaped the dynamics in East Asia (Kang, 2012: 54). Within the scope of the tribute system, especially during the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897), diplomatic missions were sent to China, gifts were presented, and economic advantages and political protection were demanded from China in exchange for the recognition of the Chinese Empire. In this system, which turned into a relationship of dependency, Korea was in the position of a tributary. Subsequently, the occupations and invasions in Korea did not end. Eventually, the legacy of the Russo-Japanese struggle on the Korean Peninsula, the Japanese colonial period between 1910 and 1945, and the 1950-1953 Korean War fundamentally changed the balance on the Peninsula. Founded in 1948, North Korea's adoption of Juche as its main motive results from such a historical legacy. Indeed, the country's historical journey reveals the consequences of military weakness. Hence, Juche's 'military first' principle is essential to the ideal idea of a stronger North Korea.

The three basic principles of Juche are political independence (chaju 자주), economic independence (charip 자립) and military independence (chawi 자위). Regarding international relations, the principle of political independence underlines the emphasis on full equality and mutual respect among nations. It also highlights the right of states to self-determination based on the principles of sovereign equality and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. In practice, this stance has made North Korea a more isolated country (Lee, 2003: 106). In terms of economic independence, it was considered that dependence on foreign aid would turn the state into a political satellite, and an independent economy was prioritized to build socialism (Li, 1972: 160). Military independence, on the other hand, led to the construction of the Korean people as warriors against 'imperialist' and 'aggressive' countries. This principle explains North Korea's current aggressive attitude and pursuit of armament. All these principles emphasized the importance of independent thinking and political autonomy, economic self-reliance, and self-assurance in national defense in North Korea.

According to United Nations reports and observations by human rights organizations, North Korea is one of the world's most frequent human rights violators. These human rights violations include arbitrary detention, forced labor, persecution based on religious or political beliefs, and impersonality. The ruling Workers' Party of Korea severely restricts the flow of information into the country and controls freedom of

expression. International human rights organizations and foreign media are forbidden to enter the country. Paradoxically, North Korea is a signatory to several international human rights treaties, including the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1981, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 2000, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2001 (Weatherley and Song, 2008: 272-273). Notwithstanding, the fundamental rights and freedoms enshrined in all these conventions are not guaranteed to the North Korean people.

Within the UN system, the Human Rights Council functions as an intergovernmental body comprising 47 states responsible for protecting and promoting human rights (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2024). In 2013, the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) was established within the Council. The body was authorized to investigate violations that would constitute crimes against humanity, especially in North Korea. The report confirmed that systematic, widespread, and gross human rights violations have been and continue to be committed (UNHCR, 2013). The latest report dated 4 April 2024 also categorized ongoing human rights problems. These problems are as follows:

- Crimes against Humanity: Murder, extermination, slavery, torture, detention, rape, forced abortion, and other forms of sexual and gender violence.
- Lack of Accountability: Failure of authorities to cooperate with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on accountability.
- Refugee and Asylum Seeker Rights: Ensure that North Korean asylum seekers are treated humanely and protected under international law.
- Labor Rights: Violations of labor rights and economic exploitation, including forced labor conditions for workers sent abroad.
- Vulnerable Populations: Special risks faced by women, children, persons with disabilities, and older people (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2024).

The reliance on collectivism is the most prominent feature of rights thinking in North Korea. To illustrate this, Article 68 of the 1972 Constitution emphasizes that "*citizens should exhibit a high degree of collectivist spirit*" (Weatherley and Song, 2008: 282). In North Korea, what is presented as the 'right to subsistence' or the 'right to basic living standards' is the right to food, clothing, consumption, and the most basic/minimum living standards for workers. Particularly, the country compares itself to the US, which it characterizes as an enemy, stating that millions of people in the US sleep on the streets, cannot go to hospi-

tal or school, and are deprived of basic human rights. On the other hand, the North Korean people have free access to all of these (Song, 2011: 137). Juche's human-based approach emphasizes that the basic rights and freedoms of the people are valued at every opportunity, especially in the construction of socialism.

In North Korea, the concept of human rights reflects class consciousness. Article 12 of the Korean Socialist Constitution stipulates that *"The State shall adhere to the class line, strengthen the dictatorship of people's democracy and firmly defend the people's power and socialist system against all subversive acts of hostile elements at home and abroad."* (Korea Institute for National Unification, 1998: 3). In 1958, Kim Il Sung declared that the purpose of the cultural revolution was to *'provide people with a civilized way of life'* (Song, 2011: 138). Under the guidance of Suryeong (the leader), the 'Ten Great Principles' established the ultimate norms controlling people's daily lives and functioned as a requirement to guarantee human rights (Korea Institute for National Unification, 1998: 3-4). For North Korea, human rights are defined as *'freedom guaranteed by the state and society'* rather than being independent of the state and society (Song, 2011: 90).

North Korea is increasingly aware of the international concern about the situation in human rights and, in 1995, published an article "Promoting Real Human Rights" in the newspaper Rodong, in which it claims that human rights are not a universal concept which is applied to all persons and that class consciousness should be emphasized in human rights. In this system, human rights are presented as providing rights to the broad masses of people, such as workers, peasants and intellectuals, and sanctioning the few class enemies who violate the human rights of the masses. In other words, for North Korea, the freedoms and rights of regime opponents are not a matter of principle (Korea Institute for National Unification, 1998: 3). While North Korea's understanding of human rights is defined as *"A complete dictatorial policy for class enemies is a human right"*, it is evident the demonization of regime opponents is legitimized (Collins, 2012: 88).

Human rights violations in North Korea are rooted in the songbun (성분) system. This concept refers to one's socio-political background and etymologically means 'material' (Collins, 2012: 77). Songbun is a system of discrimination based on regime loyalty to the regime, which is determined based on regimental classes. The individual has no control in this system, which consists of an estimated 3 classes and 51 subcategories. These three classes are as follows: Haeksim (핵심)- those loyal to the regime, Cheoktae (적대)- enemies, and Dongyo (동요)- those in the middle of the two classes (Liberty in North Korea, 2019). This system is

inherently a violation of human rights. Its goals, based on inequality and discrimination, are set to institutionalize the dominance of one group over another and ensure the regime's legitimacy. Thus, the human rights performed by the regime are rationalized through songbun (Collins, 2012: 86). Indeed, in a survey conducted by the South Korean Ministry of Unification with North Korean refugees, the songbun system was identified as one of the biggest human rights violations in North Korea with 18.3%. 66.7% of the former Party members in the group identified songbun as the most significant violation (Lee and Kim, 2009: 104). Since the status of the individual in this system is determined by loyalty to the leader and the nation, there will inevitably be people who are favored by the regime. Songbun is one of the most effective tools for the preservation of the North Korean regime.

The instability on the Korean Peninsula and the fact that the Korean War only ended with an armistice, in fact, reveal a continuing war and struggle. This undermines the prospects for human rights improvements in North Korea. The prospect of active war prompts the North Korean government to spend its limited resources on national security and defense instead of the welfare of its people (Korea Peace Now, 2024). In addition, the US-led economic blockade of North Korea and the unfriendly international environment, Western economic sanctions, and the North-South divide are the determinants of human rights crises in the country. In consequence, absolute power is retained by the state, and society is suppressed (Lee and Kim, 2009: 52).

Juche and Women's Rights

In the period between 1910 and 1945, when the Peninsula was united but under exploitation, women lived under the pressure of both colonial rule and patriarchal social structure. The forced labor of Korean women as “comfort women” led to the construction of communism as an ideology of liberation for women in post-independence anti-imperialist discourses. Due to the impact of this negative legacy, North Korean women are often referred to as “flowers”. Despite this image, women are exploited for their labor and are not considered equal to men. Confucian thought still greatly influences North Korea, and traditional gender perceptions emphasizing male superiority are seen in all sectors of society (Yang, 2018: 220).

Juche ideology officially supports gender equality. Article 15 of the 1946 Land Reform Law states that women (mostly peasant women) will improve their social status by becoming equal landowners with men. With the adoption of the Law, women would become landowners, meaning that land distribution would no longer be determined by gender

but by ability (Spezza, 2013). The principle of 'equal pay for doing equal work' was adopted and women's rights to social insurance and education were guaranteed (Kim W.H., 2024: 13). In the same year, the enactment of the Gender Equality Law marked a significant legal milestone, formally recognizing women's suffrage and granting women equal rights in areas such as labor, wages, education, and divorce (Spezza, 2013). Rights such as eight hours of work per day, equal pay for doing equal work, and regular leave were also supported by this law (Kim W.H., 2024: 13). This law aimed to eliminate the remnants of Japanese colonial rule, to reorganize the old feudal relationship between men and women (polygamy, concubines, prostitution, etc.) and to ensure women's participation in all areas of cultural, social and political life. Article 1 of the law envisages this objective: "*Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of state, economic, cultural, social and political life*" (Halliday, 1985: 56).

Establishing the North Korean Democratic Women's Union encouraged women's participation in socio-economic activities (Spezza, 2013). Since 1946, it has been publishing *The Korean Woman* (Joseon Nyeoseong), a monthly magazine aimed at educating North Korean women about different aspects of life (political, economic, psychological, etc.). The magazine is distributed free of charge to members of the Women's Union but is also available to non-members. Its primary purpose is to promote the image of women in terms of political consciousness and their contribution to the construction of the socialist state (Kim N., 2019: 63-64).

In 1958, Cabinet Decree No. 84 set targets to increase women's participation in education and various professions. Some traditional women's work was socialized by establishing nurseries, kindergartens, laundrieslaundry, and other domestic services to support reproduction and women's participation in the workforce (Ryang, 2000). In fact, the equality achieved during this period was considered a step towards the construction of socialism and the recovery of the post-war economy. Women's roles in the traditional Korean family remained unchanged. During this period, the state emphasized three areas of revolution: ideological, technical, and cultural, and tried to position women in one of these labor classes (Kim W.H., 2024: 15). All these developments symbolize a socialist transformation after the Korean War. In this period, women became an ideological tool of the state; women were constructed as 'revolutionary mothers'. For this reason, even though women participated in working life, traditional gender roles did not end.

In practice, the cult of leadership established under Kim Il Sung, who ruled the country between 1948 and 1994, impeded patriarchal rela-

ons. Under Kim regime, the Korean nation was reshaped following the traditional Confucian, male-dominated family structure (Dalton and Jung, 2016: 1). The 1972 Constitution guaranteed equality, followed by legislation such as the Infant Education Law (1976) and the Socialist Labor Law (1978), which spelled out legal guarantees for motherhood and childbirth (Haggard and Noland, 2012). While some opportunities and rights were offered to women during this period, as the economy deteriorated in the 1990s, gender equality was ultimately shelved; the 1988 Constitution removed from the Constitution the clause stipulating that the state would “*relieve women from heavy family work*” (Park K.A., 2011). In 1988, the women's labor force participation rate reached 49% (Kim W.H., 2024: 16). The focus of the period was to develop women-centered policies for the purpose of increasing women's economic participation within the framework of Juche.

When the conjuncture of the Kim Il Sung era is analyzed, it is clear that the idea of Juche was strengthened. North Korea, which emphasized the need for self-sufficiency with a good reading of the situation of the Soviet Union, provided women with formal equality, but de facto discrimination continued. Women were constructed as the 'guardian of socialist values' in the family.

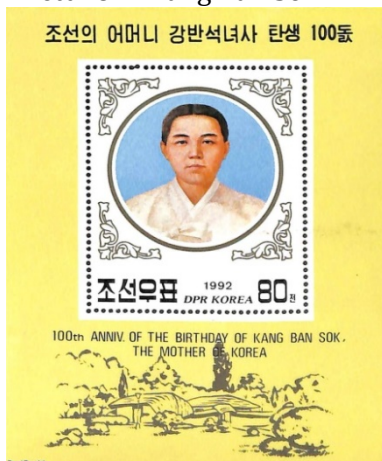
In North Korea, where the informal economy flourished in the 1990s and beyond as a result of economic crisis and famine, by the 2000s, women's position in the workforce was characterized by part-time jobs, work-at-home units, or unpaid support units. Women's labor conditions have deteriorated compared to men's. As of 2005, strict controls on individual economic activity and the market economy have further eroded women's position in the workplace. Moreover, the strict dress code, which made it compulsory to wear skirts, disclosed that the patriarchal system was based on the patriarchal system instead of the socialist understanding of equality (Kim W.H., 2024: 17-19). The great famine of this period led to the transformation of traditional social roles. The dynamics of the period also changed the economic roles of women, who turned to illegal activities out of concern for their livelihoods and the problem of human trafficking increased. State propaganda highlighting traditional family roles continued to function.

Under the Kim Jong Il, the endgame policy was primarily emphasized. Indeed, North Korea formalized its endgame policy in 1998 (Woo, 2018). Indeed, the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994, the great famine, and George W. Bush's declaration of North Korea as an 'axis of evil' after 9/11 accelerated the militarization of North Korea. This situation also led to the militarization of women. Since 2015, military service has been compulsory for North Korean women between the ages of 17 and 20. In

the military, women face serious physical threats and punishments (Ha, 2022).

North Korean leaders kept controlling women's behavior and appearance to ensure conformity with the ideals of femininity prescribed by the state. Kang Ban Sok, Kim Il Sung's mother, was highlighted as an exemplary woman, and Kang was fictionalized as a revolutionary fighter and the 'Great Mother of Korea' (Dalton and Jung, 2016: 2). Kang, who was the leader of the Anti-Japanese Women's Association, a women's revolutionary organization founded during the anti-Japanese armed struggle, was depicted as the mother who raised Kim Il sung and as a conscious bride (Kim W.H., 2024: 52). Her first husband, Kim Jong Suk, is portrayed as the perfect 'anti-Japanese hero'. These women were presented to the public as women from whom other women should take inspiration (Spezza, 2013). The cult of these two women, presented as exemplary mothers, brides, and wives, aims to create a collective image of women (Kim N., 2019: 68).

Picture 1. Kang Ban Sok



Kaynak: (Postbeeld 2022)

Picture 2. Kim Jong Suk



Kaynak: (Johnson n.d.)

Motherhood is frequently invoked in North Korean propaganda. In particular, the role of 'motherhood' is attributed to the country's leaders, the Workers' Party and the state.

"When I asked about women who might not want to have children I was told: "All women in our country want children. Any woman who did not would be considered abnormal." I checked the word "abnormal" and was assured that that was indeed what had been said. When I asked if there was therefore any social stigma attached to women who did not have children, I was told: "All women have children" (Halliday, 1985: 47).

It is inconceivable that a North Korean woman is not a mother. There is also never any mention of single mothers raising children. Mothers are always presented as part of the family. Women with three or more children are respected; motherhood is reduced to the number of children. Ultimately, no matter how many children a woman has, she must be a 'model mother' based on the Juche-style socialist value system. On the other hand, women are made visible in the workplace paradoxically, the traditional view is often emphasized. In North Korea, for example, a famous phrase goes: *"Treasure is not the wife with lots of money, but the wife with a heart full of love"* (Kim N., 2019: 74-75). In line with this discourse, it is apparent that women's individual rights are ignored, and their being emotional and devoted wives is prioritized.

In North Korea, the female figure is divided into four:

- Iconic women created by the propaganda apparatus since the establishment of North Korea.
- Little-known working-class and revolutionary women portrayed as heroes of labor.
- Women who have achieved a certain political power but remain behind the scenes.
- Women who, thanks to the internet and the partial opening of the country to visitors, have gained inadvertent fame, mainly outside North Korea.

However, the more women appear in the media, the less their role in the country is recognized (Spezza, 2013).

In a letter addressed to the 7th Congress of the Korean Socialist Women's Union, Kim Jong Un assesses women in the context of patriotism and sacrifice, family and social harmony, social participation and production, ideological education, and cultural values, rather than universal values. In this context, women's roles are associated with serving the goals of the socialist state and the leader-led Party (Kim J. U., 2021).

Current Status and Future of Women's Rights in North Korea

Authoritarian regimes may face the threat of peaceful or violent popular revolution or coup d'état by the military/elites. The elements that enable dictators to survive these threats include restrictive social policies, information manipulation, use of force, recruitment of diverse groups, manipulation of foreign governments, and institutional coup prevention strategies. The Kim family relies on three tools to prevent the regime from being overthrown by popular uprisings: 1) restrictive social policies, 2) information manipulation, 3) use of force. In this context, society is tightly controlled to prevent the independent development of civil society, the cult of personality is used to manipulate public opinion, and

the use of force is not spared when necessary (Byman and Lind, 2010: 46-51).

Shaped by the party-state principle, Juche strengthened the authoritarian system and shaped society according to the priorities of the state. In the early years of Juche, women were integrated into the system as 'working mothers' as a requirement of the socialist system. In the post-Cold War period, however, as a military-oriented approach to governance shaped Juche, women's inclusion in the military and the discourse on women's rights were simultaneously relegated to the background.

The study summarizes that women's rights have been on the agenda at the legal level in North Korea throughout history. The Kim Jong Un regime, similar to its successors, emphasizes women-oriented policies. This focus is more evident in the laws and treaties adopted: the Law on Gender Equality (1946), the Socialist Constitution (1972), the Law on Compensation for Damages (2005), the Family Law (2009), the Law on the Protection and Promotion of Women's Rights (2010), the Criminal Law (2012), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (Kim Y., 2024). While the Law on the Protection and Promotion of Women's Rights prohibits violence against women, including domestic violence, it does not define domestic violence, nor does it provide specific provisions to protect victims (Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 2017).

Under the current leader Kim Jong Un, policies towards women are shaped by revising the legislation and policies established in the previous period. For instance, the revision of the Socialist Labor Law in 2015 extended maternity leave from '60 days before and 90 days after childbirth' to '180 days after childbirth'. Such developments are linked to the intention to increase birth rates by ensuring the well-being of female workers (Cho et. al., 2020: 15).

In 2009, the Family Code, which regulates family principles in a socialist setting, came into force. The Family Code has been revised four times, citing the objectives of providing a legal basis and helping the family unit to function better as the basic backbone of society and the state. By codifying the recognition of private property and inheritance rights, the law paved the way for the legal guarantee of women's property rights. This transformation supports social change by enabling women to market participate in the market and becomes central actors in generating family income and wealth (Cho et al., 2020: 15-16). The importance of Family Law is associated with the view of the family as the basic life unit of society. Families are closely linked to the state. Through the socialist development of marriage and family systems, society will become a 'large socialist family' (Kim W.H., 2024: 24).

The position of North Korean women is determined by three pressures: high service production, a large population, and the military. To achieve these goals, the regime encourages almost all adult women to engage in production outside the home, makes contraception and abortion difficult, and expects high birth rates (Halliday, 1985: 47-48). In the country, where labor is allocated by national plans, women generally work in low-wage occupations, especially in the light industry, education, culture, and ready-made services sectors, which require female qualifications. These occupations are presented as “*occupational fields suitable for women*” (Ah, 2020: 41). Nonetheless, the combination of work and housework has been a heavy burden, especially for women who have had to make sacrifices to feed their families since the famine years (Spezza, 2013).

Similar inequality is also seen in education. In North Korea, education is focused on raising human resources that obey the leaders and establishing socialism, rather than the self-development of individuals. In this regard, the home is the most important disciplinary space. The regime, which attaches importance to education at home, emphasizes that mothers are the most responsible person for their children's education. Within the scope of this idea, the most fundamental duty of a mother is to raise her child (Kim W.H., 2024: 50). While there is no gender discrimination up to the secondary education level in North Korea, gender-based educational inequality is notable at the higher education level. According to 2018 data, the total university enrollment rate in North Korea is 27.01%, 35.43% for men and 18.17% for women. The university enrollment rate of men is approximately twice that of women. Gender inequality in educational opportunities is clearly visible at the higher education level, and as the school level increases, the level of inequality deepens and regional differences also emerge (Ah, 2020: 43). In schools, it is common for female students to call male students of the same age who have completed their military service 'comrade' and use terms of respect. In addition, tasks such as cleaning are mostly left to female students (Kim W.H., 2024: 53).

Since the Kim Jong Un reign, North Korea has tended to present women as individuals dedicated to the country's well-being and emphasize their activities in the industrial-technological field. With the discourse of the 'knowledge economy era', professions related to advanced technology, which used to be seen as the specialty of men only, have started to be discussed as jobs for women. Thus, a new and modern image of women is being constructed (Ah, 2020: 50). However, in a patriarchal society, North Korean women, despite this image construction, must be equally busy with housework and childcare (Kim W.H., 2024). Currently,

women continue to be employed mainly in light industry and service sectors. This policy is carried out under the guise of 'protecting motherhood', with women workers concentrated in lower-paid sectors. In the service sector, women usually work in sales or supply (Kim W.H., 2024: 40-41). On the other hand, women have become less wary of capitalism by engaging in microenterprises or other economic activities in informal markets. Even if limited, knowledge gained from the outside world through the border trade with China allows capitalism and knowledge to flow (Kim W.H., 2024: 88).

Women have many responsibilities in all areas of life, but they are also responsible for decreasing birth rates. North Korea aims to increase the fertility rate through activities specifically targeting women. In Kim Jong Un's speech "On Duty of Mothers for Their Families and Society" at the 5th National Conference of Mothers in 2023, he emphasized the need to stop the decline in birth rates and the importance of good child education (Jeon, 2024). In the news article "Patriotic Women in DPRK" published in the Korean Central News Agency in January 2024, it is seen that the women attending the 5th National Mothers' Conference were portrayed as 'patriotic women' by staying true to the Party spirit (KCNA, 2024). On the one hand, women's role as breadwinners in the family, both in terms of childbearing and divorce, is likely to call into question the tradition of unconditional obedience. Since the Great Famine, according to Juche, women have become "masters of their own destiny", which has increased self-consciousness, even though the regime is difficult to resist (Kim W.H., 2024: 85-86). On the other hand, the regime's promotion and legalization of abortion as a method of contraception in the 1980s only applied to married women. It has always been emphasized that premarital pregnancy undermines socialist customs and traditions (Cho et al., 2020: 65).

Donjus are an important example of the changing position of women in North Korea. Defined as the "masters of money", they represent the wealthy class and largely dominate the economy (KBS World, 2021). The wives of these people, who usually live in luxury apartments in Pyongyang and have access to luxury consumer goods, are materialistic and consumerist, display a modern outlook in fashion and personal care. The consumption of popular culture from South Korea also affects these women (Dalton et. al., 2017: 508). Donjus have a considerable impact on the economy. For example in 2020, Kim Jong Un praised female donjus for supporting the Samjiyeon City project being built near Mount Baektu. This indicates that North Korean women have become important players in the emerging market economy (Kim, S.K., 2020: 2).

The current regime cares a lot about the country's image in a digital world. Aiming to gain international prestige, North Korea under Kim Jong Un sends female delegations to Europe and other Asian countries to follow global trends (Kang, 2020). Seeking to reduce condemnation of human rights violations and build a positive image, the regime has endeavored to promote women's rights. Nevertheless, these rights and freedoms recognized by law remain lacking in practice. North Korea essentially uses the women's rights discourse to legitimize the mass mobilization of women's labor to build a prosperous socialist economy (Kim, Y., 2024).

Women's political representation is another issue. To guarantee women's political participation, 20% of the Supreme People's Assembly is reserved for women. Women's political activity is most visible in local people's assemblies. Nevertheless, women do not have effective political representation (Kim W.H., 2024: 54). On the other hand, there have been discussions on the rise of women leaders in North Korea. Kim Jong Un's sister, Kim Yo Jong, his wife, Ri Sol Ju, and his daughter, Kim Ju Ae, have been particularly highlighted in international media. This is the result of a quest to rebuild the public image of women. Nevertheless, it does not reflect a broader political and social shift.

Currently, there are human rights violations committed against women repatriated and detained in North Korea, as reported by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Leaving the country without official authorization is a criminal offense and those who do so risk abuse, arrest, and forced return. In 2014, the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea found out that human rights violations committed against forced repatriates were widespread and systematic and constituted a crime against humanity. Repatriates are transferred to border posts by the Ministry of State Security of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. They are held in detention centers (*kuryujang*) and subjected to humiliating and offensive interrogation.

On the other hand, women who cross the border may be trafficked for forced marriage, slavery, or sexual exploitation at great cost, as they may leave the country through traffickers (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2014). Despite Article 10 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights stating that *"all persons deprived of their liberty shall be treated with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person"* (United Nations, n.y.), ill-treatment and torture continue in these camps. Furthermore, forced abortions are practiced when repatriated women are found to be pregnant, and if the birth is imminent, the babies are killed after birth (Yang, 2018: 232).

As of 2011, her role in economic liberalization has been the dominant factor shaping the current period. Under Kim Jong Un, private economic activity (jangmadang) has come to the fore in North Korea. This system, a form of marketization, has had political, economic, and social consequences. North Korean youth in their 20s and 30s who grew up during the period of marketization during the famine are called the “Jangmadang Generation” (Hanssen and Song, 2019: 9).

Women are the dominant participants in this market transformation because the government perceives women as less of a threat than men. Moreover, men have more extended military service or more prestigious positions than women (Choe, 2015: 63). In the country, which experienced ruptures in the patriarchal social structure with the famine in the 1990s, women were free to collect food, barter or sell goods in the passing markets. Thus, when the state was unable to meet the needs of the people, women contributed much more to market activities (Hanssen and Song, 2019: 8). In other words, women in the Jangmadang generation became more economically independent, entrepreneurial, and individualistic than previous generations. As a result, women have moved from a 'devoted mother and wife' profile to individuals with economic power. However, despite their economic independence, pressures in the political and social spheres continue, and the state's stance on this issue remains unchanged.

Conclusion

Although North Korea has constructed its socialist ideology around Juche, the enduring influence of Confucianism, deeply rooted in patriarchal family structures, remains evident. This cultural framework, pervasive across the Korean Peninsula and East Asia, significantly shapes women's lives. Confucian principles traditionally position women as subordinate, requiring obedience to their fathers before marriage, their husbands afterward, and their sons following widowhood (Mace, 1959: 67).

Despite the traditional social structure's prediction of inequality, North Korea has established legal mechanisms and policies to promote women's participation in social life and freedoms, which, although they exist in theory, are not implemented in practice. Women in North Korea are subjected to intense gender inequality due to the patriarchal system. The fulfillment of these rights and legal arrangements is to be meant to appease international criticism of human rights violations and build a positive image. On the other hand, the situation of women is complicated by the fact that women's labor is considered indispensable for the construction of a socialist economy, as well as the dominant role of women in domestic life.

Analyzing women's rights in North Korea through thematic categories reveals several critical dimensions. Firstly, traditional roles persist despite economic participation, with women predominantly fulfilling domestic responsibilities alongside their professional obligations, particularly in rural settings. Secondly, economic hardships compel women's integration into the market economy, fostering greater autonomy and challenging traditional norms, such as an increased willingness to pursue divorce. Thirdly, educational and employment disparities endure, with women disproportionately underrepresented in higher education and key political positions. Lastly, egregious human rights violations, including sexual abuse, forced abortions, and coerced labor, highlight systemic oppression.

This study investigates women's rights through the lens of Juche ideology. Juche, diverging from conventional socialism, intertwines Confucian principles with notions of Korean identity, promoting women's economic participation under the banner of economic independence. However, contradictions emerge in the ideology's simultaneous endorsement of patriarchal values and systemic violence against women. Juche legitimizes extensive state control over personal and societal domains, including women's attire, marriages, and employment. Although the partial exposure of North Korea's elite to external influences marginally raises awareness among women, Juche inherently resists transformative ideas, prioritizing the preservation of traditional norms and values over progressive reform.

In conclusion, women's rights in North Korea are shaped by the authoritarian state structure and the dynamics of the Juche ideology. Although official equality has been emphasized in the context of women's rights under the influence of international developments, ideological and political priorities have hindered the advancement of women's rights. While the Party-State principle of Juche sought to integrate women into the labor force, the post-Cold War threat perceptions and the predominance of military priorities led to a decline in the social status of women. Nevertheless, despite the state's tight control over women and women's rights, the perceptual differences of the Jangmadang generation, which grew up during the famine, implicitly influenced the development of women's rights.

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