



INSIGHT: NORTHEAST ASIA

North Korean women's gloomy 'glory' on International Women's Day

THE TAKEAWAY

On March 8, North Korea called for a large celebration to mark International Women's Day, a day traditionally used to glorify North Korean women as socialist revolutionaries. In reality, women in the country remain subjugated by a patriarchal North Korean society and subject to the propaganda tools of the Kim Jong Un regime.

IN BRIEF

North Korea is one of several socialist countries that commemorates [International Women's Day](#) and the day's socialist roots. The country designated March 8 as a national holiday, "Wives and Daughters' Day," to appreciate North Korean women for their sacrifices and efforts in the foundation and development of the socialist country since 1948. International observers used the occasion to express concerns about women's rights violations in North Korea.

By tradition, North Korean women often receive [flowers and cosmetics gifts](#) from men, who also volunteer to cook at home and help with housework for the day. North Korea's national and municipal

governments also host [various cultural events](#) for women. To mark the day, the [North Korean state-run media released articles](#) praising women as the "flowers or heroines of the country," and various propaganda campaigns emphasized women's social roles and political obligations as wives, mothers, daughters, and participants in the Kim dynasty.

IMPLICATIONS

The front page of the North's state-run newspaper, [Rodong Sinmun](#), praised women as true patriots and said that "women should always be aware of their responsibilities as housewives, daughters-in-law, and mothers." It stressed the necessity of women's active contributions "to the prosperity of our country by bearing more children and raising them well." Recognizing the kitchen as a "woman's space" and limiting women to the borders of the household, North Korean society places the dual burden of housework and breadwinning on the shoulders of North Korean women — statistics indicate that, on average, they bring in over 70 per cent of household incomes by doing side jobs in the black market alongside their domestic housework. Considering the

discrimination and violence against North Korean women reported by [the UN](#) and various [human rights watchdogs](#), living as a woman in North Korea seems to entail a series of daily adverse experiences.

On North Korea's Wives and Daughters' Day, many North Korean women visit statues of the Kim family as a group. The [Rodong Sinmun](#) described the scene, saying three generations of the Kim family "have unfolded a new era of women's importance and respect for women for the first time in history." Women are taught that the North Korean leadership has emancipated women from the shackles of social expectations and oppression. Using Wives and Daughters' Day as a propaganda tool, North Korea aims to display its "superiority" — particularly over South Korea, which is relatively less interested in International Women's Day — within a socialist framework and the progress made in women's rights each year.

The [Rodong Sinmun](#) further praised North Korean women's dedication and loyalty to their family, society, communities, and "revolutionary comrades." Loyalty is one of the ideological requirements for North Korean women to become what the state describes as true socialist comrades and steady patriots. This reinforces the need for North Korean women to blindly conform to the current system and is a far cry from the goals of the women's groups that catalyzed global social transformation more than 100 years ago.

WHAT'S NEXT

1. Emerging VIPs and the status of women

Due to recent rumours of Kim Ju-ae, Kim Jong Un's daughter, being a [potential regime successor](#), as well as the growing diplomatic clout of government heavyweight Kim Yo Jong (Kim Jong Un's sister), and rising leaders Hyon Song Wol and Choe Son

Hui, the term "petticoat government" has come to be used to refer to the noticeable increase of women in positions of power in the North. But some North Koreans, according to observers, are concerned that women politicians' healthy-looking faces amid the [chronic food shortage](#), and seemingly arbitrary [orders](#) (like the one calling for women named 'Ju-ae' to change their name), might garner criticism rather than improve the status of women in the [starkly patriarchal society](#).

2. Fashion as a form of resistance

North Korea's unique socialist ideas are injected into [women's makeup and hairstyles, limiting women's fashion options](#). North Korean women's South Korean-style makeup and hairstyles are sometimes seen as subtle resistance against the Kim regime. It signals the potential possibility of North Korean women coalescing into a group that could march beyond the existing, rigid gender norms.

3. NGO reports on dire women's rights in country

North Korean women are forced to comply with sexual purity and face violence, discrimination, and subordination at the hands of men, according to [Human Rights Watch's \(HRW\) 2023 special report on North Korean women's rights](#). The HRW report also notes how North Koreans often lack the language and education to describe sexual offences and how victims are often socially stigmatized. Many North Korean women who escape the 'Hermit Kingdom' are often [targets of human traffickers](#). HRW and 33 other organizations have appealed to the UN Human Rights Council's 47 member states to give more attention and support to North Korean women during the Council's annual meeting, which runs February 27 to April 4.

Produced by CAST's Northeast Asia team:
Dr. Scott Harrison (Senior Program Manager)
scott.harrison@asiapacific.ca; Momo Sakudo
(Analyst); Tae Yeon Eom (Analyst); Sue Jeong
(Analyst).