

Online Series

2023. 12. 12. | CO 23-39

North Korea's 5th National Conference of Mothers and Its Implications

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Elevated Status of the National Conference of Mothers

North Korea held its 5th National Conference of Mothers on December 3-4, 2023. This fifth iteration was convened 11 years after the 4th conference, which took place in November 2012. The 4th conference featured a congratulatory speech by Kim, Ki-nam, a member of the Political Bureau of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) Central Committee, and a report by Ro, Song-sil, the chairwoman of the Women's Union. The elevated status of the 5th conference was highlighted by the presence of Kim, Jong-un at the opening ceremony, where he delivered the opening address, and his speech on the "Mother's Role in the Family and Society" on the second day of the conference. Additionally, the conference report delivered by Ri, Il-hwan, a secretary of the WPK Central Committee, further underscored the enhanced stature of the National Conference of Mothers.

What could be the reason behind this elevated status of the National Conference of Mothers? In May 2012, the first year of the Kim, Jong-un regime, the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) declared November 16 as 'Mother's Day' by decree. This date was chosen to commemorate Kim, Il-sung's delivery of a speech at the 1st National Conference of Mothers held on November 16, 1961¹⁾. Holding the

4th National Conference of Mothers during the initial year of Kim, Jong-un's leadership served as an appeal to mothers for their support and endorsement of his then yet-to-be-stabilized regime. Now, over a decade later, amid the hardships brought on by international sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic, the Kim, Jong-un regime used the 5th National Conference of Mothers to express its gratitude for the dedication and sacrifice of the nation's mothers, once again appealing to their patriotism. These past two conferences illustrate how the regime strategically mobilizes mothers during critical moments of crisis. The more grandiose organization of the latest conference, with Kim personally taking the stage to speak, indicates the desperate situation North Korea is currently facing.

Gaining the Sympathy of 7 Million Mothers as a Driving Force for Regime Preservation

According to Kim, Jong-un's opening address, the number of mothers in North Korea is approximately 7 million, with about 10,000 elected as representatives to participate in the 5th conference. The conference attendees included mothers who have given birth to many children or raised orphans, as well as those who have nurtured talented individuals contributing to the military and national development. Mothers who have maintained their positions in their workplaces for decades were also present, along with female officials from both central and local branches of the Women's Union.

Kim, Jong-un began his speech by expressing deep respect and affection for the nation's "dear mothers deserving our constant love and respect." His speech was filled with emotional and empathetic expressions, such as "mothers who have tirelessly supported our country and protected their homes through difficult times, never free from worries and never having a moment to comfortably straighten their backs" and "mothers who have carried burdens too heavy for their fragile shoulders." The scenes of Kim wiping away tears as he listened to the stories of the mothers are another example of how the 5th conference was delicately orchestrated to win the hearts of

¹⁾ At the 1st National Conference of Mothers, Kim, Il-sung delivered a speech entitled "The Role of Mothers in Child-Rearing."

the mothers.

The intent behind holding the 5th National Conference of Mothers can be found in the following statement by Kim, Jong-un: “In times of difficulty and hardship, everyone naturally thinks of their mother first, who gave birth to them, fed and clothed them, and helped them take their first steps.” He is indirectly suggesting that in challenging times for the country, the support and help of mothers are critical. Kim further highlighted that the dedication, sacrifice, spirit, and strength of mothers are not only needed for their individual families but act as a vital force sustaining the ‘socialist large family,’ or the Kim, Jong-un regime.

Kim, Jong-un went on to state that “many current social issues require the strength of mothers.” These issues include tackling non-socialist behaviors that are on the rise, establishing a healthy cultural and moral lifestyle, and addressing the declining birth rate and the improvement of child care and education. Kim explained that the government can only resolve these challenges through collaboration with mothers.

Halting Non-Socialist Phenomena at Home

In his “Mother’s Role in the Family and Society” speech, Kim, Jong-un underscored the family’s crucial role in nurturing future generations. He asserted that the primary task of mothers is to “effectively prepare the new generation to uphold our mighty nation.” Kim emphasized the overriding importance of education in the home compared to school and societal education, highlighting the profound impact of a mother’s guidance. He further detailed the significant educational responsibilities of mothers in shaping the nation’s future.

First, Kim, Jong-un stressed that mothers must embody “a noble and beautiful spirit and moral qualities” as communist mothers to raise their children properly as communists. He also discussed the importance of sending children to the military or economic construction sites to cultivate resilience and solidarity. Furthermore, Kim added that mothers should set strong examples as ‘socialist workers’ by actively participating in societal roles, especially in factories and workplaces. This part of the speech can be seen as a veiled critique of the trends of well-to-do families discouraging active participation in military or economic roles and of women leaving

their jobs to pursue private economic ventures after marriage.

Second, Kim, Jong-un called for mothers to actively eliminate non-socialist behaviors in their children. He criticized mothers who focus solely on their children's academic studies, urging them not to neglect teaching them manners, language etiquette, and moral education. Kim also condemned the trend of 'dressing children in unique clothing to make them stand out,' labeling it as inappropriate behavior for mothers.

Meanwhile, the Kim, Jong-un regime has been strengthening legal control over non-socialist phenomena pervasive in North Korean society by enacting the Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act, Youth Education Guarantee Act, and Pyongyang Cultural Language Protection Act. However, legal power alone is not enough to eradicate external ideological and cultural influences, including the widespread covert influence of South Korean culture among the youth. Therefore, the regime is urging efforts to block non-socialist influences in children from within the family.

Declining Fertility Rate, Incentives to Encourage Childbirth

According to the United Nations World Population Prospects report, North Korea's total fertility rate has continued to decline, from 1.97 children per woman in 2008 to 1.79 in 2022. Given the country's labor-intensive industrial structure, this decrease in the fertility rate, ultimately leading to a reduced labor force, could negatively affect economic growth potential. Consequently, the emphasis on promoting the birth of multiple children, a key theme of the 4th National Conference of Mothers in 2012, was reiterated at the 5th conference this year.

A notable change from the 4th to the 5th National Conference of Mothers was the detailed presentation of material benefits for families with multiple children. Rather than simply urging mothers to have more children, specific state benefits were emphasized, such as priority in housing assignment, food and goods supply, and healthcare services, as well as special living expenses support. However, skepticism remains about the effectiveness of these material benefits and preferential measures. Most North Korean women live challenging lives under the double or triple burdens of family livelihood, extraneous responsibilities, and social mobilization tasks, often

without adequate compensation or recognition within a patriarchal social structure. Therefore, it is doubtful that a temporary increase in material benefits will significantly boost the fertility rate in the near term.

Political Mobilization Toward Solidifying Kim, Jong-un's Leadership System

A notable point about the 5th National Conference of Mothers is its function as a political stage for reinforcing Kim, Jong-un's leadership system, an effort that has become increasingly evident since the 8th Party Congress. In assessing the concluded conference, the December 5 issue of *Rodong Sinmun* highlighted the significance of Kim, Jong-un's elevated status as the "parent of the Socialist Grand Family." For a long time, Kim, Jong-suk—Kim, Il-sung's wife and Kim, Jong-il's mother—has been called "Mother of Korea" and "great female revolutionist," and idolized as one of the "Three Generals of Baekdu" during Kim, Jong-il's era. This veneration continued at the 4th National Conference of Mothers in the first year of Kim, Jong-un's regime.

At the 5th National Conference of Mothers, Kim, Jong-suk's name was notably absent. During the 4th conference, *Rodong Sinmun* was filled with articles praising and idolizing her. Eleven years later, however, her name was nowhere to be found in *Rodong Sinmun*'s coverage of the fifth iteration. This absence could be interpreted as the fading of the idolization narrative around Kim, Jong-suk, likely since Kim, Jong-un's mother, Ko, Yong-hui, of Korean-Japanese descent, cannot be officially idolized.

Ultimately, the 5th National Conference of Mothers served as a political platform for Kim, Jong-un to emerge from the shadows of his predecessors, assert himself as the "parent leader," and reinforce his unique leadership system. ©KINU 2023

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