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EXPERTS TAKE

Gender Equality on the Korean Peninsula: Prospects and Challenges

An Interview with
MARGARETA WAHLSTRÖM

In commemoration of International Women's Day on March 8, gender and development expert Elin Eriksson from ISDP's Korea Team sat down with humanitarian aid professional Margareta Wahlström to address some of the development concerns currently unfolding on the Korean Peninsula.

Margareta Wahlström is former president of the Swedish Red Cross and former Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction. She has many years of experience working at the United Nations, the International Federation of Red Cross, and Red Crescent Societies, as well as in private sector disaster relief operations and catastrophe risk management in relation to development and political work. Previously serving as the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction's (UNDRR) Head and the UN Secretary General's Special Representative for Disaster Risk Reduction, Ms. Wahlström has accumulated a wide range of experience from long-term sustainable development to emergency management of both conflict and non-conflict situations.



Eriksson: Over the course of your career, you've garnered a lot of experience of interacting with North Korea. Recently, the women of the ruling Kim family have been featured heavily in North Korean news. *Do you see any possible effects of continued domestic attention to politically powerful women on patriarchal society structures?*

Wahlström: I would say I see that effect only in the very, very long term because, essentially, we're talking about three women that are very close to the privileged elite at the top of North Korean hierarchy. Still, these developments should be put in the context where DPRK news and social media content increasingly feature many happy women and young people to show the best of the country, so recent publicity of women in politics is probably an attempt to project the "human face" of the country to the world. I think that the constraints to development faced by women in North Korea, like in South Korea, Japan, and many other countries, are tradition, strong hierarchy, and national economic structures. In the DPRK, hierarchy is implicit, built-in, and curated by the political system and by social groups. I'm sure that DPRK officials are very aware of what is going on in the field of women's development around the world. **Somehow, I hope and think that they would like to convey that they're also part of this, in their own way.**

Eriksson: Gender equality has lately made significant progress in South Korea's civic spaces as younger women are more likely than younger men in their age group to attain higher levels of education and labor force involvement. Nevertheless, a substantial portion of Korean women continue to opt for the conventional decision to leave the workforce after marrying and having children. Recent statistics confirm that South Korea has the lowest fertility rate in the world at 0.78 babies per woman. This is nearly half the OECD average. *Why might motherhood be so unattractive in South Korea and to South Korean women?*

Wahlström: Based on what I have heard from South Korean women, and what there is quite a lot of writing on, is that motherhood is seen as unattractive due to the same factors that I already mentioned regarding the North: tradition and the hierarchy inherent to Korean society. **But the low birth rate is also a reaction to the fact that women cannot become as successful as their male peers, even when they enter professional life after great success at academic studies** (although men in South Korea are very frustrated also). An additional issue is to get women to join the workforce. This is a big problem in Japan, where the government has been struggling to increase women's participation

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in the workforce for 10-15 years. It's needed for the economy of the country, but the conditions for having children are, as it stands, not met for women to continue to work and advance. Progress is needed in areas like daycare centers and economic equality. This means, among other things, that motherhood must not become a rupture in women's career path, including regarding income. As it now still is in most countries in the world.

In South Korea it is also clear that tough economic conditions become an important limitation for women, through for example economic instability and very high prices of accommodation. Another thing that is not so easy to measure but is a factor nonetheless is that South Korean women may be less excited to get married because of the social conditions they marry into. So, I would say there are many converging factors influencing the low fertility rate and even though the statistic seems a bit dramatic, it follows the general trend of aging societies. The richer countries are aging the fastest these days because of declining birthrates and longer lifespans. Maybe there is an element of concern also regarding the planet's future, although this is difficult to measure. I think women's possibilities to advance into the workforce, in political life, and in business are very similar across East Asia. The situation remains difficult.

Eriksson: The situation for women in South Korea is still quite difficult, as you mentioned. A more optimistic advancement is the expansion of the feminist movement in South Korea, which has called attention to and condemned issues like sexual violence, workplace discrimination, and unachievable beauty standards in the public discourse as a way to fight the structural oppression of Korean women. *What possibilities, as well as potential challenges, do you see for the advancement of women's rights and gender equality in South Korea today?*

Wahlström: The government needs to demonstrate its commitment to promoting women's role in the modern state of South Korea. As we know, political life in South Korea can be tough and it is more difficult to advance as a woman than it seems. A pattern emerging from some countries around the world is that women advance only in certain sectors, for example in business but not in political life. In these cases, one needs to look at how the political parties work, how women are prevented from advancing in politics. I would say that a serious effort would involve a combination of issues and require that women are recognized as an economic as well as important force in society. Still, I am not convinced that such an effort in South Korea would lead to more children being born, at

249,000 babies were born in South Korea in 2022, a decrease of 4.4% compared to the prior year and the third consecutive year that the number of deaths has exceeded the number of births.¹ The fertility rate — the average number of children born to a woman in her reproductive years — is now 0.78. North Korea's fertility rate is 1.9, according to the "State of World Population 2022" report by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).² Fertility rates lower than 1 indicate a shrinking population, which may cause demographic challenges in the future. In a 2023 estimation, South Korea ranks as number 224 in the world in terms of birth rate with 6.95 births/1,000 population. North Korea in turn ranks 120 with 14.06 births/1,000 population³ (best understood as an estimate, given the opaque nature of the regime).

least not in the short term. I read just yesterday that the Japanese Prime Minister said that he must work even harder to recruit women into the workforce and to promote women's advancement, and as I mentioned previously the Japanese have tried all sorts of measures over the past 15 years. **This shows that one needs to be consistent over long periods of time to create confidence within the population that the government's efforts are genuine and consistent over time.**

Eriksson: In the 2017 presidential election, several candidates, including former president of the ROK Moon Jae-in, openly identified as feminists.⁴ The escalating anti-feminist sentiments in Korean society at the time were merely background noise. During his presidency, Moon placed a strong emphasis on gender equality and made significant investments in women's empowerment. Yet, the gender gap in South Korea continues to be the largest among OECD nations despite its swift economic and democratic advancement,⁵ and concerns about female representation in politics and wage inequality persist. *How do you view the prospect of increased female political representation in the current South Korean government?*

Wahlström: Again, I think one needs to work with the political parties, even the ones you do not sympathize with. If there are no attempts to initiate a dialogue [about women's political participation] you could still theoretically try to tackle these issues, but I do not think that is realistic. Women cannot do it alone. It takes both women and men to shape and manage progress in society. There needs to be more than one way to enter the conversation, and I would say there is a long tradition of that in the political sector. The International Parliamentary Union, the parliament of parliaments globally so to speak, is quite good at driving these issues forward. From an international perspective, you can also work with them to influence through peers. Maybe Swedish parliamentarians could influence parliamentarians and party leaders in South Korea and other countries. In any case, one must think carefully about the methods one uses to achieve results. If there is something that you want to do, you should probably try to talk to a women's group in the Swedish Parliament and see if they have any connections with South Korean politicians.

Eriksson: The previous Moon Jae-in government enforced multiple strategies to accommodate female empowerment whilst targeting the issue of the declining birth rate. Whereas the Moon

South Korea ranked 119th in the world for women's parliamentary representation in 2022, with about 19% of the country's seats held by women.⁶ Quota legislation exists at the institutional level and political parties are generally recommended to nominate at least 30% women in the national election. However, the legislation is designed in such a way that the quota may be circumvented, and party compliance has been low.⁷ Incumbent President Yoon has reneged on his predecessor's explicit agenda to appoint women to a fixed share of presidential cabinet positions and is expected to roll back other quotas from the public sector.⁸ Around 42.7% of students in South Korean universities were female in 2022. From 35.8 in 2000 to 42.7 in 2022, the proportion of women enrolled in universities has steadily increased.⁹

administration raised the number of daycare facilities and overhauled the parental leave system to promote a better work-life balance, improving the participation of women in the workforce,¹⁰ the incumbent president Yoon Suk-yeol of the conservative People's Power Party approaches the ongoing gender conflict the country quite differently. Notably, Yoon contends that feminism prevents men and women from maintaining healthy relationships, which he claims to be a root cause for the nation's low birth rate. As such, another challenge of contemporary South Korea is the conservative political climate, where anti-feminist rhetoric is increasingly promoted. This type of rhetoric has been known to influence the opinion of some young men, for example the belief that feminism and women's empowerment is somehow negatively correlated with the declining fertility rates and increasing economic hardships.¹¹ *The persisting gender conflict in South Korea seems to be the outcome of the convergence of the two distinct issues of advancing women's rights and opportunities and men's political discontent. Do you have any thoughts on this?*

Wahlström: During the election campaign, Yoon announced that the government [if elected] would abolish the Ministry of Women's Affairs, and the analysis at the time was, of course, that it was a reaction to the discontent of young South Korean men feeling competition in the labor market from women's increasing participation. If women get more

jobs, there'll be fewer jobs for men, this type of mathematic. **It is important that any government that wishes to come across as serious makes sure to handle the causes of dissatisfaction of the male workforce but without getting carried away with this kind of anti-feminist rhetoric.** In South Korea, the long military service and unemployment are two such examples that require a broader set of action to create stability in the social domain. This type of rhetoric is very strong in parts of the world and underpins a backlash against advancements in women's rights and presence in society. Globally speaking, we need to start measuring this backlash so that we can also discuss what to do about it. To pit the interests and concerns of young women and men against each other is not a positive contribution in tackling economic and social challenges.

Eriksson: Moving northwards, let's talk about North Korea in a semi-post-COVID perspective. *How do you think the pandemic restrictions in North Korea have affected the daily lives of North Korean women? We sometimes hear that women are the breadwinners in many households due to their good commercial skills. Do you think that this has been affected by the COVID-19 lockdowns?*

Wahlström: Definitely it must have had an effect. There are reasons why North Korean women are in this position, not necessarily due to good commercial skills but maybe because that is their

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only opportunity to make a living. North Korean men have ten years of military service, after which they are tied to a specific workplace with mandatory attendance. During demanding periods, economic reforms that recognize the role of local markets have played a big role for the country's economy. With the men at work, it was the women who were available to benefit from this and to take market initiative. Of course, a lot of the goods that are traded come from China, and this includes both smuggled and legal goods. I think we must conclude that since Kim Jong Un has already called for the government to retake control over the country's economy, **we cannot really isolate the effects of the pandemic from the economic recentralization policy on North Korean markets and trade activity.**

We do know for sure that the borders have been closely guarded, so we must assume that the conditions have been the same for goods entering the country. The COVID-19 lockdowns that have limited people's movement obviously must have affected women's economy and their ability to operate. To what degree this has eaten up the financial reserves of North Korean households, I cannot say. I am sure that the successful women have saved some money over the years. I think we will be able to find out more details about this only when foreign observers are granted access to North Korea again and can talk to people about their economy.

Eriksson: If we then look at women in general in North Korean society, would you say they have specific gender roles? How have women's everyday lives been impacted by pandemic restrictions?

Wahlström: What is not so obvious to external observers is the frequency and extent of the COVID-19 lockdowns in North Korea. Since they denied from the beginning that the coronavirus had reached the country, it took quite some time until this was being talked about. Overall, I think women in professions such as teachers and healthcare staff

have worked as hard as they can, as is the same in the rest of the world. Visually, when we look at North Korea's political leadership and senior positions, there are not very many women at that level. Even at huge political meetings, it is a bit of a stretch to identify any women at all among all the thousands of men. I think the fact that the country is now beginning to allow imports once again is indicative of North Korea's priorities. Recent big policy decisions appear to clearly signal that agricultural production and the ability to feed the North Korean people is one key priority right now.

*Eriksson: On that note, we've seen an increasing number of reports over the past few weeks raising the alarm over growing food insecurity in North Korea. Even though the current food shortage is likely still far from the extreme levels of the 1990s when famine killed up to half a million people, the grain deficit appears to be on the rise. In late February, the North Korean political elite convened in a multi-day conference to discuss the "very important and urgent task" of formulating a "correct agricultural policy" as Kim Jong Un called for "radical change" in agricultural production. Yet, the leadership continues to urge self-reliance,¹² and rejects on-site aid from humanitarian organizations. *How may the international humanitarian community move forward from here?**

Wahlström: I think we will move forward as fast or as slow as the government wants. I do not think it is very helpful to be pushy about it, and the international community has been doing a lot of pushing over the past 2.5-3 years. We [humanitarian organizations] have been trying to keep the door open by delivering consignments of basic supplies for health services, children's needs among others. Both the UN and the Red Cross have contributed to this time-consuming and difficult yet important work. The big risk that we are all really worried

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about is that the longer the time that passes, the more difficult it will be for us to make resources available for North Korea. **This is because there are so many humanitarian crises around the world and humanitarian funding is not zero-sum; if a big crisis strikes, there will be a little less funding for others.** The main concern that we have in the humanitarian organizations is therefore to try to keep the conversations with North Korea going. To keep up regular meetings, updates, and staying in touch with the colleagues in Pyongyang to make sure that relationship is sustained. We [humanitarian organizations] work a bit in this way. We never stop trying, because we think the need is important, we are ready to assist, and we hope that North Korea will eventually welcome that. The conversations in this domain are filled with guesses of when this will happen, but of course no one really knows for sure.

Eriksson: Last question, what other possibilities do you see to empower women and improve gender equality on the Korean Peninsula going forward?

Wahlström: My personal belief is that women should work with strong networks. Networks allow for meaningful exchanges of experiences that become sources of encouragement and help you realize that you are not alone. So, networks are first. The action that comes second will vary across different countries and contexts, but I would emphasize agenda setting and dialogue with governments. I also think it is important to work with businesses in the private sector. The economic sectors in South and North Korea are of course very different, but I believe nonetheless that it is important to engage

with all sectors in society. It is also important to identify the educational avenues that girls and young women are choosing and motivate them to go to sectors with big gender gaps like IT, technology, engineering, etc.—and vice versa to motivate men to go into traditionally women-dominated sectors. **These are some things that society must do together.** I also firmly believe that women should move into the political sector. Looking at parliaments globally, the average share of women parliamentarians is approximately 23%. Since the Nordic countries have a share of 50% women, maybe that balances it off [laughs]. A male-dominated environment is tough in most cases, and even in countries that enforce a gender quota to achieve equal representation in the parliament seating, we need to look at how political parties select people for posts in the first place. I think this is one big area for future improvement.

Eriksson: Any final thoughts?

Wahlström: Sometimes we are talking about backlash and challenges, but to give us courage and energy to continue, we also need to celebrate successes. So, we need to think about things that have improved. And I would say that when it comes to South Korea, we see women organizing themselves raising their voices about it. I think we should look at that as something positive, that we can work with and engage with, because I don't think that any one of us will make progress without having engagement by colleagues, from other countries in other parts of the world. It's a global issue. It's local and global. We try to focus on some successes, not to be discouraged.

Endnotes

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