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Women and Labour Organizing in Asia: Diversity, Autonomy and Activism

Kaye Broadbent and Michele Ford

Chun Tae-il, a young Korean tailor, had spent many years trying to attract the attention of authorities and union officials to the inhumane and exploitative conditions experienced by young women employed in Seoul's garment sweatshops. He was ignored and in desperation committed suicide in 1970 by self-immolation. As he died he shouted 'they are not machines' (Chun 2003), referring to the young women who slaved to produce the goods which fuelled Korea's economic development from the 1960s. His death gave life to a struggle led by women, which, despite brutal oppression by the ruling military dictatorship, challenged the state, employers and the management-friendly, male-dominated textile unions (Koo 2001; Chun 2003; Park 2005). The courage of workers and other activists at this time contributed to an upsurge in democratic unionism in the 1980s, the legacy of which survives in Korea today.

Women have become the new face of industrial labour – and of labour activism – not only in Korea, in all but the most and least developed countries of Asia. Export-oriented industrialization strategies favoured throughout East and Southeast Asia, and more recently in parts of the sub-continent, brought with them a feminization first of factory labour and then of the diverse agglomeration of contract and home workers that now produce consumer goods for the world. The rapidly increasing economic importance of the Asian region in the global context highlights the need for detailed analysis of the institutions and practices which constitute civil society in Asia. Globalization, with its opening up of Asia's economies, and the concomitant growth of feminized labour-intensive industries, has shone a spotlight on male-dominated union organizations in the region and their failure to protect women's interests. The chapters in this volume explore women's responses to these unions' shortcomings. They examine the strategies female labour activists have employed within and outside the organized labour movements in nine very different Asian contexts, the challenges they face, their frustrations, and their successes.

Women and unions

In many ways the fate of Asian female labour activists has been tied to that of national union movements as a whole. In her chapter on China in this volume, Fang Lee Cooke reminds us that Chinese unions are fundamentally different from western unions because they are part of

the state apparatus rather than an independent vehicle for workers' interests. Many countries in Asia have experienced a similar situation at some time in their post-colonial history. Indonesia's unions were part of a system of authoritarian state corporatism under Suharto's New Order (1967–98), and until the late 1980s Korea's dominant trade union federation, the Federation of Korean Trade Unions, functioned as the personnel bureau of the military dictatorship. While unions in Malaysia are not as closely controlled as the state unions of Indonesia's New Order period were, they too occupy a subordinate position within Malaysia's state-dominated industrial relations system (Ford 2002). In contrast, in South Asia, unions are closely tied to political parties. This is the case in India, where the left remains strongly represented in formal politics (Gillan 2004). Similarly, as Janaka Biyanwala notes in his contribution to this volume, affiliation with political parties has weakened unions in Sri Lanka. Shahidur Rahman observes in his chapter that in Bangladesh, too, the government required every political party to establish a union from 1977, and that this has had a negative effect on union organizing. Although unions' ties to formal politics have proved helpful in some contexts, these contributions show that in others, such ties limit unions' ability to independently mobilize and represent workers.

Unions are weak in many Asian countries as a result of their industrial trajectories and their political histories. However, repressive state structures and overly-strong union ties to political parties in the region have not precluded, or even always contained, labour activism. In Korea, Thailand and Indonesia, periods of explosive labour activity have been followed by periods of re-domestication, where the state and capital have reasserted their control over labour. Pro-women unions, often located in the footloose light manufacturing industries, are particularly vulnerable to this economic and political pressure. As Andrew Brown and Saowalak Chaytaweeep demonstrate in their contribution to this volume, this has been the case in Thailand where 65 per cent of the manufacturing workers who lost their jobs during the Asian financial crisis of 1997–8 were women, and where the pro-women Thai Kriang Textile Union (TKTU) was destroyed amidst capital restructuring and the slide toward authoritarianism that occurred under Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai government.

Even when unions are strong, women's issues are seldom on the agenda. The union movement worldwide has a deep tradition of anti-woman bias, and unionization has provided relatively few guarantees for women workers, who have been peripheral to union concerns and largely excluded from union hierarchies. Unions in many countries have been and are male dominated 'numerically, culturally and hierarchically' (Franzway 1997: 129), and in discussions of unionism 'worker' has most often meant 'male worker'. In this way, unions have been constructed in terms that 'conjure up men and deny women' (Pocock 1997: 3). These claims are perhaps even more pertinent to Asian unions than in the European contexts in which unions first emerged. All the contributions to this collection highlight the small number of women in positions of leadership within mainstream unions, and the structural barriers that women face in the union movement, including exclusion from unions on the basis of employment status or the provision of facilities to modify the competing demands of work, activism and family responsibilities. Many of the chapters in this volume point to women's long-standing involvement in the organized labour movement. However, all

emphasize the masculinist culture of mainstream unions, and their failure to cater sufficiently for women, even where women occupy positions within the union leadership.

A number of chapters in this volume also raise the issue of religion, a theme seldom discussed in relation to western unions, despite the strong Christian presence in the right and centre-left of the international labour movement. Religious doctrines and cultural practices have not prevented Asian women from being active on labour issues, but they have created additional barriers to their activism. Janaka Biyanwila paints a fascinating picture of the Sri Lankan monk who heads an overwhelmingly female nurses' union. The opportunities offered by what Biyanwila describes as a 'moment of social movement unionism' – when progressive monks, doctors, political leaders and the like supported striking nurses after the state enacted emergency regulations against them and froze the union's accounts – were wasted as the nurses retreated to their middle-class role as carers, under the watchful eye of their leader, whose position is shored up by the patriarchal tenets of Buddhism. Meanwhile Shahidur Rahman demonstrates how conservative Islamic doctrine worked to keep Bangladeshi women in the home before economic pressures forced them into the factories, and Michele Ford suggests that the growing popularity of orthodox Islam in Indonesia is beginning to affect the assumptions and everyday practices of even some secular unions. In China, Japan and Korea, patriarchal Confucian principles in many ways define gender relations, and have therefore also influenced the organized labour movement. Ironically, as Cooke explains, progress made by China's authoritarian government towards gender equity has been undermined by the emergence of the market economy. Similarly, Kyoung-Hee Moon and Kaye Broadbent note that Korea's IMF-imposed economic 'reforms' have resulted in exacerbated gender discriminatory employment practices as more women than men are laid off. In Japan the impact of the Confucian principle of 'good wife, wise mother' feeds into employers need for cheap labour, resulting in the gendered construction of part-time work, which excludes many from membership in mainstream unions (Broadbent 2003).

In recent years, the international labour movement has recognized the dangers of marginalizing women not only in Asia, but across the globe. In 2003 the Eighth World Women's conference of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) adopted as its theme 'Unions for Women; Women for Unions' (ICFTU 2003), in recognition of the importance of unions as a vehicle for mobilizing women workers and unions' general neglect of women workers. The International Confederation of Free Trade Union's aim was the development of 'concrete and innovative strategies to (a) make trade unions relevant to working women today; and (b) enhance women's key role in building and strengthening trade unions' (ICFTU 2003: introduction). Given that union density is declining internationally, and with it union influence, it is not surprising that union renewal is preoccupying union leaders, union members, activists and academics (Mantzios 1998; IIRA 2000; Fairbrother & Yates 2003; Yamashita 2005) – or that women's increased participation is seen to be an important part of the solution.¹ In industrialized countries, including Japan, the 'woman deficit' is especially important when we consider the expansion of part-time work, where women are disproportionately represented (Bolle 1997) often with lower wages and conditions (Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training 2006). In later- and less-developed Asian countries, it is of most concern in regard to the large numbers of women workers

located outside the formal sector altogether. This is particularly so as the informal sector, which has always been dominant in many Asian countries, again expands in India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia and Korea as global corporations and local capital seek to shore up price-sensitive labour-intensive industries in the face of fierce competition from China and the newly industrializing countries of mainland Southeast Asia.

The impact of the expansion of part-time and contract work, particularly where it occurs in the informal sector, is significant for both unions and for women. Lambert and Webster (2004:140) argue that the growth and feminization of employment in the informal sector is negatively affecting unions. While this point is valuable, it fails to recognize that part of the problem may be the organizing strategies of unions themselves. Central to this is the role of the union movement as an avenue of collective representation for paid workers. Workers who do not have access to unions have little power to bargain with employers for better wages and conditions, or to press governments for changes in labour policy. As mainstream unions have been spectacularly unsuccessful in organizing workers in part-time work, let alone the informal sector, the rapid growth of non-traditional forms of paid employment represents a now well-recognized threat to unions' very existence. The resulting global decline in union density has created a 'representation gap' where the number of workers without access to a union is increasing, and women workers are less likely to belong to unions than male workers.

Women have not simply accepted this 'representation gap'. As the chapters by Elizabeth Hill, Kyoung-hee Moon and Broadbent, and Kaye Broadbent demonstrate, women in India, Korea and Japan have organized women-only unions which have not affiliated with the mainstream union movement, and show no indication of seeking affiliation in the future. As these chapters indicate, the success of women-only unions has been mixed. In contrast to the smaller and newly established women-only unions in Japan and Korea, India's Self Employed Women's Association organizes half a million women workers in a range of jobs as well as establishing childcare centres and co-operatives. Elsewhere, most notably in Thailand, Indonesia and China, women workers and activists have created non-union vehicles for representing their interests. It is unclear whether these groups intend to formally establish either alternative mixed unions or women-only unions. However, like women-only unions, these non-union organizations do attempt to overcome issues faced by working women who are excluded from the mainstream labour movement.

Women's organizing strategies with unions and beyond

Much recent grass-roots labour activism in Asia has occurred on the fringes of the formal labour movement, or outside it, in the form of spontaneous labour protests or non-union labour organizing. It is in these fringes, too, that women have been most active, because of their marginal position within both unions and the economy as a whole. In many countries the divisions between male and female workers, sown by employers through devices such as the family wage, have served to perpetuate existing divisions which have acted to hinder the mobilization of women workers and weaken the collective strength of each country's working class. In analysing the attempts by women workers to overcome sexism in several Anglophone and European countries, Briskin (1993; 1999) identifies two broad strategies:

separate organizing, or the formation of women's committees or departments within mixed unions; and *autonomous organizing*, or the formation of women-only organizations, of which women-only unions are but one example. The chapters that follow examine separate organizing and autonomous organizing within the labour movement 'proper', as well as new forms of organized labour activism outside the union movement.

Separate organizing

There is an extensive body of literature examining the advantages and limitations of separate organizing as a method of overcoming divisions within the working class in several Anglophone countries (see Cook, Lorwin & Daniels 1984; Milkman 1985; Briskin & McDermott 1993; Gandhi 1996; Hensman 1996; Elton 1997; Pocock 1997; Mann, Ledwith & Colgan 1997; Briskin 1999). In the early days of women's union activism, women's committees were sometimes viewed as disloyal or as dividing the working class (Mackie 2003). In her chapter on Indonesia, Michele Ford notes that this is still the case in some unions, where even well-credentialed women activists like Lilis Mahmudah have questioned the need to have separate structures for women within unions at a time when the labour movement is still struggling to re-establish itself.

More recent analysis in western contexts argues that separate organizing 'has challenged not only male domination of unions' but also a range of other practices which exclude women (Briskin 1999: 546). This view is echoed in Tshoedi's research in South Africa (Tshoedi 2002). Major unions in Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Japan have dedicated women's departments, not least because separate organizing structures are strongly promoted by the international union movement, which provides financial and other kinds of support to many unions in the region. However, as Gandhi (1996), Hensman (1996), Elton (1997) and Pocock (1997) argue, there are limitations for women working only within established union structures. This is due to the reluctance of male-dominated unions to address issues important for women such as the sexual division of labour (Hensman 1996: 201). Even where the union leadership is sympathetic, initiatives are not necessarily acted upon (Elton 1997: 111). In her contribution to this collection, Vicki Crinis suggests that this has been the case in Malaysia, where a new generation of leaders within the Malaysian Trade Union Congress (MTUC) have introduced women-friendly policies which have failed not only in many of its affiliates, but even within parts of the MTUC itself. In short, separate organizing structures are a double-edged sword: in some contexts they provide valuable space for women to organize within a mainstream union; in other contexts, they serve to marginalize women's concerns.

Autonomous organizing

Briskin differentiates autonomous organizing or 'separatism' from 'separate organizing'. Separate organizing refers to the development of women's structures (e.g. a Women's Directorate) within an existing trade union or union federation. In contrast, autonomous organizing refers to the development of independent, women-only structures while separatism is 'a goal – an end in itself' (Briskin 1999: 545). For Briskin autonomous

organizing is defined broadly and includes all areas where women create women-only organizations, but in this collection, the term is used to refer explicitly to women-only unions.

As early as the 1880s women workers organized autonomous women-only unions in Australia, England, the USA, Ireland and Denmark essentially to counteract and overcome the problem of largely male-dominated craft-based unions that excluded women, migrants and other unskilled workers. Few of the early women-only unions survived: most were either dissolved or absorbed into existing male unions (Ryan 1984: 37; Jacoby 1994; Nutter 2000). There is very little literature available which analyses the industrial and political impact of the early women-only unions (see Milkman 1985; Jacoby 1994; Nutter 2000) but socialist women were critical of their development. Clara Zetkin (Cliff 1984), Eleanor Marx (Kapp 1976) and Alexandra Kollontai (1918) criticized early women-only unions arguing that it was important women workers be organized within the existing union movement to create a strong and united working class. In a more contemporary assessment, Lewenhak (1977) argued that while liberal feminist in orientation, the achievements of the early women-only unions needs to be acknowledged as they emerged at a time when the widespread organization of women and other 'unskilled' workers was in its infancy.

In the 1970s a 'second wave' of women-only unions were formed in Canada, the USA and Ahmedabad in India (see Hill in this volume). All except for India's SEWA have since dissolved. A 'third wave' of women-only unions has since formed in Japan (see Broadbent in this volume), Korea (Moon & Broadbent in this volume) and Chennai, India.² Milkman's assessment of the US women-only unions formed in the 1970s is positive, concluding that it provided a link between feminism and unionism, introducing women to the operation and functioning of unions, as well as organizing women excluded from existing mixed unions. She argues it was an important form of organizing in the USA context, as it 'implicitly challenge[d] the established traditions of the labor movement while also working to expand the space of women within it' (Milkman 1985: 10). Similarly, an organizer of a women-only union in Chennai, India, Sujata Mody, sees women-only unions as fulfilling an important role for women workers because 'trade unions see her [women workers] need to fight for her economic betterment, [but] they usually ignore her social responsibilities'. She argues that working-class men see women, especially women in low-paid and 'unorganized' sectors of employment, as being in one or the other of these categories – that is as either workers or wives/mothers – which further exacerbates the tensions in women's lives (Mody 2005: 13).

Briskin disagrees with these assessments, claiming that women workers can better achieve their goals through separate organizing within mixed unions and that the weakness of autonomous organizing is that it can create institutionally isolated and resource-poor organizations unable to gain critical mass (Briskin 1999). Not all the chapters on women-only organizing in this collection support her claims. Elizabeth Hill's contribution suggests that India's SEWA is having considerable success in providing women workers with opportunities to improve their working conditions and the material comfort of themselves and their families. Women-only unions in Japan and Korea do suffer from the constraints of an insecure financial base, but this does not mean the strategy of autonomous organizing is a failure and should be rejected. It simply does not follow that women workers' only recourse

for mobilization therefore is to organize within mixed unions. The Korean Women's Trade Union (KWTU) is affiliated with, and receives organizational support from, an umbrella group of working women's organizations, which goes some way to explaining its success in mobilizing larger numbers of women workers than its Japanese counterparts. Affiliation with working women's organizations is a possibility that women-only unions in Japan may also explore.

Organizing outside unions

Finally, as the chapters on Malaysia, China, Thailand, and Bangladesh in this collection suggest, many middle class and working-class Asian women have looked to non-union vehicles for their labour activism. This has also been the case in Indonesia, particularly before the Reform period, which began in 1998 (Ford 2001). Fang Lee Cooke suggests that while non government organizations (NGOs) remain peripheral in China, and unionists profess to know nothing of them, they are nevertheless also beginning to offer an alternative perspective on workers' rights. In some countries, such as India and Indonesia, non-union workers' groups – often associated with NGOs – have sought, and sometimes achieved, union registration. In other contexts, such as Bangladesh and Malaysia, NGOs have been content to collaborate with unions on labour issues. These developments represent a third trend, excluded from Briskin's analysis, but important in the Asian context (Ford 2001; Ford 2004), where non-union organizations have played a vital role in organizing women workers employed in the informal sector, in non-traditional capacities within the formal sector, and sometimes even at the core of the traditional formal sector.

The structure of the book

Women labour activists have suffered what Pocock (1997: 3) describes for Australia as 'the absence of a well-established, written tradition'. This applies equally to women workers and activists in the countries in the Asian region covered in this volume. In recent decades there has been a concerted attempt by researchers to redress the absence of women in histories of national union movements by documenting the nature and extent of women workers' union activism in Europe, the USA and Australia (Cook *et al.* 1984; Soldon 1985). Yet there is no comparable body of research examining the experiences of women's activism and union organizing in the Asian region within a comparative context (see Chhachhi and Pittin 1996; Hutchison and Brown 2001). We know little about how women were able to achieve the gains they have, given that the state, employers, male union officials and union members have either excluded women from joining unions or restricted the scope and quality of their participation.

Bringing together authors who work on questions of women's labour organizing from a range of disciplinary perspectives, this volume seeks to at least begin to fill the gap. In doing so, it explores two principle themes: first, while documenting the specificities of individual national contexts, it identifies and emphasizes the similarities in women's experiences of union activism and the barriers that women labour activists face; male dominance in union positions, and over union agendas; negative and stereotypical attitudes towards women active in unions; and a host of other gender, cultural, social, ethnic and religious obstacles. The

second theme focuses on the different organizing strategies and vehicles that women have adopted in their efforts to overcome the tensions they experience in their relationship with the mainstream union movement. Each of the chapters that follow shows how women have and continue to play an active role in the labour movements in their country, with many at the forefront of groups using organizing strategies that are attempting to change the culture of trade unions. In doing so they demonstrate that women workers and union activists throughout the region have been – and are – active in a range of campaigns that focus primarily on women, but address issues which affect all workers.

The book is divided into two sections. The six contributions that constitute the first section deal with women organizing within mainstream, mixed unions, and in non-union organizations. Most of these chapters describe separate organizing strategies, where activists have established women-only structures within mainstream unions. Almost all also make mention of women unionists' alliances with women in non-union structures, such as NGOs or organizations within the women's movement. The three chapters in the second section then focus primarily on autonomous women-only unions, highlighting women workers' and women union activists' search for new forms of organization and collective representation.

The first section begins with Michele Ford's case study of separate organizing in Indonesia since President Suharto was deposed in mid-1998. Ford focuses on women unionists' strategies for strengthening their position within the Federation of Indonesian Metal Workers Unions (FSPMI), the national-level federation that incorporates the female-dominated Electrical and Electronics Workers Union. This case study is contextualized in a broader discussion of the challenges female union activists face in post-Suharto Indonesia, where women are struggling to gain proper recognition within a union movement that is still finding its feet after decades of repression. Ford argues that while separate organizing has its difficulties, separate structures within Indonesia's larger unions have provided space for generating momentum for better representation of women in union hierarchies, and for keeping women's issues on the union agenda.

In Chapter 3, Fang Lee Cooke argues that in authoritarian China, the women's departments of the state-sponsored trade unions and the state-sponsored women's movement have been a (limited) force for gender equity and improved conditions for women workers, but not for collective identity or collective action. Cooke explores these claims with reference to local unions in two hospitals, supplemented by survey data collected in Fujian province, which suggest that a large number of female unionists had little faith in their unions' ability to represent their interests or solve problems in the workplace. Meanwhile, Cooke notes, local and international NGOs are beginning to make their presence felt in China's Southeast, where they provide support for local and migrant women workers, both in the form of service-provision and as assistance for community and factory-based organizing. However, to date these NGOs have access to only a tiny proportion of China's workforce, and thus have had little real power to effect change for workers, leaving women reliant on state-sanctioned representational bodies.

In Chapter 4, Vicki Crinis also uses a multi-level approach to explore women's involvement in Malaysian trade unions since the 1960s. Crinis first examines the role of the MTUCs

Women's Committee and its collaborations with women's groups and NGOs. She then demonstrates how union culture, along with state and economic policies – including the promotion of large-scale international labour migration – determine women's position in three state-based garment and textile unions. Crinis argues that while women are active on labour issues, the patriarchal culture of Malaysian unions have made it difficult for them to achieve adequate representation within unions, particularly in blue-collar sector unions, despite the best efforts of those unions' separate structures for women.

In Chapter 5, Janaka Biyanwila focuses on the Public Services United Nurses Union (PSUNU), the main nurse's union in Sri Lanka, highlighting the impact of the limits of solidarity and the role male leadership plays in containing women's labour activism. The chapter explains how the militancy exhibited by the PSUNU in its campaigns against poor working conditions in the early to mid-1980s dissipated in favour of divisive campaigns along class lines against less-educated hospital workers. Biyanwila argues that while the majority of its leadership positions are held by women, the PSUNU's classist, ethno-nationalist approach, along with its failure to establish links with other unions and other social movements (in particular the women's movement), has seriously limited its transformative potential.

In Chapter 6, Shahidur Rahman compares an independent female-dominated union with a female-controlled executive – formed with the support of local NGOs and international solidarity support organizations – with an employer-initiated welfare committee in Bangladesh. He argues that while the welfare committee achieved concrete outcomes for women workers in terms of healthcare, access to childcare, cheap shopping and entertainment, it has done little to empower them. In contrast, he suggests that the Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union Federation (BIGUF), with its NGO connections, its female-majority membership and its bottom-up approach, offers a real opportunity for women to come together and achieve social change.

Chapter 7, the final chapter in the first section of the collection, documents the leading role women have played both in unions and in alternative forms of labour activism in Thailand since the beginning of the 1990s. Andrew Brown and Saowalak Chaytawee explain how women have succeeded in expanding the political space available to labour by working around state-imposed limits on trade union organizing to establish first the Thai Labour Solidarity Committee (TLSC) and then the Thai Labour Campaign (TLC). Brown and Chaytawee argue that these non-union labour organizations have rejected the narrow, nationally-based institutional focus adopted by Thai trade unions in order to build networks between a whole range of local and international institutions that have an interest in labour issues – in the process, creating a new generation of female labour activists.

The second section begins with Elizabeth Hill's analysis of the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India. Hill argues that Indian women had long experienced exclusionary practices within the formal labour movement, prompting activists to establish SEWA, a women-only union, in 1971. SEWA organizes women working in the informal sector occupations, including those who work as labourers on construction sites or as industrial home-based workers. Hill demonstrates how SEWA challenges many aspects of

traditional unionism through its focus on the full range of forms of women's productive work and its holistic approach to women workers' lives. She concludes that SEWA's longevity and vibrancy belies claims that women are not interested in organizing, suggesting instead that traditional male-centred models of unionism are at fault for women's poor participation in mainstream Indian unions.

In Chapter 9, Kyoung-hee Moon and Kaye Broadbent examine the economic and political background to the formation of autonomous women-only unions in Korea. Their discussion reinforces Hill's conclusion that women are indeed interested in industrial issues, and as committed as male workers to industrial action – often in the face of a lack of solidarity on the part of the male union leadership and male union members. Indeed, it was the ease with which the male union leadership abandoned the struggles of women workers, and the lack of continued solidarity that prompted women workers and activists to form women-only unions, independent of mixed mainstream unions. Women-only unions in Korea have not completely abandoned wider class struggles; rather they have continued to co-operate in broad campaigns with mainstream mixed unions. The success of the KWTU in mobilizing growing numbers of women workers indicates women-only unions in other countries such as Japan may be able to overcome the insecurity of their financial base by affiliating with other women's organizations.

The growth and success in the KWTU's efforts to mobilize women workers contrasts with the more modest success of Japan's women-only unions. In Chapter 10, Kaye Broadbent argues that despite their weaknesses, women-only unions nevertheless have achieved positive outcomes not only for the women workers they organize, which are largely individual outcomes, but for all workers in Japan through their support of campaigns and actions to improve conditions and the treatment of part-time and temporary workers. They have also been successful in linking women workers, excluded from mainstream mixed unions, into broader working-class politics. Financial insecurity, however, is a constant concern for Japan's women-only unions, which are constantly challenged by the need to look for alternative strategies to enable them to grow and develop critical mass. Like their sister women-only unions in Korea, the answer may lie in developing broader connections with other organizations.

Conclusion

Declining union membership and strategies for union renewal are issues of debate for academics, union officials and union members world-wide (Bronfenbrenner *et al.* 1998; IIRA 2000; Fairbrother and Yates 2003). This examination of women workers' activism in Asia contributes to this debate. It is clear from the chapters that follow that despite the numerous economic, political, structural, religious, cultural and social obstacles faced by women workers in the countries we discuss, a critical mass of women workers is vitally concerned with work-related issues, and interested in actively pursuing these issues through mainstream mixed unions, women-only unions or non-union organizations such as NGOs.

It is understandable that many workers, women and men, are critical of separate women's committees and women-only unions, particularly in countries where unions are viewed with

hostility and suspicion by the state or employers. What needs to be kept in mind, however, is that in drawing attention to issues affecting women workers, separate organizing structures such as women's departments and committees provide an opportunity within mixed unions to better integrate this important and often-neglected constituency. In the same way, women-only unions address the needs of a growing number of non-unionized women workers who are not part of the traditional constituency of mainstream, male-dominated unions. In doing so, they extend collective representation to workers who may have had little experience of unionism or other forms of collective working-class action. What mixed mainstream union leaders and union members must remember is that employers, the state and patriarchal cultures divide the working class according to employment status, gender, ethnicity and religion. What we understand from the following chapters is that women are resisting these impulses in a number of innovative ways which have the potential to have a transformative impact on the trajectories of working-class movements throughout Asia.

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Notes

¹ Union density measures union membership as a proportion of the eligible workforce. For Europe, where data is available, indications are that the 'clear trend in union density is downward across Europe' (European Foundation 2003). See also Bronfenbrenner *et. al.* (1998).

² The Penn Thozhilalargal Sangam was originally the women's wing of the Tamil Nadu Construction Workers Union. It organizes 2500 women from the construction and quarrying, domestic services and garments and tailoring industries, which are the three largest employers of women workers (Mody 2005: 13).