

Sisters Organising: Women-Only Unions in Japan and South Korea

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Low rates of union membership and lack of representation on union committees for women in existing union structures in Japan and South Korea disguise the contributions women have made to the union movements in each country. It is therefore not surprising that women have created separate structures, women-only unions, to address issues that existing unions have failed to solve and provide alternative forms of representation for women workers who are not organised by existing unions. In this paper I explore the development of women-only unions in Japan and South Korea and whether they represent a threat to the existing union movement. I argue that the exclusive nature, their weakened position vis a vis employers and the state and the androcentrism of their policies and practices have resulted in the failure of existing unions to provide adequate and effective representation for women.

Introduction

Women-only¹ unions exist in Denmark, the Netherlands and India and have existed in a range of countries including Australia, the United States, Canada and Ireland. In Japan and South Korea, women-only unions formed in the 1990s. Japan's first women-only union² *Onna Rōdō Kumiai Kansai* (henceforth *Onna Kumiai*) formed in 1990, and in 2003 there were seven women-only unions throughout Japan. In South Korea there are 3 women-only unions all of which formed in 1999³. The Seoul Women's Trade Union (SWTU) was the first but the Korean Womens' Trade Union (KWTU) is the largest with 9 regional branches and approximately 4000 members. (interview October 2003) Of the three women-only unions in South Korea, only the SWTU, like its Japanese counterparts, remains independent from other union federations or organizations. Does the structure of unions in Japan and South Korea require women unionists to organise differently? Is the 'sexual politics' (Franzway 1997) of unions in Japan and South Korea such that women unionists in these countries need to unionise separately? I argue that this is the case because although the proportion of women in paid work in Japan and South Korea has been steady at around 40 percent since the early 1960s,⁴ labour markets in both Japan and South Korea have been and remain

highly gender segmented with women overrepresented in 'non-standard'⁵ employment. Additionally there is a persistent gender pay gap and women are poorly unionised. Women-only unions contribute to the expansion of unionising and representation by organising the growing number of 'non-standard' workers including part-time, temporary and contract workers as well as the unemployed. They also address issues that the policies and practices of existing unions have either contributed to or have not been able to overcome. In exploring women-only unions in this paper, I focus on women and women-only unions not as "passive recipients of unionizing strategies [but as] women creating unionization". (Murray 2000:13)

Trends in women's paid work in Japan and South Korea

Women in Japan and South Korea have been a continuous presence in the workforce and, as the majority of the early industrializing workforce in each country, contributed significantly to each country's industrial development. In early 1960 when South Korea introduced the export-oriented industrialization strategy, which relied heavily on young, single female labour, manufacturing became the second largest employer of female labour after agriculture. (Koo 2001:34-5) The number

of women employed as production workers in South Korea, primarily textiles, garments and electronics, increased “. . . 7.4 times from 182,000 in 1963 to 1,353,000 in 1985, while the number of men increased 5 times . . .” (Koo 2001:35) In general, although women constituted the majority of the workforce, men were more likely to be in skilled and technical positions with promotion prospects, whereas women were employed in jobs constructed as dead-end and semi-skilled. (Koo 2001:85 fn9) The early industrializing workforce in Japan resembles that of South Korea. Young single women employed as factory workers dominated Japan’s manufacturing workforce, in particular in textiles which was Japan’s most important industry before the Fifteen Year War (1931-45) During Japan’s rapid industrialization period [1894 to 1912], women constituted on average, 60 per cent of Japan’s industrial workforce (Sievers 1983:55), and in 1909 women comprised 85 percent of workers in textiles. (Mackie 1997:100-101) Women factory workers in Japan despite their value as labour and the export income they generated, until 1930 were always defined as contingent. They were “‘daughters’ or ‘students’ spending a few years before marriage working for their families, the nation and the mills.” (Sievers 1983:58)

South Korea

Women workers in South Korea have been concentrated in agriculture and then from the 1960s light manufacturing. With the implementation of neo-liberal policies in the 1990s, “restructuring was easily translated into downsizing and layoffs” (Cho 2002:60) and women were made redundant for the sake of ‘male primary breadwinners’. Changes in labour legislation permitted ‘restructuring dismissals’ and greater use of agency workers. By early 1999 the number of ‘non-standard’ workers accounted for over 50 percent of the workforce. Women were

also disproportionately transferred to ‘non-standard’ employment. According to a study conducted by the Korean Labour Institute (KLI) in 1999 temporary women workers increased by 61 percent compared to a 37 percent increase for male workers. (Park 2003:39) As Park notes the research conducted by the KLI also showed that “when there are increases in employment, women are employed as temporary workers but when dismissed, it was usually from full-time work, clear evidence that the restructuring carried out in 1998 was targeted at women workers.” (Park 2003:39) Cho argues that a “. . . Confucian patriarchal ideology was utilized in order to justify the discharge of women from the labour market.” (2002:62)

Japan

In the 1950s employers restructured the ‘lifetime’ employment system and created a ‘gender-specific escape route’ (Kumazawa 1996:167) which effectively removed women workers from jobs in competition with male workers and into low status roles and insecure employment. As in South Korea, male dominated unions in Japan often accepted the lower wages and lesser conditions of women workers to concentrate on protecting the wages and conditions of their core male membership. Union acceptance of practices discriminating against women such as forced retirement on marriage or childbirth, which is now a contravention of the EEOL, became a strategy to “soften the impact of ability-based assessment and promotion policies upon career male employees.” (Kumazawa 1996:191)

As in South Korea, while women in Japan have been a presence in ‘non-standard’ work in Japan, their representation in part-time work began to increase in 1985 in response to the introduction of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL) and the 1986 Labour Dispatch Law. In Japan 46 percent (*Kosei Rōdōshō* 2001: 18) and in South Korea 67 percent (Korean Women’s Trade Union 2001) of women

workers are in 'non-standard' employment, with the majority working in non-unionised service sector occupations and/or in small companies with inferior employment conditions compared with larger companies. In South Korea 64 percent of women work in companies with less than 5 workers (Korean Womens' Trade Union 2001) and in Japan 42 percent of women work in companies with less than 29 employees. (*Kosei Rōdōshō* 2001: Appendix 76) Such changes have been accompanied by legislative measures leading to a diminution of workers rights, especially those of non-standard workers.⁶ In South Korea this situation has been aggravated by 'reforms' imposed by the IMF (International Monetary Fund) where women have been transferred, in many cases probably involuntarily and with union agreement, from full-time to 'non-standard' forms of employment. Cho observes ". . . labor unions agreed to the lay-offs of women workers in order to save 'male breadwinners'. The male-dominated unions bartered away female workers for the interest of male workers." (2002:64)

The gender contract

In South Korea as in Japan, the dominant ideology concerning the proper role for women is defined as 'good wives and wise mothers'. In this way their role as paid workers is considered secondary, and they are seen as having weak job commitment and also a weak commitment to the union movement. Ōsawa describes Japan as a 'corporate-centred society' organised and structured around large private companies. The role of women in the corporate-centred society is to maintain the family "while men work heart and soul for the company, women must do the same to ensure men can continue to do so." (Ōsawa 1995:249) In Japan's gender contract a woman's primary responsibility as 'wife and mother' has been extended to also include part-time worker has become indispensable to complement male full-

time workers who form the backbone of Japan's corporate society.

In South Korea "the status of the wife . . . and the daughter who could not contribute to the continuation of the patrilineage, was relatively low". (Park 2001:49) Despite social changes the division of sex-based roles in South Korea remains largely unchanged with women bearing the dual burden. An interviewee from a study by Park comments "though we are a dual income couple, my husband doesn't help at all in the home. Rather he nags that the house is a mess." (2001:68)

The persistence of a gender contract in Japan and South Korea where women are constructed as wives and mothers has contributed to the negative perceptions of women as paid workers and consequently their ability to participate in the union movement. This assumption/perception has been legitimised, naturalised and systematised in industrial and social policies and supported by employers and male dominated unions in Japan and South Korea.

Male dominated unions in Japan and South Korea

At the risk of extreme simplification, the postwar structure and organisation of unions in Japan and South Korea are broadly similar. 'Mainstream' unions are enterprise based and as such do not organise workers 'outside' the organisation such as part-time or temporary workers. In Japan and South Korea few enterprise-based unions⁷ organise workers who are not full-time employees of the company. In addition, the majority of small workplaces are not unionised.

Koo argues that the trend of the South Korean union movement in the 1990s "was to become more pragmatic and inwardly oriented within the confines of enterprise unionism." (2001:208) In South Korea and Japan, workers protected by unions have become a 'labor aristocracy' or 'elites' and the unions representing these 'core'

workers have become increasingly pragmatic.

In Japan enterprise union weakness in the face of employer demands and their exclusive nature has contributed to the growth of a non-unionised workforce, which unions including women-only unions,⁸ are attempting to organise and represent. In Japan the gendered composition of the union leadership and the structure of the union has had a significant impact on unions' ability to address the demands of their members. (Broadbent 2003) This treatment had been directly experienced by some of the members of women-only unions who had been members of mainstream enterprise unions and indirectly as a result of the exclusive nature of enterprise unions.

Women and male dominated unions in Japan and South Korea

In 2001 total trade union membership in South Korea was 14.5 percent and 20 percent in Japan, yet despite comprising almost half the paid workforce, the presence of women workers is not reflected in the membership of each country's union movement, and subsequently not in their representation on union committees. The proportion of unionised women workers in Korea has declined from 11 per cent in 1987 to 5.6 per cent in 1997. (KWTU 2002:6) In the same year in Japan, the percentage of unionised women workers stood at 17 per cent. (Takashima 1997:4)

Women in Japan first had a formal role in the union movement when a women's bureau was created within Japan's first union, the *Yuaikai* (Friendship Association) in 1917. Opposition to its existence and the place of 'women's issues' generally within the union movement led to the development of a separate women's organisation, the *Fujin Domei* (Women's League) in 1927. Until the legalisation of unions in 1945, ideological splits in the union movement and constant harassment of union leaders

also created difficulties for women attempting to establish a women workers movement within the union movement. In Korea women appear to have pursued strategies of organising both within existing unions and organising separate women-only unions from as early as the 1920s (Kim 1997: 97; Minns & Fieldes 2001) but there is no continuity between the early and contemporary women-only unions. (interview October 2003) Recent publications are beginning to challenge the conceptions that women workers in the union movement were 'passive' and 'docile'. (see for example Turner 1995; Mackie 1997; Koo 2001; Minns and Fieldes 2001; Chun 2003)

South Korea

In South Korea the majority of early postwar activists were women employed in the garment, textile and electronics industries and the unions they created were aimed at either creating new independent unions or gaining control and transforming company unions. (Koo 2001:72-73) Some industrial unions within the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU peak union organization) did work to protect workers in the 1960s and early 1970s but "... after the establishment of the *yushin* regime [revitalization – Under President Park Chung Hee] in 1972, the FKTU and industrial unions became no more than government puppet organizations." (cited in Koo 2001:77 fn5) The women-led unions in South Korea sustained the union movement in the 1970s because constant "repression and cooptation nearly extinguished activism among male workers . . .". (Kim 1997:105) Koo cites the example of a male worker sympathetic to the women unionists who confessed it was 'male pride' preventing men supporting these women-led unions, but it was also a favourite employer strategy to mobilise male workers to destroy the women-led unions. Koo argues that the "democratic union movement in the 1970s was, . . . characterized by bitter struggles between

male and female workers.” (Koo 2001:70) One example he cites is the well-known Dongil Textile Union struggle where among other strategies the company sponsored a male leadership ticket and reached a secret agreement with the National Textile Union (NTU) to bring in male supervisors to control the union. (see Koo 2001:82) The sectoral shift which occurred in the Korean economy in the late 1980s with the growth in heavy manufacturing and the chemical industries fostered the growth of male workers employment in manufacturing, Koo estimates that because of the large numbers of women employed in small and medium sized firms, “it can be estimated that the participation of female workers in the 1987 labor conflicts was not significantly different from that of male workers” (Koo 2001:181) yet the union movement came to be dominated by male workers. To give an example women represented 43 percent of the National Congress of Trade Unions (forerunner to KCTU), although several women occupied high-ranking positions, it was primarily run by male leaders. (Koo 2001:183) In 1999 South Korea’s Federation of Korean Trade Union (FKTU), the largest peak labour organization, had 30 percent of its membership comprised of women however, of its 700 leaders only 30 were women. (Seok 1999)

Japan

In the postwar period women’s participation in Japan’s union hierarchy has slowly increased through their election as workplace delegates, appointment to union executives or councils and their election or appointment to full-time official positions. In 2000 however, women represented only 6.6 percent of *Rengō*’s (Japanese Trade Union Confederation, Japan’s largest national peak labour organisation) executive committee members. (*Rengō*, International Division 2002:52) In Japan women’s departments⁹ exist within peak labour organisations and

industrial federations but it is rare for enterprise unions in Japan to have a dedicated ‘women’s department’. *Rengō* is presently pursuing a policy of increasing the number of women on committees or within union structures.

Despite the struggles, waged by women in Japan and South Korea from the 1950s, through the legal system in Japan because unions wouldn’t or couldn’t address them and in South Korea through creating or transforming an existing enterprise union, persistent gender discrimination remains which unions have not been able to overcome. An example is the persistent gender pay gap where women in Japan earn 60.4 percent of a male wage (less if part-time workers are included) and which in South Korea stands at 54.6 percent. (Brinton 2001:16) South Korean women bank workers have for ‘equal pay for work of equal value’ since 1993, a struggle not supported by male colleagues. When the case was won and banks were forced to change their wage system they appealed both the decision and started increasing the number of part-time workers. (interview October 2003)

Women organising

To understand the growth in women-only structures Briskin (1993) introduced the concept of ‘separate organising’. For Briskin ‘separate organising’ is a strategy of “empowerment for women in their struggle to alter the political and economic configurations” (1993:91) and which differs from ‘separatism’ (Briskin 1993:91) Within Briskin’s conception, separate organising can involve the creation of separate structures within or separate from an existing union.

There is a growing body of literature focusing on the important issue of women’s organising strategies within unions (Cook, Lorwin & Daniels 1984; Soldon 1985; Briskin & McDermott 1993; Elton 1997; Pocock 1997; Mann, Ledwith & Colgan 1997) and employers organizing women into women-only unions as an

attempt to regulate their labour (Ellem 1989:28) The formation of women's caucuses, committees and conferences brings into focus a strategy faced by social or political organisations encompassing a diverse range of constituencies that is the issue of 'same/difference'. Same or different strategies represent the debate over whether women unionists give priority to their differences as women or to the issues they share with men. (Franzway 1997:131) The issue for women unionists is whether to continue to work within union structures numerically and culturally dominated by men or create their own independent and autonomous structures? Gandhi (1996) Hensman (1996) and Pocock (1997) to name a few acknowledge there are limitations for women of working only within union structures because of the reluctance of male-dominated unions to for example address the gender division of labour. (Hensman 1996:201)

Women-only unions in Japan and South Korea

Women in Japan and South Korea created women-only unions because they questioned the hierarchical structure and the validity of unions being solely controlled by men. (Korean Womens' Trade Union 2001) The formation of women-only unions is an alternative strategy to that of working within the existing union movement allowing women unionists to formulate and address issues of importance to women workers. Women-only unions provide women unionists both the avenue and the means to resolve issues such as discriminatory employment conditions, sexual harassment and sexual violence at the workplace which are generally ignored as 'women's issues' and not 'union issues' by mainstream unions.

South Korea

Both the SWTU and the KWTU organise women workers employed in 'non-standard' jobs and those in the informal sector who are excluded by mainstream enterprise unions. As with the KWTU, the

SWTU seeks to overcome the male oriented direction of existing trade unions, and to undertake activities focused on the resolution of problems facing women workers. (interview October 2003) The SWTU also organizes unemployed women but this has resulted in the Seoul city government refusing to recognise it as a legal union. By stating openly that it intends organising unemployed women workers, the SWTU was refused registration and is fighting a court case with the Seoul city government. (interview October 2003) The SWTU formed in January 1999 and like its counterparts in Japan remains independent from other union federations or organizations. The SWTU organises approximately 80-100 members and is growing slowly. (interview October 2003) The Korean Womens' Trade Union (KWTU) was created in July 1999 and is affiliated with the Korean Women Workers' Associations United formed in 1987. The KWTU comprises 9 regional branches and has 4000 members. (Korean Women Workers' Associations United 2001, interview 2003) The KWTU also organises unemployed women but apparently did not disclose this when registering, so its registration has been accepted. A third is affiliated with the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) (Korean Womens' Trade Union 2002) of which at present I have no data.

The KWTU organises members and unions in a variety of industries where all the workers were either part-time, contract, subcontract or day workers. These workers are employed in a diverse range of industries including as nutritionists and cooks in schools and universities, cleaners at universities, television screenwriters, hotel maids, golf caddies, clerical workers and women employed in small businesses. (interview October 2003) The grievances faced by these workers are largely the result of restructuring and employers' desire for more flexible workforces. In the case of the university cooks, the university had handed over the running of the

cafeteria to a labour hire company, which then rehired the employees on a daily or temporary basis. After deciding to run the cafeteria again, the university sacked the cooks employed at the time. In protest for 125 days the cooks continued to show up for work after which time the university reinstated the cooks as full-time employees. (interview October 2003) Other activities of the KWTU include campaigning since July 2001, in co-operation with the KCTU, FKTU and other organizations, for increases to the minimum wage. They have achieved success in that the minimum wage has increased a total of 20 percent in 2001 and 2002. (KWTU 2002:3)

The SWTU formed in January 1999 with a group of 15 members some of whom were experiencing problems at the workplace. Two of the original members were forced to retire because after marrying. Both lost their jobs but fought and received separation pay. The husband of one of the women also lost his job for protesting the company's actions. (Seok 1999; interview October 2003) Other members had worked for NGOs dealing with women's issues but felt the role of the NGOs was limited to supporting women with grievances but that they couldn't bargain with employers. In 2003 the SWTU had approximately 80 members from a range of industries and occupations including clerical, call centers and restaurants. (interview October 2003) Most of these workers are not covered by South Korea's employment laws although officially under the Labour Standards Legislation all 'non-standard' workers have employment rights. The introduction of the Dispatch Workers Law in 1997 has resulted in companies outsourcing their workforces and so greater numbers of workers are finding themselves outside the reach of legal provisions. It is these workers and the unemployed that the SWTU focuses on organizing. The SWTU has campaigned successfully for the restoration of pay on behalf of bank call centre workers. It is at present representing

two groups of women who are employed by unions. One case involves five workers who were unfairly dismissed and the second is a case of sexual harassment perpetrated by the Secretary-General of the union employing the woman. Both cases have yet to be resolved. (interview October 2003) Like their counterparts in Japan, the SWTU addresses a range of issues including sexual harassment and workplace discrimination. As an illegal union (not recognized or registered) many employers refuse to collective bargain but the SWTU has employed a number of tactics including protesting outside a company's premises. In this instance the company refused to collective bargain with the union but recognized the issue and restored the original wage level to the affected workers. (interview October 2003)

Japan

There are seven women-only unions in Japan, and *Josei Union Tokyo* (henceforth *Josei Union*) is the largest with 250 members and two paid full-time organizers. The other six women-only unions organise between 40 and 70 members and are run by volunteers. (August interview 2002)

The first women-only union in Japan was *Onna Kumiai*, which was formally created in February 1990. In 2002 *Onna Kumiai* had a steady membership of 63, the majority of whom are public servants. The union is run by a group of members, all of whom are volunteers, with all members having full-time paid employment elsewhere. Given this situation, the union doesn't have the staff or resources to recruit and at present relies on contact from potential members or by women with grievances. *Onna Kumiai* was formed by a group of women who had grievances at their workplace or in employment which had not been sufficiently dealt with by their workplace enterprise union. Only one of the union members is not affiliated with her workplace enterprise union. Until recently this member had dual affiliation

with her workplace enterprise union but withdrew because the union does not support her legal action with her employer over its gendered wage practices which discriminate against women. The union is involved in broader campaigns supporting part-time workers and benefits for temporary workers. (interview October 2003)

The *Josei Union Tokyo* was formed in 1995, by two women formerly employees of the Women's Department of the National General Workers Union but harassment from male union officials over their focus on 'women's issues' caused them to split and form an autonomous union in February 2002. Its members are employed in a diverse range of industries with service industries (37 percent) and manufacturing (22 percent) the highest. Occupations include clerical (48 percent) and specialist/technical workers (22 percent) while the majority of members are employed full-time (68 percent) and part-time (12 percent). (*Josei Union Tokyo* 2002:39) The successes of the union include recognition and payment for unfair dismissal or recovery of payments due to underpayment and negotiations which have improved employment conditions.

Preliminary conclusions

Declining union membership and strategies for union renewal are issues of debate for academics, union officials and union members world-wide (see IIRA 2000) and

an examination of women-only unions in Japan and South Korea contributes to this debate. Women-only unions address the needs of a growing number of non-unionised women workers and by unionising these workers, they are extending collective representation. Their existence and successes challenges the cultures, policies and practices of male dominated unions. The focus of women-only unions in Japan and South Korea is not confined to advancing conditions for women alone. Women interviewed argued their efforts are aimed at improving conditions for a greater number of workers, female and male demonstrated by their participation and support of actions for example for part-timers, agency and temporary workers as well as joint actions on a wide range of campaigns including in South Korea increases to the minimum wage and in Japan benefits for temporary workers. They believe the issues of interest to women workers had been ignored/sidelined by the male-dominated union movement. A discussion of 'women organising' broadens the scope and activity of the union movement. Women-only unions in Japan and South Korea also deepen our understanding of the institutions and actors in these culturally diverse industrial contexts as well as contributing to the discussion on issues surrounding gender and unionism and the relevance of unionism to a growing sector of the workforce.

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¹ Women-only unions refers to unions which have been created by women for women members. In Japan there are seven women-only unions which exist independently from other union organizations. There are other unions which have only women members but are affiliated with enterprise or industrial federations. (Josei Union Tokyo survey 2003) The present research project does not include these unions. I also want to make clear the distinction between women-only unions and unions which have a largely female membership and/or union executive.

² In Japan the creation of women-only unions contravenes the Trade Union Law as it is considered discriminatory. The women-only unions refer to themselves as 'women's unions' but often include at least one male who may be a male worker or a male parliamentarian sympathetic and supportive of their cause. The unions have responded to the Trade Union Law by including in their charter that they do not discriminate on the basis of ethnicity, religion, sex, or status. (Josei Union Tokyo Charter 2001:1)

³ There have been references to women pursuing a strategy of separate organising in the 1920s but I have not been able to find more detailed information as yet.

⁴ Women's composition of the paid workforce has risen from 38% in 1963, peaking at 48.5% in 1976 and then declining to 42% in 1985. (Koo 2001:36) In the same periods women's workforce representation in Japan resembled that of Korea. In 1965 women comprised 39.8%, 1975 37.3% and in 1985 39.3%. From 1987 in Japan women's representation in the paid workforce has remained steady at 40% (almost 41%). (Kosei Rodosho 2003: appendix 7) From 1996 until 2001 South Korean women's representation in the paid workforce has been steady at 48 percent (in 1997 peaked at 49.5 percent). (Korean Labour Institute 2002:110)

⁵ I prefer to use 'non-standard' with inverted commas as in both Japan and South Korea because for 70% of women in South Korea and over 40% of women in Japan 'non-standard' work is the 'standard'.

⁶ For example Japan introduced a Part-time Workers Law in 1993 which doesn't cover an increasing number of part-time workers working more than 35 hours per week. (see Broadbent 2003)

⁷ For discussion of an enterprise union in Japan organising elements of the part-time workforce see Broadbent 2003, *Women's Employment in Japan: The Experience of Part-time Workers*, London: RoutledgeCurzon. In Japan some enterprise unions

have reached agreement with management to limit unionising activities to full-time workers.

⁸ Women-only unions in Japan are part of a recent trend in union organising which includes community based and part-time workers unions or what Kawanishi has called 'new type' unions. (1992) These 'new type' unions are organising workers excluded from enterprise unions. Some organizations in the 'new type' union movement are considering affiliating with the national labour organization, *Rengō*. (interview August 2002)

⁹ Recently *Rengō* and a number of industrial federations have renamed their women's departments, Gender Equality Departments.