

They must be extremely strong and determined, not only to enter the movement in the first place, but also to remain committed to it. They must be willing to face criticism and also give up their dependence on men, neither of which are easy tasks.

However, the solid community and support they gain from being in the movement as well as their own peace of mind from having been released from a life which does not fit them, seem to make it worth the risk.

Women in the movement are inspiring, lively and resilient people, concerned of course with protesting various injustices in society, but also, and perhaps more importantly, determined to create a new and more accepting society free of discrimination. Thus, as marginal as it still is, the Japanese women's movement deserves respect and admiration for its determination, vitality and optimism.

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### About the author:

In October 1989, Kim Sote came to Tokyo from the US as a Monbusho (Japanese Government) research student in order to conduct field research on Japanese women activists. She participated in various women's meetings, symposia and protests, and has been an active member of the Asian Women's Association. This article is a brief summary of her research report, which she submitted to her academic advisor, Prof. Sumiko Iwao, of Keio University. In addition, Kim has also been involved with Filipino migrant women workers issues in Japan.

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## Women take the forefront:

# Women's Movement in South Korea

The Korean women's movement first sprouted as part of the national liberation struggle against the Japanese colonial rule from 1910 to 1945. After the division of Korea in 1945 and the Korean War, however, the women's movement stagnated. At times it was dominated by the conservative and elitist women organizations. The issues facing the majority of women were not addressed by the mainstream women's movement. Instead, the women's movement played a role in maintaining the status-quo in south Korea, stressing "women's loyalty and service to the nation".

During the export-led industrialization of the 1970s, the women's movement gained a new momentum as young women workers stood up for worker's right to organize. The attention of the women's movement shifted to the democratization of society and the concerns of the neglected majority -- workers, farmers and the urban poor.

In recent years, the women's movement has surged as one of the most important forces of the national democratic movement in south Korea, inheriting the tradition of the earlier women's movement as national liberation struggle. Korean women have been fighting various forms of domination and exploitation emanating from the military dictatorship, foreign intervention and patriarchy.

### Economic Exploitation of Women and the Women Worker's Struggle

Since the division of Korea, south Korea has followed the path of economic development dependent on foreign capital, technology and market. The export-led industrialization, carried out by the suc-

cessive south Korean governments, has been built on the harsh and systematic exploitation of workers and farmers.

The brunt of exploitation and repression of workers is borne by women who make up the majority of the labor force in the leading export industries such as textiles, rubber shoes and electronics. According to a study by the Korean Women's Associations United (KWAU), in the manufacturing sector, women's average monthly wage was \$ 243 in 1987, which accounts for only 51% of male wages. In 1989 more than 60% of the women workers received wages less than the single woman worker's minimum cost of living as projected by the Federation of Korean Trade Unions. To earn these low wages, women work 60 hours per week under the conditions designed to generate maximum production at minimum expense. Moreover, the "Equal Employment Law" was not enacted until 1990. The women worker's struggle has been an integral part of the labor and women's movements since the 1970s. The unions led by women showed the most courageous leadership through hunger strikes, sit-ins, and demonstrations for labor law reform. The struggle of the YH Trading Company's women workers contributed in part to the collapse of the Park Chung Hee dictatorial regime. The spirit of militant women workers, reinforced through a series of strikes and worker's actions in 1987, continues into the struggle of women workers against US multinational corporations such as Tandy and Pico Korea.

### Women Farmers

The women farmers face conditions no better than women workers. Due to the government's agricultural policy, characterized by low-grain price policy and liberalization of agricultural imports, most of the farmers are on the brink of bankruptcy. As husbands and sons seek



employment with overseas construction and daughters migrate to cities, the farm work is left to older women farmers. The women farmers suffer physical exhaustion, which often impairs their ability to bear children.

Facing the hollowing of agriculture and the pressure of import liberalization, the women farmers have organized themselves since the mid-1980s. With other farmers' organizations, the women farmers are calling for change in agricultural policy and are joining the anti-US movement.

### US Military Presence and Sexual Exploitation

Women's suffering under the male-dominated Korean society has been compounded by the US military presence in south Korea. There are 43,000 US troops in 40 military bases in south Korea. Ever since the inception of the US Military Government in 1945, there have been US base towns full of bars, brothels, and a large number of prostitutes. About 18,000 women are "registered" as prostitutes serving GIs. The women around US base towns are subjected to the most atrocious form of sexual exploitation, let alone racist degradation and social alienation. The south Korean govern-



ment, which has always stood by the US, relegates the prostitution on US military bases as a "necessary evil".

The women's movement has evoked social criticism of the issue among the Korean people, while providing shelters and education for the prostitutes. Moreover, many women are urging the US to remove its troops from south Korea to uproot prostitution brought by the US military presence.

### Women in Peace and Reunification Movements

Although south Korea boasts its economic power, the national wealth has not been redistributed to promote the social well-being of the people. The issues of housing for low-income families, health care system, resources for education, and child care are structurally disregarded. In 1990 the south Korean government spent 30% of the budget for defense against the "threat of north Korean aggression", while spending only 10% on social development. If the military spending is decreased by 1%, five times as many day-care centers can be built.

The women's organizations which were engaged in the anti-pollution movement have extended the scope of movement to the issues of peace and arms reduction. Viewing women as the most affected by militarism, the women's movement has started struggles against the construction of nuclear power plants, US military bases and nuclear weapons, and excessive military spending. The Korean Coalition of Anti-Nuclear and Peace Movements, founded in March 1991, is working hard to bring a broad spectrum of women into the peace movement.

The Korean women's fervent hope for reunification of their homeland is testified by a young student's courageous act. On 15 August 1989, Im Su Kyung, who travelled to north Korea to attend a youth festival, took a historical step across Panmunjom (a border site) to return home in the south. Upon her return, Im was arrested and

sentenced to five years' imprisonment on the charges of violating the National Security Law. However, her self-sacrificing act rekindled the Korean people's reunification movement.

### Patriarchy and Family Law Revision

Throughout Korean history, Confucian heritage bequeathed an image of women as submissive and docile. Patriarchal authority cuts across all aspects of society, reinforcing the status of women as a second-class citizen. Moreover, the cult of domesticity has been strengthened by social conservatism premised on anti-communism. The south Korean family law, for example, is very discriminatory to women. Although the women's organizations have fought for revision of the family law for 30 years, the government refused to reform it completely, citing it as a threat to the national security. As a result, the women's movement has achieved only partial success in family law reform.

### Women's Organizations

Since 1983, many progressive and grassroots women's organizations have formed throughout the country. Major organizations include the Korean Women Workers Organization, the Council of Family Movement for Democratization, and the National Committee for Women Farmers. Women's departments have been created in existing movement organizations. The KWAU, formed in 1987, a national coalition of various women's organizations, currently has 25 member groups. With a concrete vision for social change and organizational strength, the Korean women are struggling to achieve women's liberation as well as a genuine democracy, economic justice, and peace and reunification of Korea.

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