

# Women's organising strategies: Women-only unions in Japan and Korea

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## ABSTRACT

The growing non full-time workforce in Japan and Korea, is significant especially for women, the majority of whom are not unionised and who can't be organised by enterprise-based unions. Yet the creation of autonomous, women-only unions which historically has been a significant strategy for the organisation of women workers internationally, was only adopted by women in Japan and Korea from the 1990s. For those who might argue that gender based organising is counterproductive for the union movement it is important to remember that in the early period of union formation, women formed, and were encouraged to form, women-only unions because they were excluded from existing unions. While in all aspects women-only unions in Japan and Korea may not resemble traditional 'western' unions, they do resemble the women-only unions which have formed internationally.

## Introduction

Women-only unions have existed in a range of countries including Australia, Canada, England and Ireland and continue to exist in Denmark, the United States and India. Women-only unions however, have only recently formed in Japan and South Korea (hereafter Korea). Japan's first women-only union *Onna Rōdō Kumiai Kansai* (henceforth *Onna Kumiai*) formed in 1990, and in 2003 there were seven women-only unions throughout Japan. In Korea there are 3 women-only unions all of which formed in 1999. 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 4200 members. (interviews October 2003; June 2004) Organising workers on the basis of gender might be considered to contribute to fragmenting or diluting the union movement and working class organisation, I would suggest that as the union movements in Japan and Korea have hitherto been unable or unwilling to organise non full-time workers, a significant proportion of women workers are without union representation.

The proportion of women in paid work in Japan and Korea has been steady at around 40 percent since the early 1960s, but labour markets in both Japan and Korea have been and remain highly gender segmented with women overrepresented in non-full-time forms of employment. In Japan 46 percent (*Kōsei Rōdōshō* 2001: 18) and in South Korea 67 percent (Korean Women's Trade Union 2001) of women workers are in non full-time 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. (*Kōsei Rōdōshō* 2001: Appendix 76) The proportion of unionised women workers in Korea has declined from 11 percent in 1987 to 5.6 percent in 1997, compared with 19% of male workers. (KWTU 2002:6) In the same year in Japan, the percentage of unionised women workers stood at 17 percent (Takashima 1997:4) and unionisation rates for non full-time workers are negligible. With union membership in Japan and Korea declining, in 2001 total membership in Korea was 14.5 percent while Japan's rate of unionisation dropped below 20 percent for the first time in 2003. (19.6 percent). (*Kōsei Rōdōshō* 2004) Women's low levels of representation on union committees also exacerbates the difficulty for issues such as the gender wage gap and discriminatory conditions being included on union agendas. In 2000 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) but *Rengō* is presently pursuing a policy of increasing the number of women on committees or within union structures. In 1999 Korea's Federation of Korean Trade Union (FKTU), the largest peak labour organisation, had 30 percent of its membership comprised of women however, of its 700 leaders only 30 were women. (Seok 1999) It is not surprising that women in Japan and Korea have created women-only unions as a way of addressing issues that existing mixed unions have failed to resolve. Yet women are blamed for not being active or interested in workplace issues (Miller & Amano 1995:45) rather than unions addressing structural and organisational issues.

To date very little research has been conducted on women-only unions in Japan and Korea (see Broadbent 2003; 2004; forthcoming) so I compare them to existing women-only unions in Denmark and the US as a way of understanding their formation in the broader context of women's organising. Do women-only unions share characteristics with existing women-only unions? There are broad similarities in that they formed because mixed unions were not addressing issues of concern to women and they perform similar functions. Women-only unions in Japan and Korea have achieved some gains but differ from the longer established women-only unions because of their limited membership and their status as 'second' unions. In gathering information for this research I conducted interviews with officials and members of *Josei Union* and *Onna Kumiai* in Japan, and KWTU and SWTU in Korea, as well as interviews with officials in women-only unions in Denmark.

### ***Women's ways of organising***

Women workers and unionists have and continue to use a range of strategies to address issues of concern for women. The strategies adopted by women differ depending on historical and cultural context but Briskin's (1999) broad conceptualisation is useful for understanding women's organising. Briskin identifies two broad strategies of women's organising (i) separate organising and (ii) autonomous organising. Separate organising is identified as the organising of women's committees or caucuses within existing unions and is the strategy adopted overwhelmingly by contemporary women workers in a diverse range of countries. Autonomous organising is the creation of independent women's organisations including women-only unions and it is this category which is the focus of this paper.

**AUTONOMOUS ORGANISING - EARLY EXAMPLES:** There are many examples of autonomous organising in the early period of women's organising primarily drawn from the Anglo-Scandinavian countries. Autonomous women-only unions formed in Australia, England, the US, Ireland and Denmark from the 1880s and were created predominantly to counteract the exclusion of women workers from the existing unions. In many cases the creation of women-only unions received support from the male unions and/or employers as a way of managing the employer-created and perpetuated competition derived from women's labour. (Hargreaves 1982; Ellem 1989; KAD 2001; [www.uic.edu/depts/lib/specialcoll/services](http://www.uic.edu/depts/lib/specialcoll/services) accessed Oct 2004) Internationally, Denmark's Kvindeligt Arbejderforbund (KAD or Women Workers' Union) formed in 1885, the Womens' Trade Union League (WTUL) in the US formed in 1903 ([www.uic.edu/depts/lib/specialcoll/services](http://www.uic.edu/depts/lib/specialcoll/services) accessed Oct 2004) and the Womens' Trade Union League (WTUL) formed in England in 1874 ([www.genesis.ac.uk](http://www.genesis.ac.uk) accessed Oct 2004) to name a few. All formed essentially to organise women workers excluded from the male unions.

Few early women-only unions survived and either dissolved or were absorbed into existing male unions. Of the numerous women-only unions formed in New South Wales (NSW) in the 1880s only the telegraphists union survived the depression of the 1890s (Ryan 1984:37) and by 1906 the 'Tailoresses' and 'Tailors' unions in Victoria had combined. Of the international women-only unions formed in the late 19th or early 20th centuries, only Denmark's KAD continues to exist but it has been resisting overtures from the General Workers Union (GWU) to amalgamate since 1930. The WTUL (US) suffered from membership declines from the 1930s, eventually dissolving in 1950 ([www.uic.edu/depts/lib/specialcoll/services](http://www.uic.edu/depts/lib/specialcoll/services) accessed Oct 2004) and the WTUL (England) was absorbed into the Trade Union Congress (TUC) in 1925 ([www.genesis.ac.uk](http://www.genesis.ac.uk) accessed Oct 2004).

**CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLES:** Despite the existence of other examples in the following section I will concentrate on two women-only unions, KAD (Denmark) and 9 to 5 (US), in order to gain an understanding of women-only unions in Japan and Korea. All three women-only unions share a feminist consciousness to promote full equality for women. 9 to 5 evolved from the women's movement it moved closer to the organised union movement in 1975 when it received a charter from the Service Employees' International Union (SEIU). (Milkman 1986:317)

### **What do women-only unions do?**

The following section discusses the core activities conducted by women-only unions in order to achieve their stated objectives, although the unions are involved in a range of other activities including training of union activists (KAD 1995:3) and worker's education classes (www.9to5.org).

**COLLECTIVE BARGAINING:** The women-only unions all conduct collective bargaining with the focus covering a broad agenda as well as including wages and employment conditions. KAD functions like other unions in Denmark as it has the right to bargain but while organising only women workers but it concentrates on improving rights for all women, not just its members. (KAD 1995:3-4) 9 to 5 bargains on issues such as sexual harassment, equal opportunity and age discrimination (www.9to5.org; Milkman 1986:316).

**LOBBYING:** A second important activity conducted by existing women-only unions is lobbying. KAD and 9 to 5 all lobby governments over a range of issues including provision of free public childcare and maternity leave (KAD interview November 2003), family-friendly policies for low-wage women such as expanding family and sick leave benefits and anti-discrimination measures (www.9to5.org).

### **Women's organising in Japan and Korea**

**WOMEN'S ORGANISING IN JAPAN:** The primary organising strategy adopted and still used by the majority of women workers in Japan has been the organisation of women's committees often formed in the face of intense opposition from male unionists because '... these would focus women workers' attention on 'special interest' issues which would divert it from the 'real business' of the union.' (Molony 1991:236) Women first had a formal role in the union movement when a women's department (*Fujinbu*) was created within Japan's first union, the *Dai Nihon Rōdō Sōdōmei Yūaikai* (*Yūaikai* or Friendship Association) in 1916, a government-recognised and business friendly union which despite unions illegal status was not harassed in the way unions affiliated with the Japan Socialist Party and Japan Communist Party were subject to. Ongoing opposition to the existence of a women's bureau and the place of 'women's issues' generally within the union movement led to the creation of a separate women's organisation, the *Fujin Dōmei* (Women's League) in 1927.

With the introduction of the Trade Union Law in late 1945 and the legalisation of unions, collective women workers' organisations formed once again. The *Zentsu Fujinbu* (Women's Department of the Postal Workers Union) formed in June 1946 and became the nucleus of the early postwar women worker's movement. At branch level the women worker's movement was also progressing when in May 1946 the Tokyo Education Union Women's Bureau held its inaugural meeting. Moves to create a national *Fujinbu* were also advancing. (Suzuki 1994:76) Soon after Sohyo's formation, the *Fujin Kyogikai* was created in 1952 grouping together the women's departments of the industrial federations affiliated with Sohyo (predominantly public sector unions) and held its first general meeting in January 1953. (Suzuki 1994:79-80) Women's departments exist within peak labour organisations and industrial federations as 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.

**KOREA:** Korean women workers formed a union *Kunwoohoe* (Helping Friends Society) as early as 1923 concentrating on female workers in factories. *Kunwoohoe* was affiliated with the communist party, and its existence created an opportunity for women to struggle against the oppression resulting from Japanese colonisation. One of *Kunwoohoe's* demands was for the abolition of wage discrimination against women as well as the exemption from night work and labour dangerous to women and paid leave for the pre and post childbirth period. The Japanese colonial government cracked down on *Kunwoohoe's* activities as a result of its role in the demonstrations of female students' at the end of 1929 and it was finally disbanded in 1933. (Park 1987 cited in Sohn 1999:31)

The unions in the postwar period were considered

state-sponsored labour organisations . . . little more than instruments for use by the state to control the national labour force . . . [and] the FKTU [Federation of Korean Trade Unions] was concerned only with facilitating the achievement of the Park government's economic policies, without regard for costs incurred by its membership. (Chun 2003:108)

In the 1970s workers adopted the strategies of transforming existing unions or creating new, independent unions side-stepping the FKTU and NTWU (National Textile Workers Union) because

we needed collective bargaining. We had to deal direct with the owners and the government because we could not depend upon male leaders who would not represent our interests. (cited in Chun 2003:108)

Many researchers (see Koo 2001; Nam 2002; Chun 2003) acknowledge it was the women-led unions in Korea such as those at Dong-il textiles and the Chonggye union which sustained the democratic, worker-organised union movement in and through the 1970s. Only a minority of male workers supported the actions of the women unionists and worked with women-led unions as the majority were mobilised by employers to destroy the unions. One well-known example is the Dongil Textile Union struggle where among the less violent strategies used by the employer was the sponsorship of a male leadership ticket and reaching a secret agreement with the male leadership of the NTWU to bring in male supervisors to take over and control the union (see Koo 2001:82; Chun 2003).

### ***Women-only unions***

**JAPAN:** As discussed Japanese women workers have no prior history of autonomous organising, and although the membership in women-only unions is relatively small, in total approximately 1000 women workers, the creation of independent women-only unions in Japan represents a departure from women workers past organising experience. *Josei Union* started life in 1995 as a structure organised within the National General Workers' Union, continuing the strategy of separate organising. Harassment and opposition by union officials to both their existence and the 'special focus' of women's issues prompted the organisers to officially launch *Josei Union* as an independent women-only union in February 2002. It currently organises 250 women 68 percent of whom are employed full-time and employed in a 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). (*Josei Union Tokyo* 2002:39) *Onna Kumiai* began as a women-only organisation in 1990 with a core of former women temporary workers sacked when the Japan National Railway (JNR) was privatised. The women involved wanted to create an organisation for women, which would be controlled by women because they were dissatisfied with the focus of the male dominated leadership of the JNR union during the process of privatisation. *Onna Kumiai* organises approximately 70 members the majority of whom are full-time workers. The majority of members of *Josei Union* and *Onna Kumiai* affiliate on an individual basis. Both unions are committed to achieving equality for women (*Onna Kumiai* 1987:1; *Josei Union* 2003).

**KOREA:** In contrast to Japanese women workers, women workers in Korea had gained experience in controlling and running unions independently of the 'official' union movement from the 1970s. Despite the literature on Korea's union movement in the 1980s focusing on the union activism of male workers, women workers continued to be active in unions as well as the developing women workers' movement. Women active in the major protests of the 1970s such as at Control Data, Y. H. Trading, Seijin Electronics, Bando Trading and Chungkye Textile (Nam 2002:87) brought together women's groups from a wide range of sectors to form the umbrella organisation, the Korean Women United Association (KWAU) in 1987. As KWAU is a policy based organisation it decided to form the Korean Women's Trade Union (KWTU) as a women-only union in 1999, enabling it to collective bargain on behalf of its members. The SWTU was formed in January 1999 by a group of women employed in NGO's focusing on women's issues. Like its counterparts in Japan, SWTU remains independent from other union federations or organisations. The SWTU

organises approximately 60-80 members but its membership has declined since the success of its legal struggle to organise unemployed workers (interview June 2004).

### ***Comparisons with existing women-only unions***

How do the roles performed by women-only unions in Japan and Korea compare with those of KAD, 9 to 5 and SEWA? .

**COLLECTIVE BARGAINING - JAPAN:** *Josei Union* and *Onna Kumiai* are registered unions but only *Josei Union* conducts collective bargaining. In one case of collective bargaining, the focus of bargaining is wage increases, unpaid overtime, infringements of the Labour Standards Law, issues of indirect discrimination in pay calculations and discriminatory treatment in promotion. (interview October 2003) *Josei Union* conducts only a few cases of collective bargaining, there are examples where negotiations for an individual have resulted in broader collective benefits. *Josei Union* negotiated in one case over working time/paid holidays where negotiations were conducted on behalf of an individual but the outcome resulted in all employees becoming aware of their eligibility for and amount of paid holidays they were owed and making claims, including also for their overtime allowance entitlements. Another example is where negotiations over employment conditions whereby companies have been made notified by the union of their infringement of the Labour Standards Law has resulted in the companies developing more appropriate work rules (*Josei Union* 2003). *Josei Union* also provides support for a number of cases included a wage discrimination case and an unfair dismissal case each being fought by a founding member of *Onna Kumiai* the outcomes of which will have wider ramifications, a sexual harassment case and an unfair dismissal case fought by two of its members.

**KOREA:** KWTU and SWTU are registered unions but only KWTU regularly engages in collective bargaining. Both women-only unions in Korea allow individual membership, but KWTU is successfully encouraging the formation of branches for example amongst golf caddies and cooks employed at schools. As a result it is expanding its ability to collective bargain. The focus of its bargaining agenda for the majority of its workers has been on wages, conditions and forms of insurance. (interviews October 2003; June 2004) Both the KWTU and SWTU draw the majority of their membership from women employed in the non full-time workforce. In Korea a growing number of workers are being excluded from coverage of industrial relations legislation due to a series of reforms. Women workers such as those employed as golf caddies and private tutors are not covered by industrial relations legislation but categorised as ‘special employment workers’ because they are not considered to have a ‘direct’ employment relationship, but are considered to be like contractors or independent employees, and as non full-time workers they do not have the three basic rights – to organise, collective bargain and strike. (interview with Maria Rhie Chol Soon, President of KWTU, June 2004) In the case of the golf caddies KWTU negotiated a collective bargaining agreement for the first time in 2001, but in 2003 the Korean High court changed its original decision arguing that the golf caddies were not ‘legal’ employees of the golf club. Consequently KWTU and the caddies had no-one to engage in collective bargaining with and the employer refused to sign the agreement. On 15 October 2003, 110 golf caddies were dismissed from employment at one golf course, five of whom were KWTU union members. At five am the following day, the caddies and union organisers held a rally at the golf course, but the golf course manager denied any responsibility because the caddies were legally not his employees, the struggle continues.

**LOBBYING - JAPAN:** *Josei Union* and *Onna Kumiai* are involved in broader campaigns supporting part-time workers and benefits for temporary workers. (interview October 2003) Kinto taigu (Equal treatment for temporary workers) action 2003. The women-only unions are not affiliated with any peak national union organisation but they do consult and co-operate with Rengō’s Gender Equity Department. It also works to establish connections with international organisations an example of which is the case involving a sexual harassment claim against Mitsubishi in the US where *Josei Union* met with representatives from the National Organisation of Women during a visit to Japan (*Josei Union Tokyo* 1999:25).

Both Josei Union and Onna Kumiai are working to bring about a women-only union network. The seven women-only unions in Japan form a loose coalition largely because many of the members are known to each other through their unions and other venues for activism. A stated future goal of the unions is to expand their membership and create a national and ultimately international network (interviews August 2002).

**KOREA:** From 2000 in Korea, KWTU and SWTU have campaigned with Korean Congress of Trade Unions (KCTU) and Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) to change the labour legislation in order to provide security for 'special employed workers' such as insurance sales workers and private tutors. There has also been broad union support to increase the minimum wage which increased from 420,000 won per month in 2001 to 560,000 per month in 2003 and campaigning continues to increase it to 770,000 won per month. (June 2004 AUD\$1 = W737). (interviews October 2003; June 2004) The KWTU lobbied the government to adopt measures for non full-time workers by providing an example and so the Department of Education has converted some non full-time workers to full-time with plans to increase this number each year. (interview June 2004)

SWTU conducted a five-year struggle for recognition which had at its core the broader struggle of union rights to organise unemployed workers. SWTU's success through the three levels of Korea's judicial system culminated in its recognition as a union in February 2004. Their success has significant ramifications for Korea's broader union movement given the extent of layoffs under the IMF's reforms.

KWTU and SWTU belong to a committee formed in 2000 which comprises representatives from the KCTU, FKTU, KWWAU, SWTU, KWTU and Women's Link (an NGO). This committee recently formed a specialist committee, the Committee Concerning the Promotion of Labour Law Rights for Women (*Yosong nodong bub gaejeong yeondae*), (interview SWTU June 2004).

### ***Similarities with existing women-only unions***

The existence of women-only unions, newly establishing and pre-existing, raise awareness of conditions for women workers and in particular because the women they organise are not usually organised by existing unions. For those they organise, and who retain membership, membership in the union provides and educates members about for example union and labour rights (*Josei Union* 2003; interviews KWTU June 2004). In the case of KAD and 9 to 5 the focus is on women in the female dominated service sector. SEWA organises women employed in the informal economy, who comprise 94 percent of the female workforce in India. (SEWA 2002:4) *Josei Union's* membership is predominantly full-time workers, the majority of whom are employed in small companies where enterprise unions have not formed but despite the growing number of women employed in non full-time jobs in Japan, the memberships of *Josei Union* and *Onna Kumiai* are not rapidly expanding. *Josei Union*, although small is affecting some changes through the few cases of collective bargaining. Korea's KWTU is experiencing growth in membership, and while still small is organising the growing number of temporary workers in Korea. SWTU's future is uncertain due to membership decline, but its core role at present is conducting research into the needs of unemployed women workers. A further similarity is their lobbying function. *Onna Kumiai* functions primarily as a lobby group and counselling centre for women workers, a role which *Josei Union*, KWTU and SWTU also perform.

### ***Differences from existing women-only unions***

A major distinction between women-only unions in Japan and Korea and the early women-only unions is their status as 'second' unions in some workplaces. Their 'minority' status restricts their ability to collective bargain. In Japan management and enterprise unions regularly reach closed shop agreements, although 'second' unions continue to exist. *Josei Union* draws its full-time worker members from non-unionised workplaces and its non full-time worker members are ineligible or excluded from joining the enterprise union at their workplace. In the case of non full-time workers in unionised workplaces, *Josei Union* is unable to bargain collectively on behalf of these workers, although they can represent them in individual grievances (interviews October 2003). *Onna Kumiai* also has a mixed membership of non full-time workers and full-time

workers, all but one of whom has dual union membership. The member without dual membership withdrew because the enterprise union at her workplace refuses to support her struggle over the company's gendered wage payment practices. (interview October 2003) Korean industrial legislation does not at present recognise multi-union workplaces which restricts the ability of KWTU (and in some cases KCTU) to collective bargain, but it is anticipated this long-awaited amendment to the legislation will be introduced in 2005 (interviews June 2004). Both KWTU and SWTU attempt to overcome this constraint by picketing and rallying at workplaces. .

### ***What can be said about women-only unions in Japan and Korea?***

Women-only unions in Japan and Korea are a recent phenomenon compared with their sister organisations in Denmark and the US, yet there are similarities despite different cultural contexts. Women-only unions were created because many of the existing unions excluded or were not interested or able to unionise women workers. Women-only unions in Japan and Korea however differ in that they are considered 'second' unions. For this reason the significance of women-only unions in Japan and Korea lies not in their union membership which is relatively small, nor their ability to collective bargain which is not widespread. Their significance lies in their organisation of non full-time workers, unemployed workers and workers not organised by existing mixed unions. As their membership comprises women, the majority of whom are non full-time workers, they are organising workers which cannot be organised by existing unions in both Japan and Korea. Women-only unions in Japan and Korea address issues of importance to women workers which are often ignored or overlooked by mixed unions. The impact of women-only unions is in increasing the number of unionised workers and in raising awareness of the conditions experienced by women workers, educating both their members but the broader community. In doing so they are contributing to the continued politicisation of women workers and their co-operation in campaigns with the broader union movement provides these disenfranchised workers with a voice in fora from which they have previously been excluded. Interactions with mixed unions may challenge and encourage mixed unions to rethink their strategies.

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