# WOMEN-ONLY UNIONS IN JAPAN AND KOREA: THE IMPACT OF GENDER SPECIFIC UNION ORGANISING

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the 1990s women-only unions re-emerged in Japan and Korea. These unions unlike the mainstream mixed unions in both countries, organise the growing non full-time workforce and women employed in small non-unionised workplaces, both across enterprises and employment status boundaries. By examining several women-only unions in Japan and Korea this paper examines gender-specific union organising and its impact on women workers and the union movement. The paper argues the creation of women-only unions has been an important strategy for women workers in both countries because they address issues around women workers' employment conditions which mainstream unions have either overlooked or have been unable to overcome. They also create a valuable experience of unions and a connection with the working class movement for women workers who have not had this experience. Their success however, has differed. While the gains of Japan's women-only unions are limited, Korea's womenonly unions have been much more successful in mobilising women workers and overcoming sexism in the union movement. Their success is due to the availability of broader organisational assistance and expertise, the existence of a substantial progressive union federation and combined campaigns with the broader mixed union movement.

#### INTRODUCTION

In Osaka, Japan in 1990 a group of women workers formed a women-only union Onna Rōdō Kumiai Kansai (henceforth Onna Kumiai, Women's Union). In Seoul, South Korea (hereafter Korea) in January 1999 another group of women workers formed a womenonly union, the Seoul Womens' Trade Union (SWTU). The formation of both unions signifies the re-emergence of a strategy women workers in Anglophone and Asian countries have used as early as the 1880s as one means of addressing issues such as workplace violence, unequal pay, night work and discrimination. The formation of Onna Kumiai and the SWTU, and the subsequent women-only unions which have formed in Japan and Korea, represents a 'third wave' of gender-specific union organising, a strategy gaining some traction in the Asian region. The women-only unions in Japan and Korea differ from the majority of mainstream, mixed enterprise-based unions in that they organise workers in the growing non full-time workforce, the majority of whom are women, and across company and employment status boundaries. In examining womenonly unions, this research addresses two important questions: what impact have womenonly unions had on women workers and the broader union movement in Japan and Korea?

Analyses of women-only unions are thin on the ground (see Lewenhak 1977; Jacoby 1994; Nutter 2000; Hill 2005) and the re-emergence of women-only unions in Japan and Korea in the last two decades explains to some extent why there is little research available, with even less available in English. Although there are twelve women-only unions in Japan and three in Korea, this paper focuses on and compares two unions from

Japan Onna Kumiai which is Japan's first of the new wave of women-only unions and Josei Union (Womens' Union) which is the largest of the new women-only unions with two unions from Korea. SWTU was selected as it is the first of Korea's new wave of women-only unions and KWTU was chosen as it is Korea's largest women-only union. As almost no research has been conducted on any of these unions (see Ee 2005), this study draws on interviews conducted in 2003 and 2004 with organisers and members, observations at bargaining sessions and union meetings in Japan and participation in campaigns and workshops organised by the KWTU in 2004 and 2005. This methodology was deemed appropriate as the study focuses on women as subjects rather than objects where women are not "passive recipients of unionizing strategies [but are] women creating unionization" (Murray 2000:13). Gender-specific union organising is an important strategy at a time when union renewal and union recruitment are significant issues (see Bronfenbrenner, Friedman, Hurd, Oswald & Seeber 1998; IIRA 2000; Fairbrother & Yates 2003) because it re-connects non-unionised women workers to the union movement. In Japan and Korea non full-time workers, the majority of whom are women, are generally excluded from the mainstream mixed enterprise-based union movement (see Broadbent 2003), leaving these workers isolated and unrepresented. The impact of gender-specific organising has however, been mixed. Gains by Japan's womenonly unions are modest compared with KWTU's success in recruiting large numbers of members and the impact of SWTU's campaign on sexism in the union movement.

# WOMEN IN THE LABOUR MARKET IN JAPAN AND KOREA

In Japan women comprised 40.8 percent of the total working population in 2002 and although the proportion of women employed in the paid workforce has remained steady since 1965, the age composition and industries where women are employed have changed. Briefly, the percentage of young women (15-19 years) employed has declined while nearly 70 per cent of women in their forties are in paid work, particularly non fulltime work where women represent three-quarters of the workforce. Also approximately 60 per cent of women in their thirties are remaining in paid work after the birth of their first child (Kosei Rōdōshō 2003: appendix 9). The increase in women's employment in the service sector in the past decade reflects the importance of the service sector to the Japanese economy since the mid 1960s, and employs more than half the female working population (Kosei Rōdōshō 2003: appendix 24-25). Almost half the women in the paid workforce (42 per cent) are employed in companies of less than 29 employees (Kosei Rōdōshō 2003: appendix 76). In addition to the concentration of women in a few industries, indications are that the wage gap between women and men is not closing. In 2001 women earned 60 per cent of a male wage (Brinton 2001:16), estimated to increase to 48 per cent when part-time workers are included.

In Korea in 2002 women comprised slightly less than 41 per cent of Korea's total paid workforce (Korean Ministry of Labour 2003:109). Women are employed in significant numbers in agriculture (slightly less than 50 per cent), manufacturing (approximately 25 percent) and services particularly wholesale and retail (slightly less than 50 per cent) and hotels and restaurants (69 per cent) (Korean Ministry of Labour 2003:112). Women comprised 28 per cent of full-time employees in 2002 which is a slight increase from 24 per cent in the period 1998-99. By employment status women dominate the categories of unpaid family workers (89 per cent), temporary employees (55.8 per cent) and daily workers (48.6 per cent), figures which have remained relatively constant since 1996 (Korean Ministry of Labour 2003:118). Korean women are also overrepresented in small workplaces with 64 per cent employed in workplaces with less than five employees (interviews June 2004). The impact of women's employment conditions have also had a negative impact on the wage gap between women and men with women earning 54 per cent of a male wage (Brinton 2001:16), estimated to be greater when part-time workers are included.

## WOMEN IN UNIONS IN JAPAN AND KOREA

Union membership in Japan and Korea mirrors the international trend of union decline. In 2005, union density in Japan was 19 per cent compared to 35.4 per cent in 1970 (Kosei Rōdōshō 2005). In 2002 13.5 per cent of the female workforce was unionised while the percentage of women workers in the workforce has barely changed since the 1970s, the

number of women union members has declined from a high of 29.4 per cent in 1970 (Kosei Rōdōshō 2003: appendix 95). In 2002 women workers represented 28 per cent of the total union membership. It is clear women workers' links to unions have weakened and that they are under-represented in the unions of which they are members (Kosei Rōdōshō 2001: appendix 85). Unionisation for non full-time workers, the majority of whom are women, is estimated at only two per cent. Given women workers' declining levels of union membership it is not surprising that their representation on union committees is also low. In 2000 women represented slightly more than six per cent of members on the executive committee of *Rengō*, (Japanese Trade Union Confederation), Japan's largest national labour organisation (*Rengō* 2002:52).

In Korea in 2001 union density stood at 14.5 per cent which represents a decline of nine per cent since 1989 which was the most recent peak in union activism. Women have suffered the biggest decline in density as 7.4 per cent of women workers, compared to 19 per cent of male workers, were union members, a drop of 11 per cent since 1989 and a decline of 21 percent since 1977 (Korean Ministry of Labour 2003:154). With the increase in part-time workers, and women workers representing the majority of these, their rates of unionisation are estimated at less than two per cent (interviews KWTU and SWTU 2004). Women are also poorly represented in union leadership. In 1999 women represented 30 per cent of the membership of the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), the largest peak labour organisation however, of its 700 leaders only 30 were women (Seok 1999). It is this extent of under-representation, and other issues within the union movement, which prompted groups of women workers in Japan and Korea to explore alternative union organising strategies. The progressive Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) is aiming to increase its proportion of women committee members to thirty per cent (interview October 2004).

## OVERVIEW OF WOMEN-ONLY UNIONS

Women workers have largely organised within mixed unions often forming women's departments or committees. That womens' committees and departments have achieved significant gains for women workers is without question, but research suggests that the impact of this strategy for mobilising women workers long-term engagement with unions has been mixed (see Milkman 1985; Briskin and McDermott 1993; Hensman 1996; Elton 1997; Pocock 1997; Mann, Ledwith and Colgan 1997; Tshoaedi 2002; Parker 2002). In contrast there is very little research which examines women-only unions, (see Jacoby 1994; Nutter 2000; Hill 2005) possibly because the unions, with some exceptions, either didn't survive very long or became an outmoded strategy in Anglophone countries when unions started unionising unskilled workers (German 1989).

As mentioned there is little research available on early women-only unions (Jacoby 1994; Nutter 2000; Hill 2005) but writers analysing them at the time of their formation were critical of their focus. Clara Zetkin, leader of the German socialist workers movement, refused to co-operate with Germany's early women-only unions arguing that joint action with the women-only unions "could not lead to real action, but would lead to a blunting of the sharp edge of socialist policy" (cited in Cliff 1984:74). Eleanor Marx when speaking of the poor conditions of American women workers observed there was a need for a women's organisation, "not as a separate body but as part of the greater social movement" (Kapp 1976:166). Alexandra Kollontai argued "any separation on the basis of sex is artificial; it runs absolutely counter to the interests of the worker and can only damage the immediate aims of the trade union struggle" (1918:27). In Japan, Yamakawa Kikue, a leading socialist feminist of the 1920s, successfully argued for the necessity of organising women's committees within the union movement in the face of strong opposition from male unionists. She argued that because Japanese society of the 1920s was organised on the basis of 'bourgeois principles' it was necessary for the workers movements to support 'women's special demands' in order for women to overcome discrimination (Mackie 1997: 106-107). A contemporary assessment of early women-only unions recognise that, while liberal feminist in orientation, their achievements need to be acknowledged as they were gained at a time when the widespread organisation of women and other 'unskilled' workers was in its infancy. England's Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) "challeng[ed] the men's dictatorial views [and] had moved women's

trade union organization from the primary stage of simply establishing unions, to a claim for equality with men in union policy-making and leadership" (Lewenhak 1977:73) and "initiated the use of legislation to help workers who were unable to build unions" (Lewenhak 1977:81).

Milkman's (1985) analysis of a contemporary women-only union in the US was also positive arguing the union provided a link between feminism and unionism, introducing women to the operation and functioning of unions, as well as organising women excluded from existing mixed unions. Briskin's analysis of women-only organisations in the US and Canada emphasises the difficulties gender-specific organising faces "including the fact that it is not institutionally located and may have very limited access to resources" (1999:544). Briskin argues these obstacles can be overcome in the case of unions through the creation of women's committees within the mixed union movement, which she believes can maintain a balance between integrating with the mixed union movement and complete autonomy of purpose (1999:544). In the Indian context, Sujata Mody, an organiser of a women-only union in Chennai, recognises that women-only unions can fulfil an important role for women workers because " . . . [mixed mainstream] trade unions [in India] see her [women workers] need to fight for her economic betterment [but] they usually ignore her social responsibilities . . ." (2005:13). With union membership declining in Japan and Korea, women workers employed in small businesses or as non full-time workers face a similar situation to women workers in the early days of union formation in Anglophone countries, in that they are largely excluded from the enterprise-based unions. The difference is that they are excluded not on the basis of sex, as in the early days, but because of their employment status.

Important for an understanding of the third wave of women-only unions is an analysis of earlier waves of gender-specific union organising in Japan and Korea. Current research on Japan indicates there are only a few examples of women workers having formed women-only unions. The unions were formed largely to overcome the lack of independence from management of the existing unions and to pursue issues important to women workers, but in all cases the unions eventually dissolved. Women workers at the Omi Kenshi textile mill in Japan formed a women-only union in 1954 because the existing male dominated union was too close to management. The new union formed in May 1954 with 20 employees and subsequently became the focus for conducting a strike lasting 106 days. This new women-only union successfully challenged the paternalism and patriarchal management style of the company, and gained better conditions for all workers (Price 1997:119). Silk workers at Yamago also initiated the creation of an independent women-only union in 1957 to overcome the close relationship between management and the existing union and in spite of harassment by the company. The union co-existed alongside the company-friendly union until 1960 and forced the company to accede to some of its demands (Price 1997:148-49). Female bank workers formed a women-only union in 1971 to counter the discriminatory promotion policies agreed to by the male dominated enterprise union, but ultimately their campaign to overturn the policies was unsuccessful (Kumazawa 1994: 280-81).

Unlike Japan, Korean women workers organised women-only unions in the early 20th century while under Japanese colonial rule (1910-45). Women workers were active in a number of unions affiliated with political (mostly the illegal communist party) or national liberation movements. The first documented women-only union was organised at the Kyongsong Rubber factory in Seoul, and called a strike over the harassment and mistreatment of women factory workers by a supervisor (Barraclough 2006). In the post colonial, postwar period Korea was ruled by a military dictatorship for almost three decades from the early 1960s and union organisation was strictly sponsored and monitored by the state. The suicide by self-immolation of Chun Tae-il in 1970 in protest at the inhumane conditions of women garment workers became the catalyst for the organisation of independent unions (Chun 2003) - often initiated by women workers. The majority of the activists were employed in the garment, textile and electronics industries and they either created new independent unions or they worked to gain control and transform existing company-friendly unions (Koo 2001: 72-73). While there were male workers who supported the actions of the women unionists, management also favoured the strategy of mobilising male workers to destroy the women-led unions. Women remained active within the union movement, but from the mid 1980s with the industrial shift to heavy manufacturing, the union movement was dominated by male workers.

# CASE STUDIES OF WOMEN-ONLY UNIONS IN JAPAN AND KOREA

In the 1990s we see the re-emergence of women-only unions in Japan and Korea. Organisationally *Onna Kumiai*, *Josei Union* and SWTU resemble general unions while KWTU organises both enterprise/workplace-based branches and occupational branches. The four unions discussed are structurally similar as all have committees which oversee the running of the union as well as smaller committees for specialised functions such as the publication of materials, organisation of activities, recruiting and education.

Japan's Onna Kumiai organises approximately 70 members and is run by volunteers (interview August 2002; October 2003) while Josei Union has 250 members and is staffed by two full-time organisers. Neither union is affiliated with any peak national union organisation or supported by a women's group, but they have established connections and participate in campaigns with Rengo's (Japan Trade Union Confederation) Gender Equality Department. The aims of Onna Kumiai and Josei Union include supporting and improving the working conditions of union members, aiming for the abolition of sex discrimination and gaining women's industrial rights, working to gain equal pay for work of equal value, the advancement of the social status of women and establishing networks with women's struggles internationally (Josei Union 2003). Onna Kumiai was formed by former women workers employed at the Japan National Railway (JNR) because they were disillusioned with the overly bureaucratic nature of unions and the male domination of union structures particularly from 1985 when the company was being privatised (interviews October 2002; November 2002; October 2003). Josei Union was formed in 1995 within the National General Workers Union, by two women formerly employed in the Women's Department of this union. They split from the union because of harassment from male union officials over their focus on 'women's issues' and created an independent gender specific union in February 2002.

In Korea, the SWTU formed in January 1999 and the KWTU formed in July 1999. The SWTU, like Japan's women-only unions is independent from other union federations or organisations, while KWTU is an affiliate of the umbrella women's organisation Korean Women Workers' Associations United (KWWAU). The SWTU formed in January 1999 with 15 members, but was not granted legal recognition as a union until February 2004 because it campaigned to organise unemployed workers. SWTU came about as many of its founding members were dissatisfied with the employment conditions and union representation available for women. Two of its founding members were fighting against forced retirement after marriage (Seok 1999; interview October 2003). Other members employed by an NGO, were frustrated by the limitations of the NGO structure which was restricted in the support it could provide for women with workplace grievances and the impact it could have to improve women workers' employment conditions (interview October 2003). SWTU employs three full-time organisers. The KWTU is the largest of all the women-only unions in this study comprising nine regional branches, with at least one full-time organiser in each branch, and a combined total of 5000 members (interviews October 2003; June 2004). The KWTU was created by members of the Korean Women Workers' Association United (KWWAU) and while organizationally separate, maintains a close affiliation with KWWAU (KWWAU 2001). Co-operation between SWTU and KWTU occurs but is dependent on the issue, examples of which are discussed later.

The following section analyses the impact of women-only unions on women workers and the broader union movement, and argues that while the success of the strategy differs between the countries, women-only unions in Japan and Korea provide women with a link to unionism by organising those women workers excluded from existing mixed unions.

#### **MEMBERSHIP**

Women-only unions in Japan and Korea generally recruit members on an individual basis, although KWTU with its greater resources has more recently focused on organising workplace and occupational branches. Unions in both countries include workers who are not traditionally the focus of the enterprise-based mixed union movements such as workers employed in non full-time employment, in the service sector and in nonunionised small enterprises (interviews October 2003). KWTU, which organises approximately 5000 members and growing, is the exception as the three other unions discussed are small and membership numbers are either stagnating or declining. Mirroring women's employment patterns in both countries members are largely drawn from manufacturing and the service industries. Occupations such as clerical, specialist/technical workers, school cooks, cleaners, golf caddies and hotel maids are prevalent, and while non full-time or independent contractors are dominant in Korea, Josei Union's membership is overwhelmingly employed on a full-time basis (68 per cent) (Josei Union Tokyo 2002:39; interviews October 2003; June 2004). Although 'independent contractors' in Korea are not covered by employment laws, legally the Labour Standards Legislation quarantees the employment rights of all non-full-time workers. As discussed earlier the majority of non full-time workers in Japan and Korea are women and only two per cent are unionised. It is difficult to understate their employment vulnerability and underscores the positive role women-only union's play in raising their collective awareness and linking them to the broader working class movement.

#### SERVICE/ACTIVITIES

The activities/services of unions are similar to those of 'traditional' unions. However, unlike 'traditional' notions of unions Josei Union and Onna Kumiai conduct collective bargaining in a limited number of cases, while the majority of cases are negotiated individually. Emphasising the organising model of "empowering workers . . . [to] enable them to find solutions to their problems. . . . developing measures that will promote activism amongst members . . ." (Peetz, Webb and Jones 2002:87) Josei Union fosters member activism by encouraging members to literally resolve the issue by yourself (anata no mondai wa jibun de yatte moraimasu). Depending on the issue the member is facing, this can involve dealing with the paperwork or conducting negotiations with a union organiser assisting. In addition there is the added benefit of ensuring optimum use of scarce resources, notably union organiser's time. SWTU's functions were restricted by its illegal status and so the core of its activities involved organising rallies outside a company or distributing leaflets. KWTU has conducted collective bargaining with its branches and successfully concluded agreements on behalf of golf caddies, although these have subsequently been challenged by management. All the women-only unions undertake education and solidarity activities for activists, members and non-members, including study tours between the two countries. They also conduct fundraising activities.

# DISCUSSION

#### **IMPACT ON WOMEN WORKERS**

In both Japan and Korea the grievances faced by women workers are largely the result of workforce restructuring, employers' drive to achieve greater workforce flexibility and the shift to individual contracting. In 2002 unfair dismissal, sexual harassment and bullying topped the list of issues *Josei Union* dealt with (Josei Union Tokyo 2003a: 8) but grievances resulting from non-standard employment contracts and occupational illness had also increased since the previous year.

#### **RESOLUTION OF GRIEVANCES**

One restriction on the ways in which women-only unions operate is that in both countries they are considered 'second' unions by employers, which restricts their ability to recruit members in workplaces with an existing enterprise union. Japan's Trade Union Law permits multiple unions in a single company (Araki 2002:162) but the majority of union/management agreements recognise 'one union, one workplace'. This restricts the organising ability of other unions including women-only unions to organise part-time workers who are excluded from their workplace enterprise union. Korea's Trade Union

Law does not recognise multiple union workplaces, which restricts the ability of KWTU, SWTU, and in some cases KCTU, to organise workers. Their restricted access to workplaces and their individual organising focus means *Josei Union* and *Onna Kumiai* resolve grievances on an individual basis. While this is not always a satisfactory outcome as the job market is tight for women, particularly older women, there have been collective outcomes from individual bargaining. *Josei Union's* individual negotiations over working time/paid holiday entitlements have led to other employees becoming aware of their entitlements. As a result the claim was broadened to include claims for payment of overtime wages (Josei Union Tokyo 2003b; interviews October 2003 & June 2004).

SWTU is also restricted in its ability to collectively bargain with employers and so holds pickets and rallies outside workplaces to shame companies, which has had limited success (interview October 2003). KWTU's access is also restricted but as it organises branches in non-unionised workplaces it is able to gain critical mass at workplaces or in occupations and thus bargain with employers. This has been the case with cooks and librarians employed in universities and schools who are organised by workplace, while school nutritionists and laboratory assistants who are employed in smaller numbers are organised into regional branches by occupation. All of these workers have had grievances arising from employers' demands (individual schools or universities) for flexible workforces. Cooks employed full-time in a university cafeteria took strike action for over 4 months when the subcontracting company sacked them all, only to offer them their jobs again but on a part-time basis. The strike was successful and the university reinstated the cooks as full-time employees (interview October 2003). The success of this struggle has meant KWTU has been able to recruit cooks employed at other university cafeterias as well as at school canteens. Recent actions involving golf caddies and television scriptwriters are also significant as they involve workers who, due to changes in industrial relations legislation, are considered independent contractors and so do not have the same rights as employees. In 2001, KWTU negotiated the first ever collective bargaining agreement for golf caddies but the golf course manager appealed the agreement in the High Court. The court reversed its original decision arguing that as golf caddies were not the 'legal' employees of the golf club, but independent contractors, the club bore no employment responsibility for them. The company responded to the caddies' activism by sacking them. In October 2003 110 caddies were sacked, five caddies were members of KWTU. The union and the caddies responded by holding rallies and picketing the golf course attempting to shame the company and raise awareness of their conditions. Workers defined as 'independent' present a dilemma for unions. While the KWTU is able to organise and mobilise them, remedying their vulnerability long-term requires broader working class mobilisation.

# **CAMPAIGNS WITH BROADER IMPLICATIONS**

Two of *Onna Kumiai*'s members have been involved for more than ten years in court actions to address issues of unfair dismissal, non-payment of retrenchment pay and wage discrimination on the basis of gender. *Onna Kumiai* has been instrumental in the on-going struggle of Ms Yakabi Fumiko who has launched court action against her employer for gender based wage and promotion discrimination. Her claims have been upheld by Osaka's District and High courts, in the face of the employer's challenge, and she is now awaiting the outcome of the employer's appeal to the Supreme Court. An increasing number of women workers have launched gender wage and promotion discrimination cases but the outcomes have been mixed (Kōsei Rōdōshō 2003). Ms Yakabi's case addresses broader issues for women workers, and ultimately all workers, building a solid body of precedent, but it is unclear whether courts have to refer to these cases when making judgements.

The SWTU, despite the size of its membership, has had a significant impact in raising awareness of gender discrimination within broad elements of civil society including the union movement. The SWTU has played a leading role in identifying and opposing gender discriminatory practices, including sexual harassment and unfair dismissals perpetuated within mixed trade unions. It is at present representing two groups of women who are employed by unions; one case involves the unfair dismissal of five women and the second is a sexual harassment case against a union official, with both cases yet to be resolved (interview October 2004; June 2004). The SWTU has also launched campaigns

protesting against the stereotyped depiction of women, and other forms of discrimination against women workers, by unions and social movement groups. Their complaint about a KCTU poster depicting a woman as a 'mother' supporting a male 'worker' elicited an apology from the union federation (Ee 2005). SWTU also played a leading role in the Hundred Women's Committee for the Elimination of Sexual Harassment within Movements (2000-2003), which named prominent perpetrators of sexual harassment and violence within social movement groups. While there has been debate over the committee's tactics, interviews with female activists in the KCTU indicate the committee has had an impact in "changing gender relations within labour groups" (Ee 2005). Following the committee's actions in 2001 the KCTU enacted its own Code for the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (Ee 2005). Co-operation between the SWTU and KWTU is limited and dependent on the issue. In 2002 the SWTU, KWTU, KCTU and Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), and other groups, joined the Council to Reform the Maternity Protection Act (interviews October 2003; June 2004; Ee 2005). The SWTU and KCTU later withdrew from the Council because the focus of the reform concentrated on women working in large companies and neglected the conditions of women employed in small companies and non full-time workers (Ee 2005).

#### IMPACT ON THE MIXED UNION MOVEMENT

#### **CAMPAIGNS**

Women-only unions in Japan and Korea, like their sisters internationally, lobby governments and focus on issues of discriminatory pay and employment practices, equal employment conditions for non full-time workers, social insurance for unemployed workers, maternity protection and increases to the minimum wage. *Josei Union* and *Onna Kumiai* are involved in broad campaigns supporting equal treatment for part-time workers and benefits for temporary workers such as the *Kinto Taigu* (Equal treatment for temporary workers) Action 2003 (interview October 2003). *Onna Kumiai* participated in an action in October 2003 to address issues of equal rights for part-time workers which involved leaflet distribution, marching, holding speak outs and performing a play at a series of nominated venues around the march route. SWTU on the other hand has had a much broader impact. In its five-year legal struggle for recognition and the right to organise unemployed workers it achieved a significant victory for the broader union movement in February 2004 when the Korean Supreme Court recognised its right, and therefore the right of all unions, to organise unemployed workers (interviews October 2003; June 2004).

#### **CO-OPERATION WITH OTHER ORGANISATIONS**

Japan's women-only unions, while not affiliated with national union organisations, cooperate with *Rengo*'s Gender Equity Department, and internationally are affiliated with the Committee for Asian Women (CAW), but overall their impact has been limited. Japan's women-only unions are small and consistent with Briskin's observations in Anglophone countries their lack of institutional connection limits their resources, their ability to mobilise large numbers of women and thus have a demonstrable effect on the broader union movement. *Onna Kumiai* and *Josei Union* resemble Japan's 'new' type unions which organise within a geographical area or based on employment status such as part-time, day labour or labour hire workers (Kawanishi 1992; Gill 2001), which are all relatively small and unable to mobilise large numbers of workers. *Onna Kumiai* and *Josei Union* are involved in broader national and international campaigns including support for part-time workers and benefits for temporary workers, the community union network and Equal Conditions Action 2003 (interview October 2003).

Since 2000 the KWTU and SWTU have campaigned with the Korean Congress of Trade Unions (KCTU) and Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) to change the labour legislation and provide security for contract or independent workers. KWTU organises and campaigns with subcontract cleaners on university and school campuses who are employed on or below the minimum wage and together with the SWTU, KCTU and FKTU, have focused on gaining increases to the minimum wage. Gaining the support of the much larger KCTU and FKTU has resulted in a successful campaign to raise the minimum wage with increases from between eight to thirteen percent annually from 2000 until

2005 (interviews October 2003; June 2004; Nah 2005:116). The KWTU has also extended its campaign for non full-time workers by successfully lobbying the national government to begin converting some non full-time workers to full-time status (interview June 2004).

KWTU is the only one of the four women-only unions discussed with direct affiliation to an outside body, namely KWWAU. The financial and organisational support KWTU receives from this umbrella organisation of women's groups ensures organisational stability and its connection and location within the women's movement has possibly reduced the necessity of affiliating with a larger mixed union federation. This option was identified as contributing to the success of gender-specific organising in Anglophone countries but one which required creating a balance between autonomy and integration (Briskin 1999). As KWTU receives the support of the women's movement it may be able to remain independent of the mainstream union movement and in this way find it easier than women-only unions in Anglophone countries to maintain its gender-specific approach to organising. Unlike Korea's KCTU, the more progressive/activist elements of Japan's union movement are comparatively small and even if co-operation were considered, would be unable to mobilise a broad section of the working class. Likewise in recent times the women's movement appears to be concentrating on legislative rights such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Law and its amendments, with little focus on mobilising women workers or mass campaigns.

## CONCLUSIONS

The significance of women-only unions in Japan and Korea lies not in the numbers of union members they organise, which are relatively small, nor their ability to conduct collective bargaining which is limited. Their significance lies in organising women employed as non full-time workers, unemployed workers or full-time workers not organised by existing enterprise-based mixed unions. The organising focus of womenonly unions indicates a potentially huge membership that existing mixed unions in Japan and Korea are unable or unwilling to organise (Yamashita 2005). Women-only unions have had a significant impact on the lives of their members by addressing and resolving issues such as unfair dismissal, non payment of wages and benefits, sexual harassment and violence, issues which mainstream unions ignore or are unable to address, raising awareness of working class politics and the benefits of collective representation. Womenonly unions, by increasing the number of unionised workers, raise awareness of the conditions experienced by women workers, amongst women and the broader workers movement and population, through forms of organising which encourage women workers to actively participate in the running of the union. While the gains of Japan's women-only unions are limited, Korea's women-only unions have been much more successful in mobilising women workers and overcoming sexism in the union movement. Their success is due to the availability of broader organisational assistance and expertise, the existence of a substantial progressive union federation and combined campaigns with the broader mixed union movement.

Declining union membership and strategies for union renewal are issues of debate for academics, union officials and union members world-wide, and an examination of women-only unions in Japan and Korea contributes to this debate. Not only do women-only unions address the needs of a growing number of non-unionised women workers which they argue male-dominated unions do not address, they extend collective representation to workers who may have had little experience of unionism or the working class movement. The support of the women's movement and subsequent successes in Korea has challenged the culture, policies and practices of male-dominated, mixed unions. While the focus of women-only unions in Japan and Korea is not confined to advancing conditions for women alone demonstrated by their participation in and support of actions for part-timers, agency and temporary workers as well as joint actions to increase the minimum wage (Korea) and in benefits for temporary workers (Japan), their lack of institutional support in Japan limits their impact. In co-operating with mixed unions on broader issues, women-only unions in Japan and Korea may have a

transformative effect on mixed unions and challenge them to rethink their strategies and create networks and connections beneficial for the broader workers' movement.

# **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This research was conducted under the auspices of an Australian Research Council postdoctoral fellowship. Thanks to Tom Bramble and anonymous referees for comments and suggestions.

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