

Women's Movements in Asia

Feminisms and transnational activism

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11 Mapping a hundred years of activism

Women's movements in Korea

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Women's movements in Korea, like women's movements in other Asian countries, started as a result of interaction with the West, and political organizations concerned with women's issues arose during Korea's first effort to modernize in the late 1800s. Over the past hundred years, women's movements have ebbed and flowed during periods of Japanese colonial rule, civil war, military dictatorship, and democratization, and developed in conjunction with political movements that focused on broader issues affecting the whole society. Women's movements in Korea have been arenas where groups with varied ideological backgrounds have struggled to advance women's interests according to their differing interpretations of those interests. Thus, the history of women's movements has been 'fraught with tension, antagonism, competition, and cooperation' among different groups revolving around the issues of gender, class and nation (Cho 1996: 5; see also Lee 1996; Sim 1985; Yi 1994).

The first women's movement organization, Ch'anyang-hoe ('Praise and Encouragement Association'), was formed in 1898 with a mission to promote girls' education and, in 2008, there were 232 civil organizations dealing with women's issues registered as members of two umbrella groups—Han'guk yōsōng tanch'e yōnhaphoe (Korean Women's Associations United, KWAU) and Han'guk yōsōng tanch'e hyōbuihoe (Korean National Council of Women, KNCW), both with active websites (www.women21.or.kr; www.kncw.or.kr).¹ These two umbrella groups coordinate nearly all non-governmental organizations' activities dealing with women's issues in Korea. The Korean National Council of Women was established in 1959 by middle-class women, including both housewives and professional women. Its founding platform, 'improving women's status and providing service to the society and the country' (*Han'guk yōsōng tanch'e hyōbuihoe* 1993) called on women to participate in building a strong nation. The KWAU was established in 1987 as an umbrella organization for progressive women's groups, connecting twenty-one previously existing or newly founded member organizations. It developed out of the democracy movement and took a position that women's problems cannot be separated from other social issues (Cho 1996: 8).

This chapter aims to map the turbulent hundred-year history of women's movements while examining significant issues that came into prominence at

specific historical junctures. Within women's movements, various currents of feminism, including Christian, liberal, radical and socialist, predominated at different historical moments. At various times, these currents converged because of their common interests in the status of women in Korean society, and each worked to change women's status. They approached this task from different ideological positions, and their agendas sometimes overlapped but, at other times, were in conflict.

Beginnings

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Korean society was forced to adapt as the territorial aggression of its neighbours drove the country into the international political arena where its weakness left its destiny in the hands of outside powers. At the same time as Korea's political fortunes were waning, foreign missionaries were introducing new ideas that clashed violently with the Confucian ideology that had guided the kingdom for the previous 500 years.² This period was marked by an intense questioning of the existing social order, an important part of which was a re-examination of the position of women within Korean society.³ During this time Western missionaries began establishing a modern education system for girls.⁴ Korea's first girls' school, Ewha Haktang, was founded in 1886 by Mary Fitch Scranton, an American Methodist missionary, and this was soon followed by a number of other missionary schools for girls.

During this period, progressive male intellectuals⁵ supported equality for women along with other reforms of society. Korea's first vernacular newspaper, *Tongnip Sinmun* ('The Independent Newspaper'),⁶ published editorials advocating equality between men and women. An 1896 editorial asserted: 'Women are not inferior to men; men are so uncivilized that they mistreat women without any humane considerations or just cause. Isn't it a sign of primitiveness that they oppress women merely by their physical superiority?' (Kim 1976: 214). The paper also urged education for girls:

If women are educated and develop interests in society, they would realize that their rights as human beings are equal to men's. They would also find a way to stop the brutality of men. We ask, therefore, that women be educated even better than men in order to educate other women and become an example of behaviour to men.

(ibid.: 215)

In 1898, a group of upper-class women formed a women's organization, Ch'anyang-hoe, in order to establish a secular girls' school. They published their manifesto in *Tongnip Sinmun* on 9 September 1898, a document that is considered 'the first declaration of women's rights' in Korean history (quoted in Kim 1996: 128). The manifesto laid out their goals to use education for Korean women to achieve equal status with men: 'Modelling ourselves after other countries, we have plans for founding a school for girls to educate them in a variety of subjects,

rules and personal bearing, making them equal to men in the future' (quoted in ibid.). After first approaching the government for funding and being rebuffed, Ch'anyang-hoe went ahead with funds from its own members and founded Sunsong girls' school in December 1898 (ibid.: 129). Although Ch'anyang-hoe soon became embroiled in political intrigue and disappeared from the scene, its girls' school served as a model for other private girls' schools that 'mushroomed during the next decade' (ibid.: 130).

Graduates of these schools, armed with Western education and Western values, sought to replace the patriarchal value system of Yi dynasty Korea with gender equality and the ideology of democracy. In particular, Christianity's relative gender equality raised Korean women's awareness of their subordinate position within Confucian ideology. Women, educated by Christian schools, became the leaders of Korea's first women's movement and also played key roles in the independence movement during the subsequent colonial period.

Colonial period (1910-45)

The early 1900s were a chaotic period that saw the demise of the nation, and its incorporation into the growing Japanese empire. In 1905, Japan forced Korea to become a Japanese protectorate and, in 1910, it annexed Korea and established a colonial government. The colonial regime was to last for thirty-five years, during which Korea experienced varying degrees of political repression as its weak farming economy was absorbed into Japan's growing capitalist economy. In addition to reorganizing rural production under Japanese auspices, the colonial regime expanded mining and manufacturing in service of the Japanese economy. The regime also oversaw an increasing urban population and the continued expansion of education. The compulsory universal education system implemented by the colonial government increased the number of schools for girls.

The early years of Japanese rule coincided with the introduction of Western liberalism based on a philosophy of individualism which appealed strongly to the first generation of Korean women to receive a Western-style education. These mostly upper-class, educated women sought to replace the Confucian ideal of womanhood with an alternative modern ideal, *sin'yôsong* ('new woman').⁷ Their progressive essays published in new magazines and newspapers advocated 'women's self-realization' and 'free choice in marriage' (Cho 1988: 96). Some of these early *sin'yôsong* regarded it as their pioneering duty to oppose the traditional family system and tried to live according to their beliefs. These modern women felt they should be free to form relationships based on love, rather than being legally bound into an arranged marriage. The new ideology of *sin'yôsong* was expressed in 1922 in a characteristic editorial in the magazine *Puin* ('Woman'). The editorial urges its readers to transform themselves completely, not just superficially:

Should we only use the word civilization and not adopt its content; ... should we only be intoxicated by the beautiful words of male and female equality

and not cultivate our capacity for equality ... should we only adopt Western hair styles ... and dress ... and not create the situation that requires it ... should we only be proud that we do not do sewing and not learn more important skills; and should we only be proud of escaping from ordinary kitchen work and not learn more important work?

(*Puin* ('Woman') 1922 (Park 1977: 109–10))

Three of the most well-known *sin'yōsōng* of the 1920s—Kim Wōn-ju, Kim Myōng-sun and Na Hye-sōk—were all beneficiaries of the modern education offered by missionaries. Kim Wōn-ju (1896–1971) attended Ewha Haktang and studied in Japan before returning to Korea. A well-known poet and writer, Kim advocated the new sexual morality of the *sin'yōsōng* in her article, 'Our Ideal': 'We need to protest against the old sexual morality that disregards our individuality and character. ... We need to get rid of the old idea that if a woman lost her virginity, her love is no longer pure' (quoted in Cho 1988: 97). Kim married twice and divorced twice and was most notorious for her love affair with Yi Kwang-su, a famous writer who was married to another woman. In later years, she retreated from her avant-garde stance and ended her life as a Buddhist nun. Kim Myōng-sun (1896–1951) also studied at Ewha Haktang before going to Japan to attend Tokyo Women's College. She became a novelist, and her first novel was published in a famous literary magazine, *Ch'ōngch'un* ('The Heyday of Youth'), in 1917. Her reputation as a writer was overshadowed by her lifestyle of 'free love', and she became a target of society's criticism against *sin'yōsōng*. Na Hye-sōk (1896–1948), the first Korean woman professional painter and a reform-minded writer and critic, was another well-known *sin'yōsōng* during the same period: 'A beneficiary of progressive education in Korea, Japan, and Europe, rarely available to average Koreans of her time, Na enjoyed high social visibility and reputation' (Kim 2002: 1). She attended Jinmyōng Women's School before leaving for Japan to study painting at the Tokyo Women's Art College. She returned to Korea in 1913, worked as a junior high school teacher, became involved in nationalist politics and married a progressive intellectual. In 1927, she embarked on a tour of Europe and America with her husband, and chose to remain behind in Paris. Na's love affair with Ch'oe Lin in Paris was widely publicized and condemned by society because she was a married woman and a mother of four children (Kwon 1998: 387). As a proponent of 'free love', Na pursued her love affairs despite becoming a target of severe social criticism.⁸ Nevertheless, her life was far from a happy one; her husband eventually divorced her, and she died a pauper.

The term *sin'yōsōng* was first used by women who had received modern education to refer to themselves, but by the end of the 1920s, it came to designate women with loose sexual morality and, in the extreme, implied a high-class call girl. Thus educated women began calling themselves 'inteli' women to distinguish themselves from the others. These first generation women's liberationists faded out at the end of the 1920s without having made noticeable gains for women in society and attacked by both conservatives and progressives (Cho 1988: 97–8).

In addition to women who sought women's liberation through greater personal freedom, many women were active participants in political movements during the colonial period. Women students who were educated at the Ewha Haktang played an especially important role in the anti-colonial movement, 'forming an underground society called the Patriotic Women's League' (Jayawardena 1986: 222). Ewha students were prominent in the March First Movement in 1919 against Japanese occupation. During the March First Movement, many demonstrations were led by women from Ewha. The young woman who became emblematic of the independence struggle was an Ewha student, Yu Kwan-sun, who led the demonstration at her hometown in Ch'ungch'ōng province. She was arrested and tortured to death by the Japanese at age sixteen. Christian women, who participated in the March First Movement, became more aware of nationalist ideology, but the colonial government's suppression prevented the churches from developing into an overt political movement. Faced with the Japanese repression, Christian women backed away from direct confrontation with the Japanese, but continued nationalist work underground through proselytizing and organizing night classes (Lee 1996: 159).

Women were also important in organizations based on socialist ideas, first introduced to Korea by students educated in Japan (Yi 1989: 264–5). The Korean Communist Party was founded in 1925, and its early leadership included one notable woman, Chōng Chōng-Myōng. Women in this and other socialist organizations set as their main goal, national liberation, and, since they directly challenged Japanese rule, they were suppressed nearly as quickly as they formed (Cho 1988: 98–9).

In 1927, a coalition of missionary and socialist women formed Kūn'u-hoe, an important new women's organization. Kūn'u-hoe advocated progressive positions on a variety of social issues and declared in its mission statement that 'the oppression of Korean women is caused by both Confucian patriarchy and the contradictions of modern capitalism' (Yi 1989: 268). Kūn'u-hoe advocated rights for women, worked at exposing the terrible working conditions endured by Korean women workers, and advocated national independence from Japan. For four years, Kūn'u-hoe struggled with both internal division and external oppression before breaking up in 1931 (Yi 1989: 269–71; Yi 1994: 235–6). Kūn'u-hoe is important because it was the first women's organization that claimed to represent all '10 million Korean women' and was the first alliance of progressive missionary-educated women and progressive socialist women.

The Japanese colonial regime also made use of women's organizations to rally support for itself. As Japan mobilized the resources of Korea for its war effort, it established several pro-colonial government women's groups, such as 'Puin kyemong toknyōban' (1938) and 'Chosōn injonbokukdan puinhoe' (1942) to recruit women to support the war. Young women recruited by these groups were among those who ended up as 'comfort women', military prostitutes serving the Japanese Imperial Army (Son 1993: 376).

Throughout the colonial period, women's direct participation in labour increased. As colonial Korea was drawn into Japan's war efforts, men were drafted into the

military and to provide labour for factories and mines. Rural women were forced to take over a greater share of farm labour, while urban women took on new roles as wage labourers in factories. The textile industry was the employer of more than 50 per cent of these women industrial workers.⁹

Liberation to the fall of Syngman Rhee

During the last years of Japanese colonial government, national liberation movements were forced underground and the Korean women's movement effectively disappeared. After liberation, however, women's organizations were among the many social and political movements that sprung up in the contest to define Korea's future (see Cumings 1997: 185ff). On 17 August 1945, the first post-liberation women's organization, Kōnkuk Pūnyō Tongmaeng, was established by women activists representing a broad range of ideologies.

Kōnkuk Pūnyō Tongmaeng moved steadily to the left, and its more conservative members departed the organization. In December, it renamed itself Chosŏn Pūnyō Ch'ongdongmaeng, affiliated with the Communist Party and began mass organizing. It renamed itself again in 1947, NamChosŏn Minju yōsŏng Tongmaeng, recasting itself as a parallel organization to the North Korean PukChosŏn Minju yōsŏng Tongmaeng. Each of these organizations was opposed by the American military government in South Korea, which sought to suppress left-wing organizations (Cumings 1997: 244–5). When the South Korean government was established in 1948, NamChosŏn Minju yōsŏng Tongmaeng's activities were outlawed. It supported the North during the war and merged with its northern counterpart into Chosŏn Minju yōsŏng Tongmaeng (ibid.: 245–6).

More conservative women also founded several organizations during the period of American military government. One of the most important of these was Tongnip ch'oksŏng aeguk puindan, which was organized in opposition to Kōnkuk Pūnyō Tongmaeng in 1946 (Ch'oe 1979: 255). The organization's first president was Pak Sun-ch'ŏn, a participant in the March First Movement who later cooperated with Japanese colonial authorities. These right-wing women's organizations sought to establish a unified, sovereign and anti-communist Korea, but did not receive much mass support because of some of their leaders' pro-Japanese history (Yi 1994: 240–3). Women also formed professional organizations¹⁰ that put forth platforms that advocated 'better status for women', 'gender equality rights' and 'expanding women's rights in order to achieve gender equality' (ibid.: 247). Both left- and right-wing women's organizations thus supported gender equality, but whereas the right wing advocated a narrow agenda of gradual reform and nurturing professional women, the left wing sought a much more sweeping 'complete liberation in political, economic, and social arenas' (ibid.).

When the Republic of Korea was established in 1948, the Constitution guaranteed women equal rights with men, including the right to vote and stand for election. Nevertheless, women were almost completely excluded from political life: 'The membership of the first National Assembly (1948–50) consisted of 199 men and one woman' (Soh 1993: 2). The three other prominent women politicians

during this time were Pak Hyŏn-suk who became a minister without portfolio in 1952; Pak Sun-ch'ŏn who was elected to the Assembly in 1950, went on to serve five terms, and became the leader of the opposition party in 1960s; and Kim Whal-ran, who served as a minister in Syngman Rhee's administration in 1950. These pioneering women politicians came 'from the ranks of Christian women who were educated during the Japanese colonization of Korea' (ibid.: 59). Soh traces the political activism of these 'pioneer women' to 'the larger process of the resistance against Japanese rule, especially the March First Movement of 1919, which proved to be the turning point in the lives of the women legislators of the pioneer generation' (ibid.). The achievements of these women, however, remained isolated examples and did not lead to the involvement of large numbers of women in politics (Park 1999: 433).

The Korean War (1950–3) left the peninsula 'a smouldering ruin' (Cumings 1981: xix). The three years of civil war ruined both the southern and northern parts of the country.

The toll in human lives was staggering. In the South alone, the combined total of military and civilian casualties—Koreans who had been killed, executed, wounded, kidnapped, or gone missing—was about 1.3 million people. Nearly half of the industrial capacity and a third of the housing in the south were destroyed along with much of the public infrastructure.

(Eckert *et al.* 1990: 345)

The lingering effects of the devastating war lasted at least a decade, leaving people in extreme poverty; 'it also left its scars on an entire generation of survivors, a legacy of fear and insecurity that continues even now to affect the two Koreas both in their internal development and in their relations with each other' (ibid.: 346).

Towards the end of the war, several prominent women leaders, including Pak Sun-ch'ŏn, Hwang Sin-dŏk, Yi T'ae-yŏng and Yi Hui-ho, established yōsŏng munje yŏn'guwŏn (Institute for Women's Issues) in 1952 (Ch'oe 1979: 255). They formed an alliance with other influential women's organizations, such as Taehan Pūin-hoe (Korean Women's Organization), YWCA and Taehan Kanhojŏphoe (Korean Nurses Association), and worked to influence public opinion about improving women's legal status. In the second half of the 1950s, various professional women's organizations were formed and, in 1959, were coordinated under yōsŏng tanch'e hyob'uihoe (Korean National Council of Women), an umbrella organization with Kim Whal-ran as the president.

Rhee's regime became increasingly dictatorial as he clung to power by rigging elections and amending the constitution in order to hold on to the presidency. Student demonstrations against rigged elections led to Rhee's forced resignation and the founding of the short-lived Second Republic. The student revolution of 19 April 1960 established the student movement as a significant political force in South Korean politics, and students have remained prominent in the pro-democracy movement since then.

Women's movements under military dictatorship (1961–86)

The coup d'état of May 1961, led by Park Chung Hee, established a military dictatorship with policies which led to rapid industrialization and urbanization. Park's regime continued Rhee's anti-communism, but it was even more openly anti-democratic. When he came to power, Park disbanded all political and social organizations, including women's organizations. Later, the Park regime allowed a small number of pro-government, conservative women's groups to organize (Lee 1996: 245). Under the regime's tight political control, these organizations were restricted to improving women's welfare and providing anti-communist education, and they avoided any form of social activism (ibid.: 245–7). Women also formed non-government-sponsored organizations with various agendas during this period in response to these rapid changes in Korean society and the repressive government. Three organizations that were active during this period were Han'guk yōsōng tanch'e hyōbuihoe (Korean National Council of Women), the Christian Academy and Han'guk kyohoe yōsōng yōnhaphoe (Korea Church Women United). Even though Park suppressed workers' rights, this period also saw the rise of women workers' unions.

The KNCW continued to function under Park because its platform of 'improving women's status, and service to the society and the country' did not directly challenge the regime's priorities. With government support, KNCW and its affiliated organizations attracted a large following during the 1960s and 1970s. In preparation for the United Nations' 'International Women's Year' (1975), KNCW chose 'The International Women's Year and Korean Women's Reality' as the theme for its 1974 annual meeting (Lee 1996: 249). Their coalition of women's groups succeeded in obtaining a revision of Family Law in 1977. Organizations such as KNCW that remained narrowly focused on women's issues were later criticized by other social movements as being conservative and even reactionary. Groups with more progressive agendas have argued that the impact of liberal women's organizations was trivial and compromised by their cooperation with the government (Chōng 1993: 164).

During the Yusin period (1972–9), the Park Chung Hee regime took the initiative in establishing mass organizations to support its agenda. The most important of these was Saemaül Punyōhoe, founded as part of the Saemaül movement for rural development. By 1979, Saemaül Punyōhoe had over three million members and nearly 100,000 branch offices (Yi 1994: 307). The government used this and other organizations to promote its policies on education, family planning, consumerism and dietary improvement (Moon 2000).

Despite Park's conservative attitude towards women's organizations and the government's harsh repression of political opposition, the national pro-democracy movement grew in strength during the 1970s. College students and others formed groups to oppose dictatorship and support democracy. The Christian Academy was an important organization that trained a generation of women leaders. It sought to reform the women's movement by unifying young women across class divisions and taught young women from diverse backgrounds. Their position was

that the women's movement is a movement for all humanity (Yi 1994: 337–8). Many women who are currently leaders of the women's movement in Korea were members of the Christian Academy in the 1970s (Lee 1996: 250).¹¹

Organizations of Christian women were also active during this time. Han'guk kyohoe yōsōng yōnhaphoe (Korea Church Women United) took a leading role in condemning sex-tourism, and exposed the government's complicity in this issue (ibid.: 251). They also provided support to the women workers' labour movement and the pro-democracy movement by holding prayer meetings and supporting families of political prisoners (ibid.: 251–2).

Women also led organizations that were important in promoting the rights of workers during the 1970s. As Park Chung Hee's policy of export-led industrialization took hold, hundreds of thousands of young women joined the industrial workforce with extremely low wages and exploitative working conditions. Concern about the extreme exploitation of these women workers became a focus for political opposition. Women workers reacting to specific abuses in their factories spontaneously organized to resist management and form unions, but, because the industries where they worked were so fragmented, it was only when their actions were publicized and supported by groups such as Han'guk kyohoe yōsōng yōnhaphoe (Korea Church Women United) that their collective actions took on national significance. Other, specifically religious, groups such as the Urban Industrial Mission also gave their support to spontaneously organized women's unions.

The two most important labour conflicts of the 1970s were those at Tong'il Textile Company and the YH Company, both of which had predominantly female labour forces. The militancy of the women's labour movement of the 1970s is especially noteworthy because other forms of political opposition to the Yusin system were so effectively suppressed that women's unions were among the very few social forces able to stand up to the regime (Choi 1993: 37; Kim 1997; Koo 1993: 140, 156; Lee 1989: 264–71; Pak 1983; Sin 1985: 49–60). Ironically, brutal treatment applied to women workers enhanced their political importance. The 1970s produced female martyrs for the labour cause and a thread of continuity throughout a period of severe repression, but workers did not gain any lasting victories at this time. At the end of the Yusin regime, working conditions in South Korea's factories remained poor, workers were still poorly paid, and labour organizing was still difficult and dangerous.

After a brief interlude following Park's assassination, another military dictatorship was set up by Chun Doo Hwan who continued most of Park's policies. Despite his efforts to repress political opposition, pro-democracy activists grew in numbers and importance and, eventually, forced him to begin a transition to democracy in 1987. The women's movements during this period were distinctly different from their predecessors in that they were clearly social change movements. These social movements played a crucial role in moving Korean society towards democratization. Women workers, professors, college students and college graduates formed many organizations with progressive agendas: yōsōng p'yōng'uhoe (The Association for Women's Equality and Friendship)¹²

in 1983, Tto hanau munhwa (Alternative Culture) in 1984, yösöng'ui chönhwa (Women's Hotline) in 1983, Han'guk yösöng yönhaphoe (Korean Women's Associations United) in 1987, and Han'guk yösöng nodongjahoe (Korean Women Workers Association) in 1987.

The Association for Women's Equality and Friendship described itself as the first organization with a clear programme for women's liberation since the division of Korea, and opened up a new agenda for women's movements in the 1980s (Yi 1994: 341). Its mission statement declares that 'the women's movement should not stop at solving the problems of gender inequality, but work toward social change and national reunification' (ibid.: 342). They maintained that women's liberation was only possible with total social restructuring, but they disagreed among themselves about how to achieve this change. Although members of this group were mostly intellectual women, they were constrained by their position that the main players of the women's movement should be disenfranchised women. Thus, they tried to transform from a middle-class, intellectual women's organization to one based on women workers, poor women and women farmers (Cho 1996: 9). The group fell apart in 1986 because of disputes around these issues. Those who were most concerned with women's issues became the founding members of the Korean Women's Associations United in 1987, and others joined more radical *minjung* groups.

Unlike the Association for Women's Equality and Friendship which emphasized class issues, Tto hanau munhwa (Alternative Culture) was founded as a feminist organization for consciousness-raising. The founders were academics who had recently returned to Korea after earning PhDs in leading American and European universities.¹³ Rather than engaging in politics, the members of Tto hanau munhwa sought to change the lives of women through writing and publishing (Cho 1996: 7). During the 1980s, they published three anthologies that focused on overcoming Korean society's 'patriarchal hierarchy and gender inequality.' They also considered children's education an important mission of the women's movement, and published two anthologies on this topic (ibid.: 13–14).

Gradual transition to democracy and the role of women's movements (1987–97)

In 1987, following the nationwide uprising for democracy and workers' rights in June, many women's organizations were formed throughout the country. Yösöng tanch'e yönhaphoe (Korean Women's Associations United) was established as an umbrella organization for progressive women's groups, connecting twenty-one member organizations. KWAW supported the democracy movement and declared that women's problems could not be separated from the democracy movement (ibid.: 8). The organization also endorsed Kim Dae Jung in the 1987 presidential election. KWAW's platform advocated 'achieving women's liberation, democratization, and autonomy of Korean society' (Yi 1994: 313).

Also in 1987, the Korean Women Workers' Association was established in order to advocate women workers' rights. The founding members of the organization

were women workers who were active in the democratic labour union movement from the 1970s and activists from the Association for Women's Equality and Friendship. It became a member organization of the KWAW. The Korean Women Workers' Association was the first national women's organization based on women workers. It promoted the rights of women workers, and took the lead in advocating the Equal Employment Law, which was passed in 1988. Under this law, it became illegal to discriminate against women workers in recruitment or employment.

After the election of the first civilian president in 1992, the broad coalition of social movements advocating the rights of the disenfranchised (women, workers, farmers and the urban poor) was replaced by a less militant and more fragmented set of civil organizations (Abelmann 1996: 227). The unifying themes of 1980s progressiveness in the women's movement—anti-government, pro-labour and pro-democracy—have gradually faded and, in the 1990s, issues regarding *söng p'okryölk* (sexual violence against women) and *söng munhwa* (sex culture) became the central focus of women's activism. A broad spectrum of various women's groups coalesced around these 'women's issues', and sought to create a 'woman's identity' that transcended class. Women's groups with various political agendas formed a coalition and were able to have a Special Law on Sexual Violence against Women enacted in 1992.¹⁴ The movement that lobbied for the Special Law on Sexual Violence against Women was supported by a broad spectrum of civil organizations.

An issue that came into prominence in the 1990s involved forcing the Japanese government to acknowledge its responsibility for recruiting comfort women during World War II. Yoon Chöng-ok, a professor at Ewha Womans University and a member of the Korea Church Women United, started to research comfort women during the 1980s. In 1990, Han'guk Chöngsindae munje taech'aek hyöbuihoe (the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan) was organized by a coalition of 37 women's groups (www.womenandwar.net). Relying on survivors' testimonies, they built up a case against the Japanese government and presented it to international human rights NGOs and to the UN Human Rights Committee. As a result, a transnational alliance on comfort women issues was formed in 1992. The group has been staging weekly demonstrations at the Japanese Embassy in Seoul since 1992 in an effort to have the Japanese government accept full responsibility for its actions during the war and to compensate survivors.

Another issue that was important to women's organizations in the 1990s was increasing the representation of women in government. In anticipation of the 1995 local election, KWAW and KNCW led a coalition group, Yösöng Yöndae, and worked to have women elected to public office. Their efforts did lead to an increase in the number of women in the public office although they fell far short of their goal of filling 20 per cent of the seats.

At the end of the 1990s, the distinction between progressive and conservative women's organizations became ambiguous, especially after 'the KWAW registered with the state as an incorporated body in 1995' (Moon 2002: 490). In 1998,

a staff member at the KNCW told us that she no longer saw much difference between the two organizations' agendas. With the establishment of a democratic government, the old political cleavages within society are becoming obsolete.

Women-friendly governments and the institutionalization of women's movements (1998–2007)

The historic peaceful change of government in 1998 established the women-friendly presidency of Kim Dae Jung. During his presidency, he established the President's Special Committee on Women's Affairs, and a position in charge of gender policy was added to each of six ministries (Labour, Education, Law, Health and Welfare, Agriculture and Forestry, and Administration and Local Government).¹⁵ These newly established positions needed gender specialists, and were filled by women with degrees in women's studies or by women's movement activists. The Special Committee took up gender mainstreaming, and broke away from previous policies on grounds that they were divisive and objectified women as victims (Special Committee 1998). In 2001, the President's Special Committee on Women's Affairs was reorganized and elevated to the cabinet level as the Ministry of Gender Equality,¹⁶ and Han Myeong-sook was appointed as minister.¹⁷ The Ministry of Gender Equality continued to stress gender mainstreaming as its primary strategy. It listed its objectives as: first, to bring about a society with gender equality; second, to increase women's participation in society; and third, to improve women's welfare.

Working closely with the government, KWAU began an aggressive campaign—politics of engagement (*ch'amga ūi Chŏngch'i*)—for gender mainstreaming in politics, economy and society, designating these areas as priorities in the three-year plan for 1998–2000. KWAU wielded considerable influence over policy-making and decision-making during the Kim Dae Jung administration, and they incorporated feminist ideas into the government's policies. For political mainstreaming, KWAU began a campaign for a quota system for the selection of candidates for the National Assembly under the system of proportional representation,¹⁸ and a quota system for the hiring of civil servants. For economic mainstreaming, they began a campaign to ensure that women workers had standard rights and protections, preventing job irregularization. For social welfare mainstreaming, they sought to eliminate the discriminatory clause in the national pension system, and to provide pre- and post-natal care as part of social welfare.

The effects of KWAU's politics of engagement were most evident in political mainstreaming, and showed up in the increase of the number of women in the government and the National Assembly.¹⁹ Affirmative action was also successful in increasing the number of women civil servants, including professors in public universities.²⁰ The Gender Equality Employment Act²¹ and the Gender Discrimination Prevention and Relief Act²² provided the most important legal basis for implementing affirmative action. Furthermore, when the Framework Act on Women's Development was revised in 2002, it substituted the term 'affirmative

action' for the earlier phrase, 'temporary measure of preferential treatment'. Affirmative action boosted the number of women hired in the Foreign Service from 16.7 per cent in 1998 to 45.7 per cent in 2002; it also increased the percentage of women hired in the Administrative Civil Service from 23.1 per cent in 1998 to 28.4 per cent in 2002. Affirmative action was the most visible achievement of the gender policy during this period, and it exposed and corrected the systematic gender discrimination at every level of society.

The Roh Moo Hyun administration came into power supported by various groups who were active in the pro-democracy movement during the 1980s, thus, many who were involved in these movements came to occupy important government positions. The new administration advocated the 'realization of a society with gender equality' and 'the abolition of the family-head system' as two of the new government's 'national tasks'. In addition, the administration included gender discrimination as one of the six things that need to be eliminated because it contributed to social inequality. Calling itself 'the participatory government' (*ch'amyo Chŏngbu*), the Roh Moo Hyun administration emphasized active participation of civil society, and recruited many democratization activists into high government positions. Many women's movements activists were also recruited into government positions: Chi Eun-hee, the president of KWAU resigned her position in order to become the minister of gender equality; Han Myeong-sook, a past president of KWAU and the first minister of gender equality was appointed as the minister of environment; and others were also recruited into high positions in the 'National Human Rights Commission', 'Government Youth Commission', and the Ministry of Environment. KWAU also increased its power in the Women's Policy Advisory Committee, the most important committee within the Ministry of Gender Equality. Nevertheless, the ministry remained the smallest government ministry until 2006 when it was expanded and put in charge of childcare, and its name was changed to the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family.

As minister of gender equality, Chi Eun Hee maintained a close alliance with KWAU. She utilized her network with KWAU and other women's organizations in order to carry out the feminist agenda; KWAU's agenda provided underpinnings for the ministry's gender policy. During the Roh Moo Hyun administration, state feminism strengthened while women's organizations were able to solve important women's issues through policy-making by lobbying and challenging existing laws.

The two most important legal achievements produced by the women's movements' alliance with the government were the Act to Prevent Prostitution in 2004 and the abolition of the Family-Head System in 2005. These two legal changes abolished two systems that were supporting unequal gender relationships and show that the government was taking charge of fundamental social change, and had embraced progressive feminist ideology in its policy. Both abolishing the Family-Head System and preventing prostitution had been on the women's movements' agendas for several decades, but it was not until Roh Moo Hyun's presidency that these legal changes were accomplished. These two changes represent the high

point in the power of state feminism and the alliance between KWAU and the Roh Moo Hyun administration.

Neo-Conservative retreat

When the neo-conservative administration of Lee Myung-bak took office in 2008, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family was stripped of its newly acquired childcare duty, and reverted to its original size as the Ministry of Gender Equality. In order to staff the ministry, Lee's administration appointed career bureaucrats rather than feminist activists. The new minister of gender equality had worked for Lee's administration when he was mayor of Seoul City. The business of family and childcare was transferred back to the Ministry of Health and Welfare, and the promotion of gender equality no longer was at the top of the administration's agenda. The progressive women's policy organization created in 1998 in order to stop discrimination and achieve gender equality is now, in effect, a name only ministry without administrative power to deal effectively with the issues of gender discrimination.

Conclusion

Over the past century, women's movements have achieved remarkable progress in advancing women's rights and status within Korean society. The age-old family-head system, which was a key tenet of Confucian gender ideology,²³ was finally abolished in 2005, the latest step in a process of reform, driven by women's movements and put in place by reform-driven governments. A plethora of new and revised laws regarding women's issues, including affirmative action, equal employment, sexual violence, and prostitution, have also been enacted. These important changes in the legal arena have come about with the rapid transformation of Korea from a rural, agrarian society to an urban, industrialized one.

In Korea, as in many Third World countries, women's movements have been intricately connected with nationalist movements (Croll 1978; Jayawardena 1986; Lazreg 1988; Louie 2000; Moon 2000; Smith 2000; Wang 1999). Korean feminists have, from their beginnings in the 1890s until the democratic government was established in the 1990s, participated in struggles to redefine Korea's national identity within changing geo-political circumstances. Korea's earliest modernizers promoted the idea of gender equality and women's education in a drive to move away from stagnant Confucian traditions. During the early period of Japanese colonial rule, both Christian and secular women were involved in a nationalist movement that culminated in the March First Movement in 1919. The 1920s were marked by continued interest in individual freedom while the effectiveness of the nationalist movement diminished. The rise of *sin'yŏsŏng* was the most important characteristic of feminism during this period. Japanese rule became increasingly harsh during its final decade, and liberation saw a sudden explosion of social and political activism. Women's movements during this chaotic period played an auxiliary role to various political factions that were vying for control over

the country. During the three decades of military dictatorship, there were two important strands of feminism: liberal feminists who sought to reform society to improve women's status without opposing the government; and socialist feminists who saw establishing a democratic government as the crucial first step, and worked closely with other groups in the pro-democracy movement. When the democratic government was established and there was no longer a single enemy to fight against, the pro-democracy movement splintered into a multitude of single-issue organizations. Following the election of the former political opposition, the women's movement became influential during the women-friendly governments (1998–2007); however, when a neo-conservative government took over in 2008, the momentum for change had shifted.

At the current point in time Korean women's movements are once again in a period of transition. Many of the items that have been on the feminist agenda for decades have been introduced into law, and there is still a government ministry dedicated to gender equality. However, the women who were responsible for these achievements are not part of the current administration and cannot participate in formulating its policies. Furthermore, having achieved so much, the next goals are less obvious. The new generation of young feminists needs to decide for itself what issues and directions are important to them and what organizations and methods are most useful in pursuing them.

Notes

- 1 The progressive, feminist organization Korean Women's Associations United has 187 member organizations and the more conservative organization Korean National Council of Women has forty-five members. There are other women's organizations that do not belong to either KWAU or KNCW: some want to keep a distance from these two established organizations in order to maintain their organizational freedom; others wanted to become members but were not admitted because of political identity.
- 2 See Seth (2006: 220–1) for a summary of the introduction of Catholicism to Korea.
- 3 One of the early efforts to come to terms with the growing influence of the Western powers was the *Tonghak* movement. They advocated gender equality among the reforms that they promoted. See Eckert *et al.* (1990: 214–30) and Cummings (1997: 115–20) for a discussion of *Tonghak*.
- 4 For an extended discussion of women's literacy and the role of missionaries, see Choi (2000). She argues that 'the primary goal of the missionaries was to convert Koreans to Christianity and the dissemination of literacy was an expedient means for accomplishing this objective' (2000: 99).
- 5 These Enlightenment-oriented intellectuals include Yu Kil-chun, Yun Ch'i-ho, Pak Yŏng-hyo, and Sŏ Chae-pil.
- 6 Sŏ Chae-pil (1866–1951) founded this newspaper on 7 April 1896 'for easy accessibility by the masses, particularly women' (Kim 1996: 125).
- 7 The term *sin'yŏsŏng* began to be circulated around the March First Movement when magazine publication was on the rise (Kim 2006: 264).
- 8 Similar to Kim Wŏn-ju's argument on 'virginity', Na declared that 'virginity is a hobby, and it has nothing to do with morality or law' (Kim 2000: 48).
- 9 For a detailed discussion of women factory workers during the Japanese colonial period, see Kang (1993).

- 10 The professional organizations include Chosŏn Women Scientists Association (1946), Korean Home Economics Association (1947) and Korean Midwives Association (1946).
- 11 Women who were alumni of the Christian Academy became leaders in politics, administration and the academy. They include Han Myeong-sook who became the first female prime minister, Yi Mi-kyung who is a leading member of the National Assembly, and Chang Pil-wha who headed the Department of Women's Studies at Ewha Womans University.
- 12 The founding members included Lee Hyo-chae and Cho Hyoung who were professors at Ewha Womans University, and were also founding members of Ewha's Department of Women's Studies.
- 13 The founding members, Cho Haejoang, Cho Oak-la, Cho Uhn, Cho Hyoung and Chang Pil-wha, are currently professors of leading universities and leading feminist scholars.
- 14 In 1995, college students and women's groups formed a coalition to support a sexual harassment case brought to court by a woman teaching assistant at Seoul National University.
- 15 Gender policy was first given a formal cabinet-level position in 1988 when President Roh Tae Woo established the Second Ministry of Political Affairs to focus on women's issues. The Second Ministry of Political Affairs continued to be in charge of gender policy until 1998 when President Kim Dae Jung downgraded the ministry, and replaced it with the President's Special Committee on Women's Affairs.
- 16 The President's Special Committee fell short of its goals for a variety of reasons. One was due to its low status—not being a ministry—which placed constraints and contradictions on its function, such as a shortage of budget and personnel, and contributed to problems with the mainstreaming of gender policy. See Kim (2002) for a detailed discussion of the Kim Dae Jung government's gender policy.
- 17 Han's appointment was widely praised by women's organizations, academics and activists. Han had been a long-time activist, starting as a member of the Christian Academy in the 1970s, and she also served as the president of KWAU (1993–5). Her record of working for Korean women's issues was indisputable.
- 18 Each party was required to put up a slate of candidates that was 50 per cent male and 50 per cent female.
- 19 The number of women in the 299-member National Assembly increased from three in 1992 to thirty-nine in 2004.
- 20 The Framework Act on Women's Development established in 1995 provided the legal basis for the affirmative action.
- 21 The Gender Equality Employment Act was first enacted in 1987.
- 22 The Gender Discrimination Prevention and Relief Act was first enacted in 1999.
- 23 Important studies of changing gender ideology in Korea include Abelman (2003), Cho (1988), Deuchler (1992), Kendall (1996, 2002), Kim (1997), Lett (1998) and Nelson (2000).

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12 'Riding a buffalo to cross a muddy field'

Heuristic approaches to feminism in Cambodia

Trudy Jacobsen

I was sitting at a pavement café near the central market in Phnom Penh early in 2008, enjoying a *kafē dleuk kok* (ice coffee), when two men at a nearby table began to speak. 'Look at that', said one. 'She might be the next President of the United States.' His friend turned to the TV, where a beaming Hillary Clinton was displayed. 'That's okay,' he said, 'that will never happen here.' And they laughed.

Those familiar with Judy Ledgerwood's work might be struck, as I was, by similarities between this anecdote and her experiences in rural Cambodia observing political campaigning before the 1993 elections (Ledgerwood 1996).¹ Why does the idea of women attaining high political office in Cambodia continue to attract either disapproval or ridicule? Many Cambodian men (and women) believe that women are biologically predisposed to being more timid and less capable (Lilja and Prom 2002: 48–9). Feminism is considered to be a foreign concept, one that sits uneasily with so-called 'traditional' Cambodian values. As a consequence, the women's movement in Cambodia has experienced significant obstacles in achieving its goals; one commentator remarked that the women's movement was 'like riding a buffalo to cross a muddy field'. This phrase is used in Cambodia when something is useful only in times of crisis; obviously, one would prefer to ride a buffalo than slog through mud to the other side of the field. It would, however, be considered undignified and embarrassing to be caught riding a buffalo at any other time.

Cambodia has experienced several periods of crisis during the twentieth century and each of these has moved Cambodian women's activism along its unique path. Cambodia achieved independence from France in 1953 after a century of colonial rule. Self-rule brought its own particular problems and within a few years the government, led by the hereditary monarch Norodom Sihanouk,² was marked by corruption and increasing popular dissatisfaction. To complicate an already tense situation, in the early 1970s Cambodia faced the overflow of the US–Vietnam war as the eastern parts of the country suffered air-raids that displaced large numbers of people. This combination of events facilitated the emergence of the brutal Khmer Rouge regime—a socialist political party with the now-infamous Pol Pot at its head. Between 1975 and 1979 the Khmer Rouge emptied the cities of residents and forced the population into agricultural work on communized land. The terror