

# Gender Politics in the Korean Transition to Democracy

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This article investigates how a variety of Korea women's groups contributed to the processes of breaking down military rule in the late 1980s. Excluded from formal politics, Korean women partook in the struggles for democracy through alternative channels such as grassroots women's groups, labor uprisings, and political mobilization as mothers and wives. Their vigorous activism significantly shaped the direction, outcome, and strategies of the Korean democratic struggles. Women's involvement in the prodemocracy movement, on the other hand, affected the goals and the strategies of progressive women's-movement groups formed in the 1980s. This study expands the class-centered perspective of Korean democratization by incorporating women's participation and contributions in the process.

Recent research on Korean democratic movements focuses on the new labor militancy of male workers and their struggles to establish democratic labor unions following the massive labor uprisings in 1987.<sup>1</sup> Women's contributions to the transition to democracy in South Korea have been totally ignored or largely undervalued in the relevant literature. Studies dealing with the processes of democratizing the country fail to pay proper attention to women's roles in resisting authoritarian rule and reconstructing a democratic society in the late 1980s.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, many researchers focusing on Korean labor movements also overlook how the prodemocracy movement shaped women's militant labor struggles and provided political visibility for women's issues and their struggles. In explaining the processes of the Korean transition to democracy, the majority of scholars tend to concentrate on class formations and class struggles without considering gender politics and women's activism.<sup>3</sup>

Three major factors account for the systematic neglect of women's

contributions to the transition to democracy in South Korea. First, women's labor struggles in the 1980s were largely overshadowed by large-scale, male-dominant labor uprisings in heavy industries. Their collective actions were regarded as less threatening to the national economy and thus less important than men's actions, which diverted researchers' attention to the newly emerging men's militancy.

Second, the lack of sufficient historical data has been used as an excuse to disregard gender issues in explaining the processes of bringing about Korean democracy. In fact, women's participation in the democratic labor movement in the 1980s has been underrecorded and underdocumented compared to men's participation for two reasons.<sup>4</sup> First, women were disproportionately concentrated in small firms, where labor protests received much less public and media attention than in large-scale firms. Second, some union members and political activists did not understand the importance of the emerging women's political participation as wives and mothers. Accordingly, labor unions and grassroots labor organizations made little effort to document these women's political activism. The paucity of available data combined with the lack of researchers' interest in gender issues led to the exclusion of women's social protests from the mainstream literature of Korean democracy.

Third, many Korean scholars do not consider women's protests and their contributions in explaining the processes of democratization and the resulting political changes in South Korea. A growing body of literature suggests, however, that women in other countries played a salient role in breaking down military rule and reconstructing a democratic society.<sup>5</sup> Women's mobilization and activism affected the course and content of the transition to democracy in several Latin American countries. Similarly, political changes toward democracy in South Korea cannot be fully understood without taking into account women's activism and their political protests through grassroots organizations.

Women's activism in South Korea was shaped by their role in the opposition to military dictatorship. For example, their struggles against sexual torture and state violence mobilized opposition groups around the issues of human rights, social justice, and democratic politics. A variety of women's groups were also mobilized during the 1980s for the mass struggles to establish democratic labor unions and democratic social systems. Their contributions to the grassroots struggles were crucial in determining the outcome of their activism, illustrating the importance of women's roles in the Korean transition to democracy. Although these groups had different interests and goals, their mobilization and protests converged on the strategy of the opposition to the inhumane ruling of the military government.

This article investigates a significant but neglected theme in the lit-

erature of Korean democracy: women's participation and contributions in the processes of building democracy. Reversing the viewpoint, it also analyzes how the prodemocracy struggles affected women's mobilization and protests against authoritarian government.

The data for this study come largely from the documents of major labor disputes, newsletters of movement organizations, diaries of labor struggles, public manifestos, articles published in academic and alternative journals, and human-rights documents. In particular, the documents collected and published by the Korean Women Workers Associations United and the Korean Women's Organizations United provided valuable evidence for this study. The primary documents of human-rights groups, including Amnesty International and radical church groups, were also used to illustrate state repression of protesting women activists.

### **The Roots of Korean Women's Activism in the 1980s**

Women's movement groups in the 1970s, largely co-opted and controlled by the military regime, played only limited roles in fostering women's legal, social, and political rights and raising women's issues in the political arena. They were also not organized broadly enough to provide support and resources for the struggles of the working-class women in urban and rural areas. Dominated by highly educated, middle-class women, these groups were alienated from a large population of working-class women and were not concerned with problems and interests of poor women. The feminist organizations challenging the structural and cultural sources of women's oppression were established in the early 1980s by a younger generation of women. Included were the Women's Association for Equality and Peace, the Women's Association for Democracy and Sisterhood, the Women's Hot Line, and An Alternative Culture.

Several factors account for the rise of independent women's movements at the grassroots level in the 1980s. First, women's increasing participation in paid work and their direct experience of discrimination at sex-segregated workplaces increased working women's awareness of their common problems, facilitating the development of gender consciousness. Moreover, women's employment provided necessary resources for organizing and mobilizing diverse groups of women to promote their collective interests.<sup>6</sup>

Second, the early 1980s observed rapid expansion of global feminism and increasing international pressure for gender equality after the declaration of "the decade of women" by the United Nations. This climate led to the holding of many international conferences and meetings on women in South Korea, elevating Korean women's understanding of feminist issues and international feminist activities. Spurred by growing women's

demands for equal opportunities, the Korean government established national policies to promote women's status, including the installment of the Korean Women's Development Institute (Han'guk Yong Kaepalwon), the creation of the National Committee on Women's Policy, and the establishment of women's bureaus within the existing administrative structure.

Third, a number of new labor and movement organizations were formed in the early 1980s but did not provide an avenue through which women workers' special interests could be represented. Most male workers and activists expected women to follow their male agenda, deemphasizing gender-specific issues.<sup>7</sup> Marginalized within male-dominant organizations, female activists recognized the need to establish separate women's organizations to push concerns and interests specific to women.

Labor activists from the 1970s were particularly motivated to install independent women's labor organizations separate from male-dominated labor unions and male-centered labor organizations. They painfully witnessed that some of their activist friends withdrew from the movement after their marriage and child bearing because of the enormous structural and cultural barriers to married women's employment. The old-time labor activists finally established the Korean Women Workers' Associations (KWWA) to deal with women's special problems.

Fourth, the suffering and the struggles of young factory women workers in the 1970s significantly shaped the feminist movement in the 1980s. Their dramatic labor protests and the indiscriminating use of violence by the state against the protectors generated righteous indignation and humanitarian concerns among progressive middle-class women, radical church group members, and other female activists. These women were directly exposed to the grassroots struggles of their working-class sisters and became their supporters by providing ideological, material, and organizational resources for their collective actions.<sup>8</sup> Their involvement with the struggles of the working-class women in turn expanded their understanding of multiple sources of women's oppression and of the interaction of class inequality with gender inequality. In short, working-class women's activism in the 1970s contributed to the development of the gender consciousness of both middle-class women and working-class women.

### **Women's Activism and their Transition to Democracy before 1987**

The bloody massacre at Kwangju in the early 1980s radicalized and cross-fertilized the labor, student, church, and women's movements against military rule. With the rapid spread of radical *minjung* ideology after the Kwangju incident, women's activism in the expanding labor and student movements increased substantially, which led women's move-

ments to assume the theoretical and political orientations of the *minjung* movement.<sup>9</sup> Within the broad *minjung* movement, women of the urban and rural poor were viewed as “the oppressed of the oppressed.”

At the incipient stage, the feminist movement in Korea wedded the struggles for women’s emancipation with the broader struggles for democracy and nationalism. First, the ideological base and political agendas of new women’s groups were similar to those of the dissident movement in the 1970s, except for the integration of gender issues in the whole scheme.<sup>10</sup>

Second, the development of the women’s movement escalated with the extension and intensification of the broader struggles against military rule. In 1985, a coalition of women’s groups convened a national women’s rally under the theme of “Women’s Movement in Unity with National Democratic *Minjung* Movement.” The theme of the rally for the following year, “Democratization and Women’s Rights for Survival,” also reflected the political atmosphere and the struggles of the larger society. The new women’s movements attempted to gain legitimacy among the opposition through active participation in the democratic movement.<sup>11</sup>

The cohesiveness of women’s groups increased significantly in the 1980s, and their growing collective power culminated in the interunion solidarity strikes of the Kuro Industrial Estate in 1985. The solidarity strikes were led by female workers, who constituted the majority of workers in the estate.<sup>12</sup> They were sparked by the arrest of three union leaders at Daewoo Apparel, a small manufacturer of women’s clothing. Their coworkers protested against the imprisonment of the union leaders, and nine other companies in the estate joined them in staging sympathy strikes. The labor unrest attracted “wide support from students and dissident groups who staged sympathetic demonstrations outside the factory gates almost every day during the ten-day-long solidarity strike.”<sup>13</sup>

The Kuro industrial strikes gained national attention for introducing an important tactic of solidarity struggles among workers across several factories in the same industry or region. The rise of interunion solidarity strikes was one of the most distinctive characteristics of the labor struggles of the late 1980s. Although solidarity strikes were used extensively by male workers in the post-1987 labor disputes, the origin of the tactic can be traced to the female-centered strikes of the Kuro Industrial Estate.

The sprouting of solidarity strikes can be observed even in the labor protests dominated by female workers in the 1970s. Labor demonstrations staged by members of multiple labor unions broke out occasionally in the 1970s, although the solidarity struggles were on a small scale. For example, workers from half a dozen labor unions participated in a protest

to resist the death of Jong-Jun Min at Hyupshin Leather Factory in 1977. About forty workers employed in five companies pressed the Christian Broadcasting Company to cover the story of persistent labor protests in the Dongil Textile Company. Even though these joint protests were un-systematic mobilizations led mostly by union leaders, they served as a prelude to the Kuro solidarity strikes.

The Kuro strikes laid the foundation for the subsequent democratic labor movement that culminated in the Great Labor Uprisings of 1987. They shaped the direction of the subsequent movement by demonstrating the power of using interfirm solidarity strikes and of transforming a labor dispute into a political struggle. Women workers' struggles for their rights in the 1980s were an essential and integral part of the national movement for creating a democratic society.

#### **Fighting for Human Rights and Democracy: The Puchun Sexual Torture Incident**

The use of sexual violence against labor activists by the police provided another occasion to consolidate the collective power of the opposition groups before the 1987 democratic struggles. A sexual assault on a female student activist, In-Sook Kwon, by a policeman in the Puchun station was disclosed in June 1986 and received wide public attention. Kwon was imprisoned for using a false identification card to get employment in a factory.<sup>14</sup> During the investigation and interrogation, she was severely tortured, sexually assaulted, raped by a male policeman, and unsuccessfully attempted to commit suicide.

Her friends in the same detention facility asked their relatives to report this incident to the National Council of Churches of Korea. The council dispatched a team of nine human-rights lawyers to investigate the incident and demanded that the policeman be indicted. Shortly afterward, thirty leading women's organizations issued a statement protesting sexual torture of women and others. The government, however, claimed the charge was a fabrication, declined the appeals to prosecute the perpetrator, and accused Kwon and other activists of being "loose and immoral" women.

The government's decision to avoid any prosecution of the policeman provoked public outrage, leading to a series of protests and demonstrations in which women's organizations were particularly active.<sup>15</sup> Sexual torture of women by the state not only reinforced men's domination of women's sexuality but also demonstrated the undemocratic nature of the ruling regime. In fact, Korean women's organizations recognized that the elimination of sexual and physical torture was closely intertwined with the establishment of democratic principles and institutions. Such awareness led

them to deal with these two issues simultaneously by pressing for the elimination of physical and sexual violence as well as authoritarian rule.

In addition to women's organizations, democratic church groups were also active in supporting the release of Kwon and the elimination of brutal torture. For example, thousands of police were mobilized to prohibit a meeting aimed at supporting Kwon in the Myungdong Cathedral of Seoul, sponsored by thirty-three democratic religious organizations. Further, religious organizations formed the Joint Committee against the Puchun Sexual Violence with other civil organizations to consolidate the power of the opposition groups.

The Korean Federation of Bar Associations also demanded the criminal indictment of the policeman as well as the eradication of the practice of torturing suspects. Soon afterward, 166 members of the association joined Kwon's defense team, requesting an open trial.<sup>16</sup> The wide public support made it possible to organize rallies and demonstrations almost every day, resulting in the release of Kwon and a five-year imprisonment sentence for the policeman.

The Kwon incident contributed to the democratization of South Korea in four major ways. First, the incident triggered the mobilization of diverse opposition groups against military rule. It not only mobilized women's groups, radical church groups, and progressive professionals but also consolidated the collective power of the opposition groups around the single issue of human rights. Second, women's movement groups emphasized the elimination of sexual violence as a prerequisite for building a democratic society. Their campaign pushed forward the necessary elements for social democracy such as gender equality, broadening the concept of narrowly defined political democracy.

Third, the Kwon case raised the question of the legitimacy of the ruling power. The incident was viewed as a symbolic example of government suppression of activists and political dissidents rather than an individual case of sexual assault. This was concretely manifested in the goals of the struggles, which were defined as eliminating any physical torture or sexual violence against suspects and political prisoners by the government.

Fourth, two new movement groups, the Women's Council against Sexual Violence and the Joint Committee against the Puchun Sexual Violence, developed out of the struggles and served as vital organizational umbrellas for the opposition groups.<sup>17</sup> They were created by a variety of organizations and paved the way for women's groups to form coalitions with other democratic movement organizations. This connection fueled the participation of women's organizations in the democratic struggles during the late 1980s because the existing networks served as a channel for sharing ideology, information, and resources.

### Women's Activism and their Struggles for Democracy after 1987

Diverse groups of women were mobilized and actively participated in the democratic labor struggles and antigovernment demonstrations in the late 1980s. Three aspects of women's participation in and contributions to the great struggles for democratic transition in the post-1987 period deserve special attention: (1) the engagement of women's-movement groups in the broader struggles for democracy, (2) women workers' labor protests in the Masan Free Export Zone during the Great Labor Uprisings, and (3) the mobilization of wives and mothers for workers' rights.

#### WOMEN'S-MOVEMENT GROUPS IN DEMOCRATIC STRUGGLES

The unity of women's organizations demonstrated in the struggles against sexual violence eventually led to the formation in 1987 of the Korean Women's Associations United (KWAU), a national coalition of twenty-eight worker, religious, research, housewife, peasant, human rights, and environmental organizations. Twenty-one women's organizations initially started the national coalition to consolidate women's collective power.

The founding members of the KWAU were connected to the *minjung* movement and the national democratic movement.<sup>18</sup> The first group of members consisted of female labor activists and union leaders who fought for workers' rights and democratic labor unions in grassroots labor struggles. The second group constituted progressive female intellectuals who participated in democratic struggles through the student movement and acquired feminist consciousness through women's studies courses, feminist study groups, and educational programs. The third group included women's church organizations, which systematically protested in behalf of the human rights of political prisoners throughout the 1970s.

Because many founding members of the KWAU maintained multiple affiliations with or close connections to *minjung*-movement organizations, they adopted the ideology and the goals of the movement. The first issue of the official magazine published by the organization stated that "The purpose of the women's movement should not be confined to obtaining equal rights with men. It should be aimed at the transformation of the structural causes generating women's oppression. The women's movement should be rooted in a broader movement for social democracy seeking gender equality, justice, and human rights, including the rights of survival."<sup>19</sup> The name of the official publication of the organization, *Minju Yŏsŏng* (Women for Democracy), also reflects its framing of the women's movement in the context of the national struggles for democracy.

The spillover effects of the prodemocracy movement on the women's movement were particularly distinctive in the early period of the KWAU.

For example, it actively participated in the movement for a democratic constitution by serving as a founding member of the headquarters of the National Movement for a Democratic Constitution. Further, women's-movement groups initiated the struggles of June 18 by designating the date as a special day to abolish government use of tear gas against demonstrators. Inspired by the efforts of women's groups, the headquarters of the National Movement for Democratic Struggles officially declared June 18 as "the Day for Abolition of Tear Gas," magnifying the women's campaign into a part of the nationwide movement for democracy.

Women's growing involvement in prodemocracy movements, however, created internal tensions and debates among women's-movement activists.<sup>20</sup> The members of the KWAU exhibited serious disagreement over their entry into the National Alliance for Nationalist and Democracy Movements (NAND; Chun'guk Minjok Minju Undong Yŏnhap), a newly formed umbrella organization for democratic movements. Women's labor organizations and regional women's groups supported their affiliation with the NAND because the leaders of these organizations were linked closely to democratic movement organizations as former or current members. Their feminist ideology and practices were characterized by the idea of "dual militancy," which supported the struggles for women's liberation along with the grand struggles for distributive justice, democracy, and national autonomy.

Some middle-class women's groups (for example, Alternative Culture and the Coalition of Church Women's Organizations), on the other hand, placed the primacy of their movements on the direct struggles for the elevation of women's rights rather than on the pursuit of political transformation and class-based equality. These organizations were opposed to joining the radical NAND because the KWAU, as a progressive new women's coalition, needed to gain mass women's support by fighting for such gender issues as the promotion of women's legal rights. When the KWAU finally decided to enter the NAND by a majority vote, those organizations opposed to it withdrew from the coalition. Although the KWAU participated in political protests led by the NAND from 1989 to 1991, their activism in street rallies and demonstrations was restricted to the leaders of the organization, suggesting the negative effects of the internal conflict on their mobilization.

#### WOMEN'S-MOVEMENT GROUPS AND TO THE DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESS

Women's-movement organizations contributed to the democratization process in South Korea in a number of ways. First, women's movements helped broaden the agenda of democratization from narrow polit-

ical to broader social issues. To illustrate, alarmed by the horrible effects of tear gas on environment and health, women's groups initiated the protest of June 18, which incorporated environmental and humanitarian concerns with the issue of political democracy. Moreover, women's-movement organizations raised many issues that were essential to creating a democratic society but were largely overlooked by movement groups for prodemocracy. For example, the KWAU successfully publicized maternity protection, childcare problems, equal pay for equal work, and sexual violence as major policy issues.

Second, departing from radical and violent street demonstrations, women's groups introduced a feminine way of resisting undemocratic government. Its members participated in street demonstrations for democracy wearing white handkerchiefs on their heads (*sambae sugun*), a traditional symbol of mourning in South Korea.<sup>21</sup> Using the handkerchiefs was adopted as a strategy of expressing women's fury, sorrow, and suffering on the death of Korean democracy. Female protestors relied on a peaceful yet a highly visible symbol to attract public support and the attention of the mass media. White handkerchiefs became the symbol of Korean women's struggles for democracy for the next ten years, appearing on numerous political occasions.

Third, women's organizations contributed to the Korean transition to democracy by strengthening the organizational power of the democratic labor unions forming rapidly after the summer of 1987. Recognizing the unions as an organizational basis for launching a mass-based women-workers' movement, the Korean Women Workers Associations (KWWA) adopted the strategy of expanding and revitalizing women's chapters and committees within the unions. The KWWA officials offered leadership training and educational programs for the new unions, helping them to organize successfully at the incipient stage.

#### WOMEN WORKERS IN THE DEMOCRATIC LABOR UPRISINGS

Women's labor activism during this period was most dramatically illustrated in their fierce labor strikes in the Masan Free Export Zone (MFEZ). The majority of workers in the zone were female, accounting for 77 percent of the total of 36,411 workers in 1987.<sup>22</sup> During the peak period of the Democratic Labor Struggles, women workers in the zone held public demonstrations nearly every day, resulting in twenty new democratic labor unions in a short period of time.<sup>23</sup> Sit-in strikes broke out in almost 60 percent (forty-four out of seventy-four companies) of the factories operating in the zone.

One of the strongest labor unions in the MFEZ was established in 1987 by the female workers of Sumida Electronics Company, a Japanese-

owned company employing approximately two thousand workers assembling electronics parts. Sixty-six workers, in collaboration with female student activists, started autonomous labor unions and recruited about sixteen hundred workers in a month. The union successfully resisted the company's efforts to take it over and forced the company to accept several of its demands. As the increasing wages of workers produced less profit for the company, Sumida began to prepare for instant closing of the factory by reducing the size of the workforce drastically. Faced with a decrease to five hundred employees, the union started to negotiate with management to provide job security for the remaining workers. In the middle of the negotiation, the company closed the factory without even paying overdue wages and severance payments required by the Korean labor laws.

Outraged by the manipulative factory-closing tactics, the dismissed workers fought for their right to survive by carrying out solidarity struggles with the Committee for Joint Struggles of Foreign Workers (CJSFW).<sup>24</sup> Four union leaders visited the parent company in Japan to publicize the immorality and irresponsibility of the company through public presentations, demonstrations, a signature-collecting campaign, and protest visits to labor unions and movement organizations. Labor activists in South Korea and Japan staged public demonstrations simultaneously in support of the protesting workers, which received sympathetic coverage in the newspapers in both countries. Surprisingly, the Labor Office of Masan Region summoned the chairperson of Japanese Sumida Electronics Company to investigate his violation of the Korean labor laws. The pressure of negative publicity compelled the company to accept a list of workers' demands, including the payment of overdue wages, retirement compensation, and retirement bonuses of two months' wages.

While some previous research on Asian women in multinational companies suggests that their activism was spontaneous and disorganized, Korean women workers were successful in organizing democratic labor unions and using them as official channels for exerting their rights.<sup>25</sup> They framed factory closing in a larger social issue of workers' survival rights and successfully mobilized labor groups to provide necessary resources for their struggles. This strategy not only attracted the support of domestic labor organizations, but also led labor unions and human-rights activists in the parent company to form coalitions with the Korean workers.

When T.C. Electronics closed its factory in 1989, it sparked enormous resistance by female workers in the company. The core union members of the company, the largest American-invested foreign firm in the zone, refused to accept the closing and occupied the factory building.

In desperation, these workers went to Seoul to occupy T.C.'s research institute and held the president of the institute as a hostage. The kidnapping of the president did not alter the decision to shut down the factory. Instead, the company mobilized economic organizations (for example, the American Chamber of Commerce in Korea) to justify its withdrawal as a legitimate and appropriate act. Further, it pressed the Korean government to take action to guarantee its free withdrawal from the country through American diplomats. Pressured by the American business community and the American government, the Korean police forced the workers out of the research institute and arrested twenty-two protestors.

Women's participation in grassroots labor struggles after 1987 had a significant impact on the transition to democracy in South Korea. First, young female workers' resistance against factory closing raised an important issue for a democratic society, namely, the workers' right to survive. A ruthless factory closing means sudden loss of livelihood for the workers involved. As the withdrawal of foreign-invested firms threatened the survival of many female workers, several labor groups, including the KWWA, the CJSFW, and the SMCME, joined the struggles against disguised factory closing and plant relocation. These groups engaged in demonstrations and picketing, issued public statements, and raised funds for striking workers.

Second, women's activism at the grassroots level contributed to elevating their awareness of the structural source of the problems in the export-processing zone. For example, the protesting T.C. workers initially demanded direct negotiations with the American management in hopes of gaining their sympathy and support. They developed, however, strong anti-American sentiments in the final stage of their protests after observing the manipulative tactics of the company. Their growing radical consciousness produced deeply committed leaders from within the ranks of factory workers. Female activists whose working-class identity was forged during the uprising played a crucial role in the subsequent struggles for democracy through democratic labor unions and Masan Changwŏn Women Workers' Association.<sup>26</sup> Their activities promoted the transition to a democratic society by enhancing working-class workers' collective power and addressing women's special interests and problems.

#### THE RISE OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL ACTIVISM AS WIVES AND MOTHERS

A number of housewives' groups were mobilized in the massive labor uprisings in the late 1980s. The wives and mothers of working-class men used to discourage their husbands' and sons' participation in labor disturbances because of possible dismissal from the factory. However, the 1980s saw workers' wives and mothers, along with their young children,

vigorously participating in labor demonstrations and confronting company, police, and state officials at the grassroots level. Their spontaneous participation in the early period became more systematic and organized with the creation of the Committee for Family Struggles.<sup>27</sup>

The prominent cases of family struggles in 1987 and 1988 were found in Kyungwon Century Machinery Corporation, Sungjin Taxi Company, Kyungwon Paper Manufacturing, Max Tech, and Jungam Mining. Three major factors explain Korean women's participation in political activism as mothers and wives rather than as a group of women. Housewives and mothers who had not been mobilized before joined the grassroots struggles initially to assist their striking family members with moral and material support and to protect them from possible company violence. Their direct exposure to the sufferings of the striking workers not only raised their awareness of class-based social inequalities but also led them to recognize the need to fight for their common interests as a family.<sup>28</sup>

A good example can be found in the family struggles of Kyungwon Century Machinery Corporation. When overnight sit-in strikes continued for several days, the wives and mothers of the striking workers, out of their love and worry for their family members, clustered in the factory and witnessed the appalling working conditions and the sufferings of the workers on the site. The fury unleashed by these women led to the instant formation of the Family Practice Committee (FPC), which was headed by the seventy-three-year-old mother of a union leader. The committee fostered solidarity among striking workers and their family members by distributing a leaflet updating the news of ongoing labor disputes in daily evening meetings of family members. A growing number of family members participated in overnight strikes with the protesting workers. After twenty-eight days of militant labor struggles, the Kyungwon workers finally obtained wage raises, family allowances, and company recognition of the democratic labor union.

The second factor that fostered women's mobilization as wives and mothers was the educational and organizational support of the KWWA for the creation of the Committee for Family Struggles.<sup>29</sup> The KWWA officials educated striking workers on the advantages of family struggles while they encouraged and assisted the wives of the striking workers to create a formal organization for their activism. They also published two collections of cases of family struggles with an appendix describing how to organize successful family struggles (i.e., *Nodongja Kachok Tuchaeng Saryechip* I and II).

Third, housewives and mothers had no formal organizations or

institutionalized channels to represent their interests and to exert their claims on scarce resources. Their exclusion from formal political channels led them to rely on grassroots struggles with the striking workers. Further, women's political actions, based on the extension of their roles as mothers and wives, could be more easily accepted and legitimized in the patriarchal cultural contexts of South Korea compared to their mobilization as feminists or women.

#### FAMILY STRUGGLES: DEMOCRATIZING WORKPLACES AND FAMILIES

The contributions of family struggles to the democratic transition in 1987 and afterward can be summarized in five major points. First, the Korean government has frequently used anticommunist ideology to repress any kind of social protest from the civil society over several decades. Labor strikes were often portrayed as being instigated by a small number of radicals absorbed with communist ideology. The participation of wives, children, and mothers in the grassroots struggles challenged the social defamation of striking workers as communists and legitimized their struggles as an effort to secure family survival.

Second, wives of striking workers contributed to publicizing labor struggles by publishing newsletters, staging public demonstrations, and making protest visits to government authorities.<sup>30</sup> For example, the family committee of the Kyungwon Century Machinery Corporation made protest visits to the Ministry of Labor and two political parties in order to request the mediation of these authorities in convoking labor-management negotiation meetings promptly. Similarly, about sixty family members of Sungjin company demonstrated in the Incheon city hall, pressing city officials to arrange an official meeting with the president of the company.

Third, wives' and mothers' efforts and devotion to bring about democracy in the factory contributed to producing support and assistance from the community. Misinformed and manipulated by the company, many neighbors and shop owners adjacent to Max Tech, for example, used to reproach protesting workers for creating turmoil and disturbances in the area. Family members' contact with these people provided opportunities to explain the causes and the processes of the labor disputes, promoting their understanding of workers' sufferings and activism. The neighbors not only provided food for protesting female workers but also offered to submit an appeal for the workers to the government. Similarly, the labor disputes of Jungam Mining expanded into a community event mobilizing ten thousand people, including the wives of workers, elementary school students, teenagers, the elderly, and others in the community. The public demonstration started by three thousand workers and their

family members in Gohan Railroad Station turned into a rally of ten thousand people by the time the protestors occupied the station completely after several hours of violent confrontation with the police.

Fourth, the collective power of striking workers increased substantially by forming alliances with family members. Family participation not only played a crucial role in leading the labor struggles to workers' victory, but also strengthened the organizational power of labor unions visibly. As a result, workers' victory rates were much higher in the cases of family struggles than the cases involving only workers. Logically, some labor unions relied on mobilizing wives of the working-class men as a strategy in the subsequent labor struggles. Hyundai Heavy Industry, for example, created a family division within the official organizational body for the strikes of 1989 to solidify the power of workers and their family members.<sup>31</sup>

Fifth, with wives' militant participation in labor struggles, the male-dominant attitude of the working-class husbands started to perish progressively, contributing to the democratization of the family.<sup>32</sup> Further, the wives began to acquire a common identity with their striking husbands and developed a sense of class solidarity with them. This transformed depoliticized housewives into active actors who fought for the survival and interests of their families. Their empowerment and activism served as the basis for building democratic family relations by diminishing the dominant attitude of husbands and the passive dependency of wives concomitantly.

### **Conclusion**

Diverse groups of Korean women contributed to the processes of breaking down military rule and reconstructing a democratic society. Women were the vanguard of the prodemocracy movement that challenged brutal sexual violence and torture by the military state. Their vigorous resistance not only expanded the concept of democracy but also contributed to challenging the legitimacy of military rule by exposing the inhumane nature of the regime. In particular, women's activism throughout the 1980s expanded the agenda of democratization from narrowly defined political democracy to wider social issues, including workers' survival rights, sexual violence against activists, environmental concerns, and basic human rights.

The radical political discourse of Korean democracy has been mainly centered on the issues of class conflicts, unequal distribution of wealth, dependent development, and nationalism. Contrary to the popular assumption that Korean women are apolitical and excluded from the male domain of national politics, many women participated in demo-

cratic struggles. They did partake in the movements for democracy through alternative channels such as grassroots women's organizations and political protests at the grassroots level. This suggests that gender issues are important for explaining the processes and the outcomes of the Korean struggles for democracy.

Women's activism has significantly shaped the outcomes and the strategies of the Korean democratic struggles. For example, the Kuro industrial strikes led by female workers served as a prototype for subsequent labor uprisings by transforming a labor dispute into a political protest and by introducing interfirm solidarity strikes. Similarly, the mobilization of the wives of striking men increased the probability of producing successful outcomes for workers, which served as an incentive for democratic labor unions to organize committees and chapters for family struggles.

Whereas women's vigorous activism fueled the national struggles for human rights and democracy, their participation in the prodemocracy movement in turn affected the agendas and the strategies of progressive women's movement organizations. Founded by former activists in student, labor, and democratic movements, these new organizations were dedicated to the idea of double militancy aimed at promoting women's rights as well as establishing a democratic society. Korean feminist ideology and political practices in the late 1980s developed out of the radical opposition to the military regime and made contributions to the processes of bringing about political democracy in South Korea.

The Korean democratic struggles mobilized a group of women who had not been politically active before, namely, the wives and mothers of striking workers. Their militant protests at the grassroots level were not based on high levels of class or gender consciousness but on the extension of their roles as mothers and wives who were responsible for taking care of their family members. While many Western feminists assume that women's domestic roles deter their active participation in political protests, the working-class wives in South Korea engaged in grassroots labor disputes to ensure the survival of their families. This politicization arising from women's traditional gender roles breaks down the rigid boundary between the public world of politics and the private world of the family.

Women's political activism as wives or mothers, not as citizens in their own right, has limited impact on promoting strategic gender interests aimed at transforming the gender roles assigned to women, challenging existing gender power arrangements, and claiming women's rights and autonomy. Yet research on women's movements in Latin America suggests that women's politicization that grows out of prevailing feminine roles still can bring some positive changes for women by creating organi-

zational resources for further uprisings aimed at achieving strategic gender interests.<sup>33</sup>

Korean women's active mobilization for the breakdown of military rule does not guarantee increased women's political representation and improved realization of their demands in policy implementation. When democracy is restored, male-dominant political parties and institutional political actors, not social-movement groups, become the center of politics. This leaves little political space for women to be integrated into the political system. In order to survive the transition from opposition politics to democratic politics, women's-movement groups need to reconstruct their structure, agendas, and strategies to adjust to the new political circumstances. Further research is required to analyze the challenges and the changes that the Korean women's movement groups had to deal with after the return to democracy.

#### NOTES

1. See Byung-Hee Lee, "Labor Union Movements in Electronics Industry," in *Nodong chohap chojik yongu* [A Study on the Organizations of Labor Unions], ed. Han'guk Sahoe Yonguso [Research Institute of the Korean Society] (Seoul: Paesan Sō dang, 1990); Yong-Il Im, *Han'guk ūi nodong undong kwa kyekūb chōngchi* [Korean Labor Movement and Class Politics] (Masan: University of Kyōngnam Press, 1997).

2. For a rare exception to this tendency, see an insightful article by Miriam Louie, "Minjung Feminism: Korean Women's Movement for Gender and Class Liberation," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 18, No. 4 (1995): 417–30.

3. See Chun Tae-Il Memorial Foundation, ed., *Han'guk nodong undong isipnyōn ūi kyōlsan kwa ch'onmang* [The Fruits and the Prospects of the Twenty Years of the Korean Labor Movement] (Seoul: Sekye Press, 1990); Im, *Han'guk ūi nodong undong*.

4. For example, a number of housewives' groups supported their striking husbands with militant actions during the transition to democracy, but written documentation of their activities does not exist for many cases.

5. Yesim Arat, "Toward a Democratic Society: The Women's Movement in Turkey in the 1980s," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 17, No. 2/3 (1994): 241–48. For a discussion of women's role in the transition to democracy in Latin America, see Sonia Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy in Brazil: Women's Movements in Transition Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), and Jane Jaquette, ed., *The Women's Movement in Latin America: Feminism and the Transition to Democracy* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

6. For a further discussion on feminist organizations formed in South Korea in the early 1980s, see Jeong-Lim Nam, "Reforming Economic Allocation in the Family: The Women's Movement and the Role of the State in South Korea," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 18, No. 2 (1995): 113–23.

7. Loh Cheng-Kooi, "Asian Industrial Women Workers in the 1980s," in *Confronting State, Capital, and Patriarchy*, ed. Amrita Chhachhi and Renee Pittin (London: Macmillan, 1996).

8. Tae-Ho Lee, *Pulkkochiyō i ōdumūl palhyōra* [Torch! Light up this Darkness] (Seoul: Chungsa, 1986).

9. *Minjung* means a group of masses or an underprivileged class. *Minjung* implies a broad alliance of popular masses that are alienated from political power and the fruits of economic success. See Hagen Koo, “The State, Minjung, and the Working Class in South Korea,” in *State and Society in Contemporary Korea*, ed. Hagen Koo (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993). The origin of the *minjung* movement is deeply rooted in the suffering of female factory workers and their vigorous resistance. For a further discussion of the origin of the *minjung* movement, see Louie, “Minjung Feminism.”

10. Han’guk Yōsōng Tanch’e Yōnhap [Korean Women’s Organizations United], *Yōlrin hūimang: Han’guk yōsōng tanch’e sipyōnsa* [Open Hope: The Ten-Year History of Korean Women Workers Organizations United] (Seoul: Hanguk Yōsōng Tanch’e Yōnhap, 1998).

11. Han’guk Yōsōng Tanch’e Yōnhap, *Yōlrin hūimang*.

12. George Ogle, *South Korea: Dissent within the Economic Miracle* (London: Zed Books, 1990).

13. See Koo, “The State, Minjung, and the Working Class,” 151.

14. Students and labor activists in South Korea could not obtain jobs through normal procedures because their names were on a government black list designed to prevent their employment.

15. The use of sexual violence is more effective in controlling women’s protests and resistance than men’s because Korean culture promotes women’s virginity and sexual inexperience while permitting men’s sexual promiscuity. Consequently, protesting Korean women had to face an additional form of violence by the police that men did not experience—sexual violence and rape. This clearly demonstrates that the use of violence by the state is a gender-specific issue that needs to be resolved by women’s collective actions.

16. Asia Watch Committee, “*A Stern, Steady Crackdown*”: *Legal Process and Human Rights in South Korea* (Washington: Asia Watch, 1987).

17. Han’guk Yōsōng Nodongja Hyōpuihoe [Korean Women Workers Associations United], *Tūlkkot iyo, pulkko iyo, kūtae irūmun yōsōng nodongja* [A Wild Flower, a Torch, Your Name is Female Workers: A Ten-Year History of Korean Women Workers Associations] (Seoul: Dongbang Kihoek, 1997).

18. Han’guk Yōsōng Tanch’e Yōnhap, *Yōlrin hūimang*.

19. Han’guk Yōsōng Tanch’e Yōnhap, *Yōlrin hūimang*, 17–18.

20. Han’guk Yōsōng Tanch’e Yōnhap, *Yōlrin hūimang*, 26.

21. Han’guk Yōsōng Tanch’e Yōnhap, *Yōlrin hūimang*, 24.

22. For statistics on employment in the Masan Export Free Zone, see Seung-Kyung Kim, *Class Struggle or Family Struggle? The Lives of Women Factory Workers in South Korea* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Women workers constituted approximately 75 percent of the workforce in the late 1980s, although it fluctuated slightly year by year. The percentages of women workers in the zone were higher in the early 1980s, reaching 78 percent of the total.

23. For statistics on the July–August labor uprisings in the Changwon-Masan area, see In-Sun Kang, *80 nyōndae Masan chiyōk yōsōng nodongja undong* [The Women Workers’ Movement in Masan during the 1980s], Kyōngnam Taehakkyo Nonmunjip [Collected Papers of Kyōngnam University], 18 (1991).

24. For further discussion of labor struggles at Sumida, see Lee, “Labor Union Movements in Electronics Industry.”

25. See Aihwa Ong, *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), and Douglas Porpora, Lim Mali Hui, and Usanee Pronunas, "The Role of Women in the International Division of Labor: The Case of Thailand," *Development and Change*, 20 (1989): 269–94.

26. See Kim, *Class Struggle or Family Struggle?*

27. Han'guk Yösöng Nodongjahoe [Korean Women Workers' Associations], *Nodongja kachok tuchaeng saryechip I* [Collected Cases of Family Struggles I] (Seoul: Han'guk Yösöng Nodongjahoe, 1988).

28. Han'guk Yösöng Nodongjahoe [Korean Women Workers' Associations], *Nodongja kachok tuchaeng saryechip II* [Collected Cases of Family Struggles II] (Seoul: Han'guk Yösöng Nodongjahoe, 1989).

29. Han'guk Yösöng Nodongja Hyöpuihoe, *Tülkkot iyo, pulkko iyo*.

30. For a detailed discussion on this matter, see Han'guk Yösöng Nodongjahoe, *Nodongja kachok tuchaeng saryechip I*.

31. Han'guk Yösöng Nodongjahoe, *Nodongja kachok tuchaeng saryechip II*, 90–96.

32. See Han'guk Yösöng Nodongjahoe, *Nodongja kachok tuchaeng saryechip I*, 36–37.

33. Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy in Brazil*; Jaquette, *The Women's Movement in Latin America*.