

# The Current Japanese Women's Movement

by Kim Slote

Japanese women have long struggled for equality and against sexual discrimination. Their struggle started as far back as the days of the Bluestocking Society called Seitosha (1911-1916) which was founded by writer Hiratsuka Raicho.

The Seitosha was a literary community where women can gather, share ideas and publish their works. It addresses such women's issues as the need for self-affirmation, freedom of education and labor, problems in marriage, prostitution, abortion, lesbianism and chastity.

The feminists and women activists of the current Japanese women's movements have continued fighting injustices in a society committed against women. In a recent study of the women's movement and 42 activists, I explored what the movements and its members are today.

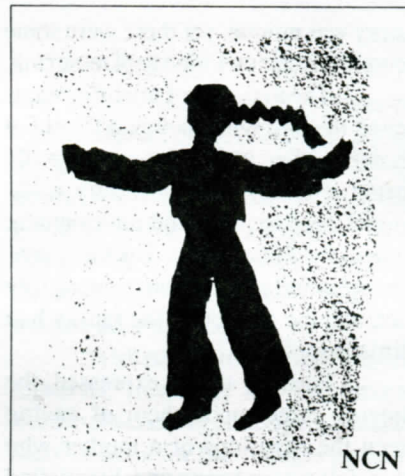
Today's women's movement is still relegated to the fringes of Japanese society and thus has limited influence upon the way society views and treats women. Nevertheless, it has an energy and vitality that is important to recognize and affirm. Although the movement has not permeated mainstream society to the same degree, for example, as in the West, it is still strong and active and a crucial part of many women's lives.

The movement provides many Japanese women with an outlet for expressing their views and frustrations and for fighting against discrimination. It also offers them the security of a community of like-minded women and a network of support.

The current Japanese women's movement expresses itself primarily in the form of small, individual women's groups, both voluntary and non-voluntary. While some focus their activities around one basic issue, others

deal with a wider range of issues. Still others are less concerned with actual protest and more concerned with the positive process of creating an alternative culture or giving support to women's accomplishments.

Further, while some groups define themselves without hesitation as "feminist" in orientation and are



quite vocal in their protests, others would not identify themselves as feminist *per se*, but prefer simply to say that they work for women's issues. (The label "feminist" still holds negative connotations in Japanese society).

Despite the diversity of the movement, the groups struggle with some common concerns. They fight discrimination in education and employment opportunities; discrimination in the requirements of birth and registration laws that disadvantage single mothers and their "illegitimate" children; and discrimination against Asian migrant workers and disabled women.

They also struggle against abortion restrictions, and sexual violence against women. Sexual violence is a particular area of concentration for many Japanese feminist groups.

"Sexual violence" is generally thought of as an umbrella term to include pornography, rape, prostitution, images of women in media, sexual harassment, beauty contests, and the pressure, in general, for women to fit a certain rigid model of femininity.

"We women want to reclaim our beauty. We want to be free to look as we want, to have control over how we are represented in society," said one activist. "We want to create a culture that has positive images of both women and men." Concrete action taken to protest sexual harassment (specifically in the workplace) and sexist advertising has been particularly forceful in recent years.

Although informal networking among groups is common, there are still only a few formal, organized network of groups. One highly successful example is the "Women's Network to Fight Sexual Violence" (STON '90), founded in 1989 in order to create an umbrella group within which individual groups could develop positive ties with each other and get along even if their way of thinking differs. This network's activities include sponsoring symposia, organizing demonstrations and conducting formal protests.

Another formal network is the International Women's Year Liaison Group. Formed in 1975, it is comprised of 50 women's organizations nationwide devoted to monitoring and improving the Japanese government's policies related to women, especially regarding the resolutions adopted by the U.N. International Women's Year Conference of Japan (1975), the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and its own proposed Plan of Action (1988). There is no doubt that the ideologies, philosophies and priorities of these 50 groups are different;



yet they have still managed to combine their forces under the name of Liaison Group to work towards the promotion of women's rights.

As mentioned earlier, the current Japanese women's movement also includes many groups which prefer to focus their energy less on protesting issues and more on creating a positive and supportive alternative environment or space for women.

A good example of such a group, which also serves as a network for women from 30 feminist groups throughout Japan, is the "Let's Have Fun Together!" Women's Association. This group was founded in 1988 "to celebrate women being together and women's expressions and creativity, to create a society where media and art are no longer offensive to women, and to have fun through our own music and art where women are depicted not as passive but as strong beings," said one member.

Other groups may provide a support base for women politicians, offer a safe haven for lesbians, give advice on how to achieve equality in the home, help women to be more in touch with their own bodies and sexuality, serve as a feminist forum for viewing and discussing films created and directed by women from all over the world, or focus on putting out publications written by and about women.

In order to have a true understanding of the Japanese women's movement, it is crucial to look at its individual participants. What forces have shaped their beliefs? What are their views towards society and woman's role in it? What choices have they made for themselves?

Although the 42 women I interviewed represent only a handful of activists in the movement, it is still useful to look at who they are, as people and as women. In analyzing the forces which have shaped these women, I inquired first into the nature of their upbringing. Each woman's



story was unique, yet there were some common themes which kept recurring.

The majority of my informants cited the struggles they had fought at home, either outwardly or inwardly often rebelling against a very traditional patriarchal home environment where the father reigned as king, gender roles and expectations were rigidly set, and the women in the family had little respect.

Further, many expressed the intense effect upon them of having seen the hardships of a mother who they felt was unhappy and dissatisfied with her life. They often cited the sacrifices their mother had had to make for her husband and family, her frustration at not being allowed or able to fulfill dreams of a career, her powerlessness caused by complete economical dependence, and her poor relationship with her husband which often entailed having to endure his inconsiderate or even abusive behavior.

On the other hand, many of my informants attributed their progressive or feminist tendencies to a liberal, untraditional and supportive home environment where they were encouraged by their parents to be strong, to challenge themselves, to get a good education, or to learn a skill.

In some cases, this was due to the presence of a father who was not so sexist or domineering and who respected his wife and children. In other cases, it was due to having grown up

either in a single mother family (i.e. no father present) or in a home where the mother played a very strong role and was independent, often emotionally as well as financially. As a result, in these types of homes, gender discrimination and repressive, fixed gender roles were generally not a part of the overall experience.

In addition to their upbringing, they identified other past influences. One-third had participated in the student political movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Some found the student movement influential because it had encouraged them to become politically aware and active, and also offered them the opportunity to experiment with non-conventional ways of thinking, behaving, dressing and speaking.

The majority, however, were affected by the student movement because of the disappointment, frustration and anger they felt upon discovering that there was just as much sexual discrimination within the movement as outside the movement. When many female student activists realized how patriarchal the student movement was--how women students were continually relegated to positions of lesser importance and responsibility--they broke away and ended up forming the women's liberation movement.

Other informants spoke about the lasting effects of having experienced other forms of sexual discrimination, such as in their workplace or at school. Others, however, cited positive influences, such as the Western women's movement, books by Western feminists, or some progressive lecture or class they had attended.

Whatever the reasons behind the development of a Japanese feminist or woman activist, it is clear that they had a huge impact on the way these women decided they wanted to live their lives. These women stand out in Japanese society because of the often radical and courageous choices they have made for themselves.

For example, many of my informants are divorced or have chosen



never to marry officially, both of which are still unusual in Japan. One of the main reasons for the latter is their aversion to their family registration (Koseki) and marriage system, which force the woman to take her husband's name, pressure her to become a member of and take care of his family, and imply that the relationship has to be validated in the eyes of the government and society.

Many of these women also described not wanting to give up their freedom and economic independence, and not wanting to get locked into set gender roles. Those who are married, however, seem determined to create a relationship that is as equal and mutually respectful as possible.

Further, all of these women are basically working full-time, and more often than not in jobs that are connected in some way to their political activism. To have a career or job is extremely important to them, but their agenda does not include "making it in the man's world." Rather, they simply want to do work that is meaningful and enriching for them.

I found that most have been able to achieve that, most likely because they are doing either freelance work or work that is extremely flexible, allowing for maximum creativity and individuality. Finally, their high level of concern with not only gender issues but a broad range of political and social issues in the world sets them apart from the average person. Through their progressive beliefs and lifestyles, they offer an inherent challenge to Japan's conventional and male-dominated society.

It was also very enlightening to learn about these women's views towards their own society. In general, the majority of them feel that despite the discrimination that still exists against women, Japanese society has changed for the better--primarily because the average woman now has a higher level of awareness and consciousness.

They say that this trend is illustrated by the rise in the number of



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women who are aspiring to be more than just housewives and who are taking greater charge of their lives. As one activist said, "Women have begun to live more for themselves." They feel that there is now a wider range of choices and opportunities open to women than ever before.

With regard to men and gender relations, however, my informants were more critical; although some feel there is hope for the younger generation, most seem to feel that men have generally not changed that much and that they are still sexist. This continued conservative tendency among men has resulted in increased tension and friction between the sexes since, while many women's views, needs and aspirations have undergone profound changes, men's simply have not.

These women also tended to be highly critical of specific laws and policies which they see as discriminatory and of the fact that many fields are still barred to women. As one put it: "We need more women in mass media, economics, politics and film-directing. We still lack power equal to that of men."

Although the movement is not yet powerful enough to have had a major impact upon society's (specifically men's) attitudes towards women, and although the traditional and patri-

archal nature of Japanese society has remained largely intact and unaffected, the movement has succeeded in communicating its message of liberation to many women both inside and outside the movement.

In addition, there have been some concrete achievements on the part of feminist groups, such as raising general public awareness of issues, gaining more coverage by the media, influencing members, forcing companies to remove sexist or offensive advertising, and helping to provide a mutually supportive and affirming community for the women in the movement themselves.

Of course, there will always be natural frustrations on the part of feminists and activists due to the slow pace of change and the resistance of society to change. Feminism does not fit well into Japanese society, which regards women as wives and mothers first and foremost. In a society where one is supposed to deny the self in favor of the "group" and to not "make waves," the women's movement must fight twice as hard to express itself and achieve recognition. Japanese feminists and activists are, in the most basic sense, struggling to lead a life truer to themselves and free from conventional mores.



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

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

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

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### About the author:

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

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Source: *Asian Women's Liberation*, No. 8, 1991.

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## Women take the forefront:

# Women's Movement in South Korea

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Women Farmers

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



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

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

### US Military Presence and Sexual Exploitation

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



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

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

### Women in Peace and Reunification Movements

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

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

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

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

### Patriarchy and Family Law Revision

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

### Women's Organizations

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

Source: *Korea Resource and Information Center*  
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