

SOUTH KOREAN WOMEN WORKERS' LABOR RESISTANCE IN THE ERA OF EXPORT-ORIENTED INDUSTRIALIZATION, 1970-1980*

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This paper examines the structural forces behind South Korean women workers' labor activism in the 1970s, an era of rapid export-oriented industrialization. Most of the labor strikes initiated by women occurred in the labor-intensive manufacturing sector, and they were in sharp contrast to the overall labor quiescence of male workers during the same period. The experiences of South Korean women refute widely held assumptions about the docility of Asian women workers. This case study suggests that women rebel when their lives undergo drastic changes under a set of antagonistic structural transformations. Women dialectically interact with the capitalist-patriarchal structure as conscious human agents, and the result of such interaction is their gender- and class-based collective resistance.

INTRODUCTION

South Korea's "economic miracle" has been phenomenal. One of the "Four Asian Tigers" (along with Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan), the nation's GNP grew by an annual average of 7 percent in the 1970s. Until quite recently, many policy makers believed that Korea's "export-oriented industrialization" (henceforth, EOI) was a useful model for other developing economies to emulate.¹ For a nation with poor natural resource endowment, limited domestic market potential, and dearth of capital, EOI was an effective development strategy for decades. South Korea concentrated its well-educated and highly disciplined labor force into the labor-intensive manufacturing sector as a way to gain and enjoy a competitive advantage in international markets (Barret and Chin, 1987). Under the strong leadership

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¹ The emergency transfusion of IMF (International Monetary Fund) funds in the Korean economy in 1997 suggests that Korea's development experiences may no longer be an ideal model for other developing economies to copy. For detailed discussions on the negative side effects of Korea's rapid industrialization, see Hart-Landsberg (1993).

of an authoritarian regime, South Korea succeeded in leaving poverty behind. However, economic success affected men and women differently. Korea's state-driven capitalist industrialization was a gendered process, and women resisted.

One of the ironies of South Korea's "economic miracle" was the co-existence of phenomenal growth and women's labor resistance. Women initiated labor strikes at a time when labor activism was severely repressed, and this behavior was always in sharp contrast to male workers' overall labor inactivity during the 1970s (Lee, 1997: 154). "Militant" and "radical" have been the primary adjectives used to describe female activism (Hamilton, 1986). Also, women's activism was a clear violation of the patriarchal culture's rigid gender norms. This paper attempts to explain why South Korean women, and not men, were at the forefront of labor strikes in the 1970s. I argue that South Korean women resisted a set of antagonistic structural changes that abruptly altered their lives during the period of rapid industrialization. Women rebel when their lives undergo drastic changes in the milieu of gendered structural transformation.

This paper hypothesizes that the social phenomenon under observation (women's resistance) can be explained by their lived experiences (class- and gender-based oppression) with the intervening variables of macro social transformation (urbanization and increased labor participation) and the existence of outside support groups. This paper attempts to demystify the glossy portrayal of economic growth by viewing the challenging work lives of women workers and their subsequent labor resistance. The impressive macro economic indicators did not mean much when the numbers were not translated into qualitative improvement in workers' welfare. Although the export regime euphemized women workers in the export industry as "the industrial warriors," they had to endure extremely hard work and gendered humiliation on the shop floor. The degrading social stigma as powerless, poor, under-educated, rural, young, and female, was another salient source of their discontent. Their lived experiences were in great congruence with the nation's social change. The increase in young women's labor participation and urban migration was in step with the country's structural transformation. The export-oriented industrialization needed a cheap and skilled labor force, and women filled the need. The rapid urbanization also meant their radical uprooting from their hometowns. This group of socially marginal women workers whose lives were at the juncture of overall social change experienced empowerment from the daily oppression, the shared camaraderie, the resistance experiences, and the outside support.

WOMEN WORKERS' PASSIVE RESISTANCE: A DOMINANT NORM?

Most comparative studies of women's labor resistance present a passive picture of women. Studies on Asian women in particular consistently suggest passive resistance as a dominant norm. Gallin (1990) describes the "muting of class consciousness" by Taiwanese women workers. She argues that women workers are inactive because of the dispersal of factories into rural areas, the influence of a patriarchal family structure, the state's repressive labor policies, and women workers' identification with the company rather than with fellow workers. In addition, Ehrenreich and Fuentes (1985), and Lin (1986) have described Southeast Asian women workers' unusual forms of resistance in the electronics industry. Southeast Asian women's mass hysteria, such as collapses and sudden outbursts, seems to reflect a lack of resistance strategy. Elson and Pearson (1981) and Hossfeld (1990) note Asian women workers' ingenuous but passive resistance against patriarchal management. Women workers mimic and ridicule male supervisors in their absence, replacing their usual expressions of respect and deference. Elson and Pearson (1981: 27) observe that "... this passivity is not a natural and original state: to achieve it requires enormous efforts of self-repression." Bose and Acosta-Belen (1995: 5) also argue for women's passive resistance by stating that "women's survival itself is an act of resistance." Thus, passive resistance has been argued to be the dominant mode of Asian women workers' labor struggles.

In contrast to these claims of women's passive resistance, there exists substantial evidence of women's labor activism. Enloe (1989: 169-174) describes an incident of collective action by Mexican women. In 1985, a severe earthquake in Mexico City destroyed about 800 small garment shops, causing significant losses of workers' lives and property. The value of women workers in the capitalist system became evident when rescue workers attempted to salvage sewing machines before they rescued the women. After this accident, the Mexican women garment workers organized a union, formed a coalition with middle class women, and subsequently won several key concessions such as the provision of day care centers. Tilly (1986) also challenges the women's passive resistance paradigm by noting the pivotal role of French women workers during the highly agitated labor unrest in the 19th century tobacco industry. Tilly sees the changes in women's roles as members of an emerging proletariat class in the industrialization process as the primary cause for their labor activism. Similarly, Mies (1988) describes Indian peasant women's active resistance against caste-based exploitation in

the 1970s. Lower-caste peasant women had long suffered unjust treatment, including unlawful eviction from their homes and brutal physical attacks by upper-caste landlords and police. As a way to protect them from such exploitation, women in the 'Harijian' caste (untouchables) successfully organized fieldwork groups. Mies writes, "they showed an astonishing degree of assertiveness and militancy and a great capacity for clear-headed analysis of their problems and working out solutions. This assertiveness was not an inborn quality of the Harijian women, but was the outcome of their work, their awareness of its importance for the survival of their family, and of the fact that they had to live by the work of their own hands" (Mies, 1988: 140). Along with these cross-national examples, South Korean women's labor resistance in the 1970s debunks the "straw woman" argument of women's inherent passivity. Passive resistance simply is not the dominant mode of women's labor struggles (Fonow, 1998; Irons, 1998; Tinsman, 2000).²

THE GENDERED TRAJECTORY OF SOUTH KOREA'S EOI

Women workers face the "double jeopardy" of patriarchy and capitalism in the milieu of global economic restructuring. Expansion of capitalism on a global scale and preexisting social norms of patriarchy produce a unique balancing act by mutually reinforcing each other's ideological manifestations (Hartmann, 1976, 1981). The international division of labor and the mobility of capital accrue salient empirical implications for women's lives in the developing economies (Barkin, 1985; Tiano, 1995; Ward, 1986).

A symbiotic relationship that formed between capitalism and patriarchy transformed women into workers in South Korea's industrialization process. South Korea's rapid economic growth in quantitative terms did not bring about fair and equitable improvement for the general populace. The government-led EOI resulted in a massive influx of low-paid and easy-to-exploit women workers into labor-intensive industries. In addition, rapid urbanization was accompanied by the stagnation of rural areas. These consequences of South Korea's uneven economic development had serious implications for women's lives (Roh, 1994; Park, 2001: 855-859). This section

² The author acknowledges the cases of non-resistance or passive resistance in other export-oriented industries such as Indonesia and Thailand. My speculation for these differences is that these cases may lack the explanatory variables this paper uses, such as oppression embedded in the women's daily lives (e.g., the shop floor, dormitory, and the degrading social stigma). The same speculation can be made about the intervening variables, such as the radical structural transformation (e.g., urbanization and drastic increase in the demand for women's work) and the existence of consciousness raising support groups from outside (e.g., the Urban Industrial Mission).

specifically aims to show that Korea's development trajectory was a gendered process. Women's lives situated in that particular structural position and historical milieu were interwoven with their consciousness raising and subsequent resistance. This section does not attempt to provide the direct causal explanation between women's oppression and their resistance. Rather, it aims to provide a mediating link between macro social change and women's lived lives. Situating women in a certain structural position helps us to be aware of the historical milieu of their times and to connect such milieu to their life experiences.

The Increase in Women's Participation in the Labor Market

Women's labor force participation increased substantially during Korea's EOI process. A significant number of women became paid workers in the 1960s and 1970s. The proportion of women in the labor force, for instance, climbed from 28.7 percent in 1960 to 35.2 percent in 1970, and it increased again to 36.6 percent in 1980. This substantial increase in female labor force participation reflects the crucial importance of women's work to the Korean economy's initial take-off in the 1960s.

The increase in women's labor force participation meant the rising importance of their work in various industrial sectors. Women's labor participation in secondary manufacturing, for instance, rose from 21.1 percent in 1960, to 27.9 percent in 1970, and then to 30.3 percent in 1980. At the same time, the proportion of women engaging in agricultural production activities grew from 30.1 percent in 1960 to 40.8 percent in 1970, and then to 44.2 percent in 1980. Women thus emerged as major members of the new proletariat class in South Korea's economy.

Despite the substantial increase in women's employment in the manufacturing sector, the majority of women were concentrated in labor-intensive peripheral industries. Due to the sexual division of labor, most women were excluded from the capital-intensive sector. As in other societies, insecure employment, low skill levels, low wages, and lack of career mobility characterized the labor-intensive industries of South Korea. For instance, the proportion of women workers in capital-intensive industries in South Korea was only 15.2 percent in 1960, 22.0 percent in 1970, and 19.3 percent in 1980. Yet the proportion of women workers in labor-intensive industries was 50.3 percent in 1960, 57.5 percent in 1970, and 57.3 percent in 1980. As a result, women workers in labor-intensive industries lacked many of the privileges that the male workers in the capital-intensive industries enjoyed such as secure employment, high wages, and upward career mobility.

The sexual division of labor between labor-intensive and capital-intensive

industries increased as time progressed. For instance, 42.2 percent of apparel manufacturing workers were female in 1960, but this number grew to 69.1 percent in 1970 and to 76.7 percent in 1980. The gender composition of occupational categories within manufacturing suggests that women were mostly spinners, weavers, knitters, sewers, food processors, rubber footwear makers, wig makers, and electronics assembly workers (Ministry of Labor, 1979). However, women were an absolute minority of workers within all capital-intensive industries except pharmaceutical manufacturing. The manufacturing of industrial machinery, for instance, had the lowest share of female workers with 1.1 percent in 1960. In 1973, shipbuilding had the lowest share of female workers with 3.1 percent. Occupational prestige of women workers within the manufacturing sector was considerably lower than that of male workers.

Despite the significant contribution made by women workers to South Korea's economic growth, the economic rewards they received for their work were minimal compared to those of male workers (Koo, Haggard, and Deyo, 1986: 67). For example, holding educational level constant, women workers in manufacturing received about 56 percent of the wages paid to their male counterparts in 1978 (Kim, 1984: 65).³ Compared to other Asian newly industrializing countries such as Singapore and Hong Kong, the wage differential between men and women has been highest in South Korea (Park, 1993: 133).⁴ These gender-biased wages are closely related to the patriarchal norm of treating women as secondary wage earners.⁵ The major-

³ Wage policy was determined at a factory level by discriminatory work assignments given to women workers, and entailed less managerial authority and promotion possibilities. Very few women were assigned to the managerial positions on the shop floor as team leader and foreman. The factory regime believed that the paternalistic male figures would be more suitable to lead the young women workers. Women's less important and less prestigious work assignments as compared to their male counterparts was used to justify their lower wage level. Non-job related considerations in determining a worker's wage such as the number of dependents, marital status, and military service led to substantial wage discrepancy between male and female workers as well.

⁴ Wage differences between other Asian countries and Korea seem to be positively associated with the degree of patriarchal beliefs. Women's socio-economic status seems to reflect the value they carry as members of society and workforce.

⁵ The empirical reality of women workers was that they were often the primary provider for their families in the rural areas. They often financed their male siblings' education as well. Contrary to this reality, the management treated women workers as if they were secondary breadwinners. Reasons for this discrepancy lied within the patriarchal norms that young women were supposed to be dependent on their parents and protected by male siblings. Normatively, they could be neither self-sufficient nor providing. Capitalists took advantage of these norms by framing the young women workers as secondary earners whose work carried less social importance than men's. Therefore, they could justify less compensation for the

ity of South Korean women workers in the labor-intensive manufacturing sector were single, in their early 20s, and from rural backgrounds. Very few of them were economically dependent on their families. Despite earning subsistence wages, some women still managed to remit a significant portion of their wages to their families (Koo, 1987). These women's economic independence as quasi-primary wage earners was not reflected in their economic rewards. Although women worked longer hours than men, they were paid less. In addition, women worked an average of 245 hours per month in 1984, as opposed to 241 hours for men. This meant that women worked 10.2 hours a day, in excess of the 8 hour working day regulation, while men averaged 10 hours daily (Park, 1993: 133-134). Economic logic alone cannot explain these gaps. Gender ideology played a part in determining the economic value of women's work. Quite simply, women could be worked longer and cheaper.

Women's Urban Migration

Park Chung Hee's authoritarian regime (1961-1979) believed in economies of scale by concentrating manufacturing facilities in a few geographical locations. This sort of industrial policy created a large pool of migrant women workers who left rural areas to get jobs in the cities. This in-migration to major industrial centers such as the Seoul, Busan, and Daegu metropolitan areas was phenomenal, creating significant out-migration from rural areas. The annual growth rate of in-migration to the metropolitan areas averaged about 20 percent in the 1960s and 1970s. By contrast, the out-migration from the agricultural areas in Chung-Buk, Chung-Nam, Jeon-Buk, and Jeon-Nam Provinces averaged 7 percent from 1960 to 1980 (Economic Planning Board, 1963, 1973, 1983). As we will see below, this process of rapid urbanization had a more significant impact on Korean women than on the general population.

Women who remained in rural areas became a major agricultural work force. For example, in the 1960s, the growth rate of the economically active female population in rural areas experienced a dramatic 48.2 percent increase. This feminization of the agricultural population continued until the 1970s, with a 4.7 percent increase of economically active women in rural areas, while the male population shrank by 7.8 percent. Women filled the void left by out-migrated agricultural male labor in the process of rapid urbanization.

Substantial numbers of women also migrated to the cities. Married

women's work.

women moved to urban areas as members of family units, and they were often absorbed into the informal urban economy. Significantly, young women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four had the highest urban migration rate, in comparison with women and men in all other age groups. Women in the same age bracket composed 40.1 percent of the total population that migrated into urban areas during 1966 and 1970. During 1971 and 1975, the same group had the highest urbanization rate, comprising 48.5 percent of the total migration to urban areas. In 1976, 48.2 percent of the people who moved to urban areas were women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four. Young women migrants in the most productive age bracket thus became a major part of the rising proletariat class in South Korea's industrializing economy.

This influx of young women into the urban sector had two important implications. The first was an increase in demand for an abundant supply of cheap and easily exploitable industrial labor. The second was the rational calculation of the economic value of their daughters by parents. Greenhalgh (1985: 276) writes that "Put badly, the parents' *key strategy* was to take more from daughters to give more to sons and thus get more for themselves ... whereas traditionally daughters could repay their parents only by helping around the house. Now daughters could repay their debt — and repay it fully — by working outside the home and remitting their wages to their parents [emphasis in original]." There exists compelling evidence of young factory women's monetary contributions to rural families. In a survey of factory women in Korea's Daegu-Gumi industrial complex, an average of 21 percent of young female factory workers' total income was remitted to parents in rural areas (Koo, 1987). South Korea's rapid urbanization thus resulted in an unprecedentedly high increase in women's urban migration. There was a strong pull for women's labor. There was also a push from the parents who desired their daughters' monetary contributions to the family. Girls from rural areas became the factory girls of the cities, who were often euphemized as the "industrial warriors" of the nation (Lee, 1990).⁶

The phenomenal economic growth of South Korea involved human costs. Women's lives and their work were fundamentally transformed in the sys-

⁶ Korean workers were often called "industrial warriors," fighting for the nation's industrialization, on the "export front." A female worker of Dong-Il Textile wrote the following poem, conveying her skepticism against this euphoria: Drinking a Cup of Hot Coffee/I drink a cup of hot coffee/Dispensed from a vending machine./A cup of coffee and one tablet of Timing awaken my tired body./My head feels numb./My exhaustion feels numb./and the passage of time feels numb./Would a cup of coffee and a tablet of Timing qualify me/As an industrial warrior?/The industrial warrior who has to work/All the time (Jung, 1985: 83).

tem of capitalism and patriarchy. Women workers were a major “cog” of the engine of South Korea’s economic growth, yet their contribution has been consistently underestimated. Behind the glamorous image of South Korea’s economic success lie the hardships experienced by women workers.

SOUTH KOREAN WOMEN WORKERS' LABOR RESISTANCE IN THE 1970S: THREE HISTORICAL CASES

South Korean women’s engagement in labor strikes has been viewed as idiosyncratic in consideration of the Confucian cultural context, which prescribes Korea’s rigid gender norms. Asian women have in general been stereotyped as meek and submissive (Gelb and Palley, 1994; Kim, 1997; Tiano, 1994: 3-6; Young, 1987). This stereotyping often obscures the empirical reality. Choi (1989: 65), for instance, notes that “women workers in Korea have been as important to the union movement as they have been to the production process.” Lee (1987: 71) writes that “gender is an important explanatory variable for the variations in labor markets and the labor movement in Korea.” Deyo (1989: 190) also emphasizes that “if young female workers rarely engage in well-organized collective action, they do engage in protests and demonstrations. South Korean female textile workers were at the center of worker protests during South Korea’s recent political crisis.” The intensity and importance of South Korean women’s labor resistance thus refutes the stereotype of Asian women’s docility.

In order to grasp an overall picture of women-initiated labor activism, I will briefly describe three exemplary strikes that occurred in the 1970s.⁷ Labor strikes were common in Korea during the 1970s and 1980s. This explosion of strikes can be explained as the manifestations of “rising political expectation” after the loosening of the tight social control exercised by the Park Chung Hee regime (Kim-Park, 1997). All three occurred at labor-intensive firms employing more than 1,000 workers at the time of the strike,

TABLE 1. ANNUAL LABOR DISPUTES, 1970-1980

Year	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980
(A)	4	10	0	0	58	52	49	58	102	105	206
(B)	541	832	0	0	22,609	10,256	657	7,975	10,598	14,258	4,897

(A) is the frequency of annual labor disputes and (B) is the number of strikers.

Source: Ministry of Labor. 1983. *Year Book of Labor Statistics*.

⁷ For other sources with more descriptions, see Han (1991) and Chungsa Pyungjipbu (1984).

and the absolute majority of the strikers involved were women. All of the strikes were at “the cornerstone of the Korean labor movement,” resulting in large-scale reactions from the general populace and significant political transformations (Lee, 1987). These three cases have been chosen not because of *strict* comparability among them, but because of their importance to the Korean labor movement (Choi, 1989; Lee, 1990). Each case illuminates the gendered dynamics of Korea’s development process, such as the sexual division of labor, work discrimination against women, patriarchal management practices, and a repressive labor regime. These dynamics were not manifested in uniform fashion in all three of the cases. For instance, patriarchal management practices showed a stronger presence in one case, while the repressive labor regime did so in another case.

The following historical accounts are from the Dismissed Workers Association of Dong-II Textile (1985), the Electing Committee for the Jeon Tae Il Monument (1983), the Korean National Christian Council (1984), and Kim-Park (1998). These sources convey the details of the events by drawing heavily on the strike participants’ narratives, women workers’ personal writings, and officially banned underground materials. Alternative data sources such as newspaper articles, public opinion polls, and government statements exist in forms not warranting a systematic analysis, or do not exist at all. The severe government censorship against the mass media, conducted out of fear of losing foreign investment and spreading anti-government sentiment, resulted in this absence of public data (cf. Daehwa, 1977).

The Peace Market Protest (1970)

The Chonggye garment makers’ sweatshops were established in Seoul in 1961. As of 1970, several hundred small workshops located at a giant garment center called the Peace Market were employing about 20,000 workers, and these small shops supplied 70 percent of the total domestic garment demand. Many provisions of the national labor law were not applicable to the Peace Market workers because most of the small shops employed an average of 16 workers. The unionization of several hundred small workshops under a single union was long deemed improbable, and the absence of a labor union worsened the owners’ violation of workers’ legal rights.

There was a strict sexual division of labor on the shop floor as well. The absolute majority of the Peace Market garment makers were young women between the ages of twelve and twenty-four, with a small proportion of male workers. Most of the cutters were men, while most of the rippers who did pressing, ironing, and delivery of thread and buttons to seamstresses were women. Even though the role of ripper was more crucial to the pro-

duction process than that of cutter, the work of the rippers was considered "miscellaneous" by the owners. As a consequence, women workers earned less than half of the average male worker's wage.

Working conditions at the Peace Market were inhumane. The owners divided each room into two-story compartments in order to maximize the workspace. As a result, the workers had to work in small compartments that typically measured 3 feet from floor to ceiling. The sweatshops were called "attics" or "beehives" because of this building structure. Throughout the 13-16 hour workday, workers could not stand upright because of this space arrangement. The working environment was also hazardous. There was little ventilation, lighting was poor, and the workers were constantly exposed to the toxic chemical odors coming from the stacks of textiles. There were high numbers of job-related illnesses. According to a survey at the Peace Market in 1970, 96 out of 129 sample workers suffered from ailments traceable to their work (largely tuberculosis), and 103 out of 129 suffered from indigestion due to nervous tension. Workers with job-related illnesses could not complain for fear of layoffs. Furthermore, their ailments were not defined as occupational hazards due to a narrow, legalistic definition.

The labor protests at the Peace Market were sparked by the suicide of a young worker in November, 1970. He set himself on fire while shouting, "Workers are human beings, too!" He resorted to this violent act only after repeatedly failing to draw attention to the inhumane working conditions at the market. This shocking incident made the women workers more aware of their rights, alarmed the general public, and brought about active student participation in the labor movement. A labor union, the Chonggye Garment Union, was formed at the market after the worker's suicide. The government officially recognized the union in the same month. The workers' protests at the Peace Market were in reaction to labor exploitation and the deprivation of basic workers' rights. Although this incident was instigated by one male worker's violent death, it illuminated the hard lives of the primarily women workers at the garment center, which were hidden behind the rosy picture of national growth.

The Dong-Il Textile Strikes (1976-1980)

In 1980, 250 men and 1,100 women were employed at Dong-Il Textile in the city of Incheon. Dong-Il was one of the pioneer Korean textile export firms of the 1950s. Its primary manufacturing items were yarn and thread. Koreans regained ownership of the company from the Japanese in 1946, and Dong-Il has been one of the leading textile and apparel manufacturers in

Korea ever since. Similar to the Peace Market, Dong-Il maintained a strict sexual division of labor on the shop floor. The workers were divided into two groups: highly educated and well paid male workers, and less educated and poorly paid female workers. Women had to work three shifts, while their male counterparts worked two shifts. Most promotion opportunities were given to male workers, while women were blocked from upward mobility. Beatings and verbal abuse of women workers by the shop floor male leaders were common.

In 1972, women union members at the company voted out the male union leaders, and elected a woman leader. The members had long been discontented with the male leadership, which had never represented the needs of the female majority. Their outside ally, a liberation theology-based church group, the Urban Industrial Mission, assisted the women in electing a woman representative (Mindy, 2001).⁸ After this change, the Dong-Il management refused to deal with the union because the management did not regard the female-led union as an equal partner. The male managers and production workers also found the new union leaders unacceptable. A hostile gender division between female union members and male anti-unionists emerged at the factory. Despite this antagonistic environment, the union succeeded in providing its members with their legally prescribed rights, such as sufficient meal breaks, which had not been implemented at the factory before.

Another union election was held in 1976, and the management resorted to various underhanded tactics in an attempt to dissolve the female-led union. In addition to buying votes and making threats, the management also used violence against the women members. On the day of the election, pro-management male workers physically assaulted women workers who had come to the union office to vote. The management also nailed the factory dormitory shut in order to prevent its residents from voting. They cut off the electricity and water supply to the dormitory as well. Some of the confined women kicked the dormitory door open, while others jumped out of the four-story building. At this point, the workers went on strike.

The Dong-Il strike began as a peaceful and legitimate demonstration. However, it turned into a full-scale hunger strike after the police arrested several members. After three days of confrontation between riot police and the hunger strikers, the fully armed riot police moved in to disperse the

⁸ The Urban Industrial Mission (UIM) began factory evangelism in the city of Incheon in the early 1960s, and soon became an active advocate of workers' rights. The UIM provided tangible assistance to workers' strikes, such as religious justifications, strategy consultation, and legal assistance (Korean National Church Council, 1979).

strikers. As the police were advancing, one of the women shouted, "They won't touch us if we undress ourselves. Nobody would touch a woman's naked body." So the strikers started to undress. This was a spontaneous act, but it was to no avail. The riot police and the male factory workers dragged away the half-naked and physically weak women by their hair. During this violent crackdown, a total of twenty-seven women workers were imprisoned on charges of creating a public disturbance. Fifty women passed out from shock, more than seventy were wounded, and fourteen had to be hospitalized due to serious injuries. Two were admitted to a psychiatric ward due to severe mental shock.

A compromise between the management and the union was unattainable after such violence. Male workers continued to function as members of "goon squads" during union meetings.⁹ To make the situation worse, the National Textile Workers' Union (NTWU) refused to mediate the dispute by defining the Dong-Il Textile union as the troublemaker. In the absence of an institutional recourse, the women workers continued their labor resistance by changing their strike site from the factory to a variety of public places. They interrupted a live radio broadcast, which was celebrating National Labor Day, and staged a hunger strike at a Catholic church located in the heart of downtown Seoul. They continued to agitate for the release of their imprisoned union leaders in various public sites, and more workers were arrested and imprisoned by the repressive national government. Their struggle ended in 1980 with the rise of a new military dictatorship.

Y.H. Trading (1979)

Y.H. Trading was a wig exporter that greatly benefited from the explosive U.S. demand for hairpieces in the 1960s. The company started with 10 workers in 1966 and expanded to 4,000 workers by 1970. The business began to decline in the mid-1970s due to a reduced demand from the U.S., which was the company's major export market. This change in market conditions led to a massive dismissal of workers. As a way to sustain its profit level, the company also started subcontracting with independent suppliers.

⁹ As female union leadership was preparing for another election in 1978, a group of male anti-unionists at Dong-Il Textile attacked the union office with buckets full of human excrement. They indiscriminately plastered excrement on the women workers who were there to vote. The male intruders shouted, "This is what you deserve." The women dispersed, crying and screaming. As union members were running away from this unexpected attack, their assailants followed them to the dormitory room. The police did not intervene. Upon a request by union members to stop the attack, they responded, "Shut up, you bitches. We will wait around a little bit longer" (Kim-Park, 1998: 12-13).

In 1979, the company announced the shutdown of its main plant. This decision meant not only a loss of livelihood for the women workers, but it also threatened the well-being of their parents and siblings in the rural areas, who were partially dependent on the women's financial support. The laid off workers were infuriated with the management when they learned that the company was continuing its operation by utilizing subcontractors. In April 1979, the union demanded the normalization of the factory's operations and launched a sit-in strike. Despite the workers' repeated efforts to gain legal redress, none of the government offices or the National Textile Workers' Union wanted to get involved with the Y.H. strike.¹⁰

The strike continued until the management cut off the water and electricity supply to the factory dormitory on August 6, 1979. The strikers then moved their protest venue from the factory to the auditorium of the national opposition party. This move was designed to draw public support for their issues. As a result, the Y.H. labor strike became a national news story, and it generated a sympathetic reaction from the general populace. Two days after the workers changed their strike site, hundreds of riot police invaded the building and arrested everybody present. The scene was described as "a battlefield." The police dragged out the strikers, and the entire area was under police control in 23 minutes. One woman worker was killed and many were injured in this crackdown.

These cases do not uniformly share internal dynamics regarding the beginning, the unfolding development, and consequences of the protests. They cannot be strictly compared with each other. However, we can find similar factors underlying the three cases. These factors are the sexual division of labor in the workplace, work discrimination against women, patriarchal management practices, and a repressive labor regime. These incidents illustrate the diverse forms of labor control that the women experienced. Sexual division of labor on the shop floor was a common practice, and institutional recourse did not exist. Patriarchal management and misogynic male workers expressed uncontrolled hostility towards women workers. The authoritarian regime was also an active participant in women's repression. The practices of labor control were pervasive, and the means of control were diverse.

An important observation we can make about these cases is the politicization of labor strikes. The labor strikes were often framed as anti-dictatorship

¹⁰ Korean labor unions had three hierarchical apparatuses: the national level union (Federation of Korean Trade Unions), industry level unions (e.g., National Textile Workers' Union), and enterprise level unions.

resistance and pro-democracy movements. The disputes at Dong-Il and Y.H. Trading peaked during the period of political schism. The protest cycle became faster, and protestors were more radicalized when the repressive labor regime loosened its controlling grip. This suggests that political facilitation is conducive to challenging actions (Kim-Park, 1994). The politicization of the 1970s' labor strikes suggests that the nature of those resisting actions was a pro-democracy movement. The repressive labor regime was a very important target for their pursuit of justice.¹¹

LABOR CONTROL MECHANISMS

South Korean factory women lived within a culture of oppression. The authoritarian labor regime of Park Chung Hee severely sanctioned any challenges from labor. Not surprisingly, the co-opted unions and anti-labor legislation failed to give voice to women's legitimate concerns. Patriarchal prejudice led to abuse of women workers on the shop floor. The ideologies of political authoritarianism, capitalism, and patriarchy were interwoven in the creation of the oppressive culture.

The Repressive Labor Regime

A state-capital alliance formed to enhance economic development provided a firm foundation for the exploitation of workers in South Korea. Political exclusion of labor is one of the most common features of the newly industrializing countries of Asia (Deyo, 1989; Koo, Haggard, and Deyo, 1986). The Park regime of South Korea was involved in almost all aspects of social, political, and economic life. The state desired to secure the political legitimacy of a military junta through the improvement of economic conditions, while capitalists simultaneously sought profits. In this political power-capital alliance, the repression of labor was essential to the survival of the system (Johnson, 1987; Lim, 1985).

As we have seen, women comprised a crucial majority of workers in the highly profitable and labor-intensive export manufacturing sector during South Korea's EOI. Considering the importance of the export sector, the state's actions to control women's work were inevitable. For instance, government officials described women's strikes as "factory girls' group hysteria" (Foreign Broadcast Information System, 1978). The police physically

¹¹ Women's movement in South Korea increased its velocity and expanded its constituencies as the society as a whole was moving towards political democracy after 1987. Other civic movements such as the environment movement, NGOs, and local autonomy began to blossom.

assaulted Dong-Il Textile strikers while dispersing them. Moreover, the strikebreakers deployed by the companies (called "Company Security Guards") often utilized brutal physical force against women strikers with the implicit consent of the state police (Lee, 1987). The Y.H. strike effectively illuminates the close link between the authoritarian political power and labor repression. The labor regime's operation was gendered.

Anti-Labor Legislation and Co-opted Labor Unions

In the 1970s, labor control was legitimated as a way to tighten national security. For example, the "Law Concerning Special Measures for Safeguarding National Security," was promulgated in 1971, and prohibited labor organizing. The enactment of such laws was justified as an appropriate security measure against the Communist North. The capitalist South took advantage of anti-Communist phobia to justify its repressive rule. The government framed labor strikes not only as challenges to local management, but as threats to national security as well. First-hand intervention by the government in labor disputes was legitimated. In most cases, government arbitration of labor-management relations resulted in the deprivation of workers' rights because of the government's pro-management bias (Kim, 1987).

The ways in which national and local labor unions operated within the boundaries of these state regulations failed to reflect the union members' interests (Choi, 1989; Deyo, 1989). The national and regional union leadership's co-optation was reminiscent of Michels' "iron law of oligarchy," in which the institution of the labor union itself becomes a part of the status quo (Michels, 1962). These deficiencies of union operation had more serious drawbacks for women workers, who were concentrated in the peripheral industrial sectors. The union's bargaining agendas under male leadership were insensitive to the female members' needs. The strikes at the Peace Market and Dong-Il Textile effectively demonstrate the workers' enthusiasm for fair union representation and frustration with the ineffectiveness of male representatives.

Patriarchal Management Practices

Manifestations of patriarchal management practices were not confined to tangible gender-based discrimination. The management's gender-based practices were both subtle and pervasive throughout everyday interactions. According to Koo (1987), a national survey of women workers in sixteen industries shows that 31 percent of the respondents cited "no human respect by the management" as the most significant source of grievance.

Other sources were "poor wages" (30 percent), "strenuous work" (22 percent), "no time to attend night school" (7 percent), "no close relationship with co-workers" (5 percent), and "poor dormitory facilities" (1 percent). Male managers' occasional beatings of women workers were a dramatic example of "no human respect" for the women workers on the shop floor (Lee, 1987).

Management also used the most profoundly damaging form of labor control: sexual violence. Sexual violence is a calculated means to express power dominance and exploit women in a goal-specific manner. Jung (1993) writes about male bosses' use of sexual coercion to immobilize women workers in the textile industry when the production quota is pressed by rush orders. In Korea in the 1970s, a male superior could literally enslave women workers to his whims with the threat of spreading the word that they were not virgins. Male supervisors' profit-oriented goals and patriarchal cultural norms emphasizing female chastity have created many silent sufferers on South Korean shop floors. The Dong-Il Textile case reveals that the management and the male workers used the threat of sexual violence as a means to control women's work. Women workers used vague terms in describing sexual violence, such as "sub-human violence and curses," "animalistic actions," "actions too horrendous to talk about," or "deeds too mean to describe." The cultural embeddedness of a taboo topic such as sexual violence legitimates these vague descriptions as valid claims (Cho, Yeo, and Yi, 1989). The Dong-Il Textile case illustrates the calculated tactic of sexual violence as a means to control women's work.

South Korean women workers, the motor of the nation's successful EOI, experienced a multifaceted and rigorous labor control system. The state, the unions, and the capitalists all played a part in depriving women of their rights. Yet in the face of these debilitating control mechanisms, the women workers rebelled. Their resistance suggests that there must have been countervailing mechanisms of empowerment and consciousness-raising. Ironically, the detrimental structural transformation in the rapid EOI process shaped women's critical consciousness, leading to their activism.

THE RISE OF SOUTH KOREAN WOMEN WORKERS' CLASS AND GENDER CONSCIOUSNESS

South Korea's women-initiated labor strikes reveal the existence of women's autonomous consciousness. In spite of the controlling capitalist-patriarchy ideology, South Korean women rebelled. In theorizing about women's resistance, Giddens's theory of the "dialectics of control" is valu-

able. Although Giddens does not specifically mention gender, his theory grants more power to a marginal social group by recognizing its “knowledgeability” and “capability.” Structure is not deterministic because human actors retain autonomy through the awareness of the unjust workings of a society (Giddens, 1979). The reciprocity between structure and agency makes an analysis of women workers’ consciousness building and empowerment more dynamic and less deterministic.

Giddens’s theory of human action differentiates between two types of consciousness: discursive and practical. Supplying reasons or “giving accounts” is the discursive capabilities of an actor who connects “stocks of knowledge” to action. Practical consciousness is tacit knowledge that is employed in conduct, but the actor is not able to formulate the reasons discursively. Practical consciousness assumes that an actor knows a rule, or knows how to apply the rules to actions (Giddens, 1982). Thus, actions themselves reflect the existence of awareness. Giddens’ actors are equipped with historical sensibilities. He writes that: “The knowledgeability of human agents in given historical circumstances is always bounded, by the unacknowledged conditions of an action on one side, and by its unintended consequences on the other” (Giddens, 1982: 180). Human actors are also aware of the socio-historical context in which they are situated; they can therefore provide insights into the causes of their activism.

Women’s resistance does not occur in vacuum. It is rather a byproduct of multiple causes that link consciousness to action in the background of macro culture and personal environment. I will express this dynamic in the following equation: $R = f(MC, PE, C)$. In other words, R (resistance) is the function of MC (macro context), PE (personal environment), and C (consciousness). According to this equation, South Korean women engaged in dialectical exchanges with macro structural context (e.g., the increase in their labor market participation and rapid urbanization) and their personal environment (e.g., change of identity from farmers to factory workers). The young women who were formerly dependent on their parents became responsible not only for themselves, but for their families as well. Their wage earning status deprived them of the social protection that they enjoyed prior to factory employment. Within a very short period of time, South Korean women experienced an abrupt transformation of their lives.

When these drastic changes in macro context and personal environment were confounded with consciousness raising mechanisms (e.g., camaraderie and outside support networks), their raised consciousness was translated into activism. A large number of women from rural areas migrated into the cities to get factory jobs. After work was found, most women remained in

factory dormitories. Company-provided dormitories were not only inexpensive, they were also considered safe by parents when compared to other housing options (Lee, 1990). This spatial concentration of women into communitarian residences meant that they could share their personal and work experiences with each other. Friendships were formed, and individuation was replaced by a sense of community (Festinger, Schachter, and Back, 1967). The women's communitarian living arrangements provided a rich soil for their cohesiveness before the protests and solidarity during their collective resistance (Kim-Park, 1998).¹² The multivariate analysis of South Korean women's activism provides a complex and yet realistic explanation for their resistance. Consciousness in and of itself falls short as a plausible cause for activism. Resistance does not necessarily mean the existence of consciousness, and consciousness does not automatically lead to protest.

While South Korean society's cultural similarities to Taiwan (i.e., patriarchal gender norms and patrilinear family structure) cannot provide a plausible explanation for the manifested differences in women's activism, an investigation into structural differences does in fact give us an opening. Small- and medium-sized firms located in rural areas employed most Taiwanese women. Taiwanese workers did not have to migrate to get jobs. They could also maintain close ties with their families. The Taiwanese government's promotion of small-sized firms implied that the women workers could receive more on-the-job training, which was useful for their career mobility. The opposite was true in the Korean experience. The social isolation experienced by Korean women is considered more severe than that of Taiwanese women. The "class structuration" of Korean women occurred as a consequence of their dialectical interplay with the economy's structural transformation, which had severely detrimental implications for their lives.

CONCLUSION

Labor activism by women workers in South Korea occurred at a time when such activity was severely repressed. The state's tight control of labor hindered the emergence of an organized labor movement in the 1970s. Legally organized labor strikes were a virtual impossibility, and the costs of challenging the anti-labor regime were too substantial to ignore.

¹² In her case study of Dong-II Textile labor strikes, Kim-Park (1998) has found that women workers' communal living spaces such as factory dormitories were sites where women's similar life paths and daily experiences converged into friendship ties and a sense of collective identity. In times of collective action, the factory dormitories served as informal communication networks, making mobilization possible.

Nevertheless, South Korean women's labor activism did emerge, interrupting an era of labor quiescence in the 1970s. Most of the labor protests of this period occurred in peripheral industries such as textile, garment, and wig manufacturing. Labor protests occurred at firms with labor-intensive, low skill, and low job security employment. The absolute majority of the strikers at such companies were women workers. Their male colleagues in many cases largely ignored women workers' labor struggles, and men rarely joined the strikes.

The global economy and its international division of labor have had a significant impact on women's lives in developing economies. The expansion of capitalism on a global scale and the preexisting social norm of patriarchy are mutually reinforcing. Women's lives undergo fundamental changes during large scale societal transformations. Women are the primary source of cheap and easily exploitable labor, a situation which helps developing economies to maintain their competitive edges in global restructuring. Women's socio-economic status relative to men's is usually diminished in the process of development, despite the increases in their gainful employment (Boserup, 1970; Ward, 1986). In South Korea, rapid urbanization, inequitable distribution of wealth, and the rapid increase of female participation in the workforce had important implications for women's lives. Labor control mechanisms of the state and corporate management practices, such as anti-labor legislation and co-opted labor unions were debilitating. Patriarchal management practices on the factory floor lowered women's work status further. Women's lives thus intersected with the macro-structural transformations in the economy. South Korean women rebelled against these abrupt and drastic changes in their lives.

Women have long been perceived as "apolitical." Women's activism has been repressed, discouraged, and missing from mainstream scholarly accounts. Social activism has been regarded as male territory. Presumably masculine virtues such as assertiveness, aggressiveness, and dominance have been seen as the crucial elements in socio-political activities (Brenner, Laslett, and Arat, 1995). This view of activism as male territory blocks our ability to see forms of collective action by women, and our tendency to label those we do see as anomalous. However, more and more studies are refuting women's "apolitical" stance (Taylor and Whittier, 1998). Women's passivity is not inherent in an immutable socio-cultural stance. A growing body of evidence points out that women shape their consciousness and action schema through dialectical exchanges in the socio-historical contexts in which they live (Collins, 1990). The case of South Korean women is an addition to the literature that challenges conventional sociological understand-

ings of women and activism.

The intensity of South Korean women workers' labor protests stands in sharp contrast to stereotypical images of submissive Asian women workers. The incidents of women workers' labor resistance strongly illustrate Korean women's largely overlooked consciousness as women workers. I argue against claims of the anomaly of South Korean women's labor activism. These claims reflect the stereotyping of Asian women as docile and submissive. This passivity is a cultural mystique that is incongruent with empirical reality. "Militant," "radical," and other masculine descriptions given to the South Korean women's activism suggest that Asian women have been stereotyped by "Western eyes" (see Mohanty, 1991; Spivak, 1987). Instead of searching for evidence that confirms stereotypes, we need to stretch our perceptual horizons to reality "as is." South Korean women's labor activism is a good point at which to begin.

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