

BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE WORKS
OF
KOREA WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS UNITED

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This is the first time that I, as a Protestant lay person, have had the opportunity to speak to a religious group like this. I feel honored and I thank you for having invited me. As I know that the other two panel members are speaking about Women in the Church and Women Workers, my presentation will be largely from the standpoint of women, and about the activities and the works of the Korean Women's Organization United.

The history of women's movement in Korea is about 100 years old and with all the various groups of women added together, there are about 100 groups at present. Among these 100 groups more than half involve women who have education and are of the middle class. Their tendency is to maintain the status quo, not carrying out activities of a real movement for social change as much as maintaining an institution, promoting friendship ties, etc. Their concern is not on the change of values or the change of structure of our society. They are more inclined to preserve the present system and to find ways within the system to bring men and women into more of an equal status. For instance, one of their chief objectives is to promote the entrance of more women into the National Assembly and other high official positions.

But our experience is that even though a few women are raised up to these high positions, it does nothing for the emancipation of the masses of women. Our desire is to develop a women's movement that makes progress along with the progress and liberation of the masses of people in our nation. We wish that our women's liberation will also work toward relieving the pain and sufferings of the masses of our people - that we will all achieve liberation together. Our ideal is not to maintain the status quo with a few cosmetic changes but to take a realistic look at our society as it truly is, and, with a historical consciousness, we want to create a truly human community for our nation and people. This community will not be for the benefit of a special class of people. This community will be for the benefit and happiness of all peoples, men and women, and those of all classes in order that they can create their own lives, decide their future for themselves and take responsibility for their lives and their future.

On March 8, 1985, the direction of the Women's Movement on this line was proclaimed at the first International Women's Day Korea Women's Rally in Korea. Issue oriented activities were continued from that time until this recent International Women's Day which was the third one ever to be held. On the occasion of this third rally, an association binding together 21 organizations was announced and this constituted the initiation of this new Korean Women's Organizations United. It includes 21 different organizations from a broad spectrum of society - Church groups, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, Buddhist groups, and social action groups unrelated to Christianity. Gradually the activities of these organizations as described below - not for their own selfish honor and achievements but for the uplifting of the total masses of our people - have begun to win recognition from society.

Members of the KWOU, united together in struggle and hope, find the conditions of people, especially women, as serious symptoms of the unjust socio-economic and political structures and philosophies existing today in our societies. The present injustices arising out of these structures have led to the near destruction and alienation of the cultural, social, economic and spiritual life of our people.

First, however, you need some background on the present national situation which is behind all that I will tell you. One of the chief root causes and greatest problems of our country at this time is that the division of our peoples, which has been imposed by foreign influences, makes us ever more firmly fixed in a situation of military arms race and opposing ideologies between North and South Korea. Because of this division, our power holders use this as their excuse for depriving us of the basic freedoms such as speech, press and freedom of assembly. This is also the reason for a severe financial burden - 37% to 40% of our national budget has to be used for national defense. Another serious result of the division is the economic competition between North and South. In order to show our progress to the North, we have gone into extremes of foreign debt. In addition to that, special benefits have been given to a small number of business groups. Thirty (30) business groups hold 80% of the nation's capital. Another effect is that we have 620,000 of our young men in the military service and in addition there are 2½ million in the Civil Defense Corps. This means a huge portion of our young men between the ages of 20 and 40 are diverted from our national strength for the progress of our nation and it also causes the prevalence of a military mentality in our nation. Because of this military control, the people of our nation are unable to express their own free will. An example of this is that one of the daily newspapers did a survey of our peoples' opinion on the Cabinet system. 94% said they did not want this system. But the newspaper was unable to print these results and instead the government announced that the Cabinet system is desired by the people.

In a militarized society there is no place for the weak - that is for the laborer, women, etc. So along with the sufferings experienced by the general masses of people, women have double suffering. In addition, instead of the Peace and Unity which our people earnestly desire, we are being pushed forward into the dangers of nuclear war. Furthermore, the economic policies of the past 20 years which have made us wholly dependent on foreign capital and foreign markets, are each day driving us further into the burden of foreign debt. The outflow of our economic surplus to overseas has caused our nation's economy to become subjugated. The continued pressures of the U.S. to force us to open up to imports is the logic of external circumstances which is turning our land into an economic colony.

More than at any other time, 1987 is a year calling for decision and moving into action in order to achieve a return to the establishment of our independence as a people and our democratization.

Against this background, let me turn to some of the events and issues which have taken our interest, concern and time. One of the areas in which we have become deeply involved is that of discrimination against women and human rights.

One example is the case of a 22-year old woman who was hurt in a car accident. She was allowed compensation for job earning losses only up until the age of 25. The reason given for this is that the average woman then becomes a houseworker after 25 and they awarded the amount of 3,800 Won per day as the value of a woman's work in the home. Our organizations went into protest against this and we were successful. It is now a precedent that a woman must be compensated for employment earnings up to the age of 55. Another example was the case of a woman employee of the Tae Han Trust Fund Corporation. At the time of marriage, they tried to force her to resign, (we commonly call this "marriage termination") but she would not resign. So to force her, they separated her from her family by transferring her to an outlying area. We joined ranks on her side and put up a struggle that was successful. She was re-transferred back to her family. Another case is that of the workers' struggle for just wages. In two cases, a group of workers were fired for their part in the struggle. We carried out a boycott of these products in the case of TOMBOY in June 1985 and the recent case of BANG-BANG. In both cases, the strength of the boycott, which was carried out in cooperation with women student groups (these products are worn chiefly by college students) forced the owners to back down and return the women to their jobs. Another example is the support of the mothers and wives of the many prisoners of conscience during the time they were in jail. In 1986 there were 4,000 arrested and 2,000 were put in prison.

Another women's concern could be the protest against torture. I'm sure all of you are very familiar with the sex torture case involving Miss Kwon. But I need to repeat it again for those who are not familiar with the case. Since the university students and graduates have become involved in the labor movement, companies are pressured not to hire a person with post-high school education to work in a factory as a laborer. Yet, in order to understand the situation of those who work at that level, many university students desire to have that experience. To do so they have to falsify their identification papers or use someone else's. If caught, of course, they are charged with a criminal offense. Ms. Kwon is one such person. She began work May 20, 1986. She was not a very strong or brave person, and after a week of the strenuous factory life she quit her job. On June 4th she was arrested for falsifying her registration papers. The investigation was quickly completed because she admitted the charge. But then the police investigators tried to force her to reveal the names of people who were involved in the May 3rd riots in Inchon, and when she insisted she did not know, was tortured sexually. It took great courage on the part of Ms. Kwon to make known that she had been sexually abused. In Korean culture this ruins a woman's reputation and makes her ineligible for marriage. She is disgraced for life. But Ms. Kwon decided to make the facts known so as to protect other women from suffering the same disgrace. It was clear to her that her experience was not an isolated case.

Women's groups learned of her sex torture on June 26 and on July 3rd Ms. Kwon laid a charge against the policeman who had sexually abused her. She obtained a human rights lawyer and told the whole story. The outcome was that nine lawyers volunteered to take up her case and laid an accusation against the police officer. This was the first time ever for lawyers to lay such a charge. Ms. Kwon's parents did not want the case publicized. They insisted that to do so would be to cause their daughter a "second death" and requested newspapers and government officials to keep it quiet so that it could be

forgotten. But when this was discussed with Ms. Kwon, she said that she understood her parent's attitude and their concern for her, but that it would be like a second death to her if it were covered up at this point.

This case brought forth another first. Joint action was taken by various groups - Buddhists, Roman Catholic Priests and Nuns, Protestant groups, and various other women's organizations. The joint action started quickly and spread throughout the country. In spite of all these efforts, the District Court sentenced Ms. Kwon to 1½ years in prison - down from the prosecution's demand of 3 years. Ms. Kwon expressed regret at the pain and suffering the case had caused her parents, but said she felt proud that she had made the facts of her case known. If this kind of thing is kept quiet, it is certain it will continue. Police count on women not making their shame public. Publicity goes a long way toward stopping the practice. A 1½ year sentence for falsifying a document was such a miscarriage of justice that 167 lawyers volunteered their services and demanded a new trial. The courts turned it down. Furthermore, on March 28 the Appeals Court confirmed the 1½ year sentence so Ms. Kwon will not be released until December 1987. Ms. Kwon's only regret is that she did not make a greater fuss, so that not only sex torture but any torture would have to have been stopped and perhaps the life of Park Chong-chul might have been saved.

Park Chong-chul was a 23 year old Seoul National University student who died under police torture in January 1987. His death was a tragic loss, but it aroused the people to even stronger solidarity and action to demand an end to torture in our country.

Ms. Kwon's case is not yet closed. A nationwide signature campaign is being conducted for her unconditional release from prison. The signatures will be sent to the Ministry of Justice along with an appeal for her release. The same committee is also raising money to give to her for use while in prison.

Ms. Kwon's case is only one of many examples of people offering their bodies as a living sacrifice on behalf of others. Numbers of university students whose total effort has been directed to the almost impossible goal of university entrance, have in their junior or senior ^{YEAR} given it all up on behalf of those who are victims of injustice and oppression, and on behalf of democracy and freedom. As you know, one of the chief motivations for the rally planned for June 10, 1987 is the continued protest of the cover-up of the death of Park Chong-chul. Our womens' group was the first to go into action on this. Only a few days after the news of his death, our women were in the street in front of Nam Young Dong, the place where the torture had taken place, and were demonstrating. In fact, even Cardinal Kim when he first made his statements on the subject said: "Can we remain silent when the mothers are so bravely protesting?"

Our United Women's groups are very active in the forefront of the protest to make our government stop using more tear gas. (We call it "Killing Bomb"). It is a protest by us mothers against the terrible use of this poisonous tear gas. It is not only damaging to our student sons and daughters but to all of the citizens including the riot police. Many people are suffering from skin diseases and other things. In fact the women's organizations will play a very important role in the June 10th demonstrations.

Women are also involved in the movements for the revision of the constitution. KWOU protested immediately against the government position of 1986 which was to talk about revision of the present constitution after the olympics. KWOU began the petition movement for the revision of the constitution together with the opposition parties and the opposition groups. Finally the government withdrew its plan and then planned to revise the constitution before 1988. This issue of revision raised the question of whether we choose the president-centered political system or the parliamentary cabinet political system. The popular choice, starting with KWOU, is to elect the president directly by the people with a president-centered system. Another focus of the revision of the Constitution is to clearly legislate in written form the people's basic rights and equal rights for women. Secondly, through the revision of the election laws, the opinion of the people should be fairly represented.

We women were not at all surprised at the announcement of 4/13/87 that there would be no revision of the constitution. We had already had that experience twice before. We had fought for the revision of the Family Law which discriminates against women. Twice we were promised by the Majority Party that it would be revised and both times they did not keep the promise. So this is why I say that the 4/13 announcement was no surprise to us women.

The recently formed National Organization for the Achievement of a Democratic Constitution is also composed in great part by our women's organizations. We have had a very important part in this group from the very beginning.

Women's movement for the freedom of speech is another aspect of women's involvement in democratizing our country in this time of our history. With the understanding that the most important and quickest way to democracy is through freedom of speech, KWOU organized a movement. This was the boycott of fees for KBS-TV, the government broadcasting system, which has been successful with strong popular support and is ongoing. The movement is to protest the distorted and prejudiced reports by public broadcasting and to press KBS to be fair in its reports. The movement has been positively supported by the newspapers, the Protestant and Catholic Churches, YMCA, and other opposition organizations have participated actively and willingly, turning it into a nationwide movement. We feel that this is an important campaign to fight against the manipulated reporting on TV because TV has a most powerful influence on our people who depend on it more than on any other mass media.

We are presently having a membership campaign to carry out these activities. Our first goal is a membership of 10,000 and we are asking 2,500 Won from each member for financial needs.

To give you a wholesome picture of women's works, I better add some church women's actions. Among the Christian Womens Groups there are four focuses of effort. The first is a protest against sex tourism and efforts to counteract this and suppress it. Another is aid to atom bomb victims. Together with the sufferings of second and third generations, those atom bomb victims number 20,000 in our country. They need help for medical needs. The third focus is discussion leading toward unification of our people and nation between the North and South. The fourth one which is just beginning at this time is the anti-nuclear and anti-war campaigns. Since

these are sensitive subjects, the church women have taken the lead in this as they are less liable to be accused of pro-communism. When these movements have been well established and moving ahead, then they will become part of the Women's Organizations United.

As you can well imagine, these activities which I have described above are highly disapproved by the leaders and power holders in our nation. So those of us who have been active in these affairs have had many sufferings such as house arrest or short periods of detention, none of us are allowed to have a passport when we are invited overseas for some meeting, some have extra taxes imposed, etc.

Our hope for the future is that many more middle class women will join us in this movement. How can such self-centered, weak-willed and submissive women take on the suffering and pain of their poor neighbours? It is our experience that one of the most common causes for them to change is through the awareness of their sons and daughters. Especially if the young people take part in a demonstration and are arrested, the mothers' awareness of the political reality grows rapidly. This often puts them in a situation where they also hear the personal experience of others' suffering and often they take this on themselves as their own. For example, when women heard about the sex torture suffered by Ms. Kwon, they all came to think of Ms. Kwon as their own daughter, and were willing even eager, to do whatever they could to see that sex-abuse by police of young women taken to police stations be stopped. They hope they may save their own daughters from suffering a similar fate.

In the same way, Park Chong-chul, who died under torture as mentioned earlier, became the son of all the women and they shared the pain of his own mother and determined to fight against the use of torture.

As those who call ourselves by the name of Jesus Christ, we must all have a common concern for the weak, the poor and the marginalized. If we really knew Christ, we would inevitably work together for the common concern of peace and justice for all God's children. This is our common concern and one which we cannot do without you and I believe you cannot do without us. We have to work together and pray together.