Integration of women into development: women’s working conditions in the Korean textile and apparel industries

Kyoung-Hee Moon
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**Abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>FKTU</td>
<td>Federation of Korean Trade Unions</td>
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<td>ILO</td>
<td>International Labour Organisation</td>
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<td>KAIA</td>
<td>Korean Apparel Industry Association</td>
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<td>KOFTTU</td>
<td>Korean Federation of Textile Trade Unions</td>
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<td>MOHW</td>
<td>Ministry of Health and Welfare</td>
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<td>MOLAB</td>
<td>Ministry of Labour</td>
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<td>NSO</td>
<td>National Statistical Office</td>
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<td>SWTU</td>
<td>Seoul Women’s Trade Union</td>
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Korea belongs to the first generation of countries that experienced the flexible operation of cross-border production in the international division of labour, becoming first a capital-hosting and later a capital-relocating country. Labour market conditions, specifically women’s employment patterns, have since tended to fluctuate in accordance with fluctuations in the life of the export industry. However, a dramatic increase in women’s participation in the industrial workforce has only brought marginal improvements to women’s work conditions. For example, female workers’ wage levels in the textile and apparel industries have remained lower than corresponding wage levels in other manufacturing industries (Joeks 1995; Park 1995), while within the textile and apparel industries themselves the gender gap in wages has closed only slightly over the past 20 years. In the textile industry, the ratio of female to male wages was 46.3, 52.0 and 62.7 per cent in 1980, 1990 and 2000 respectively, while the corresponding ratio in the apparel industry was 56.8, 58.4 and 59.3 per cent (MOLAB 2002; Seguino 1997). Moreover, only a very small number of women participate in managerial or skilled positions. These are some of the factors that have prevented female workers, despite their major contribution to industrial growth, from fully benefiting from development.

Patriarchy-based gender stereotypes of women as family-oriented child bearers and child raisers, less physically forceful than men, more tolerant of monotonous and repetitive work than men, and less inclined to join trade unions than men are widely recognised in the labour market (Anker 1998). Also, because women’s domestic work is unpaid, female workers are often regarded as less deserving of pay than male workers. Thus, the systems of patriarchy, with its formal and informal social, cultural, economic and political institutions, and the capitalistic mode of production interact to determine the asymmetric gender division of paid labour, privileging men in terms of power and values (Park 1993; Walby 1990). Male dominance is therefore systemic; it affects all labour market actors, including employers, employees and the state (Bakker 1994; Folbre 2001).

This article examines gender differences in the Korean textile and apparel industries in terms of patterns and conditions of employment, using not only data from the existing literature but also individual workers’ perceptions on the shopfloor.

Women as a disadvantaged workforce

Internationally, women make up the majority of the workforce in the textile and apparel industries, with a rough estimate putting the female proportion of the global apparel industry workforce at more than 80 per cent (Dickerson 1999:152). Because the textile industry is more machinery-dependent than the apparel industry, it has a lower demand for female workers than the latter (ILO 2000), though women still make up a majority of its workforce. The two industries can therefore be characterised not just as labour intensive but also as female labour intensive (Elson 1991:169). Meanwhile, women’s increased participation in production has not been accompanied by improvement in their employment conditions, with most women
workers continuing to be limited in their work to low-skilled and low-paying occupations such as sewing and weaving. In this regard, this article addresses two crucial questions: why are women overrepresented in the textile and apparel industries? And why are women in these industries so disadvantaged?

The production of textiles and apparel is mostly labour intensive, low paid, low tech and low skill. Low-income countries with an abundance of labour resources and a scarcity of capital, in order to increase their export earnings, tend to engage in textile and apparel production as subcontracted or outsourced producers of parent firms in high-income countries. Employers in these industries, both domestic and international, tend to regard women as best suited to sewing and weaving jobs, since these are tasks traditionally carried out by women. On the other hand, most women in low-income countries work to enhance individual or family income (Pearson 1991:143), but because these countries' economies provide few alternatives for women, modern factory jobs are preferred (Lim 1990:105).

Studies have shown that employers prefer to employ young, single women in the industries (Anker 1998; Elson 1991:170; Joeks 1995; Pearson 1998). Gender stereotypes of women are offered to explain this preference. Such stereotypes generally possess the following attributes relative to men: greater willingness to take orders, greater docility and less inclination to complain about work or working conditions, lesser inclination to join trade unions, greater tolerance of monotonous/repetitive work, greater willingness to accept lower wages and less need for income, and greater interest in working at home. Having become the ‘commonsense’ of manufacturers around the world, such stereotypes have promoted the view that women are naturally suited to positions that are lower paid, more flexible, lower in status, involve less decisionmaking and impart less authority (Elson 1991:170). Meanwhile, women’s contributions to family income and formal markets in terms of reproduction and maintenance of human resources are generally overlooked, mainly because their work in these areas is mostly unpaid. Thus, markets tend to regard women as less deserving than men to be paid for their work, even as a sort of lower-wage labour resource (Elson 1991).

Meanwhile, male dominance is underpinned by a cultural system that also privileges men in terms of power and value (Cunnison and Stageman 1993:4; Lim 1990:105; Walby 1990). In many countries, culture plays an enormous role in restricting work areas, determining what occupations women should be involved in and how women should behave in paid work (Schech and Haggis 2000). For instance, in East Asia, where Confucian culture educates people to maintain a hierarchical relationship between men and women at both household and community levels, discrimination by gender in labour markets is often taken for granted. Elson and Pearson (1988:229) argue that the cultural determination of gender roles enables global capital to draw on the female labour force to carry out certain stereotypical tasks.

In addition to culture, formal and informal social and political institutions also account for women’s underprivileged
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positions. On the one hand, family and educational institutions with patriarchal tendencies reinforce gender biases and perpetuate the notion of inequality between men and women in the primary process of socialisation (Lim 1990; Park 1993). On the other hand, the state contributes to the maintenance of patriarchal institutions through laws, regulations, policies and ideological pronouncements privileging men in both private and public spheres (Walby 1990:21). Thus, legislation and policies in patriarchal states tend to neglect women’s rights in terms of property, education, wage, and employment opportunity.

In economic policies, meanwhile, gender relations can be invisible (Elson 1991; Riphenburg 1996). In market-oriented economies the state is both patriarchal and capitalistic, and its economic policies can disadvantage women in labour markets in both direct and indirect ways (Cockburn 1991:8; Walby 1990). Many states, particularly low-income states, actually see female labour as a flexible and low-wage human resource. Thus they create policies that make it easier for employers to employ women in labour-intensive industries. In market-oriented economies with authoritarian governments, the state often uses authoritarian controls to maintain lower wage levels for women, for example by lowering the minimum wage level and hampering the activities of trade unions (Lee 1993; Park 1993, 1995). On the other hand, higher-income states are more likely to increase workforce flexibility by simplifying the legal processes of worker dismissal and casual employment. Since women are over-represented in subcontracted, outsourced and temporary contracted work, they tend to be worst affected by such employment practices.

Finally, the gender division of labour in paid work is sustained though exclusion and segregation, or the prohibition of women from filling certain jobs and positions (Cunnison and Stageman 1993:14; Walby 1990). In workplaces, as elsewhere, gender relations become competitive. Men may feel that they stand to lose where women gain. Thus, male workers tend to maintain their dominance by excluding women from positions of power in mainstream organisations. Trade unions have provided men with an important mechanism for such exclusion and segregation. Like workplaces, trade unions are male dominated and have historically given priority to the interests of their male members (Cockburn 1991; Hartmann 2002). Skilled manual workers, usually with full-time positions, actively participate in trade unions, while workers at managerial levels are represented in important decisionmaking processes. Women can therefore easily be excluded from trade union membership, particularly the decisionmaking committees and councils that govern unions, since a majority of them are segregated from men in unskilled jobs and excluded from managerial and full-time positions (Choi 2000:270; Cockburn 1991:110). The masculinity of trade union culture, with its aggressiveness, competitiveness and frequenting of pubs and clubs after work, also discourages women from participating in unions (Cunnison and Stageman 1993).
In summary, women’s over-representation and disadvantaged position in the Korean textile and apparel industries can be seen as consequences of a combination of gender stereotyping and division based on patriarchal traditions and the global capitalistic tendency to maximise profit. Labour arrangements—both domestic Korean and international—that seek to enhance efficiency through reduction of production costs tend to consolidate dual labour market structures and thus create vertical polarisation between primary and secondary markets. Patriarchal institutions—including the family, schools, laws and government policies, and trade unions—devalue women’s roles in both household and paid work and only create opportunities for women to participate in low-paid and less important jobs in the textile and apparel industries.

**Korean women in the textile and apparel industries**

The growth-oriented economic strategy adopted by the authoritarian South Korean state, a strategy that is dependent on international trade in manufacturing products, was central to the country’s extraordinary economic achievement in the second half of the 20th century (Haggard 1990). In pace with structural changes in the South Korean economy over time, the percentage of women in the total workforce has grown steadily. However, this growth has not necessarily improved the quality and status of women’s work. Korea’s patriarchal cultural traditions, formally articulated in Confucian philosophy, influence the labour market as well as the family and other social institutions, and has contributed to the formation of the popular view of women as secondary family breadwinners whose participation in waged work is not as significant as men’s. As a result, women tend to be regarded as a cheap labour resource that can be easily brought in and out of the labour market in response to labour demand (Cho 2000; Kong 1997; Bary 1998).

In addition, through laws, policies and regulations that favour men, the South Korean state has always put patriarchy into practice in social, economic and political arenas. Family law, for example, has always contained many male-favourable provisions in regards to marriage, divorce and inheritance (Moon 2002:81; Park 1993). The family registry system is generally based on male lineage, thus women cannot legally head their families. As a result, women have limited authority in family decisionmaking processes and few legal rights, especially in regards to property. Educational institutions have also reinforced the patriarchal notion of gender roles through school curricula that until just recently offered business and industrial courses for male students and home management courses for girls. The wage system has also produced significant disparity between male and female workers. On the premise that women are supported by male heads of households, women are not paid wages designed to cover family, education and housing expenses as male heads of households are.

Moreover, the legislation protecting workplace gender equality in terms of equal job opportunities, equal wages (Kim 2000),\(^2\) promotion, age of retirement and so on was first enacted only in 1988 (Kim 1999).
However, this legislation has done little to protect women from discrimination in the labour market because of the persistence of discriminatory practices (Kang and Shin 2000; SWTU 2002).

Firms, both public and private, also have deep-rooted patriarchal traditions. Exclusion and segregation are the two most common methods of marginalising women workers (Choi 2000). In many cases jobs are segregated by gender from the entry level, hence women are largely crowded into a limited number of low-skill, low-profile or contingent occupations, embracing home-related work, secretarial work, sales, teaching and caring services. At a certain level in corporations, a glass ceiling hindering women’s promotion appears, thus women are rarely seen in managerial or high-profile positions (Kang and Shin 2001:197). Such discriminatory practices seriously affect trade unions, leading to the poor participation of women in unions and female members’ lack of authority in union decisionmaking processes (Choi 2000).

The textile and apparel industries can be seen as most clearly manifesting the characteristic male bias of labour management in South Korea (Lee 1993; Park 1995). Gender-based task segregation in production is used as a major mechanism for differentiation of labour controls between male and female workers, thus different types of jobs for each gender are already set at job-entry level. In the spinning and weaving industry women work as machine tenders and operatives, whereas men work as machine technicians and other auxiliary workers. In the apparel industry women are engaged in sewing and finishing pieces, whereas men are involved in engineering, machine maintenance, cutting, ironing and the operation of specialised machines (Chang et al. 1995; Lee 1993). Vertical gender allocation appears in jobs as well, with men usually occupying the higher supervisory and managerial positions and women only gaining promotion to the lowest supervisory levels.

The rigidity of gender segregation in the textile and apparel industries also results in a general lack of status, which reflects in relatively low workers’ benefits, including wages and welfare, job stability, and rights. It could be argued that the industries’ labour conditions have been detrimental to both men and women, but statistics make it clear that women have suffered more. For instance, the ratio of female to male wages in the textile industry was 46.3, 52.0 and 62.7 per cent in 1980, 1990 and 2000 respectively, while the corresponding figures in the apparel industry were 56.8, 58.4 and 59.3 per cent (Seguino 1997; MOLAB 2002). As reported by Lee (1993), the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) estimates that a female worker’s average wage for a basic eight-hour working day was equal to just 69.6 per cent of a single person’s minimum living costs in 1980. Lee also used Korean Ministry of Labour statistics to show that textile workers worked an average of 246 hours in 1984, and earned 36 per cent of their wages by working overtime. Even with overtime pay, however, women still earned only 109 per cent of the minimum cost of living in 1980. The Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare estimates that a female worker’s average earnings for the basic eight-hour working day in the year 2000
reached as much as 200 per cent of a single person’s minimum cost of living (MOHW 2002; MOLAB 2002). This increase in real wages, which applied to men as well as women in the industries, was partly due to the increasing activities of the labour movement in the decade since 1987 (Lee 2002; Song 1999).

In the case of the apparel industry, average wages in 1994 were about four times higher than average wages in 1985. However, female workers’ wages actually fell relative to wages in manufacturing generally. In 1994 women apparel workers received 67.5 per cent of the average wage of women workers in all manufacturing, but in 2000 this figure fell to 65.3 per cent. This fall is all the more remarkable when compared to the figures for women’s wages as a percentage of men’s wages in manufacturing generally, that is 56.5 per cent in 1994 increasing to 59.3 per cent in 2000. On the other hand, average working hours, including overtime, have decreased considerably. For instance, in 1985 apparel workers worked an average of 241.8 hours per month and earned 46.7 per cent of their wages by working overtime, but these figures fell to 186.4 hours and 19.5 per cent in 2000 (MOLAB 2002).  

Changes in the age structure of the female workforce in the textile and apparel industries have also been noticeable in recent decades. During the early booming period of the industries, young single women in their late teens and early 20s made up the majority of the female workforce. In 1983, 81.6 per cent of female workers in the industries were younger than 25 years old, whereas the corresponding figure for men was just 30.4 per cent (MOLAB 2002). The dominance of young female workers in the Korean textile and apparel industries would seem to add further support to the argument made by many other studies carried out in developing economies that young single women are preferred in labour-intensive production because of their greater willingness to work for lower wages than men, their greater tendency to submit to authority and their lesser experience in organising labour unions (Lee 1993; Park 1995). In addition, young girls from poor families are seen to make crucial contributions to their families’ incomes (Lee 1993; Pearson 1991).

During the last two decades, however, a dramatic shift in the age structure of female workers in the industries has taken place. The diversification of the manufacturing industry and expansion of the service industry have introduced a number of better-paying and easier jobs, such as office and sales clerk jobs, into the Korean economy. This change is reflected in the rise of the ratio of female wages in the textile and apparel industries to those in the banking and finance industries from 70.3 per cent in 1993 to 71.6 per cent in 2000 (MOLAB 2002). In addition, an increase in schooling years has helped raise young workers’ skill levels. Meanwhile, from the beginning of the 1980s, a number of domestic and international firms began to relocate their production to other countries in pursuit of better production conditions, such as cheaper labour and easier use of capital-hosting countries’ export quotas (Kang 1995). Because better education and worse industry prospects meant low-paying
manufacturing jobs became less attractive to job-seekers, the textile and apparel industries began to face difficulties in finding enough workers, particularly young workers. Thus, from the late 1980s to the present, the number of workers in these industries fell significantly. In the apparel industry the percentage of female workers under 25 in 1995 fell to 28.2 per cent of all female worker, down from 74.6 per cent in 1985. At the same time the percentage of women over 25 increased comparatively (KWWAU 1997).

In order to understand the increase in the workforce participation of women over 25, most of whom are married, it is necessary to examine the general trend of married women’s paid work activities in South Korea. The commonly accepted norm for married women in South Korea is to take responsibility for family-related work in the household as wife, mother and daughter-in-law. At the same time, married women, specifically married women from low-income and low–middle income households, are also expected to make some economic contribution to their households, generally as secondary income earner if they have a working husband (Park 1995). However, married women’s family commitments make finding a job in the competitive formal sector difficult, thus they usually find work in the informal sector, where jobs are relatively insecure and poorly paid. Poorly paid service or light manufacturing jobs, specifically sewing and weaving in home-based or micro factories, are therefore attractive to these women (KWWAU 1997). In most cases, married women’s previous work experience, skill levels and schooling years are not factored into the wage system in such employment.

Case study: the South Korean apparel industry

In order to look at female workers’ current employment conditions in the apparel industry, the author conducted individual in-depth interviews with eight apparel workers in the Seoul area in 2001. All were labour unionists, four from Chu-gae-chun Apparel Labour Union, based on micro and small-size factories, and four from the Korean Federation of Textile Trade Unions (KOFTTU), based largely on small and medium-size factories. All worked in different workplaces. Three were men and five women. Two were in their late 20s, two in their early 30s, three in their late 30s and one in her early 50s. The interview was designed to solicit male and female workers’ perceptions of gender differences in their workplaces and to address issues relating to their current employment conditions, specifically changes that occurred after the 1997 East Asian financial crisis.

All of the interviewees agreed that the 1997 economic downturn had had a negative impact on their employment conditions. Two of the workers’ greatest concerns were declining wages and decreasing job security since 1997. However, all of them asserted that their workloads had increased after the crisis because of the boom in exports that resulted from the dramatic depreciation of Korean foreign currency. At the same time, however, their employers cut their annual wage levels, or delayed payment on the pretext of financial difficulties, supposedly to be dealt with in the future. Some employers threatened individual workers with the possibility of factory closure or relocation. All the interviewees saw this as
The female workers disagreed, saying, ‘although it could be somewhat true that we are physically weaker than men, female workers often move big rolls of cloth as men do when we are told to do so’. Thus, they insisted that women were capable of performing tailoring work in terms of physical strength. They also said, ‘we are not able to cut and pattern because the necessary skills are not taught to us’. One female worker in her early 50s said, ‘men usually refuse to teach their tailoring skills to women because they fear losing their jobs to women in the future. Men know they make up a minority of the workforce in this industry, but they believe they can maintain their dominance in the workplace by keeping the skilled jobs to themselves’. On the other hand, another female worker said, ‘in my workplace a number of machine-based jobs, particularly computerised ones, have been taken over by young skilled women, largely because of the scarcity of male workers in the industry’. Thus, the barrier between men and women’s jobs is coming down to some extent because of insufficient labour supply, especially supply of young skilled male workers.

The female workers identified another aspect of gender discrimination in labour union activities, with a female worker in her 30s saying, ‘women are not preferred as company union leaders because employers do not regard women as appropriate negotiating partners from the labour side’. KOFTTU, made up of 350 enterprises whose total membership was more than 80 per cent female, had only 12 female union leaders out of 350. One interviewee in her early 30s from KOFTTU said, ‘in my company if there is
one male worker, he becomes a union leader regardless of his age or working position. This is because all female workers know through direct or indirect experience that none of them would be approved as leaders by employers or other male unionists’. A critical aspect of this discrimination in the unions is the ‘feedback effect’, by which women become less willing to make an effort to improve their situation if they know they are already discriminated against as women, and thus remain in their disadvantaged positions (Blau and Ferber 1992:210; Loury 1998).

In sum, these interviews show that traditional patriarchy-based gender roles still prevalent in the Korean apparel industry cause discrimination against women in job allocation, wage determination and labour union activities. Job segregation seems to have become less pronounced, with some female workers now engaging in machine-related men’s work, because of improvements in female workers’ education and scarcity of male workers in the industry. However, the tradition of job allocation by gender was still seen to account for female workers’ disadvantaged position.

**Conclusion**

The treatment of female workers as a flexible pool of cheap labour in the textile and apparel industries has been promoted as a less developed country’s survival strategy to achieve and sustain economic growth in the global capital-driven economy. Regardless of the changes brought about by industrial development, including boom and decline, women are consistently treated as a major cost-reducing resource to be used for the benefit of both international and domestic oriented firms. It can be said that female textile and apparel workers in Korea have been integrated into economic development, since they now make up a majority of the workforce in production and make a correspondingly significant contribution to the success of their industries. However, their poor working conditions—with lower wages than in other industries, a gender gap in wages, low job security and segmentation into low-profile occupations—have made prevented women from fully benefiting from development.

This article has argued that the two interacting systems of patriarchy and the capitalistic mode of production form the basis for a structure of male dominance in which Korean women are positioned as an underprivileged workforce in the labour market. The international division of labour, in which cheap labour in less developed countries is a primary mechanism for the more developed economies to increase profits and for less-developed countries to achieve export-led economic growth and join global networks of production. The textile and apparel industries are typical export-leading industries, characterised by their dependence on a flexible low-wage workforce and their tendency to relocate assembly plants overseas or subcontract locally owned firms in less developed countries. By maintaining a low-wage, predominantly female workforce, Korea has been able to use this global pattern of industrial production to achieve and sustain national economic development. Korea’s patriarchal tradition, formally articulated in
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the Confucian philosophy of gender hierarchy, conditions women to become a secondary form of labour in the industries. Primary institutions of socialisation such as the family and schools reinforce traditional gender roles and relations. Meanwhile, the state has played an important role in stimulating development by exercising paternalistic and patriarchal control in political, economic and social arenas.

As the case study showed, employers’ efforts to increase profits by exercising repressive control over workers intensified during the recession period and subsequent economic crisis. Interviewees revealed that some employers verbally threatened to close or relocate factories in order to compel workers to submit in the workplace. Meanwhile, patriarchy-based gender roles were said to continue to play an important role in job segregation, wage differentiation, unequal job promotion and labour union participation. Despite the fact that female workers make up a majority of the textile and apparel workforce, resistance from employers and male union members lessen the opportunities for them to become union leaders.

In conclusion, the development pattern of the global textile and apparel industries has remained virtually the same over the last four decades, thus maintaining unequal relations between capital-exporting and capital-hosting countries as well as between male and female textile and apparel workers. Korea is one of many countries that have experienced the cycle of boom and decline of low wage-based export production, and Korean women are only some of the many global female workers who receive wages but suffer from poor working conditions and discriminatory labour practices. It is likely that this pattern of development will continue in the future as long as it benefits certain privileged groups of people. Improvements in women’s working conditions will depend on both international and domestic workers’ efforts to ensure equal job opportunities and treatment among individual workers regardless of their gender and national identity.

Notes

1 The textile and apparel industries can be found at D17 and D18 in Korean standard industrial classification, including manufacture of textile, sewn wearing apparel and fur articles. Before 1992, they were classed as a single industry in Korea (NSO 2002).

2 Kim uses years of schooling and work experience to estimate productivity level, which is supposed to constitute a rational market reason for differences among individual workers’ wages. In addition, Kim puts workers’ marital status, type of occupation and industry, and firm size in the category of employee and employer differences. In his analysis he takes a sample of 10 per cent from the total of both male and female workers’ wages in 1998, provided by the Ministry of Labour in Korea, and analyses the data by giving different log values to the independent market variables, including productivity and employee and employer differences. On the one hand, the wage differences caused by these two factors are regarded as based on rational reasons. On the other hand, the differences in wages between men and women, despite having the same productivity and employee and employer differences, are seen to have non-rational reasons, that is, discrimination. Consequently,
An interesting finding in relation to working hours is that, according to ILO data, of 17 Asian countries Korea was the only one in which women worked longer hours than men in the 1980s (Park 1995).

Seoul is the centre of national economic activities as well as the capital city of South Korea. In 1998, 77.3 per cent of all South Korean apparel firms (1,196) were located in the Seoul area, which includes its neighbour cities in Kyung-Ki province (KAIA 1999).

Chung-gae-chun is one of the best-known apparel production regions, particularly for its conventional and informal business operations in Seoul.

KOFTTU belongs to Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), consisting of 28 different member industries, including textiles, rail, metals, chemicals, taxis and so on (FKTU 2002).

**References**


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