

The journey for justice

Indai Sajor takes the “lolas” case from the grassroots to the U.N.

It is the day after the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery, held in The Hague, the Netherlands. A friend stops by the cafeteria table where Indai Sajor is seated, and hands her a glass of water. Sajor is in danger of losing her voice because of all the speaking she has done in the past two days. As one of the three women conveners of the Tribunal, she has been in perpetual motion. Activist Yayori Matsui of Japan, and Professor Chung Ok Yune of Korea were the other co-conveners.



Indai Sajor

STEPHEN WUNROW

Though tired, the energetic and enthusiastic Sajor continued to give big hugs and smiles to old friends or acquaintances that spotted her seated at the table. They too came to attend the Tribunal and participate in a subsequent conference on justice sponsored by Novid, a Dutch women’s human rights organization.

As Sajor speaks, it becomes apparent that she has the delivery of a comedian and a gift for storytelling. Even as she tells stories about her work with the former comfort women of the Philippines and about the planning of the Hague Tribunal, she relates some lighter moments that have happened as well.

Her sense of humor is a survival skill that has enabled her to handle the heavy schedule required to prepare for this event, which has been nearly ten years in the making. It even brought her through two years as a political prisoner under the Marcos regime.

Sajor was born and raised in the Philippines, and is currently the executive director of the Women’s Caucus for Gender Justice, an organization advocating for the establishment of an independent International Criminal Court.

Her activism began as a student of the University of the Philippines in the 1970s, during the Marcos regime. “I left school to join a noble cause,” Sajor said. “I dedicated my life to fighting against the Marcos dictatorship.” In 1975 and 1976, she was imprisoned, and later went underground, continuing the struggle to bring down the Marcos regime.

She hid in the mountains of the Philippines, living, eating and working alongside the tribal people of a village there. She spent her time conducting research, and teaching literacy skills to villagers. She was fascinated with her work with the tribe. That experience and her continued work against dictatorship of then-president Ferdinand Marcos fed her idealism and sense of justice. When Marcos was finally thrown out of office and out of the country, she renewed her commitment to this type of work as an activist.

“I’ve always been interested in human rights, fighting impunity, and making people accountable,” Sajor said.

Sajor first learned of the Korean comfort women issue in 1991, when she attended a conference in Seoul on sex trafficking. There, the first Korean woman went public with her story of being a victim of Japan’s sexual slavery system during World War II. After Sajor returned to the Philippines, her group decided to find the Filipina comfort women and seek justice for them, too.

“We went on Philippine radio,” Sajor said. “We said that we were looking for women who were raped during the Japanese war.”

The first Philippine woman who contacted Sajor was reluctant to have her story made public. It was such a shameful experience; “Why should I talk about it?” the woman wondered, but eventually she agreed. Sajor and her organization held a press conference with nearly 100 media organizations represented, and the woman told her

story in public for the first time.

“So that was the beginning of our work,” Sajor said. By that December she contacted the Japanese lawyer working on the Korean comfort women’s lawsuit. While interested, he was unable to come to the Philippines to meet with Sajor because of a scheduling conflict. Sajor wouldn’t take no for an answer. “I literally begged him and begged him ‘You have to come, you have to meet with us,’” Sajor implored. Finally, the Japanese attorney was won over by Sajor’s enthusiasm and passion, and agreed to a meeting. He met with the first Filipina woman to come forward, and in early 1992, he filed a court case on her behalf. In the meantime, more former comfort women came forward. Sajor conducted investigations and established documentation for the women’s testimony. In 1993, they filed the first case on behalf of 20 Filipina plaintiffs.

Sajor began speaking out on the issue in different forums, and she began traveling with the *lolas* (the Philippine term for grandmothers). The Japanese organizers were notorious for creating tight interview schedules. Sajor translated the *lolas*’ stories for interviews, and during one particularly hectic media tour, Sajor burst into tears as she translated.

“I’ll never forget. The *lola* would speak in her native language and I would translate. We’d been doing that for more than a week, you know with all the speaking engagements. I guess I internalized her story, and I thought I was the comfort woman! I was crying and then everyone else was crying.

“It ended with all the comfort women comforting me!” Sajor said. “And then, an old Japanese soldier came up to us and kneeled. He said that he was one of those responsible for the crime and apologized. All the comfort women came down from the stage and hugged him.”

Sajor founded ASCENT of the Philippines, an advocacy organization for the Filipina comfort women, after attending human rights conferences in Beijing and Vienna. Caucuses of women around the world began to

come together and speak on these issues, giving the movement an international exposure. It was a change of focus for Sajor who until then was accustomed to activism at a grassroots level—working with trade unions and standing on picket lines.

There was a time in her life when she spoke at large protest rallies, many of which were in front of the U.S. embassy. “I made sure I got arrested. Then we would organize an indignation rally protesting our arrests, and the crowds would be bigger and we’d get arrested, then we’d have another indignation rally with more people attending and getting arrested.”

This went on for some time until the police eventually caught on, Sajor said, and stopped arresting anyone. “We would walk up to the police, hands outstretched, saying ‘Please arrest us... we’re not leaving until you arrest us.’”

Taking the movement to the international level was a new experience for Sajor. While she may have felt unprepared, others saw a leader. During one conference, Sajor was elected to organize the next conference, “And I wasn’t even in the building!” she recalled.

“The International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) was one of the first international organizations that worked with us,” Sajor said. “Tina (Ustina Dolgopol) did a book and collaborated with us. So that was the beginning of that work, and raising the level of awareness by getting the Asian women together.”

The women’s coalitions began lobbying governments at the United Nations, doing interventions on the floor of conferences, bringing the comfort women victims to human rights conferences and getting international NGOs to work with the coalitions on the issue.

Whether at conferences in Vienna, Cairo, Copenhagen or Beijing, the comfort women issue brought Asian women together to discuss issues and strategize on bringing the subject to the international community’s attention. “This is a very unusual movement that we have started,” Sajor said. “The commonality is that we all agreed to commit ourselves to jus-

tice for the comfort women no matter what country they are from.

“The comfort women brought sexual violence and gender-based persecution to the forefront,” Sajor said. It was at a 1997 conference in Tokyo, that ASCENT and other organizations linked the comfort women’s issues to current war crimes “not only in Korea and other Japanese-occupied territory, but from testimonies from women from Columbia, sexual violence in South Africa during apartheid and so on; the same issues facing the comfort women.”

The published judgment document, the product of the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal, will be used in several ways, Sajor explained. One copy needs to be placed in front of the United Nations Security Council, an important step because Japan plans to apply again for a seat on the Security Council, a position that has been so far been denied, Sajor said. “We were successful at stopping them in their bid in 1994,” Sajor said, “because it was the height of the issue of comfort women. We lobbied the U.N.; (asking) how could they put Japan on the Security Council with all its wartime responsibilities unfinished? But now, they are bidding again.”

“I think we should deliver the judgment to all members of the Security Council and put Japan to task; to explicitly say, ‘look at this judgment. Japan should not get permanent status,’” she declared. Copies of the judgment should be given to the victims’ countries, Sajor feels, but admits that in the cases of her own county, the Philippines, it may be difficult to do because Japan is the largest contributor of aid to their country. There are political and economical ramifications to consider.

“The Philippines has taken on the issue, but not as strong as South Korea. As you say in English, you cannot bite the hand that feeds you,” Sajor said. “So officially, my government’s position is not very strong.

“But for me,” she said, “the moral of this tribunal is that the women have a sense of justice. After the judgment was read, one of the *lolas* told me, ‘Now, I can really die.’” ●