Democracy as a life project

Yayori Matsui contributes toward a better future for the women of Japan and the world

Despite the many thousands of women who work in collaboration with Yayori Matsui and her coalition, the Violence Against Women in War Network of Japan (VAWW-Net), one suspects, upon meeting Matsui, that she would forge ahead with her agenda for women in Japan and the greater society, even if she were the only one doing it.

It is all so apparently obvious to Matsui that human rights issues must be addressed for the women of Japan and for women in the many countries touched by Japan’s powerful and influential society. She talks of such issues simplistically, as if from a clear vision. Although she is aware of the layers of complexity caused by bureaucracy, historical precedent, race and class issues, and long-held prejudices, none of these seem to cloud her view of a future world that is better place for women to live.

Along with two other organizations, the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (the Korean Council) and the Asian Centre for Women’s Human Rights (ASCENT) of the Philippines, VAWW-Net was a co-convenor of the conference. It also provided leadership and on-the-ground logistics for the Tribunal and the events leading up to it, which started in 1997. Preparatory events were held in cities all over the world, including Geneva, Tokyo, Seoul, Taipei, The Hague, Washington, DC, Jakarta, New York City, Shanghai, and Manila.

The Tribunal itself was a huge feat of organization, requiring coordination among numerous organizations which took part in the conference, participated in the International Advisory Committee, and presented the Public Hearing on Crimes Against Women in Recent Wars and Conflicts, held December 11.

Renowned international law judges and prosecutors had to be scheduled, housed and provided for, and witnesses, many of them women whose lives are marked by deprivation and hardship, had to be supported and sponsored so that they could come many thousands of miles to tell their stories.

Throughout the six-day event, Matsui seemed to be everywhere at once, encouraging the assembled hundreds, troubleshooting problems, supplying the international press with information about the day’s proceedings, and making time for interviews.

Despite the gigantic scale and international scope of the event, Matsui said she is looking at the possible influence of the Tribunal on Japanese government as only a long term one. “Oh, I am not optimistic at all,” she said cheerfully. “Because the present government will never change their policy. …a different, better, or more democratic government (in Japan) can only solve the problem. In order to have that kind of government we have to democratize our society… Of course, many say that Japan is a democratic country, but I’m not sure if it is! Because democracy means the people have power, but here, everything is decided by government, big business, or the mainstream media. The people are sort of dis-empowered. In order to democratize, we have to empower the people. So, this Tribunal is one small step in that direction, to give more power to people to change the government in the future.”

One of the most satisfying accomplishments of the Tribunal organizing was the successful collaboration of the North and South Koreans as one prosecuting team, Matsui said. From the beginning, Matsui said, Chung-ok Yun, the director of the Korean Council, had told her the two Koreas should prosecute together, since Korea was one country in the era comfort women were taken. Matsui was glad to have a part in it. “From the beginning, I was thinking that the North Koreans should be there,” she explained, “but of course the South Koreans would not communicate with them. So we, VAWW-Net, had been sending information to North Korea… They indicated a very strong interest, and a willingness to participate starting in 1998.”

In March of this year, a preparatory meeting for prosecutors was held in Shanghai, China, involving the Chinese former comfort women and Chinese women’s organizations. “I thought that since China and North Korea have a very good relationship, this would be the best opportunity for North Koreans to be involved in the preparatory process.” After much last minute communicating by fax, North Korea finally decided to send a delegation of three prosecutors, much to Matsui’s relief. The North and South Koreans were anxious to work together, she observed.

Then, in July, the North Koreans were sent to a second preparatory meeting in Manila, and then to the Taipei meeting in September. “In Taipei, finally, they agreed to have a joint indictment, that all prosecution would be from one Korea. I heard lots of differences in views. North Koreans are much more focused on state responsibility, while the South Koreans wanted to mention the names of particular individuals,” she said. “And another very difficult part was that post-war state responsibility includes not only Japan, but the victims’ countries because they have not done enough to protect the women who are their own nationals, so South Korea wanted to include the South Korean government’s negligence, but it is impossible for North Koreans to mention that about their own government, she stated.

It was heartening to see the team members get to know one another, she said, “and that they always talking to each other during the break time. They had lunch and dinner together. Many of them met people from the other side (of Korea) for the first time.”

Matsui hopes the Tribunal will deliver some very basic messages to Japanese society about the criminal nature of the comfort women system. Attention from the international community helps to further this objective, she said. “Recently, she said, the countries involved in the events have been the victimized countries and Japan. The Tribunal, with its broad slate of participants from many countries, has globalized the issue, and brought the perspective of third parties to the table. ‘It’s so encouraging to have this kind of international support,’ she said.

Part of the struggle is to get Japanese society to view the military sexual slavery issue as a Japanese government conspiracy and as a crime. Matsui said that VAWW-Net, in an effort to find out how the military sexual slavery issue is viewed by former World War II military, once sent people equipped with surveys to a Tokyo shrine to the war dead on an important festival day when the victims visit the shrine. Two thirds of the Japanese veterans surveyed said that the comfort stations were necessary. Two thirds also said there is no need to apologize to the comfort women, now or ever. ‘They think ‘oh, these poor women. They were prostitutes.’ Something like that. They said ‘I went there. I paid.’”

The Tribunal was glad to have women who work in Okinawa against local women.

Matsui also carries on her educational activities in print. She has published 10 books, two of which are in English. The Asia-Japan Women’s Resource Center publishes a periodical of women’s issues entitled Women’s Asia, which Matsui edits (printed once annually in English). She also publishes widely in other journals.

Matsui, now age 66, and Chung-ok Yun, now 75, incorporated into the closing ceremony of the Tribunal a symbolic transfer of leadership to the younger leaders. Both know they have a finite number of days left to devote to this issue, and that the advocacy for the comfort women is still needed. “Because the Japanese government is dependent on that - for them to die. Even though they die, the struggle should continue.”

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