

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



Yayori Matsui

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 coun-

try 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 could 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 survivors 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. "I observed them 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. Until 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 veterans 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.' I asked them 'Did you ever consider how these girls got there,' and they said 'Oh, I spent 15 or 20 minutes in the room at a time. How could I think of those things?' Answers like that. They think rape is bad. But going to a comfort station, they think that's not bad. Like it's a sort of military right. That's their understanding."

Another objective of the event is to separate the "shame aspect" from the crime, so that it can be treated as any other war crime, and to name military gender violence as a universal women's human rights issue. A third objective, she said, is to restore a sense of justice to the former comfort women, all elderly and rapidly dying off. And a fourth objective to be realized by the Tribunal is the establishment of a permanent historical record in the form of documents and oral histories on videotape, she said.

Matsui's involvement with women's human rights issues goes beyond

VAWW-Net. She formed the activist Asian Women's Association in the early '70s, initially to educate about and advocate against Japanese men's sex tours to neighboring countries such as Thailand. This was at the same time as her ongoing career as a full-time staff writer for *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper, a position she retired from in 1994 after 33 years. Recently, her group, now known as the Asia-Japan Women's Resource Center, has been working on contemporary issues such as the trafficking of Thai women as sex slaves in Japan, and the increasing number of Japanese-Filipino children born to Japanese men and Filipino women while the women are working in Japan temporarily as entertainers. An office of the Asia-Japan Women's Resource Center has been opened in Manila to provide support for these one-parent families. Fundraising is continual. The group is also researching the sexual violence of U.S. military based 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 depending on that - for them to die. Even though they die, the struggle should continue."

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