

Leader of the pioneers

Chung-ok Yun and the legacy of the Korean comfort women

At the Public Hearing on Women in Recent Wars and Conflicts, women revealed stories of their victimization at the hands of a violent state. One woman from Chiapas, Mexico said her tribe of indigenous people is being systematically eliminated and that she was sterilized without her knowledge during a Caesarian section. Another woman from Burundi was tied to the ground in a rebel camp, drugged and raped, later discovered she was pregnant, and is now estranged from her family because they refuse to believe her story. She fears she has AIDS. A Guatemalan woman testified that she and other indigenous women are determined to "build an ethic of life despite what happened to us, or perhaps because of it." She was raped and tortured by about 20 soldiers, threatened with death if she told, forced to witness a crucifixion.

Aside from being together at the event because they suffered horrific sexual violations and other crimes during wars and conflicts, many of the women had something else in common. They came because they were inspired by the witness of the Korean former comfort women and the work of Professor Chung-ok Yun and the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Sexual Slavery by Japan.

"The Korean comfort women are pioneers," Radhika Coomaraswamy, special rapporteur for the U.N.'s High Commission on Human Rights, told the audience. Her report on the comfort women's case was adopted by the United Nations in 1998. "The world is a little safer today because of them." The Public Hearing was an all-day event in conjunction with the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal, held in Tokyo December 7-12.

Professor Yun, who started her research on comfort women in 1970, little suspected that her efforts to bring justice to that small group of poor elderly women would one day carry the sound of those women's voices around the world and inspire others to add theirs to the protest.

Like iron to a magnet, the women came from all over the world to see and hear the women Yun helped organize starting back in

1990, to pay tribute to them, to tell their own stories, and to face the combined shame and liberation of speaking out, all because the Korean comfort women did it first.

Yun is in the same age group as most of the former comfort women — she is 75. Today, she is still working toward the goal she set in 1990 when she first asked the former comfort women to make their names and faces public, the same year she cofounded the Korean Council. She is also setting goals for a future she may not see. She wants the Korean Council to grow beyond its original purpose, to an organization that will advocate for other military sexual violence victims within Korea and abroad.

The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal has set out "to try the criminals," she said. "In so doing, we want to restore the honor and the dignity of the survivors."

The Tribunal is sort of court of last resort for the former comfort women, who have exhausted many legal avenues of appeal, Yun said. Of nine suits filed in Tokyo High Court, three have been rejected. "We don't expect a better result from any of the rest of the cases."

Based on this prediction, Yayori Matsui, director of a Japanese sister organization, had proposed at a 1998 Seoul meeting that there be a joint war crimes tribunal. Since then, for nearly three years, the groups have been preparing for the Tribunal, and their prediction came true. There has still been no vindication through the courts, still no apology from the Japanese government. The Tribunal is still the last shot for the former comfort women.

Yun said that the Tribunal would, at minimum, accomplish the goal of giving the former comfort women a sense of support and solidarity. "They came here and they were accepted by the world. They were accepted as normal persons with honor and dignity."

But the Tribunal is not only a time to unearth and examine the past, Yun said. It is a time to consider and direct the future. "We chose this time period - we are on the threshold of the new millennium and we need to look back on the last [century], bloodied with wars, small or big, in



Chung-ok Yun

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which always, women were sexually violated. And to have women as well as men think about the meaning of this violation. We need to make promises to each other and with ourselves that we will not hand over this kind of history to our children who we love so much. This trial will be a symbol with which to start a new millennium."

Yun referred to the symbol of the Tribunal, a quartered square, the quarters set slightly off center, and illustrated by four stylized drawings, candlelight, sunlight, a woman's watching eye, and a flower. The symbolism represents the necessity of future vigilance by women. It was chosen for the Tribunal to indicate a futuristic vision, and not just a righting of past wrongs, she said.

Yun said she also asked for a ceremony in which banners would be passed from the oldest to the youngest woman in each group. "The closing ceremony was my suggestion. Because the younger generation has to go on. We (older leaders) have to step back. The Korean Council - I think they are ready. We worked together for ten years."

The ceremony also celebrates having this many survivors of the comfort women system in one place at one time. "They are all passing away now. So this is both the first and last gathering of survivors," she said.

As it prepares for the future, The Korean Council is getting ready to open a center that will take on other issues of women involved in war, to be called (as translated from Korean) the "War Women's Human Rights Center," Yun said. There are two campaigns for this center to start on immediately, she said. One is that of the children, all over 20 years old now, who were fathered by Korean men during the Vietnam War (Korea sent thousands of troops to Vietnam to help the U.S and South

Vietnamese). "Korean soldiers raped countless Vietnamese women. This year is the 25th anniversary of the Vietnam War, and still, not a single Korean man has claimed his own child there," she said. "My reasoning is that unless we take care of these women and children we cannot say we have solved our own human rights problems," she said.

The other issue concerns the sexual crimes by American servicemen stationed in Korea. "American soldiers in Korea remorselessly, continually rape and abuse Korean women." The military is at fault, she said "because they do not discipline their own soldiers... Somehow, those young soldiers have got the idea that they can do anything in Korea. That they are superior. That's wrong. Immoral. That's the same attitude as the Japanese took when they were in Korea! So, I want to warn the American government. It's not good for their own soldiers, or for Korean women."

Yun's goals for the Tribunal will be seen only as we look back in time from the future. "I want Japan as a state, and Korean men, and other men in the world to learn a lesson. ...I hope the Japanese people will open their eyes and be realistic. And not make a person [Hirohito] into a living god."

"We need a strong public opinion. There needs to be strong pressure on the Japanese government, pressure from the outside." Pressure from the inside is less likely to happen because of the conservative nature of the Japanese government. "There will grow a new generation in Japan as well. It will take time, I know."

In some ways the Tribunal marks the beginning of a transition for Yun, from life as an overworked leader on a desperate mission, to the kind of retirement where people actually rest. She says she "should" step down. Her feelings about the topic are obviously complicated. She is reflective as she talks about how much she has learned in the last 10 years. "I taught at Ewha (Woman's University in Seoul) for 33 years, and I resigned in 1991 because of my age. I thought I was old enough to know a little bit about the world. But after my retirement, I opened my eyes. ...I really did not know the reality of the world until then."

She has decided, in light of her last ten years of experience," she said, that "the state, of any size, is an organization of violence. ...I did not know the lives those women had in the comfort stations. Humans can be so cruel. I could not imagine it before I heard it from them."

Another piece of education was how the indomitable spirits of the former comfort women could face down that cruelty, even in their frailty, infirmity, and old age. Part of the presentation of the Korean team was a video taken at the deathbed of Duc Kyung Kang, former comfort woman and tireless crusader for the comfort women's cause of justice. She created what are now some of the most widely publicized paintings of comfort women's experiences. The video showed her demanding of the hospital staff and visitors, "Where is my passport? Have they found my passport yet? I have to go back to Japan. I have to tell them."

Recalling this video, Yun said this kind of spirit is not unusual in the former comfort women. "Many survivors have passed away saying they could not die leaving things as they were," Yun said. "Perhaps those spirits can rest a bit more peacefully now." ●