

NCCR's Support of the Comfort Women

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Let me begin with how I came to learn about the “comfort women.” In the late 1970s, I was part of an Asian American women’s group in Los Angeles and saw the film, “Sandakan #8.” As young women engaged in the fight for women’s rights, we were deeply impacted by the story of a very young Japanese girl who was sent to Borneo, thinking that a factory job awaited her only to find out that her job was serving the needs of Japanese soldiers at a brothel or “comfort station.” Later when I was in Japan in the mid 90’s, I was given a booklet about a “comfort woman” who was part of a lawsuit by former Comfort Women Resident in Japan and, though curious, I did not find out more about the campaign.

In 1999, NCCR, then known as the National Coalition for Redress/Reparations had successfully helped lead a grassroots campaign to win redress for Japanese Americans who had been unjustly incarcerated in concentration camps during World War II and had worked to make sure that all those whose rights had been violated were redressed. NCCR was to change its name to Nikkei for Civil Rights & Redress to reflect its continued commitment to the principle of educating others about this past injustice but also to support others seeking redress for past wrongs. In that vein, NCCR was working with several Asian American and immigrant rights groups and the women of these groups, which included Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA) and UCLA Labor Center, decided to take up the “comfort women” issue.

These women were Korean, Chinese, Latinx, Nisei and Sansei women along with one Nisei man who organized a program on December 3, 1999 called “Women’s Struggle Against Exploitation and for Equality,” at the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center (JACCC). Along with NCCR, the forum was sponsored by UCLA Labor Center and the CHIRLA. Rep. Mike Honda, Martha Matsuoka of the Okinawan Peace Network- LA, Lisa Maza of GABRIELA, an international Philippine women’s organization, and a representative from CAST (Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking) spoke at the program. This group also called for and organized an action on March 8, 2000, International Women’s Day, at the Japanese Consulate to demand an official apology and just compensation to the “comfort women” and for a reduction and removal of US military bases from Okinawa.

During the 2000’s, NCCR did keep abreast of the issue through Ken Arimitsu and Kim Yonghi, organizers and activists in Japan with the Citizens Fund for Redress. But it would be several years later before any sustained support for the “comfort women” (or grandmas as they are called) was started in earnest by a group called the Korean American Forum of California (KAFC) and Phyllis Kim who spearheaded the campaign to install a statue in Glendale that would help to educate the public about the history of sexual trafficking by Japan. NCCR felt compelled to express our support after several people from the Japanese American community spoke out against the statue and used the term “prostitutes,” hoping to disparage the grandmas. In July, 2013, NCCR spoke at the dedication of the statue and took a public stand supporting the demand by the grandmas for a direct apology and reparations. We believed it was in line with our principles of supporting others who sought redress for past injustices and we also viewed it as a women’s rights and human rights issue.

The reactions were strong and swift. We received criticism from some members in our community, both from the Shin Issei and a veterans’ group saying that we should not interfere

in the business of other countries. Koichi Mera of the Global Alliance for Historical Truth (GAHT), a key “denier” of this history, approached NCCR, saying that some of Japan’s Diet members wanted to understand why Japanese Americans supported the grandmas. We, along with a couple of representatives from the San Fernando Valley JACL, agreed to meet with four Diet members, Mio Sugita, Hiromu Nakamaru, Yuzuru Nishida) and Tomoyuki Sumori, a representative for Volunteer Group for Fight Against Comfort Women.

It became clear that they did not come to understand but rather wanted to convince us that the grandmas were not victims but willing participants and treated well by the military. The Japanese Consul General’s office tried to persuade us to step away from the issue citing that this added to the tension between Japan and South Korea in Asia. They have often intervened to express their discomfort and disagreement with programs being held at venues in Little Tokyo, like the film screening of “The Apology” which was moved to a nearby location outside of Little Tokyo and the workshop on “Women Breaking Silence” which was held at the JACCC despite their interference. Though we hoped to screen Miki Dezaki’s film, “Shusenjo” (The Main Battleground) in Little Tokyo, our group of women representing organizations like the Pilipino Workers’ Center, the Thai CDC, CARE (Comfort Women Action for Redress and Education, formerly KAFC) and NCCR, held the program at the Emmanuel Presbyterian with the filmmaker, Miki Dezaki.

And we continued to support the grandmas. In 2015, NCCR had a chance to hold a welcome reception for Grandma Yong Soo Lee who has been a vocal advocate for the grandmas. She made it clear that she held the Japanese government responsible for their past abuses and harbored no ill will towards the Japanese people, who were victims like herself. In fact, she relayed a story of the kindness of a Japanese soldier who, as a kamikaze pilot, was somehow aware of the impending end of the war and warned her to save herself. We were moved by her words and her strength. In 2017, we were to meet Grandma Lee again at the Board of Supervisors hearing on the establishment of a memorial in San Francisco. David Monkawa and I spoke at the Board meeting along with a packed room of mostly supporters but also “deniers” like Koichi Mera. When he described the “comfort women” as “common prostitutes” in front of Grandma Lee, the Supervisors quickly came to her defense while supporters had to hold Grandma Lee back from taking on Mera herself! Unfortunately, some leaders in the SF Japanese American community claimed that there would be a backlash against Japanese Americans and would not support the resolution for the memorial. It was passed and the memorial stands today in St. Mary’s Square, thanks to the determination of the Comfort Women Justice Coalition in San Francisco.

Has Japanese American support been enough? What more can we do?

Although we have spoken on panels at several universities and at memorials for the grandmas who continue to pass away and have sponsored film screenings, I don’t think that Japanese American support of former “Comfort Women” for justice has been enough for several reasons. While we see some parallels of this inhumane treatment of women with the disregard for the lives of Japanese Americans during WWII, we have not been able to build significant empathy and connections in the Japanese American community. While we have seen it as an issue in line with our principles of supporting others fighting for redress for unjust actions and harms committed by a government whether it is in the US or not, we have not clearly called out the system of imperialism for these crimes of greed, war and economic exploitation of people that seems to guide the actions of many countries today. Some in our community have told us we have no right to speak about the actions of other countries and we have not really challenged

that. Yet NCCR, along with a many other people all over the world, spoke out against “apartheid” in South Africa, so our practice shows that we believe we have the right and responsibility to speak out on actions of other governments.

I recently came across an article titled, “One of the Greatest Crimes in History,” from an old Rafu Shimpō, dated October 24, 1995. It was from a Seiji Yoshida, former Japanese official, who was responsible for “mobilizing labor” and for “the kidnapping of comfort women” during World War II. He had sent a box with videos, articles and a letter to the Rafu in 1992, three years earlier, sharing this information, but had been so threatened and harassed in Japan (accused of fabricating his story) he was forced to back off from supporting the comfort women in Japan. He opened this article with an apology to Japanese Americans who had been incarcerated in the camps and to those JA soldiers who died fighting for this country. He was making a desperate appeal to the Japanese American community to speak out for the comfort women in the Philippines because of his appreciation for the role of the MIS (Military Intelligence Service/Nisei or Japanese American soldiers) and the US military in helping to free the comfort women in the Pacific and for the role of the Nisei soldiers (522 Regimental Combat Team) who freed the Jews in Europe. Mr. Yoshida reached out to us believing that our sense of justice meant more than what country we were from. Regretfully, I don’t recall a response from our community nor support from any organization at that time.

Although we did not act on Mr. Yoshida’s appeal from 25 years ago, we can support the demands from the “grandmas” and the “lolos” (Pilipina comfort women) today for a direct apology and individual reparations. Why is the Japanese Government so dismissive of these women? Why do they want to prevent people from learning about this horrific past and to take lessons from it? Why does Japanese Government insist that the reparations they made (to countries and to private funds) is enough when the women have said that it is not? As Japanese Americans, we know how important it is to remind people about the injustice of the camps, how critical it was for people to speak up about their losses and sufferings during World War II and to voice their demands and how vital it was for the United States government to apologize and pay direct monetary reparations to each person. Japanese Americans have this important legacy of standing up for justice and winning against many odds. We were not deterred by statements that “this happened too long ago” or “there is not enough money for redress.” We fought against and continue to fight against the view that the camps were justified then and have protested the use of camps for immigrants and families detained here in the US.

So why have we not fully supported the “comfort women” when our own history and principles would seem to make support so clear? I see two obstacles: the influence of the Japanese government in our community and our own racism and sexism towards Korean/Asian women. It is time for Japanese Americans to assert our own identity and principles distinct and separate from Japan. As Japanese Americans, we can either look to our own history of standing up for justice and building solidarity with others here and in other countries for guidance or we can allow ourselves to be accomplices of a country that refuses to look at its past crimes against women and the peoples of Asia, and is sadly on a path destined to repeat them.