

Friends of 'Comfort Women'

ANNA SONG, FRIENDS OF 'COMFORT WOMEN' IN AUSTRALIA,
INTERVIEWED BY HALEY CLARK, NOVEMBER 2006.

1. Who are the 'comfort women' that Friends of 'Comfort Women' in Australia (FCWA) aims to service, and how is FCWA going about this?

'Comfort women' is the euphemistic term used to describe the estimated 200,000 women who were forced and trafficked into military sexual slavery by the Japanese government during World War II. There are victims and survivors of the 'comfort women' system all over the Asia-Pacific region, including North and South Korea, China, Taiwan, Philippines, Indonesia, East Timor, Papua New Guinea and Australia.

Friends of 'Comfort Women' in Australia (FCWA) is a group established to mobilise supporters in Australia in the spirit of friendship to bring justice to 'comfort women'. We do this by demanding a formal apology, and that legal responsibility is taken, reparation is made and the correct teaching of history takes place regarding the 'comfort women' system during World War II by the Japanese government. We hold peaceful demonstrations and gatherings outside Japanese embassies and consulates, as well as utilising Australia's democratic political system to speak out against the Japanese government's continued denial of responsibility. While doing so, we spread the message of peace and ending human rights violation against women during war.

2. What are some of the specific issues faced by this group of women and their families?

For most of these women, even after 60 years, they still feel a sense of shame and are keeping silent about this issue, and thus are dealing with the ongoing trauma alone. At the time of their human rights abuse, no counselling or support was provided for them to overcome the pains of their experiences. Thus, many still suffer daily from nightmares and fear as a result of the sexual slavery they had to endure.

Furthermore, many former 'comfort women' were never able to marry and have children because of the abuse they suffered. As a result, many are without the company of husbands or children and experience financial and emotional vulnerability as well as loneliness in their old age.

Many surviving 'comfort women' also suffer from health failures directly related to sexually transmitted disease and the unhygienic environments they were forced to live in while being used as military sex slaves. Survivors also suffer ill health from the violence and torture they were subjected to during this time. For example, the Korean 'comfort woman' survivor who campaigned in Australia in 2006, Jang Jeom Dol, has bad hearing and suffers migraines when travelling on airplanes due to her being beaten on the face by Japanese soldiers.

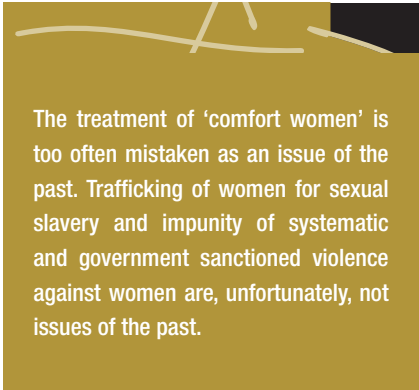
3. What led to the establishment of FCWA?

In August 2006, a Korean 'comfort woman' survivor, Jang Jeom Dol, and Secretary General Yoon Mee Hyang of the Korean Council for Japanese Military's 'Comfort Women' (formally known as the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan) were invited as speakers at Amnesty International Australia's (AIA) campaign, Stop Violence Against Women. From the powerful testimonies of 'Grandma Jang' and the rich and insightful activism experience of Secretary General Yoon, supporters of the campaign gained a wealth of knowledge on the issue and were inspired to begin

action in Australia. Also, at the last forum of the AIA's campaign in Sydney, the Korean–Australian community showed active support for ongoing campaigning on this issue.

4. Why is there a need for FCWA?

The treatment of 'comfort women' is too often mistaken as an issue of the past. Trafficking of women for sexual slavery and impunity of systematic and government sanctioned violence against women are, unfortunately, not issues of the past. During the AIA campaign, we heard from an East Timorese health worker whose aunty is a former 'comfort woman'. Through her experience, we learnt that for



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Timorese women, violence from the military did not end with the Japanese. All too soon after World War II, Timorese women once again were subjected to systematic sexual violence by the military.

The repetition of such a painful history of human rights violations is what motivated Australian 'comfort woman' survivor Jan Ruff O'Herne to speak out about her past, having kept silent for over 50 years. When rape was used as a weapon of war on women in Bosnia and other republics of the former Yugoslavia, Grandma Jang saw that atrocities against women during wars were continuing. Like Jan, FCWA is committed to seeing a non-repetition of such injustice against women

during war and to break the cycle of forgetting through the impunity of human rights violations against women. As such, it is not only important to support Australian women such as Jan in their activism for justice, but to protect the human rights of these Australian citizens through the Australian democratic system and to utilise Australia's place within the international community to bring justice for 'comfort women'.

FCWA is also committed to becoming part of an international solidarity movement for 'comfort women' and making the Japanese government accountable. We believe in the power of a global voice for justice and a global commitment to uphold human rights. The surviving 'comfort women' are already realising this; with FCWA the Japanese government have a new chance, another chance to commit to human rights and justice in spirit of friendship.

5. What are the main values, aims and objectives of FCWA?

So far, our objectives are as below. However, in continued collaboration with survivors, their families and NGOs globally, we hope to widen the objectives of FCWA.

Objectives

Empowering Australian activists and supporters, or those in Australia, in order to:

- establish a friendship and support network;
- put pressure on the Japanese government, in the spirit of friendship, starting from a Wednesday demonstration on International Women's Day in March 2007; and
- actively participate in a global solidarity movement with the focus of mobilising support for the cause of 'comfort women' in English-speaking communities and media outlets.

6. You have been touring overseas with Amnesty International Australia. What have been some of the main goals and achievements of this recent campaigning?


'Comfort women' survivors have been actively campaigning in Japan, Europe and the USA for more than a decade. But in August 2006, for the first time, AIA campaigned on the 'comfort women' issue in Australia, with a national speaking tour to Adelaide, Hobart, Melbourne and Sydney. The tour started with a meaningful meeting between two survivors: Grandma Jang from Korea and Jan Ruff O'Herne

from Australia. At Jan's home, the two women (without a common language) shared so much of their pain, strength and friendship. Bringing these two women together was a campaign achievement in itself, as it contributed so much to their healing process, as well as solidifying the reasons behind our campaign.

On Wednesday, 9 August 2006, the campaign joined dozens of cities around the world for the Global Day of Action to Bring Justice to 'Comfort Women'. In Melbourne, we held a photographic exhibition as well as an 'Afternoon Tea with a Human Rights Survivor' in a personalised and intimate setting with AIA members in high schools. The high school students learned about human rights and history from the real life experiences of Grandma Jang and her testimony. This afternoon tea with Grandma Jang inspired the students to be defenders of human rights, because they learnt about the true value of upholding them. Throughout the tour, there was keen interest from Australian local media and the Korean–Australian community media, with over a dozen interviews and five front-page newspaper articles.

As a result of the AIA campaign, we were able to draw together already existing supporters to organise the Wednesday Demonstration in Australia for International Women's Day 2007, in front of the Japanese Consulate in Sydney. In all four cities that the tour visited, supporters with a keen awareness of human rights were able to connect the 'comfort women' issue with their pre-existing knowledge.

And, of course, one of the most noteworthy achievements of this campaign was the establishment of FCWA. Through the AIA campaign, we were able to mobilise Australian supporters whom we hope will initiate a widespread grassroots movement in the English-speaking world in order to bring justice for 'comfort women'.



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7. What are some of the future plans and activities for FCWA?

Our first activity planned is the Wednesday Demonstration for International Women's Day in front of the Japanese Consulate in Sydney. After this initial demonstration we are planning to hold monthly Wednesday Demonstrations in order to show solidarity and build up support in Australia for this issue.

By doing this, we are hoping to emulate the Wednesday Demonstrations outside the Japanese Embassy in Korea, where it has become the longest consecutive weekly demonstration in the world. Children, students, nuns, adults and survivors from all over the world come together to demand justice and to learn about the meaning of human rights, particularly the government's responsibility to abide by human rights and the grassroots movement's commitment to uphold it.

8. How can people assist and/or become involved in FCWA?

I would recommend that first people get to know about the 'comfort women' issue. There is now a wealth of information out there, thanks to the brave survivors who have shared their stories with us. For instance, Australian survivor Jan Ruff O'Herne has a book entitled *50 years of silence*, and her son-in-law has made a documentary of the same title.

Amnesty International's comprehensive report, *Still waiting after 60 years: Justice for survivors of Japan's military sexual slavery system*, was published in October 2006.

A copy of the report, *Still waiting after 60 years: Justice for survivors of Japan's military sexual slavery system*, is available on the Amnesty International website at: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA220122005>. ACSSA reviewed the report in *Aware 11*, available online at: www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/pubs/newsletter/n11.html

A documentary by Dai Sil Kim-Gibson, *Silence broken: Korean comfort women*, with English subtitles, is available on VHS. See www.twotigers.org/silence/silencefilm.asp for more information about the film.

Currently we are also supporting the Korean Council's fundraising to build a War, Women and Human Rights Museum in Seoul, Korea.

Post-interview update regarding the activities of Friends of 'Comfort Women' in Australia

On Wednesday, 7 March 2007, around 60 people, including three survivors of the 'comfort women' system, gathered in protest outside the Japanese Consulate in Martin Place, Sydney, for the Wednesday Demonstration. The protest included speeches and the presentation of a petition and letter of appeal to a Japanese Consulate representative. To date, there has been no formal apology. The demonstration received wide media attention.

The invitation to join FCWA is open to anyone who is ready to demand justice for 'comfort women' in Australia. Subscriptions to our newsletter may be made by emailing fcw_australia@hotmail.com. Further information on FCWA can be found on their website: www.fcwa.org.au

ACSSA's Promising Practice Database

Many readers would be familiar with the ACSSA Good Practice Database, the online database of Australian sexual assault projects and services. This has been a popular resource, recording nearly 30,000 visits during 2006, and we hope this will continue to be a useful source of information.

As a 'work in progress', we are always thinking about how to improve the database. We are introducing a few minor changes to make things easier for those who are accessing the database, as well as for those who would like their work to be included.

Firstly, the database will now be called a 'Promising Practice Database'. This reflects the fact that ACSSA simply does not have the capacity to conduct a thorough evaluation of every project. To use the term 'good practice' suggested that the projects had been independently evaluated as meeting a particular set of standards, and this was not the case. While there is a set of criteria that projects respond to, these are more for the purpose of description rather than evaluation.

Secondly, we are working with the Web Officer to come up with ways to make the database more searchable, to make it easier for you to find what you are looking for! You might notice some changes to the way the database is organised when you visit over the coming months.

Lastly, we tried to make the submission process smoother. This will always be a challenging part of the process, as we try to balance the time constraints faced by workers in the field, with the need to get enough information about the projects to make the database as comprehensive as possible. We have made some small changes to the submission form, which we hope will make things clearer. Please be assured that all existing entries will remain online—there is no need to complete a new form for projects already in the database.

People who want to submit a project for the database have two options:

- download and return the completed submission form to ACSSA; or
- contact ACSSA and arrange for someone to go through the form with you over the phone.

We are always open to your suggestions about how the database could be improved and would be happy to hear from you. Visit www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/ppdb/promisingpractice.html