

# mOVING fORWARD tOGETHER

*Nancy Pearson Arcellana, Research Program manager of Isis International-Manila, had an opportunity to interview Heisoo Shin in a stolen moment during the proceedings of the 41st Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) at the United Nations in New York. Ms. Shin is a long-time feminist activist. She is a full-time professor of sociology, mother of two, wife of a civil movement activist, and NGO activist herself involved in three NGOs working on issues of violence against women: as president of the Korea Women's Hotline, chairperson of the International Relations Committee of the Korea Women's Associations United; and member of the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan—a coalition of 35 organizations. In this interview, Shin discussed her views and experiences in the anti-dictatorship movement and the women's movement in Korea.*

**Nancy Arcellana: Has the women's movement in Korea been an integral part of the revolutionary struggle?**

Heisoo Shin: As you might know, Korea suffered under the dictatorship for a very long time, especially since 1960-61 when there was a military coup, until 1987. But even before that, there were nearly 40 years of dictatorship after liberation from Japan. Korea had a very strong democratization movement against the dictatorship for a long time including the student movement, the civil movement and the women's movement. Especially since 1974 when conscientized women began to form groups. And naturally, they participated in the struggle for democratization. In 1980, after the massacre in Kwangju (Chun Doo-Hwan was president), more feminist and democratic women's organizations were formed with women participating in demonstrations, organizing and trying to form various movements for women's survival. In 1986, women mobilized for the fight against sexual torture of a woman leader who was engaged in the labor movement.

**Q: Was that the first time that sexual torture of women was disclosed?**

A: There were other cases of sexual harassment. For example, women students being questioned by the police after

demonstrations were harassed when they went to the bathroom. The students said their breasts were fondled, that sort of thing. That was in 1984 as I remember but that didn't develop into a mass campaign. But in 1986 this happened in the case of sexual torture inflicted upon Kwon In Sook. Ms. Kwon was jailed and interrogated by the Korean Central Intelligence Agency to pressure her to reveal the names of other labor movement leaders who were in hiding. She was told that if she didn't reveal the names she would be raped. She was forced to take off her pants and other humiliating things—a very threatening experience. She revealed this publicly so there was national support by the women's movement. More than 100 lawyers were mobilized to assist her. Ms. Kwon had quit the University to devote more time to the labor movement. In Korea, university students are highly regarded so the policemen were put on trial. This case was very well known and became a big blow to the dictatorship. In addition, women's groups formed a coalition with women workers to fight for economic survival. These were the kind of issues which gave rise to united movement efforts. As a natural result of those efforts, the Korea Women's Associations United was formed in 1987.

**Q: Within the anti-dictatorship movement, was the analysis of the situation done mostly by men and in the context of Marxist theory, class struggle at that time? Was the issue of patriarchy ever discussed or dealt with?**

**A:** There were conflicts within the women's movement. In 1983, this more militant, class-oriented analysis movement was formed by a faction of younger women... with no real distinction from the men's movement. The older women, my generation at that time, were somewhat different, more patriarchy-oriented in analysis in addition to class analysis. There were arguments as to which one is correct: Marxist feminism, socialist feminism. Feminism was caught in this

feminist tendency among the young women, still, what they could do in terms of actual work might not be Marxist feminist because of the limitations of our society. This is true for the movement itself. Among the more feminist democratic organizations, there's not really a hierarchical barrier. I think that's the main difference between the old more pro-government type organizations.

In Korea, women's organizations can be classified into three different groups:

First, the member organizations of the National Council of Women of Korea. It has member organizations which can be called women's activity organizations rather than women's movement. For example, they are professional as-



The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan

Survivors and Korean women have protested every Wednesday in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, South Korea since 8 January 1992

fight between the two. Then these more socialist feminist oriented, senior members of the movement were expelled by the younger ones. The older ones later formed an organization after 1987 when we toppled the military dictatorship. Nowadays, it is more geared to socialist feminism. There are still many elements of liberal feminism because we are still engaged with legal reforms and all kinds of reforms are going on. You really can't tell whether one organization is totally Marxist feminist with the overlapping issues and conflicts in theoretical orientation, etc. entering in. However, even though you had that Marxist

sociations like the Association of Women Beauticians, Nurses Association or the Association of Women Dietitians. They tend to be more high society or according to their professions.

Second, organizations that belong to Korea-Women's Associations United which include the Association of Women Workers, Association of Women Farmers, Korea Women's Hotline, Society for Democratic Women, as well as feminist organizations—organizations which are more non-hierarchical and working for overall democratic change of Korean society compared to the others. The leaders of

the other organizations have long-time presidents... in some organizations, if you become president you may remain president for 20 or 30 years.

There is also a third category of organizations which don't belong to either of the other two. For example, the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and the Korea League of Women Voters which think they are bigger and don't want to be identified with the other two.

**Q: Do they see themselves as being politically neutral?**

A: That depends. All these organizations would see themselves as non-partisan. The YWCA was initially a member of the National Council of Women of Korea but later separated from it. These three big groupings would be a good guideline for understanding where a certain organization belongs. The organizations which are members of the Korea Women's Associations United have a tradition of fighting against dictatorship and for democratization while we were under dictatorship. They are viewed by government and the general public as very strong, somewhat political and anti-government. There's still that kind of atmosphere although we are now cooperating with the government...trying to work for transformation from within, as well as outside, after the fall of the military dictatorship in 1987 and especially after 1992 when the present president, Kim Young-Sam was inaugurated. I, myself, am on various committees of the government. ...Although President Kim Young-Sam is not doing as much as we expected of him.

**Q: In terms of the women's movement itself, did they see the need to have a separate organization for women, as opposed to staying within the anti-dictatorship movement structures with the men? And if so, why?**

A: Yes, sure, like the necessity for a separate women's movement in any part of the world. When you work with men, it's always men who dominate the organization—in terms of leadership, in terms of the direction of the movement. From the beginning, in the mid-'70s, when women got together and formed their own groups, there was a clear understanding that we needed a women's movement, separate organizations, although we cooperate with men in terms of the general struggle. I remember there were debates like which one is first, democratization or our own liberation? I also remember that the conclusion at the time was that they should go together, hand-in-hand, neither one the priority.

For those more Marxist oriented younger women, I think in the beginning they clearly saw the need to have a united front with men. There was more—how can I say...I might be wrong.. but I think their priority was clearly the struggle against the dictatorship first.

There were continued debates on how much we should cooperate with men, how much we should participate and what should be the relationship between the general move-

ment and the women's movement.

Over the years, our experience has been that although we participate and cooperate with the general movement which has been led by men, when we need men, they don't participate in our meetings, demonstrations, etc.

In our movement, we always put some effort in the unified movement or movement in solidarity with the general movement, which naturally means the movement led by men. We allocate time, energy and sometimes money participating in that. But when women's organizations have separate occasions which advocate women's causes—discrimination, women's liberation issues—men do not take us in that same sense. So we see that not many men come to our mass meetings. Our experience was not that happy and we had to draw the line and ask ourselves how much we should go together with the men's movement.

During the '70s, Korea had a very strong women workers movement. This was when workers were not allowed to have collective activism. No labor unions were allowed except for the co-opted ones, management unions. When the workers had strikes or demonstrations they were beaten up by the police, thugs or gangs employed by the companies. During this time, Korea had a few labor unions which were very strong and led by women. These leaders later formed a separate organization for women workers. They clearly saw in their struggle during the '70s and '80s that within the unions there were clear separations and conflicts of interest between male and female members. In addition, the women leaders were even beaten up by the men. These women, however, kept the labor union and remained very strong. They saw the need to form a separate organization because the labor union, as a whole, did not reflect women worker's interests. This was the same for farmers' organizations.

Now, another organization of disabled people formed a women's group. In 1994, when we were preparing for Beijing, I encouraged them to form a group as women and participate in Beijing. Only one disabled person in a wheelchair was able to go to Beijing. I could predict then that in two years time this group would be a separate organization. This is because the male-dominated organization of disabled people cannot really work for the interests of these disabled women. I think the tendency is that although you work together and in the beginning you might work within the organizational framework of your group, later as you grow you better separate yourselves from the men's organization in order to properly work for your own welfare needs.

**Q: Do you see that in terms of a necessary evolutionary process for women to develop their own leadership skills, empowerment in that sense, and setting their own direction of where they're going?**

A: Not only the leadership skills but also in terms of finances. For example, before this separate group of disabled

women was formed, most of the finances of the organization were spent for the general improvement of disabled people. In general, not particularly men, but when they work for the improvement of the lives of disabled people that naturally means more emphasis on men. Such as employment, quotas for the corporations, it's disabled men rather than disabled women who are employed. Money is important in the sense that though women members of a certain organization have the consciousness that this organization lacks intention or consciousness to balance men and women's interests reflected in that organization, still, if you don't have the money to be independent it's not possible to move forward.

**Q: In terms of the discussions here at the CSW, there's the issue of mainstreaming gender. Our history in women's movements has tended to show the struggle to establish our own organizations in addition to the organizations with both men and women. Now they're asking us to mainstream and in a sense, that means coming back together. What's your sense of that?**

A: I think there are ways of doing that as shown by our Korean experience. We started to include men in our organization two years ago. Korea Women's Hotline initiated that—I think I can say that. I saw the need to include men in order to have more influence. Within Korea Women's Hotline, we created a group of lawyers who provided counseling for the victims of domestic violence. We operated that for some years and two years ago, we grouped them with the official name of Lawyers for Women's Peace. There was an inauguration or starting event which was advertised in the media. We did that intentionally because we need men/male lawyers who can advance women's interests in defending the victim's rights. In the Seoul area, that group is half women and half men lawyers but there are some cities with no women lawyers at all, they're all men. Organizationally, they are officially included and invited to whatever events we have. That's one tendency.

Another, although it's not working actively, is a men's group working for gender equality. It's totally men. We started with very influential male leaders such as civil movement leaders, including my husband, a movie director, religious leaders, etc. We started with 30 men. We need to expand. There are young men, in their 20s and 30s who would be interested in that.

Yet another tendency is a group of men and women who work for justice through the courts. They assist the victims of gender violence. When there is a trial, they escort the victim, monitor whether the judge is discriminatory or not, that kind of thing. We educated these rather young people in their 20s or early 30s, including some who are law students. We started this because I think now the women's movement has reached the stage where we feel that we have made a safe space, safe enough that we can

include men. So far, we have tried so much to make our own space so we would not be invaded, intruded upon by men or dominated by men. I think we have come so far, so we are now trying to include men, not all men, but progressive men who understand at least with their brain or heart. They may not be feminist in everyday life but at least they know they should cooperate with the women's movement. That's another tendency created in the women's movement. I'm an advocate of that.

Still another tendency is the way to cooperate with the men's movement or men-led civil movement. In Korea two or three years ago, a coalition of civil movement organizations was formed. It's a loose network but with its own structure. Korea Women's Hotline decided to join that precisely because we realize the need for men's support in advancing our own interests. Although we are very busy and really don't have enough time to spare, we still try to go to the meetings and raise women's perspectives or women's issues there. When important issues of civil society are being discussed, women issues are guaranteed to be included. I think we need to expand that kind of effort. At least the leaders of the Korean civil movement, I mean the male leaders, know that women's issues are very important as well as empowerment issues overall. At least they pretend that it's on their agenda.

**Q: Are you getting good support?**

A: Good support yes, but when we have a march or demonstration or a public event not many come. But still they try to send their members. When we launched a national campaign for legislation against sexual violence these men's organizations were included. Last year, we also launched a nation-wide campaign for domestic legislation. It's not over yet, it's pending in the national assembly. Within the Korea Women's Associations United, we formed a special committee for legislation against domestic violence and I'm the chairperson of that committee. In order to expand it and to include male organizations, we formed another outside coalition, the National Headquarters for Legislation Against Domestic Violence. This also includes other women's organizations which are outside Korea Women's Associations United, such as the Korean League of Women Voters, and important men's organizations such as the Citizens Coalition for Economic Justice and the Coalition of the Environmental Movement. These are two major and influential organizations in Korea. This National Headquarters includes 22 national organizations, both men and women's organizations. The tendency in the Korean civil movement is that you cooperate with other movements and you tend to form coalitions with other organizations on whatever issue you are advocating. This also means you're very busy!

**Q: From your own experience and looking at movements today, do women need to form their own parts**



The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan

In Beijing, women from victimized countries had a demonstration to demand for the Japanese Government's legal responsibility.

**within those movements for women's issues to make progress?**

A: Yes, I agree with that because you need a space of your own to strategize, to bring issues up. I think that's the peculiarity of the women's movement, you need your own space. At the same time, you need to mainstream. For example, it's like the Women's Ministry within the government. We have our own ministry of political affairs which is the Women's Ministry. It's also like the Commission on the Status of Women in the United Nations. You must have your own organizational base where you discuss women's issues only, but at the same time mainstreaming is essential. Women's issues should be discussed at the Commission on Human Rights and other Commissions. That means double burden, with mechanisms overlapping or conflicting sometimes.

**Q: Do you have any last words of wisdom to impart to people struggling in other feminist movements in other countries?**

A: What can I say? I think you need to go through stages of development to feel secure, to develop your own consciousness and create enough space for your organization or women's movement.

These days, I also think you cannot stress enough the necessity to build good partnerships with men. You need to find your friends among men, not all men. But you need

to find good men who can be supportive.

I also think you need to keep on with the struggle within your own family, with your own loved ones. I myself had conflicts with my husband, especially when we were in the United States for study. I had nobody to help. I had to juggle five, six roles—as student, mother, activist, wife, church member and teaching assistant. (I was lecturing American students.) Still, I know that for the rest of my life, I will not give up trying to transform my husband so that he will put the women's agenda as one of the main priorities of his activism—which it is not now. I will keep pushing him, in family matters as well as official activism. I think it's important for women not to give up. Sometimes we give up because it's not easy to keep struggling. There's a famous episode that I used to tell people. It took me four years to train my husband to put his socks into the dirty clothes hamper. I once wrote a letter demanding divorce if he didn't do half of the housework and child rearing. Many times I would write out a schedule for both him and me sharing the tasks. I was able to do that because he is not an authoritarian person. Since we share a common vision for social change it was easier than for other couples. Even though there are men involved in the movement who batter their wives, I would still advise young people to find their spouses among movement people. Then, you share your dreams and it's easier. ☺