

Interview with Ms. Neria Sancho, former Representative of the LILA-Pilipina

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Queen of Beauty becomes An Activist of Human Rights

Wada: Thank you for joining us for our oral history project of the Asian Women's Fund. We highly appreciate your contribution to the cause of Filipina victims. First of all, let me ask you about your short biography or your career in the movement.

Nelia: I am born in 1951. I started studying in the University of the Philippines in 1967. I took up a course, Mass Communications major in Journalism, but along the way I had to take a leave of absence, because I won an international beauty contest in Australia, representing the Philippines. For one year, in 1970-71, I reigned as Queen of the Pacific; I traveled around Asia.

In 1972, I went back to the university. During that year, in September, martial rule was imposed and again I could not continue and finish my studies. I joined the anti dictatorship movement that protested against martial rule in the country and worked to promote human rights of those victims of martial rule such as the political detainees and their children and families. I was imprisoned without charges in 1976. I was released from political detention in 1978. After that, I got involved with the social and civil society movement thru the people's organizations and NGOs. Because of my long involvement with political and human rights activism, I just finished my college. In fact, only three years ago. I did it in a special program at Ateneo de Davao University and I finally was given a bachelor's degree in Mass Communication. In 2004, I took up a master's course in humanities with major in Women's Studies.

Wada: May I ask you about your activities?

Nelia: My activities, yes. In 1991 I was selected as the regional coordinator of the Asian Women Human Rights' Council. It's an international NGO based in the Asia Pacific and our first office was in Manila, and they appointed me as head of the office and through that work we organized several programs for women's human rights. One of them was on trafficking of women, the other is on violence against women, and then the comfort women issue. Support for the cause of human rights of Filipina comfort women and other Asian women came up in 1991 during our meeting in Seoul, Korea when Kim Hak Sun came out.

And then in the Philippines in 1992, Lola Rosa Henson, a Filipina survivor of wartime Japanese sex slavery, came out as a result of our radio hotline work. She was able to

listen to us on the radio and contacted us afterwards.

Radio Hotline Work and Lora Rosa Henson

Matsuda: So you were working through radio.

Nelia: Yes. I was being interviewed on the radio on the topic of Japanese wartime military sexual slavery experiences in Asia, and she (Lola Rosa) was listening. She revealed to me later that she was shocked at the very first time she heard me speak about the comfort women issue. After a while, she decided to approach us wishing to be identified as a comfort woman, a former sex slave of the Japanese army in World War II.

Matsuda: How many times or how often did you continue this radio announcement?

Nelia: I did it twice.

Matsuda: You did it twice and then Lola Rosa contacted you for the second or first time?

Nelia : She listened twice because it was on "This Is Our Age" and that was her regular listening radio station program. The first program, the first time she listened she didn't contact us because she was shocked to hear about the issue, and then the second time she went to contact the radio announcer or interviewer, and then the radio announcer put her in touch with us.

Matsuda: How long was the program? Was it quite lengthy program?

Nelia: Yes, it was quite, one hour. I think the radio announcer was Daqui Paredes.

Wada: What was your impression of Ms. Rosa Henson? Who was she?

Nelia: Rosa Henson? She has a very good memory. That's what we noticed right away. She told many details and then we immediately went to what was called her comfort station, where the Japanese army soldiers put her in Pampanga, in the city of Angeles; and she identified the house. It was a mansion, the old house of an erstwhile prominent and rich family in Angeles, Pampanga, and now it's occupied by the central bank and the company said it was used as a former garrison during World War II.

When I came to visit there, together with the Japanese volunteer lawyers, the company renting the place immediately confirmed the historical fact of the mansion house being used as quarters by Japanese forces.

And then, of course, Rosa Henson came out. She was on television and radio, in newspapers and then many other former sex slaves and rape victims of the Japanese army came out to contact her.

The Comfort Stations

Wada: First you came to know about comfort women's issue was in Seoul?

Nelia: Yes.

Wada: And this comfort women's system varied in character by time and places. At the one end, we saw commercial prostitution and at the other, we saw true sex slavery. In Korea many young women were hired by business managers, who of course utilized official forces or deceived them. In the Philippines, we heard, many victims were totally violated by Japanese military. They were raped and confined in one building, and were obliged to lead such life for a certain period. Of course there were accounts of some victims who were hired to work in brothels for military in the cities.

Nelia: Yes, we also encountered such a variety of individual cases in our research. I'm a researcher too. Even when we had that radio program and we had the advocacy, I also did some research personally and interviewed a number of the comfort women victims; starting from the first survivor, Lola Rosa. Our research work through the Asian Women Human Rights Council, a NGO, was started in 1992. Since then, we now have three groups of survivors. The first group is LILA-Pilipina. We formed them in May, 1994. When they came out. in 1992, the Task Force on Filipino Comfort Women was set up by my Ni~U, t;ne Asian Women Human Rights Council (AWHRC). We interviewed from 1992 around seventy women. In 1994, we organized them as the LILA-Pilipina group and the nature, of the documentation we had from this first group was varied because then we were searching everywhere. So there was one set of group of young Filipinas, who were abducted then taken by force to the special place, as they call, garrison, and the garrisons range. from the Japanese forces use of a municipal hall, a schoolhouse, a hospital, to the big houses of rich people which were taken over by the Japanese army, and officers of the military would often be the ones to occupy the mansion houses. And then, we documented a case where a girl was abducted but taken into a commercial sexual area. Our group of researchers categorized her case, in our documentation, as a sex slave because the nature of her being taken to the prostitution house was not by her voluntary will but by force, thru abduction. In her story, she told that she was first taken to a garrison and then later transferred to a commercial sexual place. This is the case of Lydia. She's listed in the first group of survivors.

The second group of survivors formed in 1997 was thru Ms. Indai, known as the Malaya Lolos. Well, mostly these are the women based in Candaba, and I think their stories have come out in a book publication. The Malaya Lolos case is often referred to as a case of mass rape or sexual violence by the military. In the NGO documentation, it was stated that the girls and women who all lived in one village were taken co one house where the Japanese military raped them there; I think only for one day or so.

And then the third group of survivors, organized in the year 2000, are called the Lolos Kampanyera. The long name is Lolos Para Sa Kapayapaan at Kumpensasyon which means "Grandmothers for Peace and Compensation", or for their short name, Lolos Kampanyera.

And the members of this group are concentrated in Arayat, Pampanga and in Roxas City, Capiz Province, and then some individuals in Pangasinan, San Fernando, Pampanga and Aklan, and some other places. The most number are from Arayat, Pampanga and from Roxas City. About thirty women compose the Arayat chapter or group, and the other chapter consists of more than fifty in Roxas City. Right now, for purposes of a book publication project, I will be taking only some selected narratives to serve as samples because there are too many stories. Also, I could manage only so much of a certain number of narratives as it is hard to do very thorough interviews, it takes many years, so I think I'll be able to finish around maybe thirty, that could then be published in a book also including the history of the place, Arayat and Capiz.

I have requested a friend and volunteer to take photos of the victims survivors in Arayat and Roxas as well as of the garrison/comfort station sites in Roxas City and Dao municipality, which he did sometime in February 2006. The Lolos Kampanyera members and I are grateful for such voluntary work of this person and many other individuals.

Matsuda: When are you going to publish the book?

Nelia: We hope within this year. I'm still looking for funds for printing, but the research has been done.

How Abduction of Women were made

Wada: Can you explain how abductions of women were made?

Nelia: Abduction of women in the Philippine WW II setting means that the Japanese military would raid villages and then forcibly take women from their homes and bring them to what is called a garrison, which serves as military headquarters of the Japanese forces. The various garrison places in the Philippines are also the comfort station sites.

Wada: I see.

Matsuda: Is there any particular characteristic for the third group of yours? Your explanation is describing the first group. And then the second group is very obvious, mass rape case in one place.

Nelia: Yes... the third group is very much like the first group, except that there would be more concentrations of young women coming from the same general area taken to

the garrison, comfort station site of the province. I refer, for example, to the group of Lolos survivors from Arayat municipality of Pampanga province, and the group of Lolos from Capiz province, particularly from the areas of Dao municipality and Roxas City (during the war, it was then called Capiz, Capiz).

Matsuda: Because you have already interviewed thirty Lolos, so what do you see any characteristics of them?

Nelia: Well, one is that their garrison is very clearly identified. For example, in Arayat, Pampanga it was the central elementary school of Arayat which was turned into a huge garrison and also a comfort station site. When we (the researchers) visited that place, it is recorded and identified by the local authorities as a former military headquarters of the Japanese army. The Lolos survivors who come from different parts of Pampanga were mostly taken there. And the other one is the Capiz Emmanuel Hospital in Roxas City identified as the biggest Japanese military garrison in wartime Capiz, Capiz. It was a hospital run by the Americans which, during the war period, was turned into a military garrison by the Japanese army (at present, Capiz Emmanuel Hospital is still existing and continue to operate as a hospital).

A number of victims in the province of Capiz was also concentrated in a mansion home of a rich family in Dao municipality, known as Donya Baray Mansion. This was recorded or authenticated by the local municipality as a place occupied by the Japanese army.

So the concentration or confinement of many women in certain Japanese military garrisons clearly identified by the research process as also location of so-called "comfort stations" is one characteristic arising from the documentation of Lolos Kampanyera survivors group. Another characteristic of the group is the presence of victims who are sisters or cousins. There's several of them where I think three pairs of sisters/cousins were taken together in the same military comfort station; another case is of victims who were playmates/ friends, you know, the women lived in the same village, they knew each other, were abducted by the Japanese forces together, and so they could witness to each other's experiences.

Matsuda: How about length of confinement?

Nelia: Range of confinement is from one month to eight months. Lola Rosa was, I think, the longest. She described in her book *Comfort Woman; Slave of Destiny* that she was captured several times by the Japanese army and that her total stay, cumulatively, was around three years (although her three years are "broken confinements"). The rest of the survivors would be confined in lesser length of time than Lola Rosa. It must be remembered that the Japanese army occupied the Philippines only for three years,

consequently, the length of confinement cannot be more than that as is the case of the Korean and Chinese "comfort women". It is to be noted as well that the Filipino women victims had the luck to be freed and/or could run away from the Japanese army headquarters/garrisons during occasions of guerrilla attacks at the garrison sites. For example, Arayat, Pampanga is one of the centers of a strong anti-Japanese guerilla resistance group called the "Hukbalahap". So most of the Lolos have short-term stay in Japanese military stations because when the Hukbalahap come to "raid" the Japanese garrison, the "confined" or "quartered" victims have a chance to get out in the midst of the fighting without getting noticed by the Japanese soldiers who were busy defending or fleeing the headquarters from guerilla assaults.

Matsuda: Otherwise the confinement might be longer? But the longest one is eight months or so?

Nelia: Yes. The same circumstance characterized the victims quartered at the Capiz Emmanuel Hospital in Roxas City, Capiz. There were regular or frequent raids from the anti-Japanese resistance guerillas based then in Panay Island and covered the Capiz area.

Is It Possible to Distinguish Rape Victims from Your Comfort Women

Wada: Allow me to return to the victims. You pick up those special cases, but generally there are many rape cases by Japanese military. How do you differentiate between them?

Nelia: Those that approach us to be recorded in our documentation included rape victims. Rape victims in the sense that they were also brutally sexually violated but they were not brought to the garrison or the comfort station site.

Wada: I see.

Nelia: Even as more and more rape victims also approached us, eventually, because our resources were limited, we focused our time and energies more on those who were brought and confined at Japanese army garrisons which served as "comfort stations". However, we also recorded the names of the rape victims who approached us for help in documentation. We thought that when necessary, and if we had the resources, we could also start to do our research work on their cases when the appropriate time came. Except for some cases at the Lila Pilipina, and the mass rape case of the Malaya Lolos, which was fully documented, we did not have other systematic work done on rape and sexual violence of individual women during the war.

Wada: Do you think the building is a very important?

Matsuda: He is asking, the garrison, whether it is made out of the school or big house

or whatever, is important differentiation between the rape cases.

Nelia: That's right, the forced confinement in a Japanese military station or the general headquarters building is important to point out. It reflects the grave responsibility of the Japanese imperial army for the commission of organized wartime sexual slavery of women and young girls. However, if you refer to cases or incidents of sexual violence such as rape or killings of individual at the village done by Japanese soldiers which occurred outside of the building headquarters of the Japanese army, we must point out, as well the principle that any crime against women/humanity in times of war must not be tolerated, and should be punished as well as compensated. The only reason we are unable to document all the sexual violence cases of the Japanese imperial army is our limited capacity and resources to do our research work in a massive and systematic way. Also, it is the responsibility of the Japanese government to undertake them thorough documentation to uncover the truth of the war crime of military sexual slavery and violence done on women and young girls during World War II.

Matsuda: Many times we discuss about rape cases and sometimes it was more vulnerable than those who were brought to the garrison because at least they were placed under the shelter but the other ones on the street or fields.

Nelia: Sometimes killed. I agree that all cases of wartime violence against women, children and civilians should be brought out into the open.

The Activities of LILA Pilipina

Matsuda: So how did you begin your activity toward comfort women?

Nelia: In 1992, Lola Rosy came out as the first survivor who broke her silence, and after her, several more Lolas followed. Through my work with the NGO, the Asian Women Human Rights Council (AWHRC), I coordinated the setting up of the Task Force on Filipino Comfort Women as a program which began the research and interview work of the Filipino victims. The Lolas were only later (in 1994) organized as a survivors group known as LILA-Pilipina.

What the Task Force basically did was really just documentation of the stories as told by the Lolas survivors. Afterwards, my colleagues and I became busy, with the preparations for the filing of a court case at the Tokyo District Court with the first batch of plaintiffs in April 1993 and then a second batch in September 1993. As a result, the victim plaintiffs started meeting together, became more like a group, and we saw that they were ready to have an organization, so in May 1994, LILA Pilipina Lolas was organized as the first "comfort women" victims group . The organization was later

registered with the SEC of the Philippine government as a non stock, non-profit NGO with the official name "Liga ng Lolang Pilipina" or LILA Pilipina. It also applied and was granted in late 1990s by the ECOSOC as an NGO with Observer Consultative Status in the United Nations.

Matsuda: So you filed a case to the Tokyo District Court and then how many plaintiffs?

Nelia: The first group of plaintiffs was 18.

Matsuda: Forty seven or eight altogether?

Nelia: Yes. Eighteen plaintiffs filed in April 1993 and the second batch, who numbered twenty eight, filed in September 1993. After which, the victims organized themselves in May 1994 as the LILA-Pilipina Lolos.

Wada: The group is Lolos only?

Nelia: Yes, it was composed of victims Lolos only. There were also individuals who came as advocates for justice, as friends and family members of the "comfort women" Lolos. We came to support them in various ways. I served as their coordinator who come from an NGO called the Asian Women Human Rights' Council. The AWHRC program staff and myself organized the victims' monthly meetings, conducted interviews, and also home visits, celebrate their birthdays, you know, have regular gatherings.

Lola Rosa Henson

Wada: Lola Rosa served as a representative of this group?

Nelia: She was a member.

Wada: Only a member, not a representative, not chairperson?

Nelia: No, not chairperson, but she occupied a special place because she was the first survivor so even though she's not a leader as such, she was a special person and served as a symbol of courage for all the Filipino "comfort women" victims.

Arima: How do you think about the Lola Rosa, your impression?

Nelia: Lola Rosa, she is a survivor who has her own mind, you know? She makes her own decision. So I have respected her. She knows what she wants.

Wada: How did her decision exert influence upon your decision? Rosa Henson's decision exerted?

Nelia: I think her decision gave me the impression, or the insight, that we really should respect the survivors first, whatever their decision is, whether we accept or agree with it or not. I also learned many things from her. She was the first survivor and she was immediately drawn into the media and public exposure. But, actually she was not, yet prepared, that's what I found much later, to receive public attention

because she still needed to heal, and she felt very much ashamed of her past experience as a sex slave of the Japanese army. She was stigmatized about being a comfort woman, and she was not able yet to sort that experience out for herself in a healthy self-outlook. That is, she was yet unable to form that world view that would empower her, and enable her to articulate "never mind if I am called a comfort woman, I am the victim not the perpetrator". Not like some other survivors you see and hear speak today. They really were able to see that their dignity is not diminished because they are rape victims. To develop such healthy insight and self- understanding from a victim who experienced violation could only come with time, I supposed. Finding her own self-esteem was not an easy process. Lola Rosa didn't have that much chance for reflection because she was already drawn to the public's attention. I took that as a lesson for myself... I learned that we (who deal with the trauma of the violated women) should not bring the victims immediately to public attention. We have to ensure first of all that they are mentally and emotionally prepared, and we should try to provide as much psychological support as possible, more time for healing sessions, therapy recovery, bonding sessions with other survivors, solidarity building and things like that.

The Attitude of the Japanese Government

Wada: How did you think about the Japanese government's attitude?

Nelia: In 1991, I remember when Kim Hak Sun came out to identify herself as a victim of Japanese military sexual slavery, the Japanese government's official position was still denial. Then in 1992, with researchers from Japan providing written evidences and later with court trials at the Tokyo District Court where more survivors spoke, not only from Korea but from the Philippines, there was more acknowledgment from the Japanese government. Although the compensation issue was argued, but at least the plight and suffering of the "comfort women" victims had been recognized.

This year, in May 2006, we have the Philippines-Japan Compensation Treaty anniversary. Our support movement plan to have some kind of conference to bring out an evaluation about the treaty.

Wada: But at the time Japanese government thought that all problems were solved by this treaty.

Nelia: We opposed that view because the treaty itself really didn't elaborate on the kind of damages there were, you know, and when it comes to crimes against people (humanity), we felt that it had to be more elaborate or articulated. We felt that the treaty with Japan and the Philippines was more according to material damages and

not on effects of the war (on people or victims) such as, sex slavery, mass rape and forced labor. We felt the Treaty should have dealt with these issues and Japan, as a signatory of international humanitarian laws, should incorporate these kinds of incidents (in the context of legal compensation).

Relations with the AWF

Matsuda: What is your own inside story in relation with this issue? I still clearly remembered when you came with Lola Rosa and Attorney Takagi to meet the President of the Asian Women's Fund. That was the kind of breakthrough step for AWF projects in the Philippines. I knew you, and we were contacting unofficially until that time, but it became official when you visited us? The hotel was surrounded by reporters, we have to come from the back of the hotel entrance in order Lola Rosa meets our Board members. Do you have other interpretation of the incident which we don't know at all.

Nelia: It became quite a controversy, my accompanying Lola Rosa to the AWF.

Matsuda: Controversy from Japanese side of the supporter or NGOs? How about the reaction of the Philippine side?

Wada: So first, how did you know about Asian Women's Fund?

Nelia: Asian Women's Fund? Through Attorney Takagi. He was the lawyer for the Filipino comfort women lawsuit in Japan, so we know him and through him, of course the project of the Asian Women's Fund. He introduced the AWF project during a meeting.

Arima: And I visited the Lola's house and meet you and many Lolas in order to introduce our projects.

That was the beginning of 1996.

Nelia: No, '95, I think.

Matsuda: It was 1996, January Ms. Arima visited with Attorney Hayashi to introduce and explain about AWF activities and projects. I wasn't with AWF yet.

Nelia: I guess you're right.

Matsuda: So, what is it, your controversial criticism from the Japanese NGO is one thing which impresses you. What else?

Nelia: Well, because historically our support work for the Filipino comfort women was strong, together with lawyers and then the NGO citizens groups in Japan and in the Philippines. Then, the Asian Women's Fund project came and the victims' lawyers expressed two different opinions

One opinion was Attorney Hayashi who said that it was okay for the Filipino comfort,

women to take the assistance from the Asian Women's Fund because, anyway, it is not national compensation. And so some Lolos believed, because they recognized and had trusted the help of the lawyers.

But then other lawyers and NGO citizens groups from Japan say that it is a project that is very political because it is not "compensation", and yet it could be made to appear so. In that sense, it could be seen or misunderstood by many people, like the Filipino comfort women, and the international community and therefore, the political implications had to be weighed. The AWF issue divided our movement to support the comfort women.

It was really a pity because the support movement should have continued our dialogues and discussions. You know, I have also my own personal opinion, and really I thought that the Japanese government should provide legal compensation to the Filipino comfort women and other victims. That compensation to come from the Japanese government should be directed to each individual victim together with an apology recognizing each victim, not just a general apology (expressed publicly by the Japanese authorities).

But because the comfort women (survivors) have their own (decision-making) mechanisms to make, you know, their own thinking and their own decisions. I also think they have to be respected in whatever capacity they understand what is good for them. I believe that we (the supporters) have to accept it (the survivors' decisions), even if it's different from my or our own opinion/s. So it is in that sense that we (in the support movement) have a little difference.

Matsuda: Right. I understand that was one reason you formed within LILA the group who support those who wanted to apply for the AWF projects?

Nelia: It is supporting their (the survivors') decision, it is not supporting AWF.

Matsuda: Yeah, that's right.

Neria: It was their (the Lolos') decision too, to be assisted in the process of their application. But it didn't mean that we, the supporters, believed that the AWF was a correct response to address the victims' demand for justice and compensation from the Japanese government. That is why we continued our advocacy for legal compensation, even during the process of AWF distribution to some victims, and sustained the collective actions such as demonstrating in front of the Japanese embassy whenever it is possible for the victims and us to do so).

Matsuda: Is that the reason, because of these differences, you left LILA?

Nelia No, no, I didn't leave LILA because of that.

Matsuda You handed over LILA because of your health reason but is there a little

difference of your own opinion about LILA compensation from victims thought and then also there is different opinions among the supporting groups in Japan. It's not a very easy position to continue to be a coordinator and it might affect your health. I just want to know any particular reason you decided to let GABRIELA to take LILA over at that time.

Nelia: Uh huh. My leaving as coordinator of Lila Pilipina was in 1998, and that was done with discussion with my former colleagues from Gabriela and with my agreement that I would go on medical leave. In 2000, I was back with my work on researching on the "comfort women" because of the surfacing of more survivors who were later organized as the third batch of Lolos group who came to be known as the Lolos Kampanyera Para Sa Kumpensasyon at Kapayapaan.

But to go back to the AWF issue. It continued to be debated (in the years 1996-1997) amongst us, the supporters. One idea was to bring both groups of lolos (those who wanted for apply to the AWF, and those who did not apply/or were rejecting the AWF) into the same fold of the Lila Pilipina organization. Lila Pilipina organization itself took the stand of advocating only for state legal compensation for the victims, but since there were lolos who decided to accept the AWF (such as Lola Rosa Henson and others who followed her example), the only way to ensure that their dignity and self-esteem remain intact even as they apply for the Fund was to continue to be with them and to monitor the process. We also continued our education/awareness raising activities amongst the survivors who accepted the Fund to make sure that they understand that accepting the Fund did not solve the issue of compensation.

The second idea was the creation of another, of the second group of Lolos. The rationale being that those survivors who refused or rejected the Fund at that time of the debate should be strengthened by themselves.

Matsuda: That is Malaya Lolos' group?

Nelia: The consequence of that thinking (of creating a second group of Lolos who opposed the Fund and separate them from those who decided to apply for the Fund) divided the Lila organization of survivors. It brought out some of the members of LILA-Pilipina Lolos (in terms of numbers, those who were brought out by my former colleagues to form a separate group were 7 survivors, while all the rest - more than fifty - stayed within the fold of the Lila organization). However, the divisive action destroyed the existing solidarity among the survivors - it pitted one group against the other. To cut the long, and painful story short of how the AWF issue affected the survivors and the movement for redress - the seven (7) Lila Lolos from Metro Manila who were brought out to form the Malaya lolos group eventually came back to the fold

of the Lila Lolos organization. The creation of a second group done by splitting some survivors /members of Lila Pilipina, I believe, was a knee-jerk reaction bred, I guess, by distrust and negative feelings towards the AWF. Later on Malaya Lolos really became a new group of survivors/victims of mass rape from a province in Central Luzon.

And then supporters from Japan were also divided at that time, and I guess it was because the Lila Pilipina position of respecting survivors decision to apply to the AWF was misunderstood as support to the Asian Women's Fund, but I must clarify Lila Pilipina did not support the Asian Women's Fund. The Lila Pilipina organization simply respected the life choices that our survivors have made, whether we (their supporters) are in agreement with them or not. We respected both the choices of the victims - to apply for the AWF, or to refuse the AWF because they opt for legal compensation and an official, individual apology That's the inside story (if you may call it that).

Arima: What I'd like to ask you, you decided to support the Lolos' decision at that time, but other countries, for example, Korea or Taiwan, the supporting group did not make such kind of decision, they were all against the AWF. I myself am wondering, what is the difference between your decision and your activities, and the other countries' activities. What do you think is the difference?

Nelia: I think that there is a difference Between Taiwan, Korea and the Philippines which was the subject of the AWF. Regarding Taiwan and Korea, their governments were supporting the comfort women survivors, they gave the same money that the Japanese government was going to give through the Asian Women's Fund, but in the Philippines our government was not giving any money so we thought our Lolos survivors were more vulnerable to or were more likely to consider a decision to apply to the Asian Women's Fund so in that sense we had a difference in the situation of our respective countries.

And then also our survivors have more difficult personal lives in term of economic enjoyment and health, and the ability to purchase for their medical and health needs was weaker, that's why the AWF became more of an option to LILA-Pilipina survivors.

Matsuda: Maybe the only option, in a way because there was no government money.

Nelia: Yes that's right (although I must say that there were some Lolos who exercised the option not to apply to the AWF despite their poverty-stricken lives). At that time we were, as the support group, really advocating for our own government at least to provide a monthly pension or some financial support but the most that we got as a response were some legislators writing out resolutions proposing a pension or financial

assistance, but these were never passed by the concerned Senate or House Committees.

Wada: But your decision to follow victims' personal will is very important decision judged on standards of democracy elite activists decide this should be done or this should not be done, and subordinate peoples are obeying this decision. Good activists should respect that their own victims consider a very important standard which you exercised. In this case it was a very characteristic standard of action, different from Korea and Taiwan.

Relations with Korean and Taiwanese Movement Groups

Matsuda: But at least Korea and Taiwan there is a choice, that is what you are saying, and when you are in international meetings and so forth, how was the reaction of the supporters in Taiwan and Korea towards your rationalization of the Lolos' decision? Did it make some kind of sense for them or because their government is giving money they have a choice. What was your position in that kind of setting?

Nelia: Well, it was really a very difficult position (for us). Our supporters colleagues in these countries find it hard to understand it was their (the survivors') decision to apply and not our own, you know. But I just came to attend the meetings of the solidarity network even if I sometimes felt that they didn't understand. I felt we had to continue the dialogue because we all come from different settings and varied situations of the survivors. I thought that if they understand our organization's position, it's okay; if they don't, it would be okay also. We have to live and let live; we really have more common visions that we share and goals to achieve for our respective survivors in each of our countries. We have to continue building and expressing solidarity for each other. But eventually I think, you know, some of them later on saw the sense, that the victims have different interests.

Matsuda: Levels or background or something. That's very interesting. And even some of the Japanese supporters understood.

Arima: You said there were some options in Korea or in Taiwan, but when you decided to support the Lolos decision, I think, in Korea and in Taiwan too there was no support from the government. After the AWF begun our activities, then the Korean government and Taiwanese government have some project to support Lolos.

Matsuda: There was some kind of activities towards their own governments to support for their victims or survivors. You did the same thing to the Philippine government, which they don't give, even medical cards at the beginning. Then medical cards were given during the time of Secretary Flavio, or Senator, he gave medical

cards to Lolás.

Wada: Korea and Taiwan government responses were used to politically manipulate victims not to approach to the AWF.

My Frustration

Matsuda: What was the biggest frustration while you are supporting or dealing with us, Japanese supporters, or Japanese government?

Nelia: I think my greatest frustration is more with the Philippine government, because they never gave support to survivors on their own. Take President Arroyo as an example. When she was the vice president candidate before in 1998, she was verbally expressing support for the Filipino comfort women demand for legal compensation so we, in the Lila Pilipina organization- the Lolás and me, campaigned for her election in 1998. But when she became president, she just forgot (or perhaps she simply looked the other way).

Matsuda: That's very interesting.

Nelia: But also when lobbying, which I often do, like going regularly to the Senate and House of Representatives, I join the committee hearings or meetings and give them updates about the comfort women issue and activities. I get happy or appreciative when some of the legislators really filed resolutions for proposals like giving monthly pension to alleviate the victims' situation. But then they never pass the Committee level, you know, it's not their priority.

I must say that some individual Senators and members of the House of Representatives were supportive, but that is all I can say. Their expressed support doesn't come around to any real implementation. This is more frustrating to me than anything else. I think the Filipino "comfort women" survivors crusade have to have more support from our own people, our own government.

In the Future

Wada: But AWF already finished project in the Philippines. How do you evaluate the result, of the AWF project?

Neria: Well, I think the Filipino victims have really looked towards help from any sector, and it happened that AWF came at the time that they really needed help to alleviate their hardship situation, so in that sense you can understand why they applied for the private fund, but still the fact remains that AWF did not cover all the victims, and it became a political issue because it did not address the victims demand, so even those survivors who accepted the AWF, have articulated it was important to

continue to advocate for legal compensation as the solution.

And then, third, that AWF, by nature being a private fund, has also short time coverage. It means that some of those victims that have accepted AWF, who still live today find themselves in a destitute situation again. When the small amount of money they received from the Fund have been spent, nothing else could sustain the victims while they are still living - like they need medical assistance now more than ever because they are aging, but where is the money? Can't AWF help them still, like provide continuing pension? Some who have passed away left their families in debt because there was no burial money for the victims. Because, you know, the funds have...

Arima: Was there any comment on AWF because we are now closing next March, the end of March 2007. Is there any comment from you about AWF activities?

Neria: Well, maybe AWF has lived its time. I believe the Japanese government has to find a new way to try to solve, deal with the problems..

Arima: After dissolution of the AWF, do you think, is there any activities needed?

Neria: Yes, I think, because the problem is still there, so I hope the Japanese government will come up with something (more meaningful ways that address the demand of the survivors for justice, and for healing).

Arima: We are now thinking to organize a group about women's human rights' issues like trafficking or HIV/AIDS affected for women. We believe the violation of women's human rights still need to deal and to work with such kind of issue.

Neria: Yeah, I think AWF can move on in those issues that you have mentioned, but, I think I prefer much more than the AWF and beyond it. I am directing my thoughts much more to the Japanese government that it could move further with dealing with the "comfort women" issue in another way than it has done in the past

Arima: You mean the legal compensation system?

Neria: Yes. That and maybe some other way. Some other way?

Arima: There are some arguments recently. An American-Korean, Chunghee Sarah Soh, Professor of San Francisco State University, is suspicious about the compensation problem. She proposed problem with moral solution and legal solution. Legal solution cannot solve the problem totally; only maybe moral solution can provide the reconciliation. It should be both. There is the concept of "justice with healing" that we should try to explore as a meaningful way to give a final resolution to the problem of wartime sexual slavery.

Neria: It should be both.

Matsuda: What do you think of the future? I mean since you said half of the so-called

registered comfort women survivors are passed away. Is there any change will take place or this will be end? This issue will be finished with you after you documented thirty women with photos?

Nelia: No, it will not be finished with my documentation nor if they are passing away. Efforts to document their stories or narratives are worth a lot because it is preserving history. NGOs supporting the "comfort women" survivors today are making all efforts to establish museums, video documentation, publications, memories of war victims to ensure that they are never forgotten in history. The issue of the "comfort women" or is Japanese military sexual slavery continues to be relevant as it is similar to the war crime occurring in other countries affecting victims of war and rape such as what happened in Bosnia or Sri Lanka and so forth. Comfort women have and will continue to be in the world's attention and memory. The women's stories continue to move the international community, and people know that unless it is really given a final action or solution, it will also be recorded that the women victims never had access to justice from the Japanese government. It continues to be a post-war issue, with no solution.