

Women fight City Hall



Korean immigrant women raise their fists in protest at FEMA headquarters in Pasadena.

By Gloria Chung and Davis Park
Korea Times

Wives and mothers—strangers to any political activism in Korea—make up the backbone of hundreds of riot-victims who have been demonstrating at City Hall since June 22.

Fierce determination mark their stand.

"We will (demonstrate) until they say OK to our demands," Young-Ok Kim said. "They better do something."

Young-Ok Kim, 43, and her

husband, 52, owned a liquor store in South Central Los Angeles that burned down the first night of the riots. Her optimistic view changed to dismay and disgust.

"At first I thought it's going to be OK," she said, adding, "Something will come up. But after days passed with nothing, I was disappointed. So that's why I come (to City Hall). With one voice, we can come together."

Sun Young echoed her fellow victim Young-Ok Kim's sentiment—determined to recover what she lost. Ten

days prior to the riots, she had moved all her belongings into her store on South 59th Street. She literally lost everything she owned.

"I just cried," she said. "I can't express how it feels. No matter how hard I try to explain, no one can understand."

Young's store had not even been open half a year when it was destroyed. "In one minute, everything was gone."

Kim described how her family lost everything in such a short period:

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"We came to this country to live well, we worked so hard two to three jobs a day, and it's all gone in one night."

The aftermath of the riots is still taking a toll on its victims. Myung Ja Kim operated a swap meet that was gutted. The strain of going through loan applications and coming out to support the demonstrations has been physically and mentally exhausting.

"After a demo, I just go home and lie down," she said.

For all the women, it has been hard to not despair and keep their hopes up at the same time.

"I kept looking at my watch for the time to pass—for a new day to come," Sun Young remembers, "I didn't want to think about anything."

But for Myung Ja Kim, Sun Young and Young-Ok Kim, there are no other options for them but to rally together and open stores again once they scrape up enough money.

"My husband and I are....too old to look for new jobs. Nobody wants to hire

older people."

These women and other demonstrators were outraged when they were pelted by tacks and bottles thrown from City Hall windows.

"I was so mad! That's why we're here today," Kim said. "We don't want to hurt anyone. We scream and are loud," Kim admitted of the demonstrations, "and I understand that they might get tired of it after (all this time), but they have to understand our situation."

What worries these women most is the welfare of their children.

Young-Ok Kim has two teen-age boys in high school. She is thinking of moving back to Seattle where her family lived for 15 years.

"We don't feel safe in South Central," Kim said. "We want to raise our children in a safe area."

Myung Ja Kim with two teen-age daughters said: "I'm worried about their teen experiences, like growing up and discrimination."

Her daughters' images of America have been changed by the riots, she said. "My kids thought America was this place where you work hard and get paid for it. Now the kids feel like they want to go back to Korea."