

Gender and U.S. Bases in Asia-Pacific

By Ellen-Rae Cachola, Lizelle Festejo, Annie Fukushima, Gwyn Kirk, and Sabina Perez | March 14, 2008

The power dynamics of militarism in the Asia-Pacific region rely on dominance and subordination. These hierarchical relationships, shaped by gender, can be seen in U.S. military exploitation of host communities, its abuse and contamination of land and water, and the exploitation of women and children through the sex industry, sexual violence, and rape. Women's bodies, the land, and indigenous communities are all feminized, treated as dispensable and temporary. What is constructed as "civilized, white, male, western, and rational" is held superior to what is defined as "primitive, non-white, female, non-western, and irrational." Nations and U.S. territories within the Asia-Pacific region are treated as inferiors with limited sovereignty or agency in relation to U.S. foreign policy interests that go hand-in-hand with this racist/sexist ideology.

The imbalance of power in gender relations in and around bases is mirrored at the alliance level as well. The United States controls Hawai'i through statehood; Guam is a colonial territory; and the United States is the dominant partner in alliances with Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines. The expansion and restructuring of U.S. bases and military operations in the region depend on these imbalances of power, which are rooted in histories of annexation, colonization, exploitation, and war.

The Asia-Pacific region is a major part of the worldwide network of U.S. bases and facilities that support the global war on terror and enables the United States to extend its reach far beyond its own shores. The war on terror is only the latest justification for U.S. military presence in communities that have little say over the activities of armed outsiders. This network in turn depends on a set of interrelated phenomena – violence against women and girls, violation of local people's self-determination, and abuse and contamination of the environment – that reinforce gender stereotypes.

Military Violence against Women

Violence against women is pervasive at U.S. bases in the region and in prevailing military culture and training. The case of Okinawa is especially shocking. In the past 62 years, there have been 400 reported cases of women who have been attacked, kidnapped, abused, gang-raped, or murdered by U.S. troops. Victims have included a nine-month old baby and girls between six and 15 years old. Most recently, in February 2008, Staff Sgt. Tyrone Luther Hadnott, aged 38, of Camp Courtney in Okinawa, was arrested and charged with raping a 14-year-old girl.

In November 2005, several Marines stood trial for raping a Philippine woman, "Nicole" (a pseudonym) near Olongapo (Philippines). One man, Daniel Smith, a U.S. marine, was convicted of this crime and sentenced to 40 years imprisonment in the Philippines. However, he was transferred to U.S. custody immediately after conviction. Philippine and U.S. organizations contend that this case illuminates the negative impacts of the U.S.-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), which undermines Philippines national sovereignty.



Violence against women recurs around U.S. bases in Asia. A particularly brutal rape and murder of a Korean woman in 1992 led to street demonstrations in Seoul and the formation of a new organization, the National Campaign for the Eradication of Crime by U.S. Troops in Korea, to document crimes and help victims claim redress. Activists in Guam are justifiably concerned that such violence will rise in their communities with the proposed increase in U.S. Marines stationed there.

Military personnel are trained to dehumanize “others” as part of their preparation for war. Their aggressiveness, frustration, and fear spill over into local communities, for example in acts of violence against girls and women. Although most U.S. troops do not commit such violations, these incidents happen far too often to be accepted as aberrations. Racist and sexist stereotypes about Asian women – as exotic, accommodating, and sexually compliant – are an integral part of such violence. These crimes inflame local hostility and resistance to U.S. military bases and operations, and have long-lasting effects on victims/survivors. Cases are seriously underreported due to women’s shame and fear or their belief that perpetrators will not be apprehended.

This pattern of sexual violence reveals structural inequalities between Asian communities and the U.S. military, encoded in Status of Forces Agreements and Visiting Forces Agreements. The military sees each crime as an isolated act committed by individual soldiers. Local communities that protest these crimes see gendered violence as a structural issue that is perpetuated by legal, political, economic, and social structures.

Military prostitution continues despite the military’s declared “zero tolerance” policy, affirmed in Department of Defense memoranda and Executive Order 13387 that President George W. Bush

signed in October 2005. These days, most women working in clubs near U.S. bases in South Korea and Japan/Okinawa are from the Philippines due to low wages, high unemployment, and the absence of sustainable economic development at home. These governments admit Philippine women on short-term entertainer visas.

Servicemen are still protected from prosecution for many infringements of local laws and customs. The sexual activity of foreign-based troops, including (but not exclusively) through prostitution, has had serious effects on women’s health, boosting rates of HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, drug and alcohol dependency, and mental illness. U.S. Navy ships visit the Philippines for R & R and make stops at Pattaya (Thailand) where the sex-tourism industry flourished during the Vietnam War.

Violation of Local People’s Self-Determination

The expansion of U.S. military bases and operations has had a huge adverse impact on local communities at social, economic, political, and environmental levels. Host governments and local business elites are complicit in this. They equate progress and economic development with U.S. corporate and military interests instead of addressing the effects of U.S. militarism on local communities. The United States uses political and economic control to exert military force in the Pacific region. Allied nations trade sovereignty for militarized “security.” Japan and South Korea both pay for upkeep of U.S. troops and the restructuring or expansion of U.S. bases in their countries.

Guam has yet to attain full self-government through a UN-mandated political process that requires the full cooperation of the United States. The exploitation of Guam’s colonial status has allowed massive military expansion, slated to cost

\$10 billion, and without consent of the indigenous people. The expansion will transform the island into a forward base with the establishment of a Global Strike Force and ballistic missile defense system. It will also significantly alter the population. The expected transfer of military personnel from Okinawa and other parts of Asia will boost the population by 21%. Although the local business elite welcomes this expansion, many people oppose it. They are also against the resulting economic dependency that is designed and imposed by U.S. foreign policy.

Okinawa is only 0.6% of the land area of Japan, yet houses 75% of U.S. military facilities in that country. There are 37 U.S. bases and installations in Okinawa, with an estimated 23,842 troops and 21,512 family members. The U.S. military proposes to build a heliport in the ocean at Henoko, (northern Okinawa), despite a 10-year campaign against it by Okinawan people and international environmental groups.

Similarly, Korean activists opposed major base expansion at Pyoungtaek, south of Seoul. However, U.S. military officials convinced the Korean government to invest millions of dollars to pay for this expansion as well as a new bombing training site.

Hawai'i is a major tourist destination, but the U.S. military installations occupying 25% of the land area continue to be invisible to most visitors and even to local people. Current examples of the military camouflaging itself in the everyday are the Superferry and the University Affiliated Research Center, both "joint-use" operations for the military and civilians. Rendering the military a normal part of daily life serves U.S. dominance and superiority as truths that cannot be challenged. In tourist brochures Hawai'i is personified as an exotic woman, nearly naked, clad in a hula skirt and lei. Such images make women seem available for

exploitation, much as the military treats the land as available for misuse.

Another example of the extension of U.S. military domination is the greater involvement of local armies, such as joint exercises with the armed forces of the Philippines, the New Mexico Guard, and the Guam Army National Guard, as part of the National Guard Bureau's State Partnership Program. This allows state National Guards to partner with foreign countries and is expected to expand in the coming years within the Pacific Rim and Southeast Asian countries.

The Asia-Pacific region is part of the worldwide network of U.S. bases, facilities, refueling and R & R stops, and reserves of potential recruits that all support the global war on terror. Bases in Hawai'i, Guam, the Philippines, South Korea, and Japan/Okinawa serve as key training grounds for the Iraq War. Moreover, Guam, Diego Garcia, South Korea, and Okinawa are among the transit points for troops and military supplies for the war.

Abuse and Contamination of Environment

The military misuse of the land is part of its dominance over local communities. In many places, military training has caused fires, left the land littered with unexploded bullets and bombs, and pulverized bombing training targets.

In Hawai'i, Guam, the Philippines, South Korea, and Japan, the U.S. military has taken no responsibility for cleaning up contamination caused by its operations. This includes heavy metals (mercury and lead), pesticides (dieldrin and malathion), solvents (including benzene and toluene), PCBs, pesticides, and JP-4 jet fuel. The resulting toxic health effects on local communities are compounded as the years go on without remediation of contaminated land and water.

In Korea, environmentalists are urging National Assembly members to secure U.S. commitment to clean up the pollution on the many bases slated for closure there, or this will be an expense borne by Korean taxpayers. The proposed heliport at Henoko (Okinawa), meanwhile, threatens the dugong, an endangered manatee, as well as the surrounding coral reefs. Kadena Air Base in Okinawa is a hub of U.S. airpower in the Pacific, with Air Force planes training overhead a daily reality. A 1996 Okinawa Prefecture report on babies born to women living near Kadena Air Force Base showed significantly lower birth weights than those born in any other part of Japan, due to severe noise generated by the base.

Addressing Militarism

Militarism is a system of institutions, investments, and values, which is much wider and more deeply entrenched than any specific war. To create alternate definitions of genuine peace and security, it is important to understand institutionalized gendered relations and other unequal power dynamics including those based on class, colonialism, and racism inherent in U.S. military policy and practice.

Demilitarization requires a de-linking of masculinity and militarism, stopping the glorification of war and warriors, and defining adventure and heroism in nonmilitary terms. It also requires genuinely democratic processes and structures for political and economic decision-making at community, national and transnational levels. In addition, the United States must take responsibility for cleaning up all military contamination in the Asia-Pacific region.

Instead of undermining indigenous control of lands and resources in Guam, for example, the United States and local government agencies should sup-

port the self-determination of the Chamorro people. The proposed Marines base for Henoko (Okinawa) should be scrapped and the Japanese government should redirect funds earmarked for it to economic development to benefit Okinawan people.

Since military expansion is a partner in corporate capitalist expansion, economic, political, and social development based on self-sufficiency, self-determination, and ecological restoration of local resources must be encouraged. Communities adjoining U.S. bases in all parts of the region suffer from grossly distorted economies that are overly reliant on the services (legal and illegal) that U.S. soldiers support. This economic dependency affects local men as well as women. Locally directed projects, led by those who understand community concerns, should be supported, together with government reforms to redistribute resources for such initiatives.

In addition, the United States and Asian governments need to revise their legal agreements to protect local communities. Local people need transparency in the implementation of these policies, in interagency involvement (Pentagon, State Department, Department of the Interior, Environmental Protection Agency) and in executive orders that affect U.S. military operations in the region. Such revisions should include the ability for host governments to prosecute perpetrators of military violence so that the U.S. military can be held accountable for the human consequences of its policies.

U.S. military expansion and restructuring in the Asia-Pacific region serve patriarchal U.S. goals of “full spectrum dominance.” Allied governments are bribed, flattered, threatened, or coerced into participating in this project. Even the apparently willing governments are junior partners who must, in an

unequal relationship, shoulder the costs of U.S. military policies.

For the U.S. military, land and bodies are so much raw material to use and discard without responsibility or serious consequences to those in power. Regardless of gender, soldiers are trained to dehumanize others so that, if ordered, they can kill them. Sexual abuse and torture committed by U.S. military personnel and contractors against Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison illustrate a grim new twist on militarized violence, where race and nation “trumped” gender. White U.S. women were among the perpetrators, thereby appropriating the masculinized role. The violated Iraqi men, meanwhile, were forced into the feminized role.

Gendered inequalities, which are fundamental to U.S. military operations in the Asia-Pacific region, affect men as well as women. Young men who live near U.S. bases see masculinity defined in military terms. They may work as cooks or bartenders who provide rest and relaxation to visiting servicemen. They may be forced to migrate for work to larger

cities or overseas, seeking to fulfill their dreams of giving their families a better future.

U.S. peace movements should not only address U.S. military involvement in the Middle East, but also in other parts of the world. Communities in the Asia-Pacific region have a long history of contesting U.S. militarism and offer eloquent testimonies to the negative impact of U.S. military operations there. These stories provide insights into the gendered dynamics of U.S. foreign and military policy, and the complicity of allied nations in this effort. Many individuals and organizations are crying out for justice, united by threads of hope and visions for a different future. Our job is to listen to them and to act accordingly.

Ellen-Rae Cachola, Lizelle Festejo, Annie Fukushima, Gwyn Kirk, and Sabina Perez are contributors to Foreign Policy In Focus (www.fpiif.org) and work with Women for Genuine Security, a Bay Area group that is part of the International Women's Network Against Militarism.

For More Information

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