

---

## SOCIAL CHANGE AND NEW CITIZEN VOICES

Just as government policy institutions are being transformed to accommodate democratic transitions, citizen groups are also learning new approaches and strategies for shaping public attitudes regarding the U.S. military. Such groups have long populated the public debate at the local level, but more often than not they have had limited organizational capacity, and perhaps narrowly defined constituencies. In Okinawa, for example, only at points of considerable tension, such as the reversion movement or the movement that arose in protest of the 1995 rape, has the prefecture spoken with one voice. And in South Korea, local citizen groups saw their cause taken up by national NGOs in the 1990s as civil society groups seized the opportunity for political action afforded by the democratization process.<sup>25</sup>

When policy solutions are sought, players at the local level often diverge. Economic and social interests can conflict, and municipalities that host U.S. forces often compete with others for the economic benefits that accrue from the presence of facilities and bases despite concerns over the social costs for some in the community. Those with the most to gain economically from basing policy often seek to pursue their interests through quiet negotiations with the state, either locally or through the representatives of the defense establishment. Those who bear the brunt of the social costs or dislocations are often at the forefront of protest activities, aided by larger political agents such as political parties or NGOs with greater national visibility.

### FROM PERIPHERY TO CENTER

Broader social changes have affected the debate within these societies over the U.S. military presence. Many American bases are located in communities that have been peripheral to national power. Okinawa has long been distant from the national consciousness, not only



*U.S. forces now assist the Armed Forces of the Philippines in efforts to contend with Muslim insurgent groups in the southern Philippines.*

geographically but also in the imagination of contemporary Japan. It was the place of defeat and devastation as the only homeland battle fought by Japanese soldiers in the closing months of World War II. More than half of the 200,000 individuals who died in the Battle of Okinawa were civilians. The ensuing U.S. military effort to construct bases for a potential invasion of the main islands of Japan meant that many survivors who had lost their homes were held in settlement camps. The Korean War only expanded the U.S. military base construction effort, and postponed the return of displaced Okinawans to their home villages. Okinawa continued to be a place apart, occupied by the United States and its military long after Japan regained its sovereignty in 1952.<sup>26</sup> Only in the 1980s, with the Japanese economic boom and the expansion of tropical tourist resorts in Okinawa, did the island begin to shed its image as a base island where residents lived in the shadow of the American military.

In the Philippines, too, U.S. forces now operate far from Manila in the rebellious southern island of Mindanao. Muslim Mindanao has always had an identity separate from the Philippine national consciousness. Mindanao is home to the majority of the eight million Muslim Filipinos who live alongside Christian residents, many of whom are descendants of settlers from the north who came to the island in the early 1900s. The island has a long history of

rebellion against central authority, dating back to the colonial era.<sup>27</sup> More recently, Muslim groups—first the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), then the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)—have called for autonomy from the Philippine state, and have violently challenged the state’s ability to control Muslim areas under their control. After two decades of conflict, the MNLF agreed to negotiations with the Philippine government and in 1996 signed a formal treaty granting it autonomy over the area comprising the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao in exchange for laying down its arms.

Violence continues in the southern Philippines, however. The MILF, organized by those who disagreed with the peace formula negotiated by the MNLF, continues to occupy and control territories beyond the reach of the Philippine army and state. Moreover, in the Sulu archipelago off the coast of Mindanao, the more militant Abu Sayaff Group (ASG) has operated freely from the small islands they control, kidnapping for ransom and undermining local stability.<sup>28</sup> The MILF and ASG continue to rebel against central authority, and in the aftermath of September 11, the United States joined with the Philippine government to identify these organizations’ links with other terrorist organizations in Southeast Asia. U.S. forces are sent to Mindanao to assist the AFP in countering rebels who challenge the authority of the central government. Cooperation with the United States government in counterterrorism, and the suspected links between local armed insurgents and al Qaeda-linked terrorist groups in Southeast Asia, have made the southern Philippines a central priority in Philippine foreign and security planning.

Physical distance from Tokyo and Manila is not the sole factor that defines Okinawa and Mindanao as peripheral regions. Historically, these two regions share another common feature. They are also areas with ethnic and religious identities separate from those of the majority of Japanese and Filipinos, respectively. As regions, they have had long traditions of political resistance to the authority of the central state. Thus, their ability to draw upon

that historical identity of difference in the politics over the U.S. military presence has been a powerful tool for local political elites.

Discrimination also plays a role in the politics of U.S. bases in South Korea. A history of discrimination pervades discussions by those who live in South Korean camp towns. The distance of these camp towns from the residents of metropolitan Seoul is not in fact geographic, ethnic, or religious. Rather, it is socioeconomic and class-based.<sup>29</sup> Despite the fact that Tongducheon is only 37 miles north of Seoul, its political leaders as well as citizen activists are very conscious of their town’s status as a “lesser” locality in the new democratic politics of South Korea. Many of these towns grew up alongside the U.S. Army in the years after the end of the Korean War, and their association for decades with the U.S. military has led many in South

*By day, chili peppers dry on a doorstep in Uijonbu, South Korea. At night this home is part of the thriving red-light district, with bars and clubs dedicated to use by U.S. military personnel.*



Korea to associate these towns with prostitution, drugs, and other criminal activities. In the rapid wave of transformation that accompanied South Korea's postwar economic growth, the socioeconomic place of these towns today is much different than in decades past. Still, there remains a certain stigma that local leaders refer to when discussing why greater national attention is not dedicated to their communities.

### THE RISING VOICE OF WOMEN AND THEIR TRANSNATIONAL CONNECTIONS

One of the most articulate voices in the politics of the U.S. bases is that of women. In base communities in each of these Asian societies, women activists have worked to draw attention to the impact on women of an extended foreign troop presence. Many of these groups are documenting local women's experiences with violent crime, prostitution, and economic deprivation as a result of the U.S. presence.<sup>30</sup> In Okinawa and South Korea the testimony of women who have suffered from violence and rape by U.S. military personnel is being compiled via oral histories and other means to chronicle the incidents that went unpunished in the past. Suzuyo Takazato of the Naha City Assembly writes:

We are engaged in research to ascertain the reality and full extent of military violence against women and the way that cases have been handled. Starting in 1945, we have details of 92 incidents so far, taken from historical records, police reports, newspaper articles, and individual testimony.<sup>31</sup>

The National Campaign for the Eradication of U.S. Military Crimes, formed in 1992 after the brutal murder of a Korean bar worker by an American serviceman, also maintains a list of criminal claims against U.S. forces in South Korea, including court case references and descriptions of the crimes.<sup>32</sup>

These women's groups have created networks of communication and information that reach beyond national boundaries. In September 1995, 71 Okinawan women traveled to China to attend the Beijing Women's Conference to testify to the conditions faced by women in their communities. They arrived home to news of the rape, and immediately began to work toward the broad mobilization of citizens who turned out in an island-wide protest the following month. In November, the women announced the establishment of Okinawa Women Act against Military Violence. In February of the following year, the group began its American Peace Caravan, an extended sojourn around the United States visiting universities, local women's groups, and Washington, D.C., to speak out about the rape and the problems faced by Okinawa as a result of the U.S. military presence.<sup>33</sup>

But their key challenge is in articulating women's interests within domestic politics at home. Okinawan women worked within their community with local political leaders to stop the construction of a new military base. When the Japanese government sought to consolidate U.S. military bases on Okinawa after the rape, women at the municipal level began to take a more active role in the effort to oppose the government plan. Leaders of the Women Act against Military Violence worked with Ota and other prefecture leaders to increase awareness of the problems faced by Okinawan women. And when local women in Nago City, where the new base was to be built, began to organize themselves, they sought advice and support from those who had organized the Women Act against Military Violence.<sup>34</sup>



*Suzuyo Takazato, co-founder of Okinawa Women Act against Military Violence, traveled to the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995 to advocate greater attention to the impact of U.S. military bases on local women. As an elected member of the Naha City Assembly, she works with local law enforcement to articulate new policies for rape victims, and was instrumental in the creation of the Rape Crisis Center of Okinawa.*

*Women's groups  
and scholars have  
shed light on  
what was the  
dark underside of  
the U.S. military  
presence in Japan,  
South Korea, and  
the Philippines*

Today, Okinawan women communicate regularly with women's groups in the United States, South Korea, and the Philippines about women's issues in U.S. military base communities.<sup>35</sup> And they continue to speak out on issues related to violence against women. Takazato, now an elected representative in the Naha City Assembly, has worked to gain greater awareness among local police and prosecutors of the need for counseling for rape victims, and for a better representation of victims' interests in the investigation and prosecution of rape. Moreover, she and other women established a nonprofit center offering counseling to victims of rape, and they continue to monitor and report on individual trials where U.S. military personnel are charged with the crime. They have also been instrumental in gaining public attention and policy change within Okinawa for rape victims.

In South Korea and the Philippines, local women's groups have focused on providing assistance and services to indigent women working in the bars and clubs in U.S. base communities. The first counseling center for these camp town women in South Korea was Duraebang (My Sister's Place) in Uijongbu, near Camp Stanley Army Base, which was established in 1986 as an outreach effort by the Korea Presbyterian Church. According to Young Nim Yu, the current director, the main goal of Duraebang is to provide counseling services, education, and shelter for the women working in bars, as prostitutes, and, in some instances, for those married to U.S. servicemen. Increasingly, these women are non-Koreans brought in to work in clubs under false pretenses. Begun in 1996, Saewoomtuh became the second organization dedicated to these women; it now has centers in Tongducheon and Pyeongtaek.<sup>36</sup> According to director Hyun Sun Kim in Pyeongtaek, Saewoomtuh also seeks to organize support for the children of these women by offering childcare and assisting in finding nonthreatening educational environments for their Amerasian children who are often rejected by mainstream Korean society. In Tongducheon, Myung Bun Kim counsels women on finding alternative sources of livelihood. Both Duraebang and Saewoomtuh have helped women develop new skills to sustain themselves. Duraebang helped establish a bakery run by older women, and Saewoomtuh began a women's center, a cooperative where women grow and sell plants and herbs and make potpourri, cards, and other craft products.<sup>37</sup>

Although the American bases are gone from Olongapo City and Angeles City, women's groups continue to work at the grassroots level in both municipalities monitoring the continued visits by U.S. naval ships and other forces. The Buklod Center is a cooperative project of the National Council of Churches of the Philippines and GABRIELA, a progressive women's organization, in Olongapo. The center was founded by Alma Bulawan, a "survivor" of prostitution in the "A Bars" (bars designated for U.S. military personnel) when the Subic naval facility was still open, and Brenda Stoltzfus, a volunteer from the Mennonite Church. Opened in 1987, the center serves as a drop-in site for women in prostitution and mixed-race children fathered by U.S. military personnel. Since Subic closed, the center has worked with women to find alternative livelihoods, and to provide job skills training. Another organization, the Women's Education, Development, and Productivity, Research, and Advocacy Organization (WEDPRO), works to support women in the Philippines who have served (and some who continue to serve) U.S. personnel. It also provides assistance to the Amerasian children of these women. It began in 1989 with a clear mandate founded on issues related to violence against women and children, and framed its grassroots work as well as its national legislative advocacy on gender and rights issues. WEDPRO has also conducted a study on a comprehensive base conversion



*Activism for women in U.S. base towns includes grassroots efforts to improve the lives of women working in the clubs that cater to Americans. Today, women's centers such as My Sister's Place in Uijonbu and Saewoomtuh in Tongducheon and Pyeongtaek, South Korea, continue to offer shelter to victims of violence, assistance in education for Amerasian children, and job training clinics for camp-town women.*

program that outlines alternative visions for employment for women in prostitution in Angeles City and Olongapo City, and has opened NAGKA (the United Women of Angeles City), a multipurpose cooperative for women in prostitution and survivors of prostitution. Moreover, WEDPRO leaders have worked on the anti-prostitution bill currently under consideration in the Philippine Congress, arguing for the need to see prostitution as a human rights issue.

These small women's centers are also beginning to work together to help women who want to return to their home countries. In many of the remaining base communities in South Korea and Japan, Filipina and other foreign nationals are increasingly recruited to work in bars and as prostitutes in establishments that cater to the U.S. military. Local women's centers in South Korea and Okinawa have therefore begun to reach out to women's groups in the Philippines for assistance in securing the return of women (and, in many cases, their children) who have been trafficked, who have suffered from violence, or who have been abandoned by their husbands.

These women's groups, along with a growing number of scholars, have shed light on what was the dark underside of the U.S. military presence in Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines. Prostituted women, bar workers, and, in some cases, even those who married U.S. servicemen were abandoned by mainstream society and have been portrayed as women unworthy

of the protection and advocacy of the state. With changing norms regarding women's rights in each of these societies, there is greater interest in providing relief for the victims of violence and in economically empowering women. Both of these goals play a significant role in highlighting the particular experiences of the women that have lived alongside the U.S. military.

Today, there is a much wider and more receptive audience for the ideas and the goals advocated by these women's groups, and the transnational connections between them have become a source of resources as well as learning. They have raised the consciousness of national and international audiences regarding the less visible and underappreciated consequences of a sustained foreign troop presence on the human rights of women. In terms of the policy debate over U.S. military bases, it is clear that the past government practice of sanctioning networks of "entertainment" and prostitution in Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines is increasingly problematic. In South Korea, for example, prostitution is now against the law. International efforts, including U.S. government efforts, to curb trafficking in persons, have also put pressure on these governments to develop laws and impose sanctions on trafficking. This puts pressure on the networks of prostitution in these countries. Again, South Korea was the first of the three societies hosting U.S. forces to pass an anti-trafficking law, and there is intense pressure from the U.S. government for Japan to do the same. Pressure on national governments to address women's rights and security concerns within base communities, therefore, is coming from two directions: from grassroots activism of women's centers in the base communities and

*Civil society activism has played a central role in recasting the national debate on U.S. military base issues*

from transnational efforts to address the exploitation of women as part of a human rights agenda.

Broader currents of social and economic change are exposing the concerns of those who live in proximity to U.S. bases. Civil society activism has played a central role in recasting the national debate on issues such as discrimination and human rights, and this has implications for the way in which local community relations with the U.S. military are being viewed. In each of the three countries, the circumstances of local communities were for decades far removed from the day-to-day experiences of urban residents. But today, these once peripheral areas and the experiences of their residents are as accessible to national audiences as events in Tokyo, Seoul, or Manila. Media coverage, civil society activism, and a greater interest in seeing what happens to any citizens in their interactions with the U.S. military as a national experience suggests that local communities may no longer be as isolated as they once were.