

Forum

Becoming an Ally: Moving from Knowing toward Understanding

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I was born and raised in the north of England. In the early 1980s, I was involved in a women's peace movement in Britain, participating in nonviolent direct action and documenting women's activism. Since then I've lived in the United States. In this essay, I reflect on how I learned about women's anti-military activism in Okinawa and how, working with others, I've tried to be an ally in this struggle. We are all part of one militarized system, though it affects us differently in our specific locations. At times, I write about my experiences; at others, I use "we" as many of my ideas have developed through conversations and activities with members of Women for Genuine Security¹ and the wider International Women's Network Against Militarism.² Other Network country groups are in Okinawa, mainland Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Guahan, Hawai'i, and Puerto Rico, many of them island nations that the US government considers strategic locations for bases and military operations.³

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Leafing through the *San Francisco Chronicle* in the fall of 1995, I noticed a photo of Okinawa women marching in the street with signs, protesting US military sexual violence. There was no story, just a short caption. The photo caught my attention. Who were these women? And what was happening for a US news service to publish this photo from a small island half a world away?

Then a friend, Nobu Tomita, sent a telegram (this was pre-email) from Japan to say that Okinawa women would be visiting Berkeley. I went to the presentation with Margo Okazawa-Rey. Members of Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence (OWAAMV), who were touring four US cities, discussed the impacts of the US military presence on their communities, especially crimes of violence against women, and the environmental destruction caused by constant preparations for war. I learned that the group had formed in September 1995 in response to the rape of a twelve-year-old girl by three US servicemen, the context for the photo in the *SF Chronicle*. Carolyn Francis, a US missionary member in the group, interpreted the speakers' remarks in English.

Earlier, Margo and I had met women from South Korea and the Philippines who were also dealing with the effects of US bases. We thought it was crucial for them to speak to US audiences; we also wondered if it would be useful to share information and strategies as women activists.

Okinawa women agreed to host an international gathering the following year. In the United States, we raised money for airfares. It was my first visit to Asia.

About forty women from Okinawa, mainland Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and the continental United States met in Naha, Japan, in May 1997. This was the founding meeting of what became the International Women's Network Against Militarism though we didn't know that then. I helped to draft a Statement of Purpose in English. Carolyn Francis, Suzuyo Takazato, Nobu Tomita, and others worked through it line by line to get the best version in Japanese and English.

We shared reports from our home countries and talked in small groups about various aspects of US militarism: environmental destruction, sexual violence, limitations of the Status of Forces Agreements (SOFAs), and the situation of Amerasian children. Participants spoke at a public forum and at press conferences. We enjoyed a performance by Okinawan dancers, which gave us a glimpse into traditional culture. We visited memorials commemorating those who had died in the Battle of Okinawa in 1945: student nurses, schoolteachers, workers, and Korean women and men living under Japanese colonial rule and conscripted into the Japanese war effort. We heard how the bloody three-month battle turned this lush green island into a treeless rubble. At the end of the gathering, Suzuyo Takazato, OWAAMV co-chair, summed up: "We have the US-Japan Security Treaty, but it doesn't protect us. We need a new definition of security."

In 1998, I was invited to join a women's action outside Kadena Air Base, Okinawa. Participants protested military sexual violence by reading details of rapes and assaults from a chronology that Okinawa women were compiling (also see Takazato 2000). I shared photos from the Greenham Common Women's Peace movement that I'd been part of, a protest against nuclear weapons at a US base in Britain (Cook and Kirk 1983). Although a very different context, Greenham Common was another US Air Force base, off limits to local people, with US military policy imposed on an allied nation.

I stayed with Carolyn Francis at her home in the Ginowan Christian Center. She was fluent in Japanese, a long-term resident of Japan, and an active member of OWAAMV. She was working on an English translation of *A Mother's Story of the Battle of Okinawa* (Oshiro 1991). Like many older people, the author, Oshiro Junko, was only then beginning to find words to talk about the brutality she'd endured over fifty years earlier. I also took part in a human chain at Futenma Marine Corps Air Station, where thousands of people joined hands around the base, opposing the US military presence and plans for base expansion. Our group stood near the Sakima Art Museum, squeezed alongside the fence. The next day, I saw the huge paintings in the museum by Iri and Toshi Maruki, with their harrowing depiction of the horrors of war, and stood on the balcony there where family graves were clearly visible inside the base. When the US military took this land, they ignored the fact that graves were already located there. Gradually, I was beginning to see the enormity of what had happened.

Carolyn was an important bridge. She read *Stars and Stripes*—the US military paper—and followed Okinawa news. She mailed news clippings to us in the States, some she'd translated from Japanese, together with hand-written updates on OWAAMV activities.

Writing about the Holocaust, philosopher Alan Rosenberg (1988) distinguished between knowing about this atrocity and understanding its significance.⁴ Knowing concerns facts. The Nazis killed six million Jews, as well as Roma, gay people, and people with mental and physical disabilities. Rosenberg argued that it is possible to learn facts without “their having any impact on the way we understand ourselves or the world we live in” (382). Understanding the meaning of an event is a much deeper process by which “it becomes integrated into one’s moral and intellectual life” (382), part of a person’s analysis and ethical principles. In addition, “Understanding compels us to action, even though we may not initially want to change our habitual ways of thinking and being” (382).

I’ve found this distinction helpful in thinking about how outsiders, especially from dominant nations such as the United States and mainland Japan, can be allies in Okinawa people’s struggles. How do we change our habitual ways of thinking? What gets in the way? And what compels us to act?

The US public rarely hears about Okinawa. For older people, the name may stir a vague memory from World War II. Many US activists are already committed to struggles in the United States or to international issues that make the news here, if only briefly. Some people accept US policies uncritically. For others, the US military is involved in so many destructive operations in so many places that it’s impossible to keep track of them. Also, the practice of separating domestic from foreign policy makes it difficult to see connections between our lives “here” and a few small islands “over there.”

Back in 1997, Margo and I were concerned that US women might be too dominant in a meeting focused on Asian women. We’d heard comments that some white women from the United States had played an inappropriate role at the NGO conference in China in 1995. Suzuyo Takazato told us, “You need to bring the strongest delegation you can because ultimately this is your problem.” Her sharp reminder cut through any confusion about our responsibility on the issue. At the same time, Okinawa women’s feminist critique of militarism has provided a strong connection between us despite the inequalities that shape our lives.

The International Women’s Network has focused on creating relationships, not just addressing issues, to help overcome the vast differences of history, language, and culture that separate us. International meetings are not conferences where participants drop in for parts of the program that interest them but four-day gatherings that include internal discussions, site visits, public forums, media work, and creative activities such as making a banner or a quilt. Women from each Network country bring our varied experiences of militarism to generate a more complete analysis together.

The Network’s second gathering was held in Washington, DC, in 1998. Then Okinawa women organized a third in June 2000, entitled “International Women’s Summit to Redefine Security.” This took place a month before Japan hosted the G-8 Summit in Okinawa. Our summit challenged the principle of militarized national security on which G-8 economic policies are based.⁵

Our group was there for June 23, Okinawa Memorial Day. We placed flowers at the Cornerstone of Peace, remembering unnamed women who died in the Battle of Okinawa. I was impressed that the memorial includes blank sections for those whose names have not been found as well as commemorates all those who are known: Okinawans, Japanese, Koreans, and soldiers from Australia, New Zealand, Britain, and the United States. I thought of British war memorials I'd seen, invariably dedicated to "Our Glorious War Dead." Emphasis on "Our."

Later the same day, we drove north to Henoko. Keiko Itokazu, OWAAMV co-chair, explained, "Naha is a modern city because ninety percent of it was destroyed in the war. A third of the population died from war-related injuries." These included bombing, starvation, disease, terror, anger, and despair. Those who survived lived in miserable camps while US occupation forces took their land to construct the bases that remain today. Only then could people begin to rebuild their homes and repair their shattered lives.

Pointing from the bus, Itokazu-san stated, "That hill was covered in thick forest. People hid there for weeks." Then, toward the sea, "At this beach there was intense fighting." And to the south, "Over there are the caves where young nurses were left to die."

Suddenly, it was 1950. I was five years old, on the bus to Manchester, listening to Mum as she pointed out bombsites from the war. "See that space at the edge of the park? That used to be the school for blind children." Then, "There was a row of houses here. Mrs. Stanley lived in the middle one. She was a wonderful dressmaker . . ." Invisible to me, this history still so alive to her.

In Okinawa, too. Without someone to show us, visitors would never guess at this terrible past, driving through the green undulating landscape with its fields of vegetables and sugarcane. At Henoko, women described how their families had hidden in caves or in the mountains. The battle raged from April to June. It was the rainy season. People ate roots and bark and wild plants. Mothers struggled to keep children alive, though many died of malaria and malnutrition. These women honored the land and the ocean, which still sustain them, and strongly opposed the plan to construct a new base for US Marines nearby.

Specific details made history come alive: "On that hill . . . On this beach . . . Korean women were held as sex slaves . . . It was the rainy season; there was deep mud . . ." A small group of us visited Zamami Island after the meeting. Harumi Myagi pointed to the far end of the beach. "The Allies landed over there. Their ships were so close you could walk across from deck to deck."

What does it mean for people to live with these memories? What is still buried underground or unspoken in people's hearts? What do outsiders see? How do we understand what we see and the stories we're told?

3

For my part, I showed up—despite my cluelessness and Eurocentrism, the big blanks in my mental map, the prejudices I didn't know I had—listening, trying to enter into unfamiliar frames of reference, wanting to help in some way. I felt humbled and challenged by people's stories. After a while, some began to sound familiar. I found myself thinking, "I already know this," impatient

at the repetition, sometimes even a bit smug. Yet each teller added something new—a different emphasis, a deeper insight—or the interpreter chose words that conveyed more than I’d heard before. I learned to keep paying attention because I never knew what was coming next, even when I thought I did.

Learning what had happened provoked feelings of shame and guilt. Like most people in the United States, I didn’t know what Okinawa people had endured or the ongoing impact of US military operations that are wrecking the islands to this day. Also, from afar, we don’t see the vibrancy and persistence of local organizing: the anti-base landowners who have contested the appropriation of their land since 1945; the powerful protests in the 1970s and ’80s, partly inspired by the US civil rights movement; the massive demonstrations following that rape in 1995, which prompted many women to speak out; and the decades-long campaign against base construction at Henoko.

Our deepening understanding, as women living in the United States, compelled us to take action based on our opposition to militarism and in solidarity with Okinawan activists.⁶ We wrote letters to US and Japanese officials and signed petitions opposing US bases in Okinawa. We put on educational events in the San Francisco Bay Area, sometimes featuring activists and elected representatives who were visiting from Okinawa. We compiled fact sheets, produced radio shows, and urged our elected representatives to take a more critical stance on US bases in Okinawa and militarism in general. Visiting Okinawa, we lent a little extra visibility, as concerned outsiders, to anti-base struggles. As activist scholars, several of us took up Suzuyo Takazato’s early comment and helped to change the discourse about security, from militarized national security to everyday security for people and the planet (Akibayashi and Takazato 2009; Fukumura and Matsuoka 2002; Fukushima and Kirk 2013; Kirk and Okazawa-Rey 2000; Kirk and Francis 2000).

4

Moving from knowing toward understanding is many-layered, a non-linear process that requires opportunities to hear the details of people’s lives and to witness something of their experiences and also requires intellectual frameworks and empathy that allow us to absorb and reflect on what we’ve seen and heard. I’m grateful for patient and generous guides in Okinawa, the Bay Area, South Korea, Guahan, and Hawai‘i. Some were friends; others have become friends. Some I met briefly or by chance. Since I do not know Japanese, I’ve relied on interpreters and translators who bridge both language and culture, which is vital political work.⁷

I’m full of appreciation for people’s willingness to share their stories, despite the distances between us. One afternoon in 2006, when Martha Matsuoka and I were visiting Naha, we went into a grocery store with Takazato-san. Between the neatly packaged noodles and elegant tins of tea were shelves of Spam: Spam with Cheese, Spam with Garlic, Classic Spam, Spam Lite. Takazato-san told us that Okinawans got Spam from America during the Occupation. “Then we got it cheaper from Denmark. Now the cheapest comes from China. Many Okinawan people love Spam! Okinawan mothers send whole boxes of Spam to children studying in Tokyo. It’s much cheaper here than on the mainland.”

In the years following the war, my family ate Spam too, part of the scarcity of that time. Takazato-san was astonished. “But you were on the winning side!” she exclaimed. “I thought only those who lost the war had Spam.” I was grateful she could blurt this out and also felt the separation in our experiences keenly in that moment. I didn’t think of myself as on the “winning side,” but of course, Britain has not lived under US occupation as Okinawa continues to do.

5

Over the last 25 years, the International Women’s Network has provided a context for women activists from very different locations to work together, based on our shared opposition to US militarism. In the early years, we had a strong gender analysis and an environmental justice framework. When women from Puerto Rico, Hawai‘i and Guahan joined (in 2000, 2004, and 2007, respectively) they brought their perspectives on militarism as colonial practice and on how we can decolonize solidarity, which strengthened our joint analysis (Cachola et al. 2010).

It is an ongoing challenge not to reproduce acts of discrimination in our processes of resistance.⁸ Inequalities among Network country groups include financial resources, the differential buying power of our local currencies, the ease or difficulty of obtaining visas for international travel, and the personal and political stakes in each national context for women to engage in and be identified with this activism. Hence, it is important to explain the complexities of our diverse locations and to break through stereotypical assumptions we may hold about each other. The courage to speak our truths—in words and through creative projects—provides opportunities for individuals and the wider group to shift our perspectives and to undo the systematic ways that colonialism and militarism have oppressed and distorted our communities.

Despite complex histories among our nations, we see ourselves as sharing a “common context of struggle,” a term introduced by Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) in discussing the possibility of feminist solidarity across different locations and circumstances. Through our ongoing relationships, Network women have learned about each other’s stories and generated a more complete analysis of militarism from the ground up, based on our varied experiences. We know militarism is deeply embedded in economics, politics, and cultures, constantly adapting to fashion (think camo clothing), new forms of police violence, the militarization of schools and immigration policies, as well as the militarization and violence of daily life. Also, we have generated a shared vision for genuine security.⁹

Network members in the United States oppose militarism in this country, in the Asia-Pacific region, and worldwide. We recognize that militarism drives the US economy, deploys gender, race, and class inequalities, and destroys the environment here and in many other countries, including those considered allies. This is a marginal position, as elected representatives from both major parties support wars and militarism, vote huge sums for the military part of the Federal budget,¹⁰ and corporations make so much money from it.¹¹

Indeed, providing for the military is a key function of nation-states. Both the US and Japanese governments insist that US bases remain in Okinawa. Over the years, Okinawan protestors have used every possible means to express their opposition to increasing militarization

but have been consistently ignored by the two governments (Ginoza, Hase, and Kirk 2014). In September 2022, Okinawa Governor Denny Tamaki won a second term with a strong majority, running on an anti-base platform. Nevertheless, Japanese Prime Minister Kishida immediately announced that construction at Henoko would continue regardless.¹² US Congressmembers rarely question the situation; their rationale: “But Japan supports this.”

As a grassroots volunteer group, our activism in support of Okinawa women has been smaller than we want, due to these political realities and our limited capacity. Our goal has been to bridge “here” and “there,” to show that we are all part of the same militarized system, which is rendered invisible in this country. One of our contributions has been to redefine security, through writing and through the documentary *Living Along the Fenceline* (Hoshino and Kirk 2011).¹³ Also, we’ve been involved in behind-the-scenes efforts to sustain the International Women’s Network.

This relational organizing, sustained over time, has allowed us to link our separate localities across national borders. For those of us in the United States, family connections, faith traditions, or life experiences have helped us to make a long-term commitment to anti-militarist work as a group. We sharpen each other’s thinking, inspire and energize each other, learn together, and keep each other on track.

What’s in it for women from the United States to support Okinawa women’s struggles? I’ve been challenged to see injustices I didn’t know before and to act on that new-found understanding. Okinawa women’s views have expanded and reinforced my opposition to militarism and my belief in the importance of sustaining long-term activist relationships. Their friendship and willingness to work with us has allowed us to contribute to their struggle, which is also ours. Although it seems remote at present, we continue to envision and work for genuine security together.

Notes

¹ See: <http://www.genuinesecurity.org/aboutus/index.html>.

² See: <http://iwnam.org/>.

³ Deep thanks to many others whose scholarship, activism, and friendship have informed this essay and enriched my life, especially Carolyn Francis, Yoko Fukumura, Deborah Lee, Martha Matsuoka, Margo Okazawa-Rey, and Suzuyo Takazato. Thanks to Ayano Ginoza for inviting me to contribute to this issue.

⁴ Thanks to Margo Okazawa-Rey for introducing me to Rosenberg’s work.

⁵ See International Women’s Summit to Redefine Security *Final Statement*, 2000. At http://iwnam.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/6_Conference-Statement-Okinawa-2000.pdf.

⁶ This “we” has included Bay Area members of the Okinawa Peace Network as well as Women for Genuine Security.

⁷ See: <http://iwnam.org/what-we-do/communication/translation/interpretation-is-a-political-act/>.

⁸ See: <http://iwnam.org/about/decolonizing-solidarity/>.

⁹ See <http://iwnam.org/2021/04/13/a-feminist-vision-of-genuine-security-and-creating-a-culture-of-life/>.

¹⁰ In December 2022, the US House of Representatives voted 350-80 in favor of a 2023 National Defense Authorization Act of \$858 billion, the highest ever. See: <https://truthout.org/articles/house-passes-858-billion-military-spending-bill/>.

¹¹ US defense contracts totaled \$408.4 billion in Fiscal Year 2021. The world’s top arms producers are based in the United States, including Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Northrop Grumman, Raytheon, and General Dynamics. See <https://about.bgov.com/top-defense-contractors/>.

¹² <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2022/09/859aeb333e86-govt-to-pursue-us-base-relocation-in-okinawa-despite-tamakis-win.html>.

¹³ Available at <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/livingalongthefenceline> and at <https://www.twn.org/catalog/pages/responsive/cpage.aspx?rec=1437>

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