

Korean Military Wives in *The Women Outside*: Witnessing Violence

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the impact of the U.S. military presence on the lives of Korean women in South Korea. Its primary evidence is *The Women Outside*, a documentary made by J.T. Orinne Takagi and Hye Jung Park, which looks specifically at camp towns, the sex work industry, and the personal experiences of women married to American soldiers. The two main narratives are drawn from Yan Hyang Kim and Chong Sun France, two Korean women who dealt with abuse, prejudice, and social stigma during and after marriages to American military men. Kim's story details abuse in her first marriage, her remarriage, and her move to the U.S., where she faced racial prejudice. France's story focuses on the negative consequences of her abusive marriage, which resulted in the death of her child and a 20-year prison sentence. Theorists like Cynthia Enloe argue that sex work is "naturalized" in military settings, and Heisoo Shin writes that Korean women were exploited as "dollar-earners" for American soldiers. According to Silvia Federici, women's exploitation is a part of larger global economic systems, including neoliberalism and the international division of labor, which perpetuate gendered violence and economic hardship. Ultimately, this paper argues that a revision of the dominant narrative of the U.S. military's role in South Korea is required, recognizing how structural violence and exploitation create gendered hardship for wives and sex workers in Korea.

Introduction

Since the end of the Korean War, U.S. military presence in the peninsula has led to the development of camp towns, a regulated sex work trade, and the intermarriage of thousands of Korean women and American military men. *The Women Outside*, a documentary by J.T. Orinne Takagi and Hye Jung Park, follows the lives of four Korean women—two who remain in the camp towns and two who migrate to the United States via marriages to American soldiers. Yang Hyang Kim and Cho Sung France serve as examples of two opposite ends of a spectrum—one woman assimilates through a successful remarriage, whereas the other is sentenced to twenty years in prison after the accidental death of her child while she is forced to work to support herself. These two stories highlight the complex intersection of gender, economics, and military presence and the general erasure of this violence in their lives. The documentary pushes back against the dominant narrative that the U.S. military is simply a benevolent "big brother" figure and argues that geopolitics and militarism encourage the economic exploitation of women in the camp towns. It also reveals the strong link between domestic violence and military partners, which is supported by studies outside of the film. This paper intends to analyze the complex intersection of cultural, economic, and geopolitical factors that align with the women's stories in the documentary *The Women Outside* in order to expose a cycle of violence and exploitation of Korean comfort women, military wives, and domestic violence survivors that have gone overlooked for decades.

The Women Outside Documentary

The Women Outside is a documentary made by J.T. Orinne Takagi and Hye Jung Park, which looks at the camp towns around U.S. military bases in South Korea and the exploitation of sex workers and military wives of American soldiers. After the Korean War ended in 1953, the U.S. military remained in South Korea to defend against the threat of the North's invasion. Camp towns eventually formed around each base, and regulated "entertainment workers" or sex workers began to populate the camp towns. In 40 years, over 1 million women have worked in the military sex industry in South Korea, but it isn't considered a part of official U.S. history (Takagi and Park, 1996). Takagi and Park emphasize how the U.S. views itself as an elder brother who is responsible for saving Korea from the Communists. But they articulate that Koreans know that Americans look down on their country because of this and that this extends to looking down on Korean women.

The movie establishes that over 100,000 Korean women have become wives of American servicemen—a phenomenon that has been relatively forgotten. But the documentary also points out that 80% of marriages end in divorce, and many women experience domestic violence, mental illness, and economic exploitation. This is a startling statistic which is confirmed by a 1977 article by Bok-Lim C. Kim on Asian Wives of U.S. Servicemen—he writes that a 1975 "National Inquiry on Needs and Problems of Asian Wives of U.S. Servicemen" reported many cases of extreme violence against the women. The women "became known to human service workers through physical abuse, neglect, suicidal attempts, and severe depression, which necessitated immediate interventions" (Kim 108). A lack of nationwide reporting at the time made it difficult to report the exact number of cases, but Kim argues that they are most likely underreported.

By tracing the lives of two women in particular, Yang Hyang Kim and Chong Sun France, the movie offers two contrasting narratives for the resolution of domestic violence within these women's lives. Yang Hyang Kim can leave her abusive first husband and successfully remarry, become pregnant again, and move back to the United States, specifically Hawaii. Another young woman, Chong Sun France, flees her abusive husband in the U.S., only to later be convicted of the murder of her two-year-old son when he's found dead underneath a toppled chest of drawers. One woman successfully remarries, and the other is sentenced to 20 years in prison. There are two main aspects driving the documentary's analysis of the military presence—an unequal hierarchy between the two countries, which is reflected in how the women are treated as sex workers and wives, and an element of economic exploitation.

Korean Patriarchy

Interviewed in the movie, Professor Elaine Kim points to the hierarchy between the two countries. She concludes that there are two things going on—the first being an unequal relationship between the two countries, the US and Korea—but also that the Korean patriarchy plays a significant role. Kim says that Korean culture has "a history of patriarchal practices which makes women's bodies controlled by men" (Takagi and Park 1996). Not only are the women's bodies controlled by the state's practices around them, but they are also economically exploited. Heisoo Shin points out that there's an economic aspect underlying the relationship between the military and the women. The state has previously used the women for national interests, including serving Japanese soldiers and then as prostitutes for American soldiers. Korean women are used economically, "So when Korea needed foreign currency, for example, Korean women were used as dollar-earners" (Takagi and Park 1996).

Witness 1: Yang Hyang Kim

The documentary's main character, Yang Hyang Kim, offers her personal encounter with abuse, which the movie witnesses without necessarily explaining. In the case of these military wives, simply shifting the main narrative from one of happy assimilation to one that observes the presence of violence and trauma begins to revise the story to one

that is more accurate, if not completely explained. The movie's main character, Yang Hyang Kim, tells the story of a Korean woman military wife who experiences abuse in her first marriage and ultimately finds redemption in a more successful second marriage and assimilation into American culture. After being trapped in a brothel, she recounts how a college student spent \$6000 to release her—but that afterward, the stigma of sex work was so significant that her family did not want to spend time with her. One of her cousins told her, "Don't come to our place." Her outsider status meant that the army base was more comfortable for her, so she returned there. She then met her first husband—they married and moved six months later to South Carolina. Eight weeks pregnant, Kim discovered that the military police were trying to arrest her husband for going AWOL. Months later, she gave birth to a baby and then was subjected to extreme physical abuse, "My husband, he abused me with a curtain leg (rod), he abused me with a tennis racket, he abused me with a mop, a mop stick. He abused me and all of my body got abused. My mouth was so bruised—so I could not chew, chew any food, or any soft bread either. I just drank water or juice." The movie offers no direct explanation for this violence—but simply records Kim's story.

The movie then follows Yang Hyang Kim as she dates another American soldier and seems to resolve her experience of physical violence by portraying her successful remarriage and move back to the United States. An interview with the soldier, Tod, features him empathizing with everything that she's been through and observing that she feels like an outsider in both cultures. They eventually marry and move to Hawaii, where Yang Hyang Kim is shown as a newly pregnant housewife—Tod explains that Hawaii is good for her because there are other Korean women and even a Korean TV channel. But Kim continues to experience prejudice from the other military wives, who can't understand how she married an American soldier since she comes from such a "poor" country.

Domestic Violence and Immigrant Women

An essay on domestic violence experienced by immigrant women analyzes what makes women vulnerable to domestic violence after they've moved to a foreign country. Uma Narayan focuses specifically on women whose immigrant status is dependent on their husbands. But Narayan also cites a study that violence is most common in military couples, "One study indicated that military men used weapons on their wives twice as often as civilians and that three-fourths of the cases were life-threatening, compared to one-third of cases involving civilians" (Narayan 106). Kim's experience of being beaten with a curtain rod seems to follow this observation of military men using weapons more often than civilians. Another article by Anita Raj and Jay Silverman highlights that isolation is an issue for immigrant military wives and arranged brides—and that there is little sympathy for the women because the general opinion is that the women "are taking advantage of American men and the U.S. economy" (371). Raj and Silverman write that the women often receive little sympathy and that there have been more than 200,000 immigrant military wives since World War II, most of them Asian (371).

An in-depth study of the camp towns by Ji-Yeon Yuh also highlights how many military wives have to grapple with American cultural practices. Yuh argues that many have to grapple with a "double minority" status and that they are also in "constant negotiation with American cultural hegemony" (3). Once military wives move to the United States, they are forced to deal with the problem of assimilation and different forms of racism and sexism. Yuh writes, "The neo-imperialist relationship between South Korea and the United States has shaped the ways in which these women have experienced and encountered America" (3). Rather than portray the United States as just a military ally, Yuh points out that the relationship between the two countries has a profound impact on how women navigate their lives in a new country. In *Haunting the Korean Diaspora*, Grace M. Cho continues this study of sex workers and G.I. brides, pointing out how military violence comes to be hidden in women's intimate lives. She writes, "The war bride, as the pioneer of Korean migration to the United States, then operates as a figure for the disappearance of geopolitical violence into the realm of the domestic. And what better place to bury a social trauma than in the closely guarded space of the family?" (Cho 14). The family becomes a site of disappearing; women like Yang Hyang Kim come to be viewed as failed wives rather than survivors of domestic violence.

Witness 2: Chong Sun France

The movie contrasts this successful narration of assimilation with the story of Chong Sun France. Her conviction depicts the interplay of race, economy, and morality imposed on immigrants, especially the wives of military wives. It also hints again at the high prevalence of domestic violence and how it is often hidden under the narrative that Raj and Silverman pointed out, that the women are "taking advantage of American men" (371). France received little sympathy from the jurors due to overlapping myths of women taking advantage and also engaging in immoral sex work. The movie explains that Chong Sun France came to the United States as a soldier's wife in the 80s, but after fearing an abusive husband, fled to a military base near Jacksonville. She was arrested in 1987 after she left her son and thirteen-month-old daughter alone at home while she went to work, only to return later and find the son dead. An appellate attorney interviewed in the movie explains that the prosecution tried to paint her as an "immoral woman" who was engaged in an immoral business so that, therefore, it was likely that she also killed her child. This sense that military wives are immoral and greedy isn't uncommon.

Within the documentary, Professor Cynthia Enloe discusses the military's importance in influencing gender roles. She argues that sex work, in general, has come to be expected or "naturalized" because military commanders think that men need sexual access to maintain morale. Prostitution becomes "naturalized" because of this mentality, but Enloe argues that it's actually a highly regulated process. Enloe also points out that "entertainment workers" and Korean military wives are never supposed to be the same women—yet they often overlap. These two very contradictory attitudes in the American military reveal the hypocrisy in how the military treats women and the gender roles assigned to them by governments. Professor Elaine Kim explains as well that once these women immigrate to the United States, they have to navigate anti-immigrant sentiment and racism while generally lacking job skills. Many end up working in bars or in the US sex trade again because they have no other skills. For the prosecution to have viewed Chong Sun France as "immoral" erases greater processes that led to her having to leave her children home alone while she went to work.

Gender, Labor, and Structural Violence

Silvia Federici's look at globalization and the new international division of labor provides a potential explanation for why these military wives struggle in low-wage jobs after experiencing a newly globalized sex work industry. Federici cites neoliberal economic policies as a foundation for understanding why domestic violence is also still relatively unrecognized by political organizations like the United Nations. In "Reproduction and Feminist Struggle in the New International Division of Labor," Federici writes that campaigns against gender violence focus on domestic violence, ignoring the greater structural violence at the heart of neoliberal processes. This structural violence arises from the development of the NIDL, or a new international division of labor that emerged in the 1970s due to changes in economic structures such as free trade policies (Federici 67). Unregulated Free Trade Zones and new "global assembly lines" supposedly liberated women by offering them more work, but closer analysis reveals unsafe working conditions and low wages in these new industrial zones. Federici writes that capitalist relations are still based on separating producers from their means of reproduction, as well as "cuts in social services, land expropriation, massacres, famines, wars" to "expropriate populations who, until recently, had access to land and natural resources" (Federici 69).

Gender and Economic Exploitation

Unsurprisingly, this economic exploitation coincides with an increase in the global sex industry, especially for the U.S. Army. Federici writes that it has developed "especially in parts of Asia (Thailand, South Korea, Philippines)....serving an international clientele, including the U.S. Army who, since the Vietnam War, has used these countries as Rest and Recreation areas" (Federici 72). So, the NIDL, under the guise of industrialization and Free Trade

Zones, continues to further the economic exploitation of women by reinforcing gender hierarchies and roles that continue to confine women to low-wage jobs with little social mobility. This captures the case of Chong Sun France, who was unable to provide for herself after divorcing her military husband in the United States.

Crucially, though, Federici observes that even the United Nations and seemingly neutral government parties have ignored these structural issues. She writes that the UN "has ignored the violence inherent in the process of capitalist accumulation, the violence of the famines, wars and counterinsurgency programs that, through the '80s and '90s, have cleared the way to economic globalization" (66). A recent United Nations fact sheet and a Ford Foundation study both show this inability to address a broader spectrum of international and structural violence. Under the United Nations' UNITE campaign, a fact sheet titled "Violence Against Women: The Situation" the sheet describes how violence is global and not tied to specific cultures or regions. It gives a quick summary of what the cause might be, writing briefly that "The roots of violence against women lie in persistent discrimination against women." Whereas Federici points at the NIDL and globalization, the United Nations focuses only on gender discrimination.

Domestic Violence in Military Families

A search for studies on violence specifically against Asian-American Women led to a Ford Foundation study, which observed, but didn't explain, that domestic violence is higher in military families. The study writes that domestic violence is "at least as prevalent in the Asian American population as the general American population and may be higher in certain Asian subgroups" (129). A footnote clarifies that the subgroup includes Asian military wives, especially in Hawai'i populations with a large military population. The study explains that it's been observed that "Asian immigrant women married to US servicemen have fewer financial and social resources, suffer from prejudices against interracial marriages, and are especially vulnerable to abuse" (page 129). This explanation takes on a greater scope than the jury who convicted Chong Sun France, but it still does not tie the "vulnerability" to abuse to larger structures of violence. The violence remains gendered and tied very closely with the women's economic disadvantage rather than processes of globalization and imperialism.

Gender and Continuums of Violence

When analyzing the violence committed against Korean sex workers and military wives of American soldiers, it is useful to consider an analysis of how violence functions in international relations on a larger scale. In Ann Tickner's *Gender in International Relations*, Tickner proposes that women's experiences of insecurity occur on a "multidimensional continuum of violence" (Tickner e-book). This continuum includes violence in the home, poverty, ecological violence, and war (Tickner e-book). Violence can be analyzed in relation to state formations—international relations, in general, is focused on the dichotomy between the foreign and the domestic.

The outside is a space where violence isn't regulated, and the domestic state's security focuses on protecting against this outside violence. The documentary called attention to these boundary distinctions through Yang Hyang Kim and Chong Sun France—Kim could remain "inside" American borders through a successful remarriage, whereas Sun France remained "outside" after her divorce. In a way, by divorcing her husband, France didn't condone the violence committed against her. Unfortunately, this form of resistance intersected with her economic disadvantage, and so she continued to remain seen as a kind of security threat for her "immoral" work.

National and Domestic Spaces

However, feminist perspectives of global security attempt to revise these boundary distinctions. Tickner writes that domestic violence is closely related to conceptions of national security in that violence across all levels of society is interrelated. Tickner writes that feminist revisions of categories of state and other emphasize "the interrelationship of

violence at all levels of society—as well as its relation to family violence, which also takes place in spaces that are usually beyond the sanction of the law" (Tickner ebook). The domestic family space is usually "beyond the sanction of the law." Still, as numerous reports on domestic violence in Asian-American homes show, the military's influence extends into the private lives, subjectivities, and identities of military wives and sex workers.

Double Outsiders and the US Military Presence

The Women Outside begins the work of exposing the American military's violent presence, which has created a highly-regulated sex work industry that renders Korean women "double outsiders" and that has contributed to violent marriages that leave many women isolated in a new country. Successful marriage is presented as Yang Hyang Kim's main escape path, but this doesn't provide a true path of resistance. For Chong Sun France, divorce and returning to sex work meant a temporary escape from an abusive husband, but she remained trapped in low-wage work without assistance from the government or military. Further analysis would help to understand what exactly about the military leads to such a high prevalence of domestic violence in the private and family lives of sex workers who wind up marrying military men—but the first step in these cases is witnessing their existence when organizations like the UN and the Ford Foundation are unwilling to analyze structural violence even as they attempt to address global gender violence.

More recently, organizations like the RAND Corporation have continued to report and analyze the prevalence of domestic violence in the US military. Sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, their 2023 report details gaps in strategies for approaches to domestic abuse prevention (Miller iii). The primary suggestions follow the CDC model of domestic abuse prevention: teaching safe relationship skills, providing economic support to families, and creating protective community environments (Miller 72). While this report indicates the US government is investing in the research and prevention of domestic violence among its officers and families, it still does not show a greater structural analysis similar to theorists like Federici and Enloe.

Meanwhile, journalists continue to report on the U.S. military's creation of a sex trade, perpetuating the role of Korean comfort women even after Japan's colonial era. In 2023, Choe Sang-Hun reported in the New York Times on how the South Korean government worked with the U.S. to provide "comfort towns" or sites for sex trade to American soldiers. In 2022, 100 women won a case against the South Korean government for compensation for the sexual trauma they experienced, based on the fact the government encouraged prostitution to maintain its American military alliance (Sang-Hun). Even within their own country, these 'comfort women' were treated as outsiders and made to sacrifice their bodies for the military's greater goals.

Conclusion

The documentary *The Women Outside* depicts the stories of Yang Hyang Kim and Chong Sun France, Korean women who faced challenges as military wives, such as domestic abuse, racial discrimination, and economic exploitation. Since the Korean War, U.S. military presence in South Korea has created a sex work trade and increased marriages to American soldiers, but there has not been a corresponding increase in support for women impacted by this presence. Patriarchal structures and unequal power between the U.S. and Korea have been factors in the abuse of these women. Domestic violence within immigrant marriages is more pervasive than commonly known and often overlooked as women are told to be grateful for their economic opportunities. In a broader context, gender, labor, and structural violence offer insight into how women continue to be exploited due to neoliberal economic policies, as analyzed by Silvia Federici. More recently, although nonprofit organizations like the RAND Corporation have presented research on how to address domestic violence in military settings, the systemic issues that contribute to women's oppression in South Korea and abroad remain. Finally, this documentary provides crucial evidence to support further research

into how structural violence, particularly stemming from the patriarchy and divisions of labor, contributes to the oppression and marginalization of these women, who become outsiders in both their home and new countries.

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