

NAPIESV

**NATIONAL ORGANIZATION
OF ASIANS & PACIFIC ISLANDERS
ENDING SEXUAL VIOLENCE**

U.S. Military, Sexual Violence, & the API Community Roundtable Discussion Report

The National Organization of Asians & Pacific Islanders Ending Sexual Violence (NAPIESV) hosted its third roundtable on the relationship between the U.S. military and sexual violence in API communities in Portland, Oregon, from April 4 to April 6, 2023.

Background

NAPIESV has been invested in the issue of sexual violence committed by the U.S. military since its inception as a program aiding API organizations across the country and in the U.S. territories to improve services for sexual assault survivors. NAPIESV, the national arm of Monsoon Asians and Pacific Islanders in Solidarity – a dual domestic violence and sexual assault organization for API victims/survivors in Iowa -- has received numerous outcries for help from victims, each with complex circumstances and trauma not depicted in news headlines. NAPIESV Director Nina Jusuf, a former Executive Director of San Francisco Women Against Rape (SFWAR) in the early 2000s, said the issue of sexual violence has been focused on individual trauma without consideration of the role of family and community so interconnected in victims' experiences of suffering and the key to their healing. Jusuf added that this difficult topic required a space that promoted a personal and intimate conversation to fully ascertain the significant effects of sexual trauma on the individual and society at large.

The impetus behind convening the roundtable discussion stemmed from the imperative to address the often-neglected aspects of military sexual violence. These aspects encompass the impact of the military on civilian victims, individuals engaged in the sex trade, native populations residing near military installations, and the enduring legacy of trauma, affecting not only those directly impacted but also their descendants and entire communities.

This report is dedicated to disseminating the valuable information, insights, and ideas that emerged during the third roundtable session. Additionally, it outlines the strategies and initiatives that NAPIESV intends to pursue in order to further deepen its understanding of military sexual trauma and to bolster the provision of services to victims of sexual violence within API (Asian and Pacific Islander) communities.

Demographics

Seven (7) individuals participated in the three-day discussion; most participants were current or former military personnel and enlisted military. Two participants were from Guam, and the rest were from the continental United States. Three participants were from communities of color besides Asians and Pacific Islanders (API). All participants identified as female.

Asians & Pacific Islanders in the U.S. Military

Asians and Pacific Islanders (API) have served in the U.S. military since the early days of the country, with records showing Asian immigrant soldiers during the War of 1812. Asian Americans played a significant role in World War II, the most well-known example is the 442nd Regimental Combat Team composed of mostly Japanese Americans who fought in Europe despite facing discrimination and the internment of their families back home. API continued to serve in subsequent conflicts, including the Korean War, Vietnam War, Afghanistan War, and Iraq War.

In addition to the establishment of U.S. military bases in the Philippines during the American occupation that began in 1898, Filipinos were actively recruited to serve in the U.S. Navy.¹ Notably, Filipinos were the only Asians who served in the United States military in substantial numbers despite not possessing U.S. citizenship.² Following the acquisition of the Philippines, the U.S. Navy significantly escalated its recruitment efforts among Filipinos. What started with a modest number of nine recruits in 1903 surged to around 4,000 during the 1920s and 1930s. Even after the Philippines gained independence following World War II, the recruitment of Filipinos into the U.S. Navy continued. The 1947 Military Base Agreement between the newly independent Philippines and the United States contained provisions that allowed the United States to continue recruiting Filipinos for its military forces. Interestingly, these military bases played dual roles: not only did they function as crucial coaling stations and symbolic representations of America's regional presence, they also served as recruitment centers for Filipinos aspiring to serve as stewards and mess boys in the Navy. Notably, during the 1960s, an astonishing number of around 100,000 Filipinos would apply to join the U.S. Navy each year.³ However, due to an exceptionally high

¹ Espiritu, Yen Le. "Colonial oppression, labour, and importation and group formation: Filipinos in the United States." *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, January 1996, Volume 19 Issue 1, p.33.

² Espiritu, p.15

³ Espiritu, p.37

reenlistment rate of 94-99 percent among Filipinos, only a limited number of new enlistees were admitted. By the 1970s, the presence of Filipinos within the U.S. Navy had grown to surpass the number of personnel in the Philippine Navy itself, underscoring the substantial impact and significance of this recruitment phenomenon.⁴

According to the Department of Defense (DOD) 2020 Demographics Profile of the Military Community, “(M)embers who report themselves as White make up the highest percentage of Active Duty members (68.9%), while Black or African American members represent 17.2 percent. Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Multi-racial members each make up less than 5.0 percent of Active Duty members.⁵

Sexual Violence in War Time Perpetrated by the U.S. Military in Asia

Sexual violence as a tool of war is not a recent phenomenon but has a long and tragic history. Starting with the ancient world, sexual violence has been used to subjugate, intimidate, and demoralize populations, as well as to assert power and control over individuals. In Asia, there have been various instances of sexual violence in the context of armed conflict and military occupations. A few examples of sexual violence that the U.S. military perpetrated include:

- Occupation of the Philippines after the Spanish-American War: After the Spanish-American War, which concluded with the signing of the Treaty of Paris in December 1898, the United States acquired several territories, including the Philippines, from Spain. The subsequent Philippine-American War, from 1899 to 1902, and years of American colonial rule created a fraught environment where sexual violence against Filipino women by American soldiers was widely reported.
- Occupation of Japan after World War II: Following the end of WWII, Japan was occupied by U.S. forces from 1945 to 1952 as part of the broader Allied effort to demilitarize the country. Sexual violence and exploitation of Japanese women occurred through coerced or forced prostitution, rape, and assault.
- Korean War: Sexual violence against Korean women by U.S. soldiers occurred in the broader context of war and military occupation. The Korean War, which took place from 1950 to 1953, was a conflict between North Korea, supported by China and the Soviet Union, and South Korea, supported by the United States. Reports of rape, harassment, and other forms of violence were made during military operations, occupation, and interactions between U.S. soldiers and Korean civilians.

⁴ Espiritu, Yen Le. “Colonial oppression, labour and importation and group formation: Filipinos in the United States,” *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, January 1996, Vol. 19 Issue 1. p.37.

⁵ <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2020-demographics-report.pdf>

- Vietnam War: The United States military faced allegations of sexual assault and rape against Vietnamese women, including the infamous case known as the My Lai Massacre in 1968, where American soldiers participated in the rape and murder of Vietnamese women.
- Contemporary Cases: Allegations of sexual assault against local women by U.S. military personnel stationed in countries like South Korea and Japan have led to protests and discussions about the impact of military presence on local communities.

Sexual Violence: Beyond War

“There have been few explorations into the sexual assault committed by U.S. military officers against women in Asia, specifically those who work near the military bases,” shared by Mira Yusef, NAPIESV Program Co-Director and the Executive Director of Monsoon.

It is important to note that “red light districts” are established adjacent to the military bases supporting the growth of the sex trade, a well-known example is the U.S. Subic Naval Base, located in Olongapo City, Philippines. The military base in Subic is a significant U.S. naval installation that played a crucial role in U.S. military operations and presence in the Asia-Pacific region for several decades. It was known to have a vigorous red-light district, particularly in the nearby city of Olongapo. With the presence of many U.S. military servicemen seeking entertainment and services during their time off, Olongapo's entertainment industry grew to cater to their needs. This led to the establishment of bars, nightclubs, brothels, and other establishments that operated in the red-light district. The Subic Naval Base highlights the complexities of military presence, cultural interactions, and the broader impact of military bases on local communities.

According to the Army Civilian Service, more than 330,000 civilians work on military bases in fields such as health care, science, mathematics, finance, cybersecurity, engineering, and human resources. Sexual violence against civilians on military bases refers to instances where civilians, often living near military installations or conflict zones, become victims of sexual assault perpetrated by military personnel or others associated with the military. This can occur during armed conflicts, in peacetime, or during military occupations.

Sexual assault committed by active or inactive military officers outside of military bases are also not often discussed, as well as assault on individuals who are in the sex trade near military bases such as Guam, a U.S. territory which hosts two strategic military bases.

Wisdom from the Discussion

Toxic Masculinity & Sexual Violence

“I had to tap into my masculine energy and really just become a different person in order to command respect.” – R

“...oftentimes we talk about ...who are the bad guys and how to identify the bad but often we do not see or have models of the healthy male.” – C

“People don’t want to talk about it [toxic masculinity] ...It’s so ingrained. How do you change that?” - M

The U.S. military has been a traditionally male-dominated institution, and its culture and training can sometimes reinforce hyper masculine ideals by emphasizing physical strength, emotional resilience, and an unwavering commitment to duty. This has created an environment where expressions of vulnerability, emotional well-being, and alternative forms of masculinity may be stigmatized or shunned. Hypermasculine ideals can lay the groundwork for toxic masculinity and sow the seeds for sexual violence; we contemplated how to even begin to reform an institution that is so informed by toxic masculinity and vulnerable to instances of sexual violence.

Mission Comes First

“Mission is going to come before a victim. The mission is going to come before an alleged perpetrator. The mission is the mission.” – M

Participants noted that an example of the military’s commitment to duty could be seen in members’ fidelity to their mission, which are specific tasks or objectives assigned to military units or individuals. The integrity of the mission must be protected at all costs, even in the context of sexual assault. Leaders may feel like they have no time to fully respond to a concern or incident because they are preoccupied with accomplishing the mission. Sexual assault victims may hold back disclosure to finish their mission. Participants who worked with victims shared how often reports were made a year after an assault – or after a mission was completed.

“Othering:” A Climate of Hostility

In addition, we noted that toxic masculinity not only contributed to a climate of hostility towards women, but also LBGTQ+ individuals. Lynn Rosenthal, Director of Sexual and Gender-based Violence at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, said men that were sexually assaulted in the military had longer histories of sexual harassment which were expressed in anti-gay slurs. Rosenthal said, **“this ‘othering’ was not just about women but anyone who was different from [the] white, cisgender norm.”**

Emasculation of API Males

“Recently when I went to Pohnpei this woman was explaining to me that her son, who is in the [U.S.] military, can never hold a leadership position...he is not of U.S. citizenship...he is exempted from an officer position.” – C

The emasculation of Asian men is often intertwined with intersecting forms of discrimination based on race and ethnicity. The intersectionality of racism and emasculation can compound the challenges faced by Asian men, affecting their self-esteem, relationships, and opportunities for social and professional advancement. Our group discussed the oppressive histories of API men and other men of color in the military. One area where racism was most stark were the barriers to career advancement and opportunities. For example, during World War II, Filipino soldiers fought alongside American forces as part of the Philippine Commonwealth Army but were paid less than white soldiers, had limited opportunities for promotion, and lived in segregated military units. Participants shared that to this day Filipinos, who have a long history of serving in the U.S. military, are often referred to as the “Filipino mafia” for members tendency to socialize closely with each other, which is likely the result of a long history of exclusion, cultural insensitivity or “othering.”

We discussed how emasculation is attributed often to all API males, but Pacific Islander men may be an exception as current media has highlighted hakas and other ceremonial aspects illustrating warrior culture. It must be noted that while Pacific Islander men may be depicted as strong warriors, this also can turn into a stereotype and does not allow for nuance or diversity.

The portrayal of API men as less masculine -- or meek, submissive, socially awkward and lacking in sexual appeal – was not noted as a factor in terms of their vulnerability to sexual assault or harassment. However, we discussed the negative impact that emasculation has on the individual and the propensity to overcompensate by embracing toxic masculine traits. It is important to address the emasculation of API men by challenging stereotypes and promoting inclusivity and diverse representations.

Hyper-Sexualization of API women

While racism and the legacy of colonization emasculated API men, the stereotypes that abound for API women emphasize their perceived exoticism, submissiveness, and hypersexuality. We have seen the consequences of these stereotypes in the streak of violent crimes against API which started during the COVID-19 pandemic – most victims were Asian women. There is a connection between female victims of recent anti-Asian hate incidents and the long history of violent misogyny against API women – the root cause being the perception of API women as docile objects, making them easy targets of aggression. In our group we contemplated how hyper-sexualization has impacted the way API female enlisted personnel are treated, as well as native women around military installations.

Role of U.S. Military in Asia's Sex Trade

The U.S. military has played a unique role in cultivating and expanding the hyper-sexualized image of API women. The sex trade around U.S. bases in Asia has been an institution found wherever US forces are stationed since the mid-20th century – places like Japan, Okinawa, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Taiwan, and the Pacific Islands. It was U.S. military expansion that gave rise to Asia's notorious sex entertainment industry. The sex trade swelled to cater to the American military amidst political and economic distress, and some local economies became dependent on the presence of the military and its personnel.

The commercial sex industry not only includes consensual sex work, but also instances of exploitation and trafficking of adults and minors. Our group discussed how it is almost cliché for officers to use their military “R&R” – which stands for “rest and recuperation” – to visit brothels and expel their most debauched desires. Male sexuality is assumed to be uncontrollable and in need of regular release, so there is little oversight into misbehavior. Oversight and accountability become even more challenging when jurisdiction is considered, and enforcement due to legal frameworks and the extraterritorial nature of military bases.

Sexual Assault of Civilian Women

An important realization from the roundtable discussion was the lack of data regarding the rate of sexual assault against civilian women by U.S. military officers, as well as resources within the military available to these victims. The singular report released by the Independent Review Commission tasked with making changes to address sexual assault in the military did not include recommendations for civilian victims. Although some of our participants noted that civilian victims often have no desire to seek military justice after an assault, we discussed the need to offer them resources within the military.

Prevention is Key

“I believe that true primary prevention is changing the mindset of the potential perpetrators. Kids are learning about things like sex and healthy relationships and power and control ...they are talking about topics that in the past, you just learned from your friends or your family.” – R

“The military is a microcosm to the greater society.”- L

The culture of the military must change to prevent sexual assault. We agreed that to achieve this goal resources have to be channeled to sexual violence prevention and not just

sexual assault response. The disciplinary process within the military certainly needs improvement, but the most significant work should be done before sexual violence occurs.

We noted that prevention at the age of the average enlisted military member, which is between 18 to 25 years old, is often too late. While it is crucial to continue training and education on sexual violence and healthy sexuality, the learning should start early, in primary education.

Military Service Academies & Sexual Assault Epidemic

“...these people [in military academy] are going to be officers in the military, who are going to leave and they are accused of sexual assault.” - M

“You have to think about the 24-hour nature of military life. And that’s why they can start to feel so trapped.” - L

It has been widely reported that sexual violence has spiked at U.S. military academies. In 2023, student-reported assaults at the Army, Navy and Air Force academies jumped 18 percent overall compared to 2022, and was the highest number reported since data was collected. Our group noted that the recent figures are only part of a concerning pattern that has existed for decades at military service academies, which are essentially the training grounds for future military leaders.

We noted the similarities between the sexual assault epidemic seen at U.S. colleges and universities and military service academies. Both involve young people between the ages of approximately 17 and 23 who live in proximity and are far from home and their usual surroundings. Alcohol and substance abuse also are part of sexual assault incidents on college campuses and military academies, as well as peer pressure.

Although we need to continue looking at military academies, it’s important to ensure sexual violence prevention reaches other military gatherings or groups, such as boot camp and the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) and Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC), a college program and high school program, respectively, that prepares young adults to become officers in the U.S. Military.

In addition, our group acknowledged that sexual violence reports with high numbers can be perceived as a mixed blessing. While high numbers are alarming, small numbers of reported sexual assault can suggest a culture that does not make victims feel safe to disclose and seek help. High numbers of reported sexual assault may imply that the military has been successful at reducing the fear of reporting.

Action Plan: The Time is Now

“This is the time. If there was ever a time, this is it”. - M

“Sexual assault is taken more seriously. People are being held more accountable than in the past.” – R

In 2021 Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin established a 90-day Independent Review Commission on sexual assault in the military. The commission’s report was lauded by some advocates as a significant reform of military justice. The legislation that followed—passed as part of the fiscal 2022 National Defense Authorization Act—directs a slew of changes, including making sexual harassment a crime under the Uniform Code of Military Justice and creating a special trial prosecutor in each military service to manage 11 specific offenses. Commanders, who advocates have said had too much power and biases to be involved in investigations, also were removed from the prosecution of sexual assault; this role would be steered by a new prosecutorial office.

Although some advocates believe the changes do not go far enough – commanders still can approve witnesses, decide whether someone can be dismissed, and negotiate a settlement – our participants within the military said this indicated a cultural shift that has been a long time coming.

They said real changes have occurred, and more are in store. The military’s sexual assault program has been split between response and prevention, and historically responders outnumbered prevention workers. For the first time a priority has been placed on sexual violence prevention with the creation of preventionist jobs open not only to military members, but civilians. Participants working within the military said this new prevention workforce will want to be part of community conversations about military sexual violence and will seek collaboration with community partners to aid victims and combat sexual assault.

Collaboration with Culturally Specific Technical Assistance Programs

We talked about the importance of connecting the military with culturally specific sexual assault organizations to provide sexual assault training and introduce culturally rooted healing modalities. However, a great challenge would be civilian advocates’ limited understanding of the culture and language of the military and the hesitation of military leadership to work with anyone who did not have this knowledge.

Command Culture: The Importance of Buy-in from Leadership

“There is this barrier that we want to protect our own.” – M

“You could do two things at one time. You can address the sort of toxic masculinity, the toxic leadership issues, the oppressive leadership, and at the same time, have respectful relationships with military leaders that you do believe are doing a good job.”

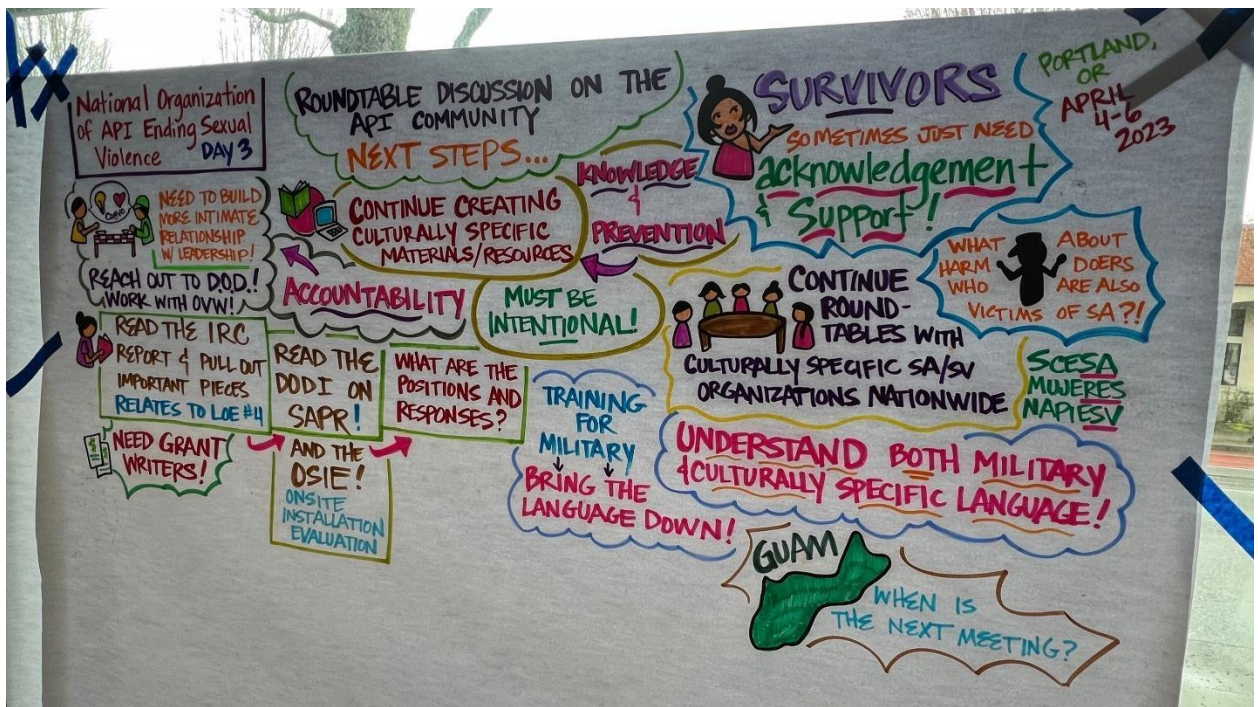
– L

Command culture plays a crucial role in shaping the overall ethos of the military, and in the context of addressing sexual violence, it means effective advocacy requires an authentic collaboration with military leaders. This will require efforts by civilian advocates to learn the language and the culture of the military.

NAPIESV: Our Next Steps

When we decided to host the roundtable on military sexual violence, we understood the subject was daunting and that participants would raise more questions than provide answers. We believed it was essential to have the convening and the conversation. This important first step connected civilian advocates with military advocates and illuminated the need to collaborate.

NAPIESV plans to hold additional roundtables on the relationship between the U.S. military and sexual violence and will expand the conversation to other cultural communities impacted by the military. We plan to focus on Guam as a starting point for advocacy and collaboration with military leadership because Guam, a U.S. territory since 1898, has been characterized by its connection with the U.S. as a territory and its ongoing relationship with the U.S. military. Moreover, the history of Guam reflects its role as a crossroads of colonization and military power in the Pacific region as its indigenous population, the Chamorro people, struggle to maintain their cultural identity amidst military occupation and different colonial powers.



Participants

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