

Asian and Pacific Islander Survivors: Barriers to Access

Background

Asian and Pacific Islander populations in the U.S. have tremendous ethnic,¹ demographic, and linguistic diversity.² In addition to API communities' demographic diversity of LGBTQ,³ rural, urban, youth, elderly, first-and multi-generation immigrants, and refugees, there is significant variation in socioeconomic status⁴ and acculturation levels, depending on education⁵, English fluency⁶, employment, family and community support, health, and well-being.

Based on a compilation of studies, 21-55% of Asian women experience domestic violence (physical and/or sexual) during their lifetime.⁷ The low end of the range is close to the NISVS data, i.e., that 19.6% of Asian or Pacific Islander women reported experiencing rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner. However, the high end of the range is higher than prevalence findings for American Indians or Alaskan Native women (46.0%), Black women (43.7%), Hispanic women (37.1%), and White women (34.6%).⁸

Organizing around domestic and other forms of gender-based violence has been central to the activism and leadership of API women. There are currently over 160 (up from ~70 programs first counted in 2001) established and start-up programs⁹ in 36 states and territories and spanning all U.S. regions that explicitly address the special circumstances, challenges and complexities specific to API survivors. These programs have amassed a wealth of expertise and innovative practices.

¹ We include people of Arab/West Asian/Middle Eastern origin (though Arabs are categorized as Whites in Census).

² The U.S. Census recognizes 20 Asian and Native Hawaiian & Other Pacific Islander (NHOPI) ethnic groups and over 100 languages spoken by these groups.

³ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning. A 2005 study of pan-Asian Pacific American LGBT community members by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute found that they varied greatly along ethnic, religious, language, citizenship and class lines. 96% of the respondents agreed that homophobia and/or transphobia is a problem in their community, and more than 82% agreed that they experienced racism within the white LGBT community. From aapidata.com on 5-12-15.

⁴ In 2010, the median household income for Asian Indians was \$86,660 (up from \$78,315 in 2006) but only \$45,953 for Bangladeshis. Eleven Asian ethnic groups have poverty rates above the national average (9.9%); 24.5% Hmong live below the poverty line. Census Bureau, 2007-09 American Community Survey 3-year estimates.

⁵ Some Asians are more likely to have graduated college than the general population (29.3% vs. 17.6%), but 4 Southeast Asian groups have some of the lowest educational levels in the nation. U.S. Census Bureau, 2007-09 American Community Survey 3-year estimates.

⁶ An estimated 32.4% of the Asian population has limited English proficiency according to the 2010 U.S. Census.

⁷ Yoshihama M., and Dabby, C. (2015). Facts & Stats: Domestic Violence in Asian & Pacific Islander Homes, Updated 2015. Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence

⁸ Black M, et al. (2011). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2010 Summary Report. Washington, DC: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

⁹ Based on data collected in 2015-2016 by API-GBV for our national directory on Domestic Violence Programs serving API survivors.

Their visibility and effectiveness is evidenced by increased public awareness in API communities: small programs are seeing a large number of callers indicative of changes in the help-seeking attitudes of survivors,¹⁰ a large volume of unfunded work,¹¹ and an overwhelming demand for services¹² that are also reflected in national trends.¹³ They build programs fundamental to their community: 82% provide services in one or more Asian languages (including Arabic), 18% in over 10 Asian languages.

Whilst most of these programs started off with a focus on domestic violence, they keep expanding to address multiple forms of gender-based violence (GBV) affecting APIs such as abuse by in-laws, abusive international marriages, child abuse, dating/hook-up abuse, elder abuse, forced marriage, homicide prevention, LGBTQ intimate partner violence, sexual assault, sexual violence experienced by refugees in conflict zones and camps, trafficking of domestic and international victims, and transnational abandonment.

The successful history of institutional or systems advocacy is a corner stone of the battered women's movement. The reach of systems has grown, in large part due to the recognition of the complexity of violence against women and its consequences and the co-occurrence of problems such as domestic violence and child abuse; the need for coordinated responses across multiple systems; and attempts to ameliorate unintended consequences. Ironically, many unintended consequences of system interventions have grown out of multi-system involvements, in which gender and race-based discrimination in separate systems have converged. When systems are survivor-centered, they are empowering, just, fair – serving as vehicles for change. API programs and advocates have built collaborations to ensure that systems are gateways, not barriers, to services and prevention.

Barriers to Access

By dint of their immigrant, refugee, and/or other historically marginalized identities, API survivors face barriers that are compounded by socio-cultural factors such as economics (e.g., dependency on men as sole wage-earners in traditional families, low wage work for immigrant women), immigration status (e.g., threats of deportation), culture (e.g., tightly prescribed gender roles), religion (e.g., expectations to submit to male authority), systems failure (e.g., in providing interpreters), homophobia, victim-blaming communities, and limited English proficiency (LEP).

¹⁰ Narika in Berkeley, CA, responded to over 1,500 calls and emails for support from January 1-December 31, 2015 while working with 200 families over the course of the year. From www.narika.org on 5-12-16.

¹¹ In a one year period, 22 organizations spent a total of 9,200 (mostly volunteer) hours on outreach sessions that reached a total of 31,500 individuals. Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence, Unpublished data.

¹² Asian Women's Shelter reports providing almost 4,000 shelter bed nights for Asian women and children and responding to over 700 crisis calls. From www.sfaws.org.

¹³ National Network to End Domestic Violence found in its 2015 24-hour census that 71,000 individuals were provided services on that day while 12,197 additional requests were not met because of a lack of resources. From www.nnedv.org on 5-12-16.

In the changing landscape of gender violence, unique dynamics, new trends, stringent barriers, and increased manipulation by batterers, API survivors face complex service barriers. Trends include: increased rates of abusive international marriages; survivors losing custody of their children as batterers exploit a partner's LEP and immigration status (regardless of whether the mother is documented or not)¹⁴; familicides; the hyper-exploitation of household labor as a form of elder abuse, where elders are forced to cook, clean, babysit, care for sick relatives, etc.; and transnational abandonments or 'marry-and-dump' occurring after periods as short as 3 months. Unique domestic violence dynamics in API homes, such as abuse by male and female in-laws and/or abuse related to immigration status compound barriers because these dynamics and trends are not well-understood, and at times not even identified as domestic violence.

Sub-groups of API survivors can face unique barriers: Islamophobia exerts a chilling effect on the help-seeking behaviors of Muslim survivors; refugees from conflict zones cope with the triple traumas of war, escape/refugee camps, and re-settlement; immigrants can face daily macro-and micro-aggression; victims with limited English proficiency struggle to be understood and establish their credibility; individuals trapped in sex trafficking are all too often treated as criminals instead of victims; and LGBTQ Asian and Pacific Islander survivors are confronted by a tangle of homophobic familial, community and systemic structures.

Because patriarchal community norms and leaders prevent change instead of preventing gender violence; survivors and their children contend with community-generated barriers. Community reinforcements that keep gender violence in place utilize victim blaming, silencing, shaming, and rejecting survivors who speak up or seek help. Because the nexus of battered women's public disclosure and shame is strong, batterers enjoy covert or overt community support and even immunity from accountability.

Help-seeking is severely compromised by barriers, backlash, and trauma. All too often, women have experienced or been exposed to violence across the lifespan and these abuses can be accompanied by negative help-seeking experiences. Negative help-seeking experiences in the past influence future attempts. Japanese women analogize help-seeking to being trapped in a spider web – the more one struggles to get out, the more the web tightens. Indian women use the image of a spring – where with each incident the coils of the spring tighten to end in feelings of subjugation and despair. Complex trauma has long-term negative impacts in many domains and a convergence of different sources and types of traumas can and do impinge on trust, including trusting an advocate. Though trauma has been understood as an effect of gender-based violence, it has also come to be seen as a barrier to help-seeking and healing – and the move to establish trauma-informed systems and interventions attests to that.

Survivors from Asian and Pacific Islander (API) communities face batterer-generated, family-and community-generated, and system-generated barriers, exerted in, and fortified by, a culture of hostility towards immigrants and refugees.

¹⁴ Asian Women's Shelter, San Francisco, reported in 2011 that almost half the battered women in the shelter are coming from jail, following a dual or wrongful arrest.

Training, TA and Resource Development Responses

Resources available from the website of the Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence address/fill knowledge gaps, identify barriers, recommend practices, and analyze trends on the following topics. API-GBV provides training, training materials, and technical assistance on all issues listed.

- Abusive international marriages
- Asians and Pacific Islanders: Demographic Data
- Child custody
- Cultural competency and gender competency
- Domestic violence in Asian and Pacific Islander communities
- Types and dynamics in API homes
- Domestic violence related homicides
- Forced marriage
- HIV
- Language access
- Men's engagement
- Muslim survivors
- Lifecourse violence and help-seeking
- Research on gender-based violence and APIs
- Services for API survivors: Directory of Programs Serving Asians and Pacific Islanders
- Sexual violence
- Trafficking: domestic and international
- Translated materials
- Trauma and trauma-informed interventions

Priority TA/Training/Resource Development Gaps and Opportunities

- **Refugee service programs serving Asian and Middle Eastern/West Asian communities** need training on domestic and sexual violence to identify victims and provide referrals and services. Training should include ORR staff and ORR's Technical Assistance providers.
- **Immigrants' rights groups** need training on how API survivors of domestic and other forms of gender-based violence are affected, and what immigration remedies are available under VAWA.
- **Asian civil rights organizations** need to be trained on applying a gender lens and the dynamics of gender-based violence in their work.
- **Training for bi-or multi-lingual API advocates** is needed on basics and ethics of interpretation so when they are forced to interpret, they have enough knowledge and skills.

- **Military bases** almost entirely lack language access services on bases in the continental U.S. or territories for foreign- or US-born Asian spouses (a significant population demographic) with limited English proficiency. Policies, training, services and resources need to be established and implemented by the DOD.
- **Training to systems personnel and traditional domestic violence service programs** is needed on abuse by in-laws, and other forms of inter-generational family violence such as forced marriage need to be provided to design and implement culturally-specific services.
- **Policies and remedies tailored to non-citizen students** that include foreigners on student visas, DREAMers/DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), and spouses on dependent visas who are not allowed to work, but can study. High proportions of foreign students in the U.S. are from Asia. Most campuses apply remedies and administrative procedures drawn up for citizen students who are survivors of domestic and sexual violence and lack policies for non-citizen students.
- **Counter the chilling effects and barriers encountered in a heightened climate of Islamophobia, xenophobia, racism, and anti-immigrant sentiments** through policies and training to implement inclusive practices.
- **Address housing needs and gaps encountered by API survivors** who may not be homeless but are 'houseless', i.e., couch-surfing or doubling up with extended family members in already over-crowded dwellings.
- **Technical assistance needed to child welfare systems** to develop training and culturally-specific and relevant protocols for API familial contexts and homes.
- **Training to API programs on trauma-informed practices** that integrate an understanding about mental health and illness and substance use and abuse to counter the deep stigmas held by API communities about these issues.

The Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence is a national resource center on gender and domestic violence in Asian and Pacific Islander communities, including domestic violence dynamics in refugee zones and language access for limited English proficient survivors. Please visit us at www.api-gbv.org or contact us at info@api-gbv.org with training or technical assistance requests.