

Defining Sexual Violence against Asian, Asian American, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander (AANHPI), and Middle Eastern & North African (MENA) Communities

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Introduction

There are high rates of sexual violence rooted in control of women's sexual expression, victim-blaming, stigma, and normalization of dynamics of power and control over women. Violations include being forced to watch and imitate pornography; denying the right to choose or express a different sexual orientation; forced marriage; marital rape; 'corrective' rape of lesbians; body modification and humiliation; cyber-stalking; mass rape in conflict zones; and more. Only 10% of rapists in the U.S are convicted for their crimes. Women and girls are overwhelmingly targeted for sexual violence. Boys, men, and LGBTQ individuals are also victimized.

Sexual violence is a critical issue that needs to be addressed in Asian, Asian American Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander (AANHPI), and Middle Eastern & North African (MENA) communities for several reasons:

- Child sexual abuse and adult assaults often stay undisclosed and/ or denied proper help when disclosed. Many women and advocates have been sexually abused as children, teens, and/or adults or know someone who has. AANHPI and MENA women and girls fear they will not be believed, or feel silenced by familial victim-blaming attitudes, or find that disclosure did not lead to help and safety.
- Compartmentalized services do not work for our communities. AANHPI and MENA women coming to domestic violence programs may eventually disclose their histories of sexual violence after establishing rapport with a domestic violence advocate. They may be reluctant to go to a different program.
- Immigrants and refugees can have traumatic histories of sexual violence. Many may not disclose victimization for many years, after having experienced childhood sexual abuse in their home countries, unsafe immigration routes, or escaping violence in civil or international conflict zones/wars and refugee camps. Most likely would not consider going to a rape crisis center.
- Advocate discomfort about sexual violence is a barrier to disclosure by victims/survivors. AANHPI battered women often mention that their domestic violence advocates hesitate to bring

up sexual violence beyond the issue of marital/intimate partner rape. They also need a place to talk about sexual abuse by non-intimate partners. Domestic violence service providers can address these barriers, facilitate help-seeking and refer to appropriate resources.

- Women and girls at certain stages in their lives, in certain jobs, and in dangerous settings can be targets for sexual violence. This does not mean that everyone in these situations is assaulted or unsafe but advocates can be alert to possible exposure for prevention and intervention.

Definition

Sexual violence is defined by the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention as “sexual activity when consent is not obtained or freely given. It impacts every community and affects both sexes and people of all sexual orientations and ages. Anyone can experience or perpetrate sexual violence. The perpetrator of sexual violence is usually someone the survivor knows. This can include a friend, current or former intimate partner, coworker, neighbor, or family member. Sexual violence can occur in person, online, or through technology. This includes posting or sharing sexual pictures of someone without their consent, or non-consensual sexting.”

~CDC, [About Sexual Violence Report](#), updated 2025

This publication provides examples of types, settings, and communities vulnerable to sexual violence for AANHPI & MENA women. However, information on types of sexual violence and potentially dangerous settings is applicable to women and girls in any community.

Types of Sexual Violence

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forced body modification or bodily humiliation • Child Sexual Assault (CSA) by known assailants or strangers • Coerced (forced) sex • Coerced sexual initiation • Custodial rapes: in police stations, jails, etc. • Cyber assaults, cyber stalking and cyber predators • Date rape/Drug facilitated rape • Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) or Female Genital Cutting • Forced marriages, including marriage of children • Forced group sex • Gang rapes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marriage-related sexual violence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▫ Abandonment, physical and/or sexual of wives/brides ▫ Infidelity ▫ Marital rape ▫ Polygamy: one man has several wives – whether through legal or ‘cultural’ marriages (listed as sexual violence because the culture or husband forces women to accept this arrangement) ▫ Polyandry: one woman has several husbands (if a woman is forced into this arrangement) ▫ Temporary marriage: practiced as a way to legitimize sexual relations between non-married couples (over the
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ignorance about sexuality, anatomy, sex, or sexual safety, ostensibly to ‘protect’ girls. • Incestuous Sexual Assault (ISA) • Neglect/coldness: extreme sexual neglect or coldly going through the motions of sex • Pornographic-related violence: being forced to watch and mimic pornographic acts. • Public molestation by known assailants or by strangers in crowded public spaces, particularly public transport. In India, this is termed ‘eve-teasing’. • Rape by known assailants or strangers • Rape and its aftermath, which can include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▫ Victim-blaming. ▫ Being forced to marry rapist or someone else right away. ▫ Abandonment or violence by the victim’s family towards the victim. ▫ If a pregnancy results from the rape, family may send her to their home country permanently, force her to carry the pregnancy then give up child for adoption, or force her to have an abortion. ▫ Few consequences for perpetrators of campus rape, and disciplinary actions like suspension are decided by college administrators. • Sexting: texting sexually explicit materials, including pictures of a partner without his/her permission. • Sexual harassment in workplaces, places of worship, homes, schools, or university campuses. 	<p>dating period, for example) or with a prostitute (for the length of the encounter).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▫ Marriage by capture: a practice where a woman is ‘captured’ by potential husband and kept captive for a few days in his family home until she ‘consents’ to marry him. • Wife inheritance: also called fraternal polyandry where a widow must marry her dead husband’s brother. • Survival or transactional sex: women having sex in exchange for necessities like food, children’s clothes, a place to stay, etc., and not necessarily with multiple men. (This is not the same as sex work.) • Unprotected sex (forced) leading to an unwanted pregnancy, HIV, or STI exposure. This can affect women with trans-national partners who travel between the U.S. and home countries frequently. • Virginity examinations and attendant surgeries to ensure that her hymen is intact (e.g., sewing up a torn hymen). In fact, ruptured hymens do not necessarily bleed - referred to medically as a compliant hymen. • Voyeurism, which includes flashing, peeping, or through the use of technology • Witnessing rape: children or family forced to watch (or know it is happening) and how it affects both victim and witness.
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Women & Girls and Potentially Dangerous Settings

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actresses • Advocates • Athletes • Battered women • College campuses • Disaster zones (aftermaths of floods, wildfires, hurricanes, earthquakes, etc.). • Divorced, separated or widowed women • Domestic workers • Elderly • Entertainment industry • Farmworkers • Garment workers • Girls and young women in juvenile detention • Healthcare settings • High schools (can include predatory behavior from teachers, coaches, other authority figures) • Homeless women and children • Immigration processes/unsafe travels • Incarcerated women or those in police custody/jails • International Marriage Bureaus (IMBs): women marrying through such services. • Lesbians, bisexual and transgender individuals, including teens and young women. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentally disabled or mentally ill • Migrant workers • Military wives/partners and women who live or work in the vicinity of military bases. • Models • Poor women and the exploitation of female poverty in the form of adoption, trafficking, and transactional sex. • Pregnant women • Prostituted women and children or sex workers • Refugees or Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in war or post-war camps • Religious and cultural minorities • Sexual abuse by clergy/clerics • Stalked women • Teens: pregnant, sexually active teens, or runaways • Trafficked women • War survivors (civil or international) • Women with disabilities • Workers in exploitative settings
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Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence

For questions, information, publications, training requests, and technical assistance related to domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, and/or stalking in Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) and Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) communities, visit www.api-gbv.org or email info@api-gbv.org

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