

Monsoon Asians & Pacific Islanders in Solidarity

**Community Listening Sessions on Sexual Violence
in Asian and Pacific Islander Communities in Iowa,
March 2021**

Report: Loulwa Soweid

Planners: Loulwa Soweid and Mira Yusef

*Co-facilitators: Soe Moe, Nikeya Paw, Tara Gurung, Ebtehal Alzakrooty, Danya Albert,
Aiyuko Maun, Chyna Kavan, Loulwa Soweid and Mira Yusef*

**Monsoon Asians & Pacific Islanders in Solidarity thanks all community members
who participated in the Community Listening Sessions.**

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I. Introduction

Monsoon Asians & Pacific Islanders in Solidarity (formerly Monsoon United Asian Women of Iowa) serves victims/survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault and human trafficking in Asian and Pacific Islander (API) communities in Iowa. Monsoon's mission is to end all forms of gender-based violence and build healthy communities through transformative justice and social change.

From July 2020 to February 2021, Monsoon organized and conducted listening sessions with various Asian and Pacific (API) communities in Iowa to learn more about community attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors related to sexual violence. Our long-term goal is not only to gain a deeper understanding of these topics, but also to use the knowledge generated by the listening sessions to improve our own services towards API victims/survivors of sexual violence.

Community listening sessions and focus group discussions have been one of the ways Monsoon has learned from and connected with the diverse and dispersed API communities we serve since our inception in 2003. The overall subject of our latest effort was sexual violence in API communities in Iowa. The listening sessions were semi-structured: Co-facilitators asked open-ended questions that sometimes were akin to guided conversations because of the involvement of interpretation.

There are a number of API communities in Iowa, including but not limited to Chinese, Indian, Korean, Bhutanese or Nepali ethnicity, ethnic Burmese, Vietnamese, Filipino, Laotian, Middle Eastern/West Asian, and Pacific Islander communities, such as Marshallese, Micronesians and Palauans. For the listening sessions, multilingual advocates and outreach workers at Monsoon recruited members from their own communities, and we hosted six 90-minute dialogues with participants from the Karen (2), Bhutanese/Nepali (2), Arab (6), Pacific Islander (2), and Asian-American (4 adults and 9 youths) communities. While the sessions were originally set to take place in community sites (such as our Banh Hao community healing space in Des Moines), they were moved online due to COVID-19 restrictions and thus took place through Zoom meetings.

In terms of participant demographics, community members recruited were made up largely of women, with the exception of two male high-schoolers who participated in the Asian-American youth session. In the future, Monsoon plans to host community listening sessions with a primary focus on API men for their perspectives on sexual violence in their communities.

II. Findings

Community identity

Participants were asked whom they considered part of their communities and who made up the API communities in Iowa.

Responses were varied, with some participants recounting the history of their communities' arrival in Iowa as immigrants, migrants, or refugees, or highlighting which cities in Iowa were home to the largest number of specific Asian populations. Several participants indicated identification with Asians or Asian-Americans more generally, while some mentioned specific regions (i.e., Southeast Asia), languages (Marathi), or nationalities (i.e., Indian-Americans, Vietnamese, etc.) with which they associated themselves.

Perception of sexual assault

What behaviors constituted sexual assault were considered. Most participants agreed that sexual assault was non-consensual (including examples such as child marriage), forced, and physical. There was some disagreement on whether or not sexual assault, sexual harassment, and rape were the same. Some participants considered sexual assault to include verbal assault or genital exposure, even if physical assault did not occur. One participant said that sexual harassment was verbal, but that sexual assault was physical. Another participant believed that sexual assault was the actions that eventually led to rape as the end result. Others defined rape as forced anal, oral, or vaginal contact and penetration, whereas sexual harassment was verbal or non-penetrative physical acts, or even being at the receiving end of discrimination or racism.

Some participants mentioned that sexual violence could happen in relationships and not just between strangers. However, others did not agree with the notion that being forced to have sex with your husband was violence or abuse, adding that if this was considered rape, then "we have all been raped."

A number of participants pointed out that there was an umbrella of sexual violence and that it was up to each individual to classify what they experienced as part of their healing. They also pointed out that society created "levels" of severity regarding sexual violence, and, as a result, minimized anything that was not physical rape.

Barriers

Participants provided examples of multiple barriers that API victims/survivors faced when accessing support.

- For API women, shame, fear of judgment from the community, and impact of said judgment on social status were offered as reasons for the difficulty in disclosing sexual violence.
- For API men, communal norms regarding masculinity (discussed more below), as well as feelings of shame, ego, and difficulty being believed were cited as barriers.
- For members of the API LGBT+ community, a major barrier was the fact that their existence was often not acknowledged by their community. Other barriers included fear of being outed, criminalized, or ostracized due to communal cultural or religious beliefs, as well as the fear of them reflecting badly on sexual or gender identities as a whole. Discrimination against the LGBT+ community was actually reflected in the responses of select participants, who said they believed that LGBT+ community members “deserved” to be harassed because they knew that their communities would not accept them, and even that they “changed genders” in order to be harassed.
- For API youths, fear of how others would react when they disclosed sexual violence, they said, could dissuade them from reporting. Furthermore, they added, a lack of awareness of sexual violence could lead to an inability to recognize if one had been assaulted or had assaulted someone else. They also stated that failures of schools on mandatory reporting, Title IX services, and consequences for harm-doers made reporting violence complicated, intimidating, and confusing to navigate. One participant also admitted that it could be difficult to tell someone you cared about that they had harmed you. Youths also pointed out that sometimes adults at school were dismissive of harassment when it did occur. Some participants considered API youths in college to be at an advantage because there were sexual violence resources offered by higher learning institutions, and so one did not have to seek help from relatives. However, it was acknowledged that having an initial negative experience when seeking support in college might impede further efforts to seek help, and one participant mentioned that she believed many assaults actually took place in college. Other barriers that surfaced during conversations specifically considered child sexual assault by adults or family members. Because sexual topics are not spoken about freely in API families, a child may not know how to tell their parents that they had been subjected to violence. Furthermore, the importance of family in API cultures might deter a child from reporting a family member, and a child would not necessarily know where or whom to turn to if the abuse came from within their own family. Fears

of not being believed by parents, jeopardizing family social standing, or causing familial shame by coming forward were also suggested as barriers.

- In terms of barriers that API victims/survivors faced regardless of age, sex, or gender, participants listed economic or linguistic, feelings of pride, fear of being discriminated against, and social and cultural stigmas. Victims/survivors also might not be aware of sexual violence laws and culturally specific organizations that could help them. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, lack of knowledge about sexual violence could translate into people not fully realizing that they had been assaulted in order to seek help in the first place, or into doubting themselves.

Perceived causes of sexual assault

Watching pornography, use of alcohol or drugs, women dressing provocatively, sexual frustration, fetishes, mental illness, cyclical trauma, power dynamics, patriarchal norms, love, stress, and lack of discussion around sex were offered by some participants as perceived causes of sexual assault. Others said that it did not matter what someone is wearing or how they are acting, it was never an excuse to rape someone.

III. Emerging Themes:

Participants were asked about community identity, their definitions of sexual assault, the perceived prevalence and causes of sexual assault in their communities, assistance available, and their ideas regarding strategies to end sexual assault. Some of the shared topics that appeared in multiple community listening sessions are described below.

Language

Linguistic barriers were discussed with regards to both the lack of specific terminology existing to describe sexual violence in participants' native languages, as well as being a difficulty that victims/survivors faced when attempting to access resources in Iowa. The majority of participants noted that in their mother tongues, there were either no specific terms pertaining to sexual violence, and/or that the vocabulary that they were familiar with was vague or vulgar. This contributed to a lack of understanding of what sexual violence encompassed, and exacerbated the difficulties in discussing sexual violence with family or community members. Phrases such as "slept with" (regardless of consensual context), "was taken advantage of," and "to harm someone" were provided as examples of language used when discussing sexual violence. One young Asian-American participant noted that "we can't even talk about sex without hiding it behind a euphemism." Other participants admitted that there were no words for sexual assault/rape (such as in Karen or Tai-Dam), or consent, or that they did not know them; one participant suggested that it may be because of the cultural taboos surrounding sexual topics that she did not know the words. Finally, the crudeness of certain words relating to sexual violence was brought up, with one participant noting that a

Hokkien phrase similar to “rape your mom” was routinely used lightly on the streets and online. Another highlighted that the Japanese term and characteristics for sexual violence was misogynistic, and denoted “cheapness” and “husband ownership.”

“In the Marshallese community, ‘kakure’ (broken) is the word that best describes sexual assault or rape. In reality, there’s really no best word that describes sexual assault in Marshallese. In the Pingelapese community, ‘force’ is the word that best describes the words sexual assault and rape.”

However, Nepali participants did have specific words for sexual assault, and Arab participants noted that Arabic was a rich language with many different words to describe all kinds of sexual acts. *They also pointed out that gestures/gesticulations could be used instead of words.*

Another language-centered issue that was offered by participants was the fact that victims/survivors in Iowa may face difficulties in seeking help for sexual violence victimization if they did not have a strong grasp of English, and that “if you ask for help from someone in your community in your language, you worry about rumors that could reach the perpetrator.”

“I don’t know what words to use to talk about it. So, if you don’t talk about it, it doesn’t exist in the community.”

Cultural norms, stigma, and silence

Another theme that arose during the sessions was the notion of intergenerational silence surrounding sex, sexuality, and sexual violence. This theme is closely tied into the notion of language, the lack thereof, and its impact on open discussion. Cultural norms and stigma towards these topics contributed to the community’s hesitance towards speaking about them freely, even though all participants acknowledged that sexual violence did occur in their communities.

- **Lack of discussion and subsequent understanding of sexual assault**

Participants pointed out that it was awkward, uncomfortable, or difficult to discuss sex-related content with elders and/or parents, and that young people were even discouraged from discussing their sexual health with doctors. There was a sense of shame involved with confessing to having been assaulted or when speaking about sex in general. One participant admitted that she had trouble even saying the word “sex.” Some participants said that sex was only brought up to them in the context of marriage or reproduction. “It is always implied that you are going to have children, but the ‘how’ is not talked about,” noted one.

A lack of conversation, and subsequent awareness, about sexual topics meant that there was often a lack of understanding of what constituted sexual assault. As a result, individuals may

not realize that they had assaulted someone or that they had been assaulted. Disagreements with adults, both within and outside the API community, over what amounted to sexual assault was also brought up, with a young participant noting that “even adults need training on what sexual assault is.”

“We don’t talk about sexual violence because we can’t even talk about sex without hiding it behind a euphemism, and we can’t talk about it generally so the act is seen as shameful or something that needs to be kept hidden or private.”

- **Cultural and religious norms**

Finally, cultural issues influenced if or how sexual violence was considered. Regarding consent, in the context of hospitality, for example, it can be seen as a sign of respect to not accept the word “no” and to keep offering goods or services. In some cultures, protecting your virginity is extremely important, it is prohibited for women to speak about sexual topics, and it is a religious duty to sexually “satisfy” your husband. “In Burmese, we call it rape, [but] if married we don’t call it rape, due to [being] married,” said one participant. Another noted that community values and notions of honor impacted marriage and bodily autonomy, and that she would have probably had to prioritize marriage over education had she remained in India. In other cultures, victim shaming and blaming occurs often and could lead to victims/survivors being afraid to speak out. However, one participant specified that she believed that silence around sexual abuse was precisely the reason it continued.

But another participant mentioned that sometimes there were culture clashes in terms of what was considered inappropriate, giving the example of an uncle helping a niece clean herself in the bathroom being seen as implicitly violent in the United States while it may not be seen as such in her home country.

- **Masculinity**

Hypermasculinity in both API and Western cultures was brought up, simultaneously making it difficult for men to admit that they had experienced violence while making it permissible to enact violence. Men having sex is often seen as positive and something to be proud of, and being a victim/survivor of sexual violence something to be ashamed of, according to many participants.

Perpetrators and victims/survivors

It is important to note that several participants did bring up the fact that anyone can be a perpetrator, regardless of biological sex, and that men could also be victims/survivors of sexual violence. “A victim/survivor is whoever violence is perpetrated against; usually when we think of SA – the victim is usually women and perpetrator are men, and that’s rampant, but we don’t really consider other scenarios,” one participant said.

However, in the majority of listening sessions, men were either directly or indirectly characterized as the perpetrators of sexual violence, and women or children as the victims/survivors, in API communities. Men, or patriarchal structures as a whole, were seen as “the problem,” and men could take advantage of women who were in vulnerable positions, such as being drunk, financially unstable, widowed, etc.

As a result, when strategizing about ending sexual violence, educating boys and men and lessening the power of the patriarchy were brought up as crucial needs.

With regards to children, childhood sexual assault (CSA) was also highlighted, usually in the context of incest by male family members such as fathers or uncles, or by friends of male relatives.

IV. Conversation and Education: Next Steps

The general consensus at the sessions regarding next steps/strategies to prevent sexual violence in the future was a call for further community conversation and education. Dismantling oppressive structures such as patriarchy is also necessary. Open and frequent discussions with API parents, teachers, community leaders, and youths, are needed to destigmatize sex, sexuality, and sexual violence.

While there should be a focus on men and boys, all genders should be taught about these topics, whether at school, by community-based organizations, or through group conversations.

**“We need to acknowledge that sex is part of everybody’s life,
and that it isn’t shameful.”**

There was also a dual emphasis on informing older generations about the realities of sexual violence while simultaneously working alongside younger generations to ensure a violence-free future. Both Asian-American community listening sessions also highlighted the need to speak about mental health as well as sexual and reproductive health.

Many participants also said that they wanted more education about their rights, support from organizations, and access to jobs so that they could be financially independent and take care of themselves without having to rely on anyone else. One participant believed that extensive rehabilitation for harm-doers was needed, noting that while it was useful to discuss preventative measures, we also needed to talk about how to respond to harm that has already occurred.

V. **Conclusion**

The National Organization of Asians & Pacific Islanders Ending Sexual Violence (NAPIESV), a program under Monsoon, completed a national community listening on sexual violence and wrote a report on its findings in 2013 (see: <https://napiessv.org/resource/napiessv-community-listening-session-report/>). At the time, issues around definition and conceptualization, toxic masculinity, intergenerational silence, harmful cultural norms, and lack of understanding of sexual violence had all been raised as had been strategies of further conversation and education to end sexual violence.

However, the same sentiments being echoed in this Community Listening Sessions report does not necessarily mean that change is not occurring. Rather, it reminds us that there is still work to be done, that change can at times be incremental, and that communities have to grapple with a lifetime of unlearning. Monsoon is committed to continue our work abolishing gender-based violence, advocating for community accountability, and having the necessary conversations with our community members to uproot oppressive patriarchal systems of power.

Monsoon aims to carry out more such sessions within a specific timeframe and with some, if not all, of the same participants to get more diverse perspectives and a better gauge of community progress and change. We also intend our work to help contribute to the limited body of participatory action research studies currently available regarding API communities and gender-based violence in Iowa.