

Silent Epidemic:

A Survey of Violence
Among Young
Asian American
Women

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N A W H 
health equity for asian americans



Silent Epidemic: A Survey of Violence Among Young Asian American Women

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The National Asian Women's Health Organization was founded in 1993 to achieve health equity for Asian women and families. NAWHO's goals are to raise awareness about the health needs of Asian Americans through research and education; to support Asian women and families as decision-makers through leadership development and advocacy; and to strengthen systems serving Asian women and families through partnerships and capacity building. Through its innovative programs, NAWHO is increasing knowledge of breast and cervical cancers, expanding access to immunizations, changing attitudes about reproductive health care, building awareness on sexual violence and intimate partner violence, and breaking the stigma around depression and mental health.

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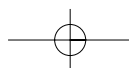
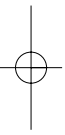
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INTRODUCTION

With the mission to achieve health equity for Asian Americans, the National Asian Women's Health Organization (NAWHO) has strived to educate, address knowledge gaps, and increase the awareness of health care needs for Asian American women and families since 1993. Committed to eliminating and resolving health inequities, NAWHO is leading a major effort to gather and document accurate baseline data surrounding varying types of violence in the lives of Asian American women.

Most studies and reports on violence conducted in North America have neglected to include or identify Asian American women, particularly young Asian women, as a population at risk. As a result, federal, regional, and local law enforcement and community health organizations have not prioritized Asian communities as targets for prevention education. These agencies are influenced by the prevailing myth that Asian Americans are a "model minority" – economically and educationally successful, physically and mentally healthy, and well supported by strong family networks. Instead, culturally and economically prescribed constraints (e.g., the need to "save face," submission to patriarchal authority, social and economic dependence on perpetrators) prevent Asian American women from recognizing violations of their fundamental human right – to live in a violent-free environment, free from all forms of abuse.

To understand the greater depth of the attitudes and experiences of Asian American women in relation to sexual violence (SV), intimate partner violence (IPV), and stalking, NAWHO commissioned a study to examine the true impact of these forms of violence on Asian American communities. The study found that young Asian American women are suffering from violence at alarming rates and are facing SV, IPV, and stalking without strong systems for prevention, intervention, and support.

Silent Epidemic: A Survey of Violence Among Young Asian American Women is a California state-wide study, which examines the levels of awareness, prevalence, and access to services in relation to SV, IPV, and stalking. With a sample size of 336, the study represents the first major effort to examine the impact of these types of violence in Asian American women aged 18-34. Also unique to this study is the focus on young women which represents a departure from existing, non-age specific studies of Asian American women and violence.

Adopting qualitative research methodology, *Silent Epidemic* reveals the prevalence of violence in the lives of many Asian American women, who have become muted contributors to a devastating and ubiquitous public health crisis in the United States. One major finding in this survey shows that Asian American women lack understanding

INTRODUCTION (continued)

and awareness of behaviors that constitute SV, IPV, and stalking and their corresponding life-threatening outcomes. Furthermore, the study found that while a large number of women are victims of SV, emotional abuse by intimate partners and stalking is prevalent, and the utilization of support services is extremely low. Cultural barriers and stigmas within Asian American families add to the magnitude of the silent epidemic of violence. Shielding violence as a “family matter” and blaming SV victims of “bringing shame to the family” perpetuates violations and prevents women from seeking support.

NAWHO’s findings will ensure access to prevention education and services by underlining the overarching need for further research on a local and national level to provide a thorough understanding of the prevalence and barriers facing Asian American women. To start, this report includes recommendations to assist college campuses, policy makers, law enforcement agencies, community organizations, and Asian American communities to increase outreach and prevention programs that empower Asian American women to break the silence on violence.

According to the American Medical Association, SV is defined as “any form of non-consensual, coerced or unwanted sexual activity or touching.”¹ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines IPV as “the threatened or actual use of physical force against an intimate partner that either results in or has the potential to result in death, injury or harm. IPV includes physical, psychological, and emotional abuse by current or former spouses, dating partners, boyfriends or girlfriends, and/or same-sex partners.”² Stalking generally refers to harassing or threatening behavior that an individual engages in repeatedly, such as following a person, appearing at a person’s home or place of business, making harassing phone calls, leaving written messages or objects, or vandalizing a person’s property. These actions may or may not be accompanied by a credible threat of serious harm, and they may or may not be precursors to an assault or murder.³

1 American Medical Association. *Facts About Sexual Assault* (1995-2000).

2 Osattin, A., Short, Lynn. *Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Assault: A Guide to Training Materials and Programs for Health Care Providers*. Atlanta: National Center for Injury and Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, (1998): 4.

3 Thomas, Kenneth R., “How to Stop the Stalker: State Anti-Stalking Laws,” *Criminal Law Bulletin*, (1992).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Asian Americans are one of the fastest growing communities in the United States. By 2050, the United States Bureau of the Census estimates 36 million Asian Americans, approximately 12 percent of the total population, will be living in the United States.⁴

While SV and IPV have become devastating and pervasive public health crises that impact women in all communities, a comprehensive national study among Asian Americans has yet to be conducted. Existing quantitative and qualitative data suggests that young Asian American women are suffering from violence at rates comparable to or higher than the broader population of women.

The National Violence Against Women (NVAW), for example, found that 51.8 percent of American women had been victims of physical assault, and 18.2 percent had been raped in their lifetime. Of these cases involving women over the age of 18, 76 percent of the violent acts had been committed by someone they knew.⁵ Young women overall were among the most susceptible to acts of violence. 54 percent of the female respondents to the NVAW Survey had experienced rape for the first time under the age of 18. The NVAW Survey findings on Asian/Pacific Islanders (API) women specifically revealed that 49.6 percent had experienced physical assault, and 6.8 percent had been victims of rape in their lifetimes.

Other indicators suggest that the brutality of SV and IPV against Asian American women is even greater. In Massachusetts, a local survey showed 25-30 percent of all participants knew at least one Asian American woman who had been a victim of some form of abuse.⁶ In Los Angeles County, Korean families experience very high rates of domestic violence among all the diverse Asian groups.⁷ The Korean American Family Service Center (1995) reported that of all the cases served by the center, acts of violence against women were the highest at 30.3 percent. Korean women account for the majority of the domestic violence victims in the Asian American Battered Women's Shelter in Los Angeles.⁸ Finally, data from informal focus groups in Seattle, Washington estimates 20-30 percent of Chinese families have experienced some form of family violence.⁹

4 U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Population Estimates and Projections*. (June 2000).

5 Tjaden P, Thoennes N. *Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence Against Women: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey*. National Institute of Justice, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Research in Brief (November 1998): 1-16.

6 Yoshioka, Marianne. Dang, Quynh. *Asian Family Violence Report: A Study of the Chinese, Cambodian, Korean, South Asian and Vietnamese Communities in Massachusetts*. Asian Task Force Against Domestic Violence, Inc. (November 2000): 3.

7 Rhee, Siyon. "Domestic Violence in the Korean Immigrant Family." *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*. (1997): 64.

8 Ibid.

9 Ho, Christine K. "An Analysis of Domestic Violence in Asian American Communities: A Multicultural Approach to Counseling." *Women & Therapy*. 9 (1990): 1-2.

LITERATURE REVIEW (continued)

NAWHO's research has uncovered that the burden of SV and IPV against Asian American women is even greater than recorded data. Numerous studies show Asian Americans may be less likely than other ethnic groups to perceive certain abusive actions due to cultural norms, which lower their reporting rates of SV and IPV.¹⁰ In addition, the "culture of silence and shame" shared by many Asian American ethnic groups contributes to barriers that point to a higher risk of SV and IPV. One study found that young Asian women, who had been victims of violent acts, refrained from taking action or speaking out for fear of bringing shame to their families.¹¹

According to Christine Ho, a psychologist who specializes in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) resulting from domestic violence and sexual abuse, many Asian Americans distrust the American legal system since historically, they have received minimal protection from it.¹²

Broader institutional barriers also contribute to a higher susceptibility of SV and IPV among Asian American women. Immigrant Asian women are especially unfamiliar with the law and their rights in America, often resulting in fear and stress when dealing with the police and courts.¹³ In addition, Asian American women face cultural insensitivities from service

providers and facilities that deter them from seeking assistance. A study of Chinese women found that the utilization of services, including shelters and social service agencies, was very low due largely in part to cultural and language barriers.¹⁴ These traditional roles, values, and social constraints severely compromise Asian American women's power, leaving them especially vulnerable to SV and IPV.

In sum, cultural beliefs compounded by broader societal factors hinder Asian American women from seeking appropriate health or legal services when they experience SV or IPV. NAWHO seeks to address these issues by filling critical data gaps and supporting SV and IPV prevention strategies that equip young Asian American women most at risk with the education and leadership skills to reclaim their right to safety, security, and freedom from violence in any form.

¹⁰ Moon A, Williams O. "Perceptions of elder abuse and help-seeking patterns among African-American, Caucasian American, and Korean-American elderly women." *Gerontologist*. 33 (1993): 386-395.

¹¹ Yoshihama, Meiko, Parekh, Asha, Boyington, Doris. *Dating Violence in Asian/Pacific Communities*. (1991): 189.

¹² Ho, Christine K. (1990): 139.

¹³ Yoshioka, Marianne, Dang, Quynh. (2000): 4.

¹⁴ Lee, Mo-Yee. *Understanding Chinese Battered Women in North America: A Review of the Literature and Practice Implications*. (2000): 219.

METHODOLOGY

In April of 2001, NAWHO commissioned the Field Research Corporation (FRC), a consumer marketing and public opinion research firm, to investigate the knowledge and awareness levels, incidence and prevalence, access to services, and education of SV and IPV among Asian American women. Using guidelines developed by NAWHO, FRC conducted a telephone survey of Asian American women between the ages of 18 to 34 in San Francisco and Los Angeles. Because of the delicate nature of the topic being surveyed, FRC interviewers underwent rigorous sensitivity training as well as strict confidentiality agreements.

In total, 336 women participated in the phone survey, which was conducted in English. The breakdown of the ethnicities was as follows: 52 percent Chinese, 13 percent Korean, 12 percent Vietnamese, 11 percent Japanese, 4 percent Filipino, 2 percent Asian Indian and Thai, respectively, 2 percent Other Asian, and less than 1 percent Hmong and Laotian, respectively. Potential participants were randomly selected from a list of phone numbers in the Los Angeles and San Francisco metropolitan area that contained an “Asian” surname. Interviewers did not know the names of the respondents and ensured the participants full safety by informing them the options of not participating, rescheduling a call back, or terminating the session at any time during the survey.

KEY FINDINGS

“Asian/Pacific Islander women are least likely to report rape and physical assault victimization.”

- National Institute of Justice,
Centers for Disease Control
and Prevention

NAWHO’s survey of violence among Asian American women is unique on several fronts. Compared to existing national data, the sample size of Asian American women in NAWHO’s *Silent Epidemic* survey is larger than previous studies conducted on Asian American women regarding issues of violence (NAWHO Survey: n=336 compared to NVAW Survey: n=133, National College Women’s Sexual Victimization (NCWSV) Survey: n=151). In addition, this is the first survey of its kind to

examine various types of violence in the lives of Asian American women from California including IPV, SV, and stalking.

KEY FINDINGS (continued)

Key findings include:

■ Young Asian American Women Lack Knowledge About Sexual Violence and Partner Rape

A significant number of survey participants lacked understanding of the prevalence of acquaintance rape and rape by intimate partners. According to NAWHO's survey findings, young Asian American women have a limited scope of knowledge regarding the definition of rape, primarily viewing it as stranger rape. Although the majority of the women surveyed (94 percent) agreed that rape is a serious problem in our society today, 19 percent of those did not believe that rape is most commonly committed by someone they know. Furthermore, 18 percent believed that rape does not happen between two people who are in a relationship. These findings underscore the critical need for acquaintance and date rape education and outreach programs.

■ Prevalence of Violence Higher than Previously Reported

Data collected from NAWHO's survey indicated that young Asian American women are facing various forms of violence in their lives. More disturbingly, the survey found they are facing violence at higher rates than previously estimated.

19 percent of the surveyed women said they had felt pressured to have sex without their consent since the age of 18. Of those, 44 percent (or 8 percent of the total sample) experienced completed rape. NAWHO data also showed that of those completed rape victims, an intimate partner was the perpetrator 16 percent of the time.

Reports of physical violence and emotional abuse by intimate partners are also alarming. Respondents were asked if an intimate partner had hurt or had attempted to hurt them by means of hitting, kicking, slapping, shoving, object throwing, or threatening their lives with a weapon. 12 percent reported "yes." Because IPV includes emotional as well as physical abuse, the survey also addressed emotional abuse indicators. Respondents were asked if they had been repeatedly yelled at, sworn at, insulted, or had been a victim of excessive jealousy and/or were denied access to family and friends. 26 percent of Asian American women surveyed had experienced at least one of the above stated emotional abuses by an intimate partner.

The result suggests two possibilities: either emotional abuse among Asian American women is more common than physical abuse or fewer stigmas exist with emotional abuse compared to physical abuse, resulting in increased reports from survey participants. The misperception that emotional abuse is “not really abuse” or that it is “more acceptable” and “less obvious” perhaps allows Asian Americans to talk about it more openly.

Data on the prevalence of stalking is equally disturbing. One national study reported that Asian/Pacific Islander women were “significantly less likely to be stalked.”¹⁵ NAWHO’s survey yielded dramatically different results. When participants were asked if anyone had ever repeatedly followed or spied on them, had appeared at unexpected locations, had stood outside their home, school, or place of work, 14 percent responded “yes.” These results were higher than the national estimate of stalking for women overall (8 percent).¹⁶

■ Access to SV and IPV Services Low Despite High Incident Rate

Despite the high incidences of violence among young Asian American women, their utilization of preventive care and treatment services is extremely low. Of those who identified themselves as college students, 95 percent said they had never used the rape or physical abuse services on their campus. When asked “why,” 23 percent responded that they were not aware of them. The survey revealed similar trends in Asian American women’s usage of services in their communities – 97 percent had not used any of the rape or physical abuse services within their community, with 19 percent of those reporting not knowing about them. With the prevalence rate as high as 18 percent, these statistics are extremely alarming.

RECOMMENDATIONS

NAWHO recognizes the broader, overarching issues that must be addressed in order to combat violence in the Asian American community. These include increased ethnic-specific research and improved data collection, collaborative efforts, culturally and linguistically appropriate education, culturally competent response systems, and

¹⁵ Cullen, Francis. Fisher, Bonnie. Turner, Michael. *The Sexual Victimization of College Women*. U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report. (December 2000): 29.

¹⁶ Tjaden P, Thoennes N. Prevalence, incidence, and consequences of violence against women: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey. National Institute of Justice, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Research in Brief (November 1998): 1-16.

RECOMMENDATIONS (continued)

leadership development. NAWHO is making a call to federal, regional, and local social service organizations to prioritize Asian communities for inclusion in research, public education, and provision of services.

1. Research and Data Collection

A concerted effort is needed to research the needs of a diverse population of Asian American women. NAWHO advocates for more empirical research – both qualitative and quantitative – on prevention of all forms of violence, including SV and IPV, among Asian American women to advance greater knowledge of modifiable risk factors. Research will also increase understanding of consequences associated with violence and advance the development of new prevention strategies.

2. Collaborative Efforts

Health care providers, social services, law enforcement officers, and the judicial system must be aware that cultural barriers, particularly in the areas of SV and IPV, restrict Asian American women in situations of violence from speaking out against perpetrators. Asian American women need to be provided with an explanation of behaviors that constitute different types of violence and be given information about their legal rights and access to support services.

To this end, NAWHO supports educational programs that provide Asian American women with information about their basic human rights so that they can develop the necessary skills to take preventive care or to escape violent situations. NAWHO advocates for stricter enforcement of laws that assign greater accountability to perpetrators of violence. In addition, NAWHO supports cultural sensitivity training to health care providers, police, and other law enforcement officials to enhance their response to the needs of Asian women.

3. Communications and Public Education

Public awareness and education is critical in bridging the language barriers, cultural stigmas, lack of knowledge about violence, and confusion about legal rights. Educational materials translated into Asian languages should be

developed and distributed to Asian American communities. Disseminated information also needs to be culturally responsible to effectively communicate to Asian populations most at risk.

4. Leadership Training

Asian American women should be involved at the local and national levels in strategy development to prioritize our communities in violence prevention policies. NAWHO supports efforts such as leadership development and advocacy training of Asian American women to increase their participation in programs and policy development.

The combination of these efforts will begin to provide Asian American women, health care providers, public policy makers, and law enforcement agencies with the knowledge and strategies to develop prevention programs that empower Asian women to break the cycle of silence in SV and IPV.

CONCLUSION

NAWHO's groundbreaking survey is a first step to understanding the realities of violence among Asian American women. It provides an unequivocal call for increased awareness, prevention programs, and support systems in both the Asian American communities and on college campuses. In particular, NAWHO's findings indicate that Asian American women between the ages of 18-34 are highly susceptible to SV, IPV, and stalking and experience these violations at an alarming rate.

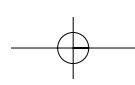
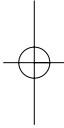
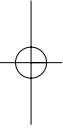
Silent Epidemic is an independent research project that complements NAWHO's ***Breaking the Silence: Culturally Competent Approaches to Violence Prevention for Asian American Women*** program. *Breaking the Silence* is an evidence-based, multi-component program that seeks to address prevention strategies by working with young Asian American women, who are most at risk for SV and IPV, yet best positioned to make a difference for themselves and future generations. Designed to train peer advocates and to evaluate culturally competent intervention strategies tailored specifically for Asian women, NAWHO's program components include:

- Establishment of a Prevention Conference and Leadership Institute to build leadership and advocacy skills of campus administrators and college students.

CONCLUSION (continued)

- Development of a culturally competent educational curriculum to address barriers and stigmas that have been preventing Asian American women from speaking out and seeking help.
- Launch of NAWHO's Violence Prevention Site (www.nawho.org), which is an additional distribution channel for the latest culturally responsible prevention information for the Asian American community.

These efforts will begin to provide awareness, strategies, and recommendations to understand the need for more community based outreach programs and education. Asian American women need to empower their lives through knowledge and utilization of culturally competent health care services.



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