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The following is an article I wrote in the Summer of 2019 in collaboration with the A/PI Domestic Violence Resource Project (DVRP) as a Public Service Scholar for the Conference on Asian Pacific American Leadership. The article discusses common barriers faced by Asian immigrant survivors of domestic violence while acknowledging the diversity in experience among individuals, communities, and ethnic groups. It emphasizes the importance of analyzing and combatting domestic violence within Asian immigrant communities. A shortened version of the article be found on DVRP's blog at <https://dvrp.org/guest-writer-kristina-smelser-and-immigrant-experiences/>.

A Forgotten People: Exposing Domestic Violence Within the Asian Immigrant Community

In failing to comprehend the sheer scale of Asian and Pacific Islander migration into the United States, our society largely tends to discount these immigrants as unworthy of culturally-specific support and resources. It will come as a surprise to many that since 2010 the number of South and East Asian immigrants arriving in the U.S. has surmounted that of Latinx migrants; according to Pew Research Center, Asians now constitute 27.4% of the immigrant population. In fact, Pew projects that Asians will comprise the U.S.'s largest immigrant group by the year 2055.ⁱ Others may be just as startled to learn how many of these immigrants are actually undocumented: in 2017, approximately 1.4 of the 10.5 million undocumented immigrants entering the U.S. between 2012 and 2017 came from an Asian country.ⁱⁱ

However, these large statistics will remain little more than intangible numbers unless we take the time to analyze what they mean for Asian immigrants, especially those who are undocumented. One of the most unrecognized implications is the prevalence of domestic violence (also referred to as “intimate partner violence”) within many Asian immigrant communities. This violence, and gender-based violence more largely, is a global epidemic that approximately one in three women experience; it affects nearly every culture and community to some extent, and Asian immigrant populations are unfortunately no exception.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence estimates a broad range of Asian women who report experiencing intimate physical or sexual violence during their lifetime. The vastness of this range can be attributed to the wide disparities across specific Asian ethnic groups, which can be better understood by disaggregating the data: one study found that 61% of Japanese women reported having experienced some form of physical, emotional, or sexual intimate partner violence that they considered abusive, while another found that 21.2% of sampled South Asian women reported having experienced physical and/or sexual abuse at the hands of their intimate partner.^{iv}

It is essential to acknowledge these disparities and to avoid generalizing the diverse array of experiences that women of different Asian origins face, while recognizing that trends exist across various cultures. Many Asian women, both in their native country and elsewhere, face culturally- and traditionally-imposed barriers to seeking help when in situations of domestic violence. Traditional societal norms in many Asian countries dictate that a woman's role in marriage is to be passive and adherent to her husband. Domestic violence is often viewed as a “private” matter, not to leave the boundaries of the family; similar beliefs exist across different Asian cultures, as displayed by a number of studies. In her article, Nahoko Harada of the University of Pennsylvania discusses the *sewa-nyōbō*, or the “devoted wife”, within traditional Japanese culture. The *sewa-nyōbō*, who maintains a perfect home and devotes herself to her husband, “represents not only the idealized notion of a wife but also the frame of mind necessary to become a wife” to many Japanese.^v Such ideals are perpetuated by mainstream American society; Neesha R. Patel explores U.S. social constructions of South Asian womanhood and notes that white women are often set in opposition with South Asian women. She argues that

while the former group is portrayed as “normal, confident, self-possessed, and assertive,” South Asians are often depicted as “weak, passive, exotic, and submissive.”^{vi} This burden of not just racist, but also sexist stereotyping only further exacerbates the situations of many Asian women once they move to the U.S.

Such expectations of female submissiveness and acceptance in situations of domestic violence are often reinforced by the individual’s family and society. Many Korean immigrant women who were interviewed during a Saint Joseph University study disclosed that parents within the Korean immigrant community would use physical punishment to discipline their children; the study also found that the women who received this type of punishment were almost six times more likely to later be victims of domestic violence.^{vii} Indian professor Uma Narayan argues that despite these cruel realities, “there is a sexist and culturally chauvinistic insistence that ‘our traditions’ guarantee respectful treatment of women.”^{viii} Because of these detrimental pressures, survivors of domestic abuse are often too fearful and ashamed to seek help, even from a medical provider in the U.S.

Moving to the U.S. can add challenges that can exacerbate the situations of Asian immigrant women. Once here, many must work outside of the home to support the family’s expenses yet are still expected to do all of the cooking and housework.^{ix} Failure to meet spousal expectations of domestic duties can aggravate the violence. An article in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* analyzes domestic violence against Cambodian immigrant women and highlights a prominent difference between their native country and the U.S.: in Cambodia, many families reside in “matrifocal homes, where sister and natal family networks served as natural barriers to

marital disputes and deterred interpersonal violence.”^x When immigrant women come to the U.S., they instead tend to live in public housing that is often geographically isolated from not only family, but also public transportation, schools, supermarkets, and other urban facilities.

The various forms of oppression — physical, social, psychological, and financial — can be devastating and seemingly inescapable for immigrants who experience any or all of them; in particular, a spouse’s control over their partner’s finances, immigration status, or both, makes seeking help or separation even more difficult. If someone’s legal status is dependent on their spouse’s, as is often the case among Asian immigrant couples, they may be fearful of deportation; an abusive partner can use this as a threat if they suspect their partner intends to leave them or contact authorities.^{xi} Thus, it is imperative that organizations providing support to survivors remain completely independent from immigration authorities; it is also important that they emphasize the confidentiality of survivors’ personal information and experiences.^{xii}

This confidentiality is vital for other reasons as well; due to experiences in their home countries with corrupt, neglectful, or victim-blaming officials, immigrant survivors may instinctively fear and distrust U.S. authorities.^{xiii} Their wariness of authorities is often well-justified; in the U.S., local criminal justice authorities and federal ICE agents often work in conjunction to arrest and deport undocumented immigrants through a variety of means including direct communication, fear tactics, and programs such as Criminal Alien Program and Secure Communities.^{xiv} The targeting of people of color, exemplified through the recently-leaked Facebook group of Border Patrol agents joking about migrant deaths and debasing minority lawmakers, has only added to immigrant survivors’ aversion to seeking help from law enforcement.^{xv}

Other barriers exist for Asian immigrant survivors of domestic violence who seek vitally important outside help. One of the most prominent of these is language: some, especially those with limited exposure to American social settings, do not speak English well enough to feel confident explaining their situation to authorities or resource centers. Many Asian immigrants who experience domestic abuse not only lack language skills, but also tend to possess less knowledge about social institutions and norms in the U.S. than their abusers.^{xvi} Experiences such as these deter survivors from seeking the help that they so desperately need and deserve.

Although many shelters exist for Asian American survivors of domestic abuse, these are often concentrated in areas of larger Asian American populations; few exist in rural areas, and those that do may not be intended specifically for survivors of their nationality. Besides neglecting to offer language translation services, shelters and resource centers that support all survivors rather than a specific subgroup often fall short in other ways: for example, these institutions may offer resources or services that A/PI immigrant survivors cannot access, require that survivors do chores or activities they are not comfortable with, or serve American food for every meal rather than their native cuisine. Though these details may seem insignificant, when compounded, they can make a survivor's path to recovery all the more difficult.^{xvii}

Despite the flaws of some community centers, shelters, and programs, these organizations are truly essential and can fill in the gaps where government institutions fall short. By providing many types of support to Asian immigrant survivors, they can facilitate different aspects of their recovery, from long-term housing options to medical services to litigation assistance to career

counseling. One great culturally-specific example is the Asian/Pacific Islander Domestic Violence Resource Program (A/PI DVRP), an organization that supports Asian and Pacific Islander survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault in Washington DC, Maryland, and Virginia. DVRP connects survivors to culturally appropriate legal services, shelters, and social services such as counseling, court accompaniment, and public benefits. In this way it is able to help survivors like Amy*, a Vietnamese immigrant who after experiencing physical, sexual, verbal, financial, and mental domestic abuse, reached out to the program. Recognizing Amy's dependence on her husband's green card, DVRP connected her with not only counseling and shelter, but also legal services that allowed her to submit a VAWA petition. Amy managed to receive a visa extension, as well as the resources she needed to pursue life independent from her husband.^{xviii}

The absence of culturally-specific resources for Asian immigrant survivors can be attributed not only to a lack of awareness about Asian migration into the U.S., but also to a widespread assumption that this group is unworthy of help and resources. If such societal ignorance persists, Asian immigrant survivors will continue to face often-insurmountable barriers to accessing support. Thus once we acknowledge both the extent of Asian immigration into the U.S. and the prevalence of domestic violence within these immigrant communities, it is vital that we invest in culturally-specific resources that can provide these survivors with the support they need and deserve. Ultimately, there is so much more we can do to empower, validate, and lift this community from spaces of marginalization. Please visit dvrp.org for more information about the avenues you and your community can take to do so.

*Name has been changed for confidentiality reasons.

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