2023
SAFE SPACES
REPORT

NAPIESV

NATIONAL ORGANIZATION
OF ASIANS & PACIFIC ISLANDERS
ENDING SEXUAL VIOLENCE

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ABOUT THE NATIONAL ORGANIZATION OF ASIANS & PACIFIC ISLANDERS ENDING SEXUAL VIOLENCE

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ABOUT NAPIESV

The National Organization of Asians and Pacific Islanders Ending Sexual Violence (NAPIESV) is a program under Monsoon Asians & Pacific Islanders in Solidarity, with a mission to support local and international community-based programs and governmental organizations in enhancing their services to victims of sexual violence from the Asian and Pacific Islander communities in the U.S., U.S. Territories in the Pacific, and Asia. Monsoon Asians & Pacific Islanders in Solidarity is a community-based organization with a mission to end violence against women in the Asians & Pacific Islanders communities in Iowa.

INTRODUCTION

IN THE CONTEXT OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE, SAFE SPACES ARE PLACES THAT OFFER SUPPORT, UNDERSTANDING, AND RESOURCES TO SURVIVORS SO THEY CAN COPE AND HEAL FROM THE TRAUMA THEY HAVE EXPERIENCED.

The term "safe space" risks oversaturation, used to describe anything from comforting environments or ideals in a romantic partner. In the context of sexual violence, safe spaces are places that offer support, understanding, and resources to survivors so they can cope and heal from the trauma they have experienced. These environments are designed to be free from judgement, victim-blaming, and harassment, with the priority on the well-being of victim/survivor.

But what does safe spaces mean for Asian and Pacific Islander victims of sexual assault? How do programs assisting API victims provide services and programming to meet the cultural needs of survivors? How are survivors even defining what is "safe" to them? Moreover, how do we practice safe spaces when engaging the API community? How do we model this ethos as an organization, to ensure our staff battling for the rights of victims are feeling safe themselves? These are some of the questions that prompted the National Association of Asians and Pacific Islanders Ending Sexual Violence (NAPIESV) to embark on a search for effective safe space practices among organizations assisting API victims of sexual assault.

Between June and August 2023 NAPIESV, a program under Monsoon Asians & Pacific Islanders in Solidarity, conducted interviews with nine community-based organizations across the United States and in American Samoa.

The following questions guided the conversations with the programs:

1 — **What does safe spaces mean to you, your organization, and the communities you serve?**

2 — **How can we provide safe spaces to the most marginalized and underserved populations among API?**

3 — **How can we extend the practice of safe spaces to take care of our staff and avoid organizational trauma?**

The organizations participating in our project include:

- *Womankind, iamwomankind.org*
- *Sahki for South Asian Women, sakhi.org*
- *DVRP, dvrp.org*
- *Banteay Srei, banteaysrei.org*
- *KAN-WIN, kanwin.org*
- *SEWA-AIFW, sewa-aifw.org*
- *Boat People SOS, bpsos.org*
- *New Mexico Asian Family Center, nmafc.org*
- *American Samoa Alliance against Domestic and Sexual Violence (ASADSV), asalliance.co*

We interviewed individuals in various roles at these nine culturally specific programs. Some were advocates working directly with victims, coordinators of community outreach, managers, and executive directors. In the spirit of safe practices, we have quoted participants but kept their identities anonymous.

NAPIESV has a mission to support local and international community-based programs and governmental organizations in enhancing their services to victims of sexual violence from the Asian and Pacific Islander communities in the United States and U.S. Territories in the Pacific and Asia.

SAFE SPACE PROGRAMMING-GENERAL OVERVIEW

> *"I am very glad that there are people who want to help and educate about a topic that is hardly talked about but is very damaging to our society. Great work that you all [at NAPIESV] are doing!"*

The concept of "safe spaces" has a history that dates back several decades, starting with activists from the Civil Rights movement and feminist movements in the United States vocalizing the need for environments where marginalized people could feel protected from discrimination, harassment, and other forms of violence. Currently "safe spaces" are used in various contexts, including educational institutions, workplaces, and community organizations.

Here are some common features and characteristics of safe spaces in the context of the anti-sexual violence movement:

- **Confidentiality**
- **Physical safety**
- **Emotional Support**
- **Trauma-Informed Care**
- **Support Groups**
- **Resources and Information**
- **Inclusivity**
- **Accessibility**
- **Healing**

Provided by programs assisting sexual assault survivors, safe spaces have looked like crisis hotlines, support centers on college campuses, online forums, and support groups. Below we will explore what they look like provided by culturally specific API organizations, and most importantly, how safe spaces are being defined at the moment.

KEY FEATURES OF SAFE SPACE PROGRAMMING FOR CULTURALLY SPECIFIC ORGANIZATIONS

"We need the ability to help ourselves."

BREAKING GENERATIONS OF SILENCE

Sexual violence has existed in our communities for a long time, cloistered in so much shame that it has silenced victims who want to share their stories. Programs said victims who come from families where sexual abuse has occurred over several generations – for example grandmother, mother, and daughter -are not just facing emotions from disclosing their assault, some are processing what it means to be the first one in their families to speak out. For this reason, programs must be able to work with victims and their families to address the question of justice, accountability, and healing from sexual violence.

> "...Healing is a very new experience for a survivor, for any survivor.... But for someone who is sharing this for the first time and breaking this generational cycle, it's hard. So, for example, if you are aware that your mother or your grandmother have also been abused as a child or as an adult, and they may not have reached out to our agencies or shared their experience with someone else, you may be the first person to break that cycle. I think that also becomes very heavy on a survivor to acknowledge and to process that and move forward."

REDUCING THE STIGMA OF MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

"...in our culture, for example, if you are going to a psychiatrist, you are tagged as you know, mentally ill...an insane person. You are the one who is blamed for behaving in a certain way."

The programs we spoke to identified mental health services as vital for sexual assault survivors but highlighted the widespread problem of limited access and the stigma surrounding seeking mental health care. Advocates said if survivors had insurance or could afford therapy, the next obstacle – a more arduous task – was to find a therapist from the same culture as the survivor and spoke the same language. Many programs interviewed had sidestepped this issue by hiring an in-house therapist or contracting with a local psychologist from the community; these programs often saw advocates and mental health professionals working in tandem to assist victims. Other programs provided support groups for survivors either traditionally, via a closed group with the goal of achieving well-being through discussion, or in the form of cultural gatherings such as sewing groups or cooking classes.

While the challenge of access to culturally relevant and language specific mental health care has been largely met by the creativity and steadfast work of community programs, the larger cultural hurdle -- the stigma of seeking mental health services -- exists in many API communities. Several programs, especially those who assist refugee and immigrant survivors, said people are concerned about being labeled as "crazy" if community members knew they saw a psychologist. Advocates attributed lack of awareness and understanding about mental health conditions and issues, which lead to misconceptions and stereotyping.

To combat the stigma of mental health services, programs emphasized the importance of community engagement and education. API communities tend to be close-knit, and individual actions can reflect on the entire family. As a result, survivors may be discouraged from seeking mental health services because they don't want to be judged and are fearful of the impact it may have on their family's reputation in the community. In order for victims to feel safe to access the support they need work must be done to eliminate the stigma of mental health services.

WHEN IT'S NOT SAFE TO TALK

Mental health services such as talk therapy, which is also known as psychotherapy or counseling, can be a powerful tool for healing sexual assault trauma. However, not all API survivors are ready to utilize talk therapy; some victims, in fact, take a long time to feel safe or ready to share, if ever. In some cases, talk therapy is not effective because victims cannot find an API therapist who speaks their language. Even if the survivor is proficient in English, therapy relationships are not immune to the historical and cultural contexts of race that exist in the greater society, so some victims will require a therapist they can identify with culturally.

> "I feel like once you have that space where you have another person or another group of people who you know you can be vulnerable with and who will understand where you're coming from, even if they aren't survivors but are Asian American...I think that in itself is healing."

For survivors who are not interested in therapy, it becomes paramount that advocates are ready to provide the emotional reassurance and sense of "safety" that can help them cope and heal. To be able to do so, advocates must be trained on sexual violence and feel comfortable assisting victims and talking about sexual assault. Programming also must reflect the diversity of needs, meaning there should be spaces for survivors to be connected to other survivors without needing to disclose their sexual assault. Many programs described creating various forms of support groups centered around peer connections, community, and the safety in not having to disclose sexual assault; some of these include resting circles, art workshops, yoga classes, or gatherings on cultural holidays.

SAFE DOES NOT ALWAYS MEAN "COMFORTABLE"

Some programs expressed a need to deeply reexamine the definition of safety considering the looming societal problems of racism and oppression that is also crucial to address in the anti-sexual violence movement. While safe spaces are generally viewed as providing comfort and support, advocates have questioned if it impedes the necessity of difficult conversations with victims. If a victim espouses racist beliefs, how do advocates respond in ways that can question that viewpoint and still maintain a relationship with the victim in which they feel secure and at ease?

> **"It's a 'fierce space' for me. I don't believe in 'safe space.' It's a promise based on an illusion."**

Programs expressing this concern said it will be valuable for advocates themselves to learn how to feel safe while in conflict, especially when working in prevention and community spaces where there might be resistance to the analytical frameworks applied to the anti-sexual violence movement.

> "If someone brings up something and someone disagrees, or someone disagreed with another survivor or staff member, then it's like, 'oh, we don't know how to deal with that... that's not safety.' But it's like, no, that's real life. That's the world we live in."

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COMMUNITY SUPPORT IS VITAL

> *"Safe space is not only a space to share their [survivor] stories but is also making sure that we're building community around them."*

Survivors often do the work of healing alone, programs said, and the experience after disclosure can be very isolating for some victims. When survivors have community support, even if it's one friend that they trust, they feel much better; for this reason, it is pivotal to connect survivors to other survivors, community members, and social networks. Advocates who work with refugee and immigrant survivors said the consequences of social ostracization is particularly acute for this survivor group, since many have not established social networks in the U.S. and rely on family and community members for not only emotional support, but assistance with navigating a new country and resources.

> *"We need more communal spaces."*

Programs highlighted establishing relationships within the community as a starting point in building rapport and engagement. One program described cultural and religious holidays being celebrated by the organization as an opportunity for everyone – staff, survivors, and community members -- to gather and get to know each other. Another program described frequently utilizing community surveys to inquire what the needs of members are, and providing more social services – financial assistance, legal services, etc. – as ways to prove to the community that they are trustworthy and sincere about collaborating.

Advocates noted that while the community is often cited as the problem for sexual assault victims for victim-blaming and judgement, the community is also the solution. Advocates and programs alone do not have the capacity to meet all the needs of a survivor, especially considering the long-term services that sexual assault survivors often require. Community support provides a powerful network of care that survivors may need for months or even years as they heal.

NOT SAFE ENOUGH FOR API LGBTQ+ VICTIMS

Programs agreed that not enough survivors who identify as LGBTQ+ are reaching out to community organizations and accessing its services. There was consensus among all programs that efforts to engage the API LGBTQ+ community must be prioritized and intentional. Organizations should evaluate themselves first to discover if there are barriers to accessing their services. Safe spaces are trauma-informed, meaning inclusivity and a spirit of openness and acceptance must be present in every aspect of an organization, from its policies and procedures to the language of its written materials. Additionally, the level of comfort that staff feels when assisting an LGBTQ+ person is important because initial interactions are critical to ensure that victims will return for services; LGBTQ+ people have been historically oppressed and misgendered by service providers so language, such as the use of their preferred pronouns, should be respected.
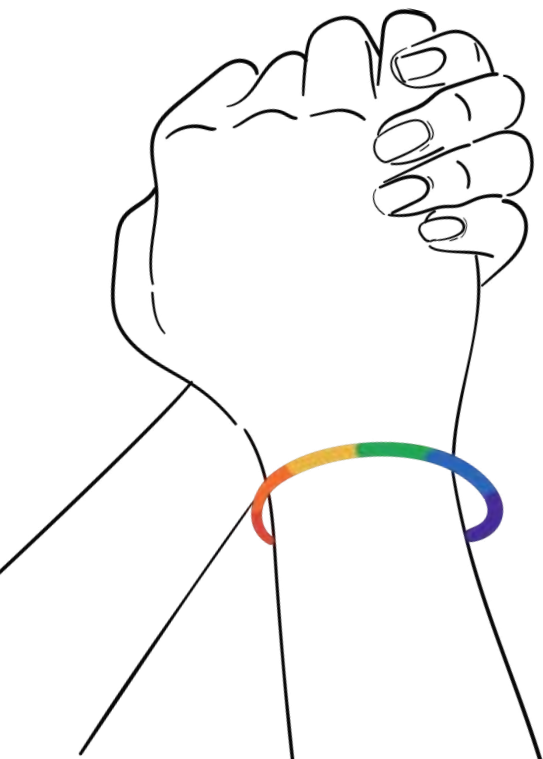
Lastly, representation matters and many LGBTQ+ survivors do not see themselves reflected in the programs whose services would be valuable to them, making some hesitant to approach organizations. Programs said LGBTQ+ advocates should be hired to fill this gap in representation because they are better able to provide victims specific tools and knowledge that apply to their unique experiences. Furthermore, it is not enough for LGBTQ+ victims to work with someone who accepts their identity – the meaningful interaction will come from an advocate with whom the victim can identify with.

IS THERE SPACE FOR MEN?

Programs say they are serving male survivors of sexual assault, but these numbers are paltry compared to female survivors. While sexual violence disproportionately affects women, advocates say they know there are many male victims who are suffering in silence due to rape myths that make male sexual victimization incompatible with notions of masculinity. Additionally, programs said the perception that agencies only assist female victims persist in API communities, deterring men from stepping forward. And if they speak up about sexual assault, they fear that no one would believe them, or they would be seen as unmasculine.

> "*I still get questions like when I go out to educate people, especially men are like, 'do you serve men?' Sort of like they want to find out but they also want to test me. So I think we need to do more education about what violence means and how it could impact cisgender males.*"

Similar to the observations about working with LGBTQ+ survivors, programs said outreach must be intentional. They said several factors would have to be in place to make men feel comfortable approaching organizations for services. First, programs would need to have male-friendly spaces. An organization that achieved success engaging with males from their community did so by establishing a men's group that was active both in the community and with the program – an outcome facilitated by having a male staffer lead the outreach effort. Second, men need to be involved as staff and collaborators in advocacy, prevention, and education. When men play an active role, they help reduce the stigma for other males to speak up about sexual violence.

DO WE KNOW HOW TO DO CULTURALLY SPECIFIC WORK?

> *"What does doing culturally specific work mean to you? It is it just working with an ethnically specific community or linguistically specific community? If that is where it ends, you still take the same principles from mainstream and Eurocentric culture and just apply them. Or does it [culturally specific work] go further?"*

It seems antithetical to suggest that culturally specific programs do not know how to do culturally specific work, but this question was raised by several programs contemplating the legacy of colonization and racism on the API community and its impact on how we view effective advocacy and optimal practices. Are programs too absorbed in professionalism, a set of beliefs about how one should operate in a workplace, and becoming distant from the communities they serve? Are we modeling the hierarchal power structures from non-culturally specific organizations at the expense of our staff? These are questions that some suggested culturally specific programs consider regularly to ensure they are providing "safe spaces" and truly reflective of the communities they serve.

Although questions were raised about whether programs have templates for advocacy truly informed by their culture and community, all agreed that a defining characteristic of culturally specific work is authentic collaboration and partnership with the API communities they serve. Programs need to be "working with" rather than "helping" communities; advocacy cannot be done from a pedestal or podium. Programs described different levels of engagement with the community, and those who had strong ties to the communities they served said it took a long time to build trust and establish a good relationship. Examples of successful outreach include inviting community members to be co-facilitators in training and events, attending cultural and religious celebrations, hosting festive gatherings, creating Asian food pantries, community closets with traditional clothing, and – most importantly – asking community members what programs can do for them.

ADVOCACY AFTER COVID

> "*People don't feel safe around each other. You have to make extra effort to connect online or on the phone. And then if you're newer staff, you were like, even more disconnected. And if you're talking only through email or zoom or like texting, there's a lot of miscommunications.*"

It was evident that the programs participating in this project were committed to the task of creating safe spaces and were having discussions about what constitutes "safe" in their respective communities long before NAPIESV's Safe Spaces Project. There are many reasons for this interest in reflection, and one of them is how challenged the very concept of "safe spaces" has become for the API community following a streak of hate crimes that started during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many victims were elders, and a majority were female, highlighting an often-overlooked history of violent and racist misogyny against API women. As a result, there are API who no longer feel that there are safe spaces for them anywhere.

The pandemic has also made some permanent changes to the way community organizations structure their work, and this shift has a ripple effect on all aspects of programming. Many advocates work hybrid schedules and it has become more common for in-person interactions to be reduced and replaced with phone calls, text, or video calls. Connection and trust building may have to be achieved without advocate or survivor ever meeting in person. Program leaders have said they do not believe advocacy can be done remotely, but at the same time they have observed the benefits of working from home on the well-being of staff. Many programs say they are still seeking a balance between their responsibility to victims, and their obligation to their staff.

Community engagement also looks different as virtual convenings are standard. Our work with survivors and the community has expanded to digital spaces, and we use various communication platforms to connect with each other; this is a trend that only seems to be progressing forward. Programs said the digital transformation has been positive for the most part, creating ease and greater opportunities to "gather" without the requirement of physical transportation. However, the convenience of virtual gatherings should be considered alongside the goals of the event and what is best or appropriate for participants. For example, can the virtual event be digitally inclusive to ensure that everyone has access? Not all API communities can access online services so programs will need to meet in person or increase efforts to bridge the digital divide by training the community to use the technology.

Overall, programs have shown adaptability and innovation in response to the challenges posed by COVID-19. Culturally specific programs continue to play a crucial role in providing services to victims of sexual assault, and support for their communities in times of need.
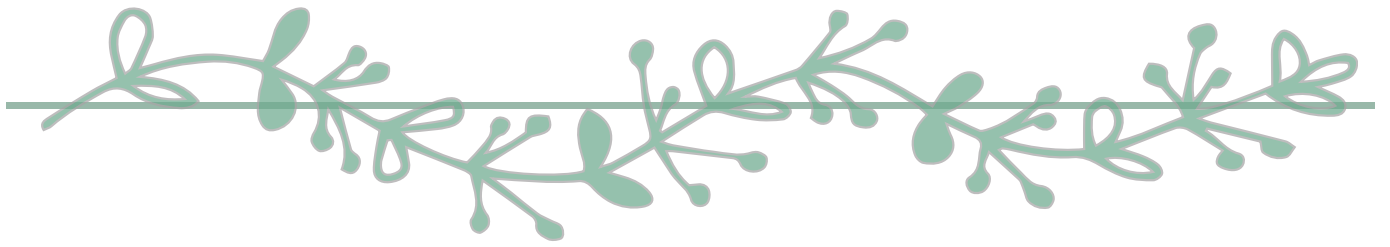
NAPIESV ON BEST PRACTICES

"NAPIESV AROSE AS A PROGRAM 13 YEARS AGO BECAUSE THERE WEREN'T ENOUGH "SAFE SPACES" FOR API SEXUAL ASSAULT SURVIVORS."

NAPIESV arose as a program 13 years ago because there weren't enough "safe spaces" for API sexual assault survivors. Specifically, the problem we set to address was how the scarcity of programs centered on sexual violence left victims underserved by dual domestic violence and sexual assault agencies that inevitably attended to domestic violence advocacy, where there were more victims. A lesser number of reported victims does not mean sexual assault isn't occurring at the rate of domestic violence – the reality is infinitely more complex. Sexual violence is extraordinarily difficult to confront for API because our cultures perceive it to be connected to sexuality, a taboo subject, rather than an issue of power such as domestic violence.

The approach NAPIESV has endorsed to meet the needs of API survivors has been the embracing of culturally specific practices at all levels and aspects of an organization. This means that advocates reflect the ethnic communities they serve, victims can use their native language and be understood, and programs set aside the familiar models of support services obtained from social services, hospitals, and schools – systems that have historically struggled to adjust to cultural communities – and replace it with programming that resonate with the history and realities of their people.

In addition, healing – the goal for sexual assault survivors – should also incorporate cultural healing practices. Western approaches to healing often use a reductionist approach by breaking down the body into organs, systems, or body versus mind. Meanwhile API healing methods are founded on a holistic view of health, considering the interconnectedness of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. This means programs cannot compartmentalize services; to do the healing work, programs should offer programming and experiences which address physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs.

We recognize that the API community is diverse and constantly evolving. Cultural healing practices may have been lost by some or may no longer resonate for generations growing up in the diaspora. Programs will need to respond to the character and specific needs of their communities. However, we believe that centering culture is important, especially regarding the history of cultural erasure API have experienced in the U.S. The models for healing and advocacy by mainstream or non-culturally specific organizations have not been able to adequately help survivors or our communities overcome the magnitude of sexual assault trauma; it is time for us to look to our own culture for the tools to heal.

Lastly, this report is intended to be a snapshot of the discourse around safe spaces programming at this moment and not a definitive summary. NAPIESV plans to keep this a "working document" as we encourage all programs assisting API victims of sexual violence to have conversations about safe spaces amongst themselves.

thank you!

NAPIESV expresses our deepest gratitude to the organizations who generously participated in this report. Your willingness to share your insights, lived experiences, and practices have greatly enhanced our understanding of what safe spaces truly mean for Asian and Pacific Islander victims of sexual assault. By opening up and sharing your vulnerabilities with us, we will be able to create powerful resources and spaces that will empower API survivors to feel safe and supported in embracing their own vulnerabilities.

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