HOLDING UP MORE THAN HALF THE HEAVENS

Domestic Violence in Our Communities,
A Call for Justice

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Domestic violence is a disease that knows no boundaries, it cuts across the barriers of culture, race, and political and socio-economic divides. It has claimed countless lives, both literally and figuratively. The precise number of casualties is unknown because most victims do not report domestic violence. They excuse, deny, or bury the violence away, never to be discussed but always remembered in the truth of midnight nightmares.

Few Asian Pacific Americans (APA) would fail to recognize the killings of Vincent Chin and Jim Ming Hai Loo and the massacre of the Stockton schoolchildren: Raphanar Or, 9; Ram Chun, 8; Thuy Tran, 6; Sokhim An, 6; and Ocun Lim, 8, as racially motivated crimes of hate. Anyone who has been called “Chink” or “Gook” or “Dirty Jap” knows that the violence underlying the “harmless” name-calling can, given the wrong circumstances, eas-
ily lead to more brutal manifestations of hate. We readily see the
tenure denials of Don Nakanishi, Jean Lew, and Rosalie Tung as
cases of employment discrimination and civil rights violations.
After many decades of struggle by Nisei activists, we now under-
stand that the internment of 120,000 Japanese during World War
II was an unlawful deprivation of civil liberties.

What about domestic violence? Few people would consider
spouse abuse a crime, much less a hate crime violating victims'
civil rights. The American Medical Association's official count is
that one in four U.S. women are victimized by domestic violence
in their lifetime. This rate translates into two to four million women
attacked by current or former partners every year. The surgeon
general, Dr. Antonia Novello, has described domestic violence as
"more common than automobile accidents, muggings, and rapes
combined."

To what extent the cases of APA women contribute to the
national statistics is unknown. The marginalized history of Asian
Pacific women in the United States—where our lives do not merit
inclusion into official data—holds true with domestic violence
figures. Activists working to provide support for battered APA
women and their children and to eradicate the circle of violence
know that domestic violence is pervasive in APA communities.
They see the fatalities and the casualties in the women they work
with and in their own families.

Battered women are everywhere. They are in ESL classes and
community health centers, in multiservice agencies and job train-
ing programs, in your office and working side-by-side with you.
Because of the stigma, the shame, and the blame we still attach to
victims of domestic violence, most simply suffer in silence. No one
is immune from the disease, yet there exists a conspiracy of silence
whose source lies deeply embedded in the roots of patriarchal
perversities. It is a web that holds all of us who hold our tongues
out of shame or guilt or need to protect the family's name, the
family's honor. It holds all of us who hold our tongues in complicity.

This chapter is a wake-up call to APA activists fighting on the
frontlines for the civil rights of Asian Pacific Americans, as well as
all peoples. We as a community can never hold our heads high and
claim a righteous struggle for civil rights unless we fight hand-in-
hand for the rights of our sisters to be free from violence of the
body, the mind, the spirit. This is a wake-up call to all Asian Pacific
Americans. There will never be a strong and healthy community
unless violence in the home—the number one health hazard to
women—is eradicated. We can never reach the potential that is
our birthright unless we stop denying the impact of domestic
violence on our own lives and start dealing with its effects. It is
fruitless to hope and work for a better society when we pass on a legacy
of violence and dysfunction. The violence tolerated against our
mothers, our sisters, our daughters, our lovers, our wives has
shaken, wounded, or devastated every single life in this country.

Defining Domestic Violence

Domestic violence encompasses the whole range of violence
in the home among family members and between intimate part-
ners, married or unmarried. Strictly speaking, it includes elderly
abuse, child abuse, incest, and partner abuse. In this chapter, we
examine domestic violence from the perspective of a woman in-
volved in a heterosexual relationship because our work has focused
on that and it is from this perspective we feel best able to discuss
the issue.

Most people if asked would say that we should not tolerate
domestic violence. Yet, many community leaders still say that a
little discipline, an occasional beating now and then to teach the
woman a lesson, is not domestic violence. This reveals that a lot of
confusion exists about what domestic violence is, or is not. First,
let us tell you what domestic violence is not. Domestic violence is
not the occasional fight, or conflict, or disagreement between two
individuals. Domestic violence is not an interaction between two
equal individuals.

Domestic violence is the imposition of total control over a
family member, usually an intimate female partner or child (al-
though more and more elderly are also being victimized), by
systematic intimidation, isolation, and manipulation through
emotional, psychological, physical, and/or sexual abuse or with the
threat of physical and/or sexual abuse. Domestic violence usually (though not always) begins mildly with psychological and emotional abuse. It can start subtly with a few criticisms here and there. The criticisms become “put downs and accusations” and develop into a systematic stripping of the victim’s confidence and self-esteem. The abuser can also extort control by isolating the victim from friends and family, withholding affection, or destroying her possessions and pets. The message sent is “Submit to my control or I will visit similar violence.” Once the violence starts, it always escalates. A push turns into a slap turns into a punch turns into kicks, stabs, burns, and sexual abuse.

Domestic violence is the willful control, use, and abuse of a female partner with impunity. When someone is being stabbed, punched, kicked, burned, or beaten by a stranger, chances are that someone will intervene. At the very least, someone will call the police. But when violence happens behind locked doors—in the privacy and “sanctity” of the home—even when a neighbor can clearly hear screaming, intervention is improbable because no one wants to interfere in a “family” affair. Preserving the family and male control has more value than the life and safety of women and children. This is especially true in APA communities where the family serves as the locus of identity. In addition, APA women who are isolated from mainstream society because of linguistic and cultural barriers rely more heavily on the family structure than they would in their home countries. And to refugee women who have suffered the ravages of war and dislocation, having often lost both family members and worldly possessions, the batterer may be the only family they have left.

Because emotional and psychological abuse usually precede physical abuse, the victim often blames herself for the violence perpetrated against her. It is not only the victim but other people who wrongly believe it is the woman’s fault. More often than not, when the woman seeks help, others tell her to be patient, tolerant, or forgiving because he—the abuser—does not mean it. People will ask, “What could she have done to aggravate him so badly? If only she would not nag him so much or be so demanding. If only she would get his dinner on time, argue less, be more understanding of his stress and tensions.” She is then sent back with admonishments to be a more compliant wife.

This attitude is prevalent among the friends and family members of battered women as well as among many of the professionals who “service” battered women—ministers, doctors, social workers, counselors, police, and court officials. It does not take much to realize that this widespread feeling is based on the irrational but tacit acceptance of male control and superiority that we, living under patriarchy, are conditioned to accept.

To complicate this violence, there is usually a time of repentance and remorse right after an outbreak of violence when the batterer promises not to do it again. For a while he is attentive and loving, the man she fell in love with and married. So, she begins to hope that this time he will really change, but then slowly but surely the criticism and emotional abuse begins the whole cycle of violence again.

These difficulties are further exacerbated for refugee women, who are the most isolated members of our society. Refugee men who experience post-traumatic stress tend to express symptoms of uncontrollable rage and angry outbursts, which they often target at the most vulnerable people around them—their partners. The refugee woman who takes courageous steps to learn English, get a job, and become more independent, threatens the traditional balance of power between the husband and wife. This threat will often trigger the male need for greater assertion of his control.

Institutional Barriers from the Outside

In the 15 years since the beginning of the battered women’s movement, many activists have galvanized public attention and funneled resources into addressing domestic violence. The marginalization of the Asian Pacific American community, outside of those that serve as tokenized examples of the “model minority” myth, has meant that our problems have also been marginalized. To the extent that the battered women’s movement has raised mainstream society’s consciousness, it has cut APA women out of the loop.
The rising statistics of domestic violence have reached alarming proportions. Domestic violence is the number one cause of injury and death to women in this country. In 1991, one million women were reported attacked by their husbands or lovers. An estimated three million violent domestic crimes—murders, rapes, and assaults—went unreported. In San Francisco and Boston, as well as in other large cities, domestic violence is spiraling. In San Francisco, domestic violence has increased by 64 percent in the past eight years. In Massachusetts, in 1990, a woman was killed every 22 days as a result of domestic violence; as of April 1992, the rate rose to a woman killed every nine days. These are just the fatality statistics that make the headlines. For those of us who represent the unreported casualties, we know the extent of underreporting. In Massachusetts, in 1991, over 13 percent of the women and children killed were Asian, even though Asians constitute only 2.4 percent of the state’s population.

APA communities are not immune from domestic violence. Yet, no data exists for the number of battered APA women in any given city, much less nationally. While numbers barely begin to tell the whole story, the lack of numerical accounting is a political statement of our exclusion from the fruits of “full-blooded” U.S. citizenship where numbers determine the recognition of a problem and the allocation of limited resources. A coalition effort is in the making uniting the East/West Coast efforts of collecting data on APA victims of domestic violence.

Because of the barriers of language, culture, and economic disparities and the vagaries of racism and sexism, APA victims of domestic violence suffer revictimization at the hands of institutions designed to serve battered women. According to the 1990 U.S. Census, Asians and Pacific Islanders are the fastest growing minority group, totalling nearly seven million. And yet, in the entire United States only two shelters exist for APA women, one safe-home network and one advocacy group that provides culturally sensitive programs and counseling. Of the domestic violence resources available—police, shelters, hotlines, human services programs—few have staff who speak Asian Pacific languages. Given the highly sensitive nature of addressing domestic violence, it is unacceptable not to have linguistically accessible resources. The language barrier, in effect, shuts out most refugee and immigrant women. In addition, many battered women’s shelters turn away APA women because of language and cultural difficulties or out of sheer racism. Economic concerns present yet another obstacle. Most women who are victims of domestic violence do not have control of the family’s money. Many leave their homes with little besides the clothes on their backs. This means that many battered APA women who have gathered up the strength and courage to flee the violence in their homes must then return there because they have no other viable options. Legal protection is also often both inaccessible because of cultural and linguistic barriers and unavailable because of institutionalized racism and sexism. There are too many examples of the revictimization of battered APA women by institutionalized forces; it would require another whole book just to document the abuses we have seen. We will simply give you a few here. Consider the story of Ling.

One evening, as Ling was cleaning some fish for dinner, her husband who had beaten her repeatedly for the past eight years, who had given her concussions, a broken hip, and a broken jaw, began to pick a fight. Ling did not answer any of his accusations and her enduring silence made him even angrier. He picked up a chair to strike her. She sidestepped the appendng blow and screamed at him to stop. The chair broke against the door and he lunged at her, more enraged than before. Ling tried to ward him off by waving the knife that she had been using to clean the fish for dinner that evening. He continued to lunge at her and in attempting to get the knife, fell upon the knife and cut himself open. He continued to strike out at Ling.

Terrified, Ling ran to a nearby store to call the police. When the police came, her husband who spoke good English, accused Ling of attacking him. Ling’s English was not enough to defend herself. The police who she called arrested Ling and put her in jail. They set her bond at $2,500. The case against Ling is still pending. This is how our justice system works to protect battered women.

Then there is the case of Thuy, who in desperation to get away from her abusive husband sought the safety of a battered women’s
shelter with her three children. One day as she was in the bath-
room, one of her children fell down and cut himself on the forehead.
The shelter staff admonished Thuy for leaving her kids on their
own. A few days later, while Thuy was cooking supper, her kids
got into a fight with other shelter children. Again, the staff reprimanded Thuy for neglecting her children. Not knowing enough
English, Thuy could not counter the staff’s judgement of her. A 51A
child abuse/neglect form was filed against her. Now, Thuy faces
the possibility of losing her children to a system that she does not
comprehend and that not only does not understand her but fails to
protect her.

The Primacy of Fear of Racist Attacks, The Sacrifice
of Our Sisters

Within each ethnic group, male control and domestic violence
take on culturally specific expressions. APA communities have
tolerated and overlooked domestic violence for some of the same
reasons that mainstream society has tolerated and overlooked it
for so long—the unquestioning acceptance of patriarchy, of male
control and privilege. Some APA activists worry that bringing
domestic violence into the open will confirm negative stereotypes
about the community, and further fuel the fires of anti-Asian
sentiment. To expose the problem within APA communities is not
a statement about the greater violence or misogyny in Asian Pacific
culture. Instead, the sad reality is that Asian men, like all other
men, live in a male-dominated culture that views women as prop-
erty, objects they must control and possess. Compounding this
reality, or underlying it, are cultures that view violence as an
acceptable solution to problems.

As a reaction to the pervasive racism and cultural imperialism
that threaten to undermine our cultural integrity, APA activists
and community leaders have been reluctant to look self-critically at traditional misogynistic attitudes and practices
for fear that it would reinforce racist stereotypes about Asian
Pacific Americans. This attitude of denial, however, does not keep

racism at bay. Instead, it is at odds with cherished notions of our
rights as humans and citizens.

The same reasons that inspire the unequivocal and emphatic
support of APA activists to have crimes motivated by race, color,
and/or national origin identified as hate crimes hold for crimes
motivated by gender. As with crimes of racist hate, statistics on
domestic violence are inadequate; elected officials will not fund
programs until we fully document the violence; keeping such
statistics would encourage more public awareness and debate on
the crimes.

While there is an emerging effort on the part of APA women
activists to include domestic violence as a hate crime, APA civil
rights and advocacy groups have not supported their work. We
believe that along with sexist motivations, fear of betraying our
brothers, of adding to their oppression, plays a role in the glaring
absence of their support. Such fear causes APA activists to overlook
and ignore domestic violence. It has meant sacrificing the lives of
our sisters.

A heinous example of this is Dong Lu Chen’s murder of his
wife, Jian Wan Chen, and his successful use of the cultural defense.
On September 7, 1987, Jian Wan Chen’s husband smashed her
skull in with a claw hammer after she allegedly admitted to having
an affair. Chen’s teenage son discovered her body in the family’s
Brooklyn apartment. The trial judge sentenced Dong to five years
probation on a reduced manslaughter charge after concluding,
based on the testimony of an anthropologist, that Dong was driven
to violence by traditional Chinese values about adultery and loss
of manhood. APA activists came out in support of the cultural
defense as a necessary tool to protect immigrants in U.S. court-
rooms.

Does this mean that Jian Wan Chen’s immigrant status is
negligible, or that such activists believe that Asian men are tradi-
tionally more violent and misogynistic than their white counter-
parts, or that the status of Jian Wan Chen as an Asian sister, as a
human being, is negligible when weighed against the crime of her
husband? And what are the repercussions of such outrage? Domes-
tic violence counselors have reported that the case has convinced
true and real and must be dealt with, however, is the sickness that pervades our communities, as it does mainstream society. It is not acceptable for us to struggle alongside our brothers to get out the vote, to bring justice to Vincent Chin’s murderers, to fight for equal treatment in the workplace, schools, courts, and legislatures, and then have our brothers betray us on issues that violate our sacred spaces. We do not shed blood struggling for our equal rights and human dignities on the streets to then turn around and accept subjection to violence in our homes and complicit silence from our communities about our abuse.

Our Struggle Together

Domestic violence demeans and destroys our communities more than any other violence perpetuated on us. It is not an isolated issue. It is not a private family affair protected by the rights of privacy. It is a violent crime of hate that attacks the very fiber of our collective health and we should treat it as such. Symptoms of the sickness spill beyond the confines of the home and taint our participation in the community, our performances in jobs and schools, our personal relationships. It harms every aspect of our lives and the lives that we touch. Because it is premised on unequal relationships and because of its destructive and often fatal impact, domestic violence is not suitable for internal solutions nor should the rights of privacy protect it.

The power to define domestic violence, to give credence to its reality, means much more than validating the experiences of battered women and children. Recognizing the critical dimensions of domestic violence in APA communities translates into accessing resources for dealing with the symptoms, such as making local community health clinics and doctors aware of and able to treat the problems, providing multilingual and multicultural services, and making outside funding sources available to shelters and programs. It means community pressure—saying that domestic violence is unacceptable, that we can no longer sweep it under the proverbial rug or sanction it with patriarchal/misogynist sayings. It means, most of all, empowering victims: stopping the interna-
ization of blame, recognizing their agency to leave, and reaching the empowerment to heal and realize their potentials as humans.

We Asian Pacific Americans in control of our destinies, who are concerned about the well-being of our families and our communities, we must be the ones to break the silence.

Our challenge as leaders and activists in our communities is to strategize ways we can work together to address domestic violence in our own communities. We need to examine and change the underlying attitudes and structures within our communities that maintain violence against women and children. We need to focus on both intervention and prevention. We need to work together on outreach and education to make our communities aware of domestic violence issues and to create intolerance to violence against women and children.

Those of us who work in community health and social services agencies must make information on domestic violence available. We need to have in-house training sessions for our staff so they will understand the seriousness of the problem and know, at the very least, how to approach suspected victims of domestic violence to offer information and resources. We need to take on the responsibility and be the vehicle for change. We need to begin to collect data on domestic violence. As long as no data exist, government agencies at all levels can deny the problem and we will continue to lack the political leverage to advocate for appropriate services.

We need to advocate for multilingual and multicultural services in the human service, legal, and law enforcement systems so that they do not overlook or underserve the needs of Asian Pacific Americans. We need ethnically specific services like Asian women’s shelters and resources that are culturally sensitive and appropriate but also connected to the larger resources. Lack of access to services places the lives of Asian Pacific American women and children at unnecessary risk.

We need to support the proposed federal Violence Against Women Act which would allow battered women more opportunities to seek redress for crimes committed against them. The Act would allow women to bring civil cases for attacks committed against them because of their gender, provide educational programs against domestic violence, and mandate stiffer laws against spouse abuse. For example, the bill may make rape a federal offense.

Most of all, we need to go inward, deep within, to examine the effects of domestic violence on our persons, to get rid of the shame and blame we feel as victims, to recognize our responsibility and agency for change if we are perpetrators of the violence, to heal the wounds that keep us silent and complicit.

Conclusion

Our communities face many challenges from the outside. To survive amidst racist hate and violence, we have to put our own house in order first. If our own families are not strong, if our own relationships with one another are not characterized by mutual respect and non-violence, how true is our vision for a world filled with respect, dignity, peace, and justice?

As poet Audre Lorde said regarding Paulo Freire’s work in The Pedagogy of the Oppressed, “The true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors’ tactics, the oppressors’ relationships.”

The Year of the Rooster, 1993, portends a time when many possibilities come home to roost. Let us, in these times of great hope, learn to dream. Let us choose to love. Let us go hand-in-hand to reach empowerment like bamboo shooting after the rain.

Notes

3. Centers in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York City provide programs for Chinese, Korean, Philippine, Japanese, Indonesian, Laotian, Vietnamese, and Cambodian women, and are staffed with multilingual abuse-hotlines. A program in Boston provides counseling and advocacy services for Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Chinese women.
Bilingual hotlines are available for Koreans in Honolulu and Chicago and for Indians in New Brunswick, New Jersey.


5. The ability of refugee women to find work as low paid, unskilled laborers in often unregulated and dangerous conditions, such as sweatshops, is a statement about the capitalist oppression of women’s labor rather than any evidence of their advantage over men.


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Although in force for nearly 20 years, the Pacific American Liberation Front, a group of Asian American Leftists, continue to organize Asian American workers in the ranks of the post-1960 labor movement. They fight for equal pay and benefits, as well as for an end to discrimination in the workplace.

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