

# **Movement Building Starts with Healthy Relationships:**

## **Transforming Silence Into Action in Asian Pacific Islander LBQT Communities**

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### **Introduction**

Transforming Silence Into Action was a series of national gatherings between 2003 and 2008 that brought together a national network of advocates and activists addressing intimate partner violence in Asian & Pacific Islander (API) lesbian, bisexual, queer women and transgender communities. The conversations and analysis development that happened in TSIA gatherings were unique in simultaneously centering the experiences of being queer, API, *and* part of the movement to end domestic violence. The space gave queer API women and transgender people the opportunity to build capacity and leadership through dialogue that 1) recognizes the complexity of these issues across our diverse communities and experiences, and 2) understands that movement building starts with healthy relationships. At TSIA gatherings, participants met to collectively create new ways of understanding and addressing violence in our relationships, and contribute new and important thinking to queer movements, the larger anti-violence movement, and other movements for social change.

The following pages document some of the history, values and core analysis from TSIA toward a goal of building the strength, visibility, institutional memory, and sustainability of this work. The material that follows reflects one moment in the evolution of our analysis; we hope that it can spark and support further discussion and action around abuse in queer API relationships and communities, and contribute new perspectives to domestic violence efforts in all communities.

## History

The Transforming Silence Into Action (TSIA) initiative grew out of an early network of queer API women addressing domestic violence in their communities that gathered three times between 1998 and 2001. During that time, Asian Women's Shelter also organized a series of focus groups with queer API women in the San Francisco Bay Area on their understanding and experience of relationship violence. A report titled *Raising Our Voices*<sup>1</sup> documents the results of those initial focus groups.

From 2001 to 2003, AWS launched the *Transforming Silence Into Action* initiative with partners who had been doing the work in Seattle and Hawaii, and selected Hawaii as the site for the first national gathering in order to directly address the marginalization of Hawaii and the Pacific U.S. territories in most national efforts, and the under-representation of Pacific Islanders in the early network itself. The gathering aimed to bring advocates and activists together into a shared space in which to share information, resources, and strategies to address relationship violence in API queer communities.

From 2004 to 2008, AWS coordinated three more TSIA national gatherings, each expanding the network to more effectively integrate transgender communities and other marginalized API queer communities, and strengthening relationships and connections within the group. The dialogue and information shared at the gatherings evolved significantly over time, reflecting deepening analysis within the network, the growth of queer anti-violence efforts in local communities, meaningful community-building within the network, and a self-reflective organizing process that refined the national gatherings over time.

Each gathering consisted of small and large group discussion and strategizing, as well as peer presentations and resource-sharing about work happening in local communities. Participants shared training curricula on LGBTQ issues and homophobia (for use in API communities), queer domestic violence, and other relevant topics. Across gatherings there was also a desire to discuss community accountability models and concrete community-based interventions, to get feedback on local strategies and challenges, to build healthy relationship skills training curricula, and to explore other creative ways of doing anti-violence work within queer API communities. The meetings were largely informed by participants' own activist, advocacy, and personal experiences, and structured to encourage a meaningful exchange of practices between TSIA and participants' local community work.

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<sup>1</sup> Available online at <http://endabuse.org/userfiles/file/ImmigrantWomen/Raising%20our%20Voices.pdf>

Approximately forty participants from across the U.S. attended each gathering as a result of an invitation process that prioritized former participants and people from un/under-represented API groups. Attendees were a mix of concerned community members, organizational representatives, progressive activists, and domestic violence advocates. Together they represented Pacific Islander, West Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian, East Asian, mixed Asian backgrounds. In addition, TSIA included 5 allies in each gathering who were queer women and transgender people from other communities of color, including Latino/Latin American, Dominican, African American, and Alaska Native communities.

## Terminology

The terms people use to identify themselves and their experiences are layered with private and public political and social meaning, and vary depending on context. These differences and the concepts behind them are too complex to analyze here. It is our intention to use terminology in a flexible way to promote and open dialogue. The language we use here is *not* suggestive of a “right” way of discussing and defining these topics. We have included a few comments below on several terms that we use repeatedly in this writing.

### 1. “Domestic Violence,” “Relationship Violence,” & “Intimate Partner Violence”

We use these terms interchangeably. We are aware that they can connote different contexts and meanings to different people.

### 2. Asian & Pacific Islander (API)\*

We use API to refer to people of East Asian, South Asian, West Asian, Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander, and/or Central Asian descent.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Queer, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender

We value inclusive language and recognize that people’s identities and experiences are complex to a degree that we cannot accurately or consistently reflect throughout this document. We use the terms queer, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender broadly. The term “queer” has been reclaimed and used as a more inclusive term by some, while others dislike it due to its historical use (and use in some current contexts) as an oppressive term. We recognize that we simultaneously engage and risk alienating different people by using the term “queer.” We also recognize that there are people in non-heterosexual relationships who do not identify with any of these terms.

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<sup>2</sup> For more on how we use “API,” please visit <http://www.apiahf.org/apidvinstitute/definition/htm>.

#### 4. “Community/ies”

We perceive that “communities” based on race, gender, sexuality, geographic region, political beliefs, etc. are rarely truly intact or homogenous. Often, references to “the \_\_\_\_ community” really refer to the most dominant and visible members of that group. For example, references to “the Korean community” often overlook or deny the experiences of people marginalized within the Korean community. References to “the queer community” are also rarely inclusive of those who are marginalized within that already marginalized group, such as queer API people or queer people with disabilities. Based on these and other realities, we recognize that the concept and experience of community is often complicated. For the purposes of TSIA (and especially in our discussions about community accountability), we use “community” to refer to any group of people who are aligned with each other in some way through shared experience, identity, location, and/or friendship. We do not make any assumptions about group size or composition, and believe that there is value in differentiating between larger communities (i.e. the Afghani community), and smaller more intimate communities (i.e. a survivor’s community of three close friends).

#### 5. “Relationships” & “Communities”

We use “queer API relationships and communities” as locations of domestic violence with the intention of acknowledging the following: (1) Generally speaking, domestic violence is not completely enclosed within individual relationships but plays out in and affects communities; (2) However, there are queer relationships that *are* totally disconnected from communities, either because they are largely (or entirely) closeted or because they exist in isolated local contexts in which there is no queer/queer API community; and (3) When we talk about “queer API relationships” we are referring to a relationship in which at least one member identifies as API.

## Core Themes and Key Ideas

*TSIA's work exists within the context of the mainstream domestic violence movement and the movement to end violence against women. While the TSIA network is interested in advancing understandings of intimate partner violence in ways that reflect experiences in queer API communities and in particular address women and trans people's uses of violence to exert patterns of power and control, we do so in a way that is intended to strengthen rather than dismantle existing analyses of domestic violence and violence against women. We understand why and how gender-based analyses of domestic violence exist and are critically important given the pervasiveness of male violence against women and girls, heavy currents of sexism and straight male privilege in our communities and society, misogynistic backlash against the domestic violence movement, and the potential of well-meaning efforts to deconstruct gender to erase the gendered nature of patriarchal violence. As part of the queer domestic violence movement we must strengthen our assessments of violence and power within relationships in ways that take into account complex gender dynamics in our communities and do not rely on gender-based shortcuts or assumptions. We believe that all people are capable of using violence and perpetrating abuse, AND we know and challenge patriarchal violence in all communities. We believe that a complex analysis of abuse in queer API relationships can strengthen anti-violence efforts across all communities.*

The analyses and questions presented here are primarily developed out of and informed by on-the-ground experience. They emerge out of years of peer-to-peer conversation and storytelling, and are an attempt to synthesize a wide range of ideas from participants' personal and community experiences. They also synthesize examples of community responses to violence that participants shared whether they viewed them as successful or not.

### **Theme 1: We are developing models for understanding domestic violence in queer API relationships and communities.**

What does violence and abuse look like in queer API relationships?

TSIA participants generally agree that:

1. Most people have learned and survived violence and have the capacity to use it in some form;
2. Violence does not have a singular definition, and tactics of abuse exist along a broad spectrum of behaviors;
3. Just like violence in all other relationships, abuse in queer API relationships can cover the entire spectrum (i.e. name calling, financial control, attempted homicide, sexual abuse, etc.);

4. Patterns of behavior and uses of violence must be assessed and understood within their relationship contexts rather than in isolation;
5. Shared understanding and analysis about the spectrum of behaviors can inform our development of corresponding prevention and intervention strategies.

How do we assess and understand the violence?

TSIA participants have struggled with what we are calling “the survivor/perpetrator dilemma.” Over the course of TSIA gatherings, we have acknowledged situations such as the following:

1. Some people in relationships get stuck in an unhealthy pattern in which two people use forms of violence in response to conflict that are not patterns of power and control;
2. Some people continually survive violence in a relationship and develop defensive or retaliatory responses to it that are not patterns of power and control;
3. Some people use violence as a means of asserting power and control against their partners across multiple relationships; and
4. It is possible to be a survivor in one intimate relationship and then a perpetrator of power and control in another, or to survive violence during one period of a relationship and perpetrate it during another (in the same relationship)—though this is not true of all manifestations of domestic violence and is at almost unheard of in certain contexts of dangerous and lethal domestic violence;

The domestic violence movement has worked tirelessly over the last 30+ years to increase societal acknowledgment of domestic violence as a critical community issue and to expand public awareness of survivor/batterer power and control dynamics. Raising that awareness is critical in straight and queer communities, and we are part of that movement. *And*, in TSIA discussions participants have grappled with the binary concept of survivor/batterer: Does it always apply in queer API relationships in which there is violence? Conflicting perspectives arise repeatedly.

Some participants reject the survivor/batterer dichotomy, asserting any of the following:

1. Everyone is capable of violence in some circumstance;
2. Everyone may use various forms of violence at some point in their relationships;
3. People’s lives hold complex relationships to violence that cannot be summed up in “survivor” or “batterer” terms;
4. Labeling people as survivors or batterers is dehumanizing and does not contribute to healing and reintegration into the community and ultimately to community transformation.

Others believe that the survivor/batterer framework remains useful, asserting any of the following:

1. Understanding domestic violence requires the placing of violent incidents within the context of power and control.
2. The survivor/batterer dichotomy helps us differentiate between unhealthy behaviors or moments, and patterns of imbalanced power and control.
3. The distinction helps TSIA participants name some patterns of emotional and physical violence to which they have responded—relationship violence contexts of a type and severity that they think is appropriately named with a very clear survivor/batterer paradigm.
4. The distinction can become critical if partners choose to or have to access certain systems such as social services, shelter, family court, or the criminal legal system.

To move this work forward, the TSIA network's challenge is to shift the debate and reframe the question as: *When and how are aspects of the survivor/batterer dichotomy (and power and control analysis) useful and appropriate in understanding domestic violence in queer API communities, and when and how can aspects of it be harmful or limiting?*

Violent, manipulative, controlling, and otherwise harmful behaviors in relationships must be meaningfully assessed. And those doing assessments must be deeply aware of their own assumptions and biases. When someone who has used violence against their partner but whom we easily see and identify with as a survivor (i.e. a queer woman, a transperson of color, an immigrant from our home country, a friend) asserts that they are “the survivor” or that their partner uses the same amount of violence that they themselves use, what do we do? What effect does their gender identity and expression and that of their partner have on our interpretation of the situation? Do we ask questions to learn more? What questions? Do we take their words at face value and conclude that the survivor/batterer analysis doesn't apply to queer relationships? Or do we recall that though straight men can be survivors of relationship violence perpetrated by their female partners, there is some statistically justified skepticism of straight male partners who berate their partner's behavior and unequivocally claim their own status as abused and controlled. There is no statistically justified skepticism in the realm of queer domestic violence, but we have seen some tendencies in communities to skip an assessment of power and control upon hearing one person's assertion that they are (or were also) “the survivor.”

We in TSIA strive to further our analysis and practical assessment skills to ensure that:

1. If there *is* an abusive dynamic in a relationship *and* more than one person is using or has at some point used violence, we are able to acknowledge and assess all of the violence; discern and recognize the patterns and context that make the situation one of domestic violence; accurately assess who in the relationship is perpetrating a pattern of power and control; and take steps toward safety, accountability, and change; and
2. If there is a situation in which two people have an unhealthy dynamic and are both using violence as a response to conflict in their relationship, we do not force our understanding of the situation into the binary of survivor/batterer simply because we have no other ways of assessing violence in relationships.

As we build tools and skills to support queer API communities challenged with responding to domestic violence, we grapple with questions that come up when any community builds common ground on the issue: What types of behavior and contexts of violence make us respond to a relationship situation as if it is unhealthy? Abusive? Immediately dangerous or lethal? How much violence can a person perpetrate within a certain context and still be considered “the” survivor? How can we better identify dynamics of power and control when relationship violence surfaces in our communities?

And as we expand these analyses within the domestic violence movement, we face important assessment considerations. We want to support everyone in our communities to move toward healthier relationships. We know this will create stronger and healthier queer API people and communities. But supporting a community to move toward healthier relationships involves encouraging all to identify and unlearn their uses of violence and other unhealthy patterns, whether they are involved in relationship abuse or not. And if we create community norms that encourage everyone to identify and unlearn their uses of violence, we will likely prop open the door for some in our communities to misuse those norms to victim-blame or deny the existence of survivor/batterer dynamics in situations that *are* abusive. At this moment in our attempts to expand upon existing assessment tools, we arrive at the following:

1. We can understand a complex relationship situation when we constantly evaluate when reliance and focus on batterer/survivor distinctions impairs our responsiveness to violence and blocks creativity in developing interventions, and when it enhances responsiveness and promotes access to safety and accountability;
2. We help end violence when we encourage everyone to unlearn harmful patterns *and* educate ourselves and our communities to identify power and control, assess for risk and safety, and call-out rather than collude with victim blaming and survivor self-blame; and
3. We effectively expand analyses of gender-based intimate partner violence when we mold them to reflect the realities of queer relationships, unique patterns of power and control

played out in them, and dynamics that impact how the abuse is viewed (i.e. by queer communities, straight API and other communities, and systems), in collaboration with violence against women movements.

## **Theme 2: The complexities of queer Asian & Pacific Islander identities and experiences complicate the development and implementation of effective domestic violence interventions.**

TSIA, as part of the movement to end domestic violence, recognizes that successful interventions must take into account the social contexts of people's lives and relationships. Queer Asian & Pacific Islander identities vary across age, English language proficiency, ethnicity, immigration history and status, gender identity, gender normativity, ability, geography, class, body size, and other factors. One such factor, the degree of recognition and support from family, ethnic and faith community, work environment, and local community plays a significant role and cannot be easily summarized. Through the course of the TSIA national gatherings, we have heard numerous perspectives from participants about the impact of these factors on their lives and relationships.

Participants have voiced realities that include but are not limited to:

- I am depending on the acceptance and support of my ethnic community.
- I am either invisible in or ostracized from my ethnic community. I am considered either "Indian," "Filipino," "Iranian," etc. or "queer." No one accepts and sees me as both.
- My ethnic community faces overlapping issues of oppression, violence and survival. There are "bigger" issues there than queer relationships or domestic violence.
- I have never been part of any single ethnic community. I have no place there.
- I am depending on the acceptance and support of my queer community.
- As a queer Asian person I am either invisible or exoticized in the queer community or even queer people of color community.
- There is no queer community where I live. I am isolated and closeted.
- I am depending on the acceptance and support of my progressive community.
- My progressive community faces "bigger" issues than queer relationships or domestic violence.
- I am depending on the acceptance and support of my family. I cannot tell them about my relationship.
- My family rejects me. I am depending on the acceptance and support of my friends and/or relationship.
- I am alone. There are individuals who matter to me, but there is no whole community whose opinion matters to me.
- Homo/bi/trans/phobia is deep and widespread. It impacts everything.

These statements reflect some of challenges faced by API queer women and transgender people trying to understand and respond to relationship violence amidst homo/bi/trans/phobia, racism and xenophobia, and other forms of oppression. They reveal that oftentimes, community members' experiences of identity, social context and oppression amplify their reliance on the very things that interventions to violence ask them to risk: the security of their relationships with their partner, close friends, and/or queer, progressive, or ethnic communities.

TSIA gives us an unprecedented opportunity to discern what kinds of interventions may work in these varied contexts. While we acknowledge that interventions will often be as diverse as individual situations of violence, we also strive to analyze which aspects of interventions are useful in what types of circumstances, and to locate and map important patterns and trends.

### **Theme 3: We are exploring concepts and practices of community accountability as potential models for responding to domestic violence.**

Participants in the TSIA network know that queer API community members face homo/bi/trans/phobia, racism, xenophobia, and other oppressions in accessing existing domestic violence and sexual assault services and systems. TSIA participants also generally agree that just as there is a spectrum of violent and abusive behavior, appropriate interventions to relationship violence also fall on a spectrum. A full scope of interventions might range from community education, to individual one-on-one conversational interventions, to calling 911. They could look like “calling someone out” or supporting someone to change their behavior over the course of years. No single type of intervention is “right” for addressing violence in API lesbian, bisexual, queer women’s, and/or transgender relationships and communities.

While some API queer community members experiencing relationship violence have chosen or needed to call the police, go to the hospital, get restraining orders, fight custody battles in court, and seek safe confidential housing in domestic violence shelters, etc., most others have said that they would risk entry into those systems only as a last resort, and instead rely heavily on the support of their peer networks and communities. Community-based education, prevention, and community accountability intervention models have therefore always been a central theme of the TSIA network, with the importance of peer networks being a thread throughout all discussions.

Community accountability as it has been discussed at TSIA gatherings can most succinctly be described by the following excerpt from a definition by Creative Interventions, an Oakland-based organization: “an umbrella term for many models and processes for community responsibility for and control over ending violence.” Throughout TSIA national gatherings, participants have for the most part assumed (1) the necessity of developing community

accountability models; and (2) that there are ways in which the often marginalized, small, and close-knit nature of our communities can increase our reliance on them and thereby make community accountability more possible. Over the course of the four TSIA gatherings, more and more participants tried new community-based strategies to address intimate partner violence in their relationships and communities. But most approaches focused on early stages of community engagement such as creative community outreach and education in queer API community spaces. We had fewer examples of the new models that revealed practical implementation of community mobilizing and/or community accountability as violence intervention.

So while the discussion of “*why* community accountability” has thrived at TSIA gatherings and in other progressive communities and spaces, the “*how*” has proven to be harder to implement and replicate. Below are some common challenges and lessons learned from TSIA conversations are below. They are not meant to make community accountability seem impossible. They are a compilation of honest challenges and barriers that we have faced and know we will face again; laying them out in the open reduces confusion and frustration, and prepares us for the future.

**i. We’re dealing with *extra* dirty laundry.**

Many individuals and communities (particularly within marginalized social groups) facing domestic violence will deny, suppress, collude, and/or victim-blame in order to refrain from airing their “dirty laundry” in public. TSIA participants generally agree that many factors make domestic violence in queer API relationships and communities feel like “extra dirty laundry.” First off, experiences of domestic violence are difficult for any survivor to disclose and challenging for any community to face. Secondly, racism, anti-immigrant sentiment and attack, and other factors isolate participants’ ethnic communities and further encourage community members to handle their “dirty laundry” privately. And finally, homo/bi/transphobia attacks the basic essence and existence of queer people and their relationships, compounding people’s defensiveness and protectiveness of their relationships, and their resistance to potentially adding fuel to existing hatred of queer people, API people, and queer API people. The combination of these factors can make it incredibly challenging for an API LBQT survivor to come out about their experience of relationship violence.

**ii. Denial, Denial, Denial**

Simultaneously, communities often want conflict to go away or resolve itself. Most of us have been raised to deal indirectly with conflict, and thus have limited comfort and skills in conflict resolution. This combines with common dynamics of abuse, resulting in communities often denying, avoiding, or ignoring abuse. Other times, community by-standers may feel that they don’t know the people involved in an abusive situation well enough to get involved. Or they may be hesitant to “choose sides” by supporting the survivor or “calling out” the abusive partner’s behavior.

### **iii. Understanding unhelpful leverage of community power.**

Community tendencies to minimize or deny violence can cause:

1. Community members *not* to intervene.
2. Survivors to remain silent about abuse; and
3. Perpetrators to continue violent patterns.

Ironically, the very power of the community that makes community accountability possible can also silence potential interveners and create a culture of collusion and silence. Those by-standers or friends who could put community accountability into action can be silenced by fear of the same risk (loss of acceptance or approval within the community) that we hope to harness to engage perpetrators and build safety within the community.

### **iv. Looking out for “s/he said- s/he said.”**

Oftentimes people who are perpetrating abuse are the first to spread throughout the community that they are being victimized by their partner. When friends and community members have limited ability to assess what is happening and/or make assumptions based on gender short-cuts, or “believe whomever first says they are the survivor” or other biases, they can often act in ways that are harmful to the situation, or do nothing at all. Community responses can become entrenched in “s/he said, s/he said” camp-building. In these situations, it is important for key involved people to open communication channels, reduce gossip, and help take leadership to assess power, violence and safety needs in the situation and work with others to address them.

### **v. Calling out “We Have to Look Out for Our Own...”**

Communities can de-prioritize a survivor’s need for community and safety in their desire to spare an abuser from being ostracized from the already marginalized group. Many often find it easier to silence the survivor, victim blame, or wrongly assess that there is no survivor/batterer dynamic, than to intervene and engage a person to stop and unlearn their problematic behavior.

### **vi. It takes more than “community.”**

It can take time to build common core values around what constitutes intimate partner violence, what successful accountability can look like, and what role, if any, community members should take in it. Community accountability requires coordinated time and effort and emotional commitment that is difficult to sustain on top of people’s life schedules. People often have limited support or structure in their community accountability efforts and want to “just move on” whenever possible. Given that confrontation and conflict are hard for many or most people, those involved in community accountability (from any perspective) need support, respite, and understanding.

**vi. Strong friendships and effective direct communication lead to lasting efforts.**

Friendships or community relationships feed community accountability when they are (or become) based on support, trust, willingness to challenge each other to grow, and constructive direct communication. Friends and support people from all vantage points (in relationship to the violent situation) may be involved in a violence intervention: friends of the person taking accountability, friends of the survivor, etc. These relationships need to make it through what is likely a tough road. And unfortunately, many factors impact what kinds of peer networks people may have, the degree of established trust in friendships, and the extent to which those friendships can endure a process as potentially challenging as community accountability. Care, patience, and practice with communication and conflict resolution help these relationships emerge renewed and strengthened.

**vii. Survivors and community members can disagree.**

Conflict sometimes arises between what survivors want or need, and what community members think is an appropriate way to “call out” abuse or intervene in a violent situation. Oftentimes, survivors fear possible escalation of violence from the abuser, the abuser’s community, or from the community at large if others speak up on their behalf. And community interveners often start out with strong feelings and differing levels of consciousness around domestic violence, and may rally behind interventions that may put survivors at heightened risk of harm. A survivor may want personal support but wish to keep the violence a secret, and insist that it’s not a community issue, while their supporters feel that it *is* an issue that affects the community and that community members should come together around it. Participants have brought up situations in which it was challenging to determine what to do because the survivor did not want any form of intervention. Solid and consistent communication and safety planning between survivors and community members have made for successful community accountability practices.

**viii. Figuring out what counts as “accountable” and when the process is done...**

Situations of relationship violence can flare up in communities and generate crises and high intensity engagement by those most affected by it. Friends and supporters can engage perpetrators and survivors of violence in different ways to try to stop the immediate violence, but rarely is the situation a single isolated incident that can be quickly and cleanly resolved. Lasting positive behavioral change requires a slow, supported process during which progress can be frustratingly unclear, unknown, or even backwards. That being said, an accountability process can’t stay at the same level of intensity forever. There must be markers of noticeable or measurable accountability. Friends and supports need to talk together, often with survivor(s) about what will signal that the process is “over” and successful.

**ix. Homophobia can isolate relationships from community.**

Community accountability implies the influence and presence of a community, even if the community is made up of just two or three people. But homo/bi/transphobia forces many queer relationships into the closet where they have limited ,if any,community support.

**x. On-the-ground dynamics in activist communities...**

Taking accountability for our actions and changing our behaviors are not easy, and we all know how tempting and common it is to dodge, resist, and avoid being accountable through a variety of tactics. In progressive and activist communities, this dodging and resistance can often take the form of over-problematizing the accountability process, challenging the analysis and language of those trying to hold us accountable, using experiences of oppression (or another's experiences of privilege) as an excuse for using violence, viewing any challenge or questioning of our behavior as abusive and disempowering (or white, bourgeois, academic, classist, sexist, homo/bi/trans/phobic, racist, etc.) and blaming the full range and history of our anger and shame and trauma on the whistle-blower.

These tactics often play into the cultural norms of progressive and activist communities. Because we always want to take those issues (process, language, oppression and privilege, context of someone's experience and use of violence) seriously, and because sometimes aspects of these responses have validity to them, we often back away from calling them out even when they are smokescreens or aggressive tactics used by people using violence to avoid taking responsibility and to put blame on others. Calling these tactics into question takes courage, and challenges a progressive community to expand beyond its own dominant norms, and support a process that makes real accountability and change possible.

That said, no two communities or situations of violence are exactly the same. Sometimes community members (including survivors in a situation) holding someone accountable can blame the full range and history of *their* anger and trauma on the person who they want to hold accountable. They can generate or demand accountability processes in which it is impossible for anyone to succeed. In these situations, it is important for community members to remember that the pain and harm caused by situations of relationship violence cannot be undone or erased by a single community-based accountability effort. Community-based interventions are just one element of individual and community healing.

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**There is hope.** Despite challenges to creating safety, change, and/or transformation through community accountability efforts, there is value in reflecting on the importance of looking at a full range of possible impacts in addition to whatever core goal(s) were initially named as measures of success for stopping the violence and creating safety. It is impossible to have control over how, when, or whether intervention efforts lead a person to change their behavior in a lasting or meaningful way. And community accountability efforts cannot be expected to work at all stages of intervention in all situations of domestic violence. Yet even if community accountability actions may not achieve the originally intended result(s), they can build pockets of values-based communities and accomplish other unintended results that can be documented and evaluated. They can also serve as an example to others about the community's values and "bottom lines," and impact the future such that:

1. Domestic violence is addressed not as "dirty laundry" but as an issue of community health, safety, and wellness;
2. Shared values and behavior around interpersonal nonviolence are developed alongside shared identity and shared politics;
3. Communities hold abusers accountable for their violence and support their transformation;
4. Peer groups resist conflict-avoidant denial and instead face and intervene in domestic violence as it emerges in their social networks.
5. Communities nurture cultures of healthy relationships and build shared values around relationship violence and implementation of community interventions.

In the meantime, to build more collective understanding of when and how to use community-based interventions, we continue to discuss these questions together:

1. What behaviors or relationship dynamics compel community members to intervene?
2. Are there abusive behaviors or situations that cannot be effectively addressed from within a particular relationship, and/or through community engagement and accountability?
3. When and how might individuals or communities integrate state systems (i.e. law enforcement, social services, etc.) of intervention and accountability?
4. What are communities' "bottom lines?" Are there actions or behaviors that must always be addressed? What actions or behaviors make rejection from the community feel appropriate, safe, and/or just?

## **Theme 4: We need more practical tools and models for identifying and unlearning uses of violence in ourselves and others.**

The TSIA network recognized that there are few tools or models to do this kind of work within grassroots communities or within the anti-violence movement. We understood that people have complex relationships to violence (having perpetrated it, survived it, witnessed it, colluded in it, etc.), and that examining our histories and uses of violence can help us in our own lives as well as better equip us to support others who are committed to unlearning and being accountable for *their* violence. We designed a workshop on this topic for the third and fourth TSIA gatherings, and centered exercises and discussions on the following goals:

1. Respond to the strong interest in this topic within the TSIA network;
2. Build the value of critical self-reflection, accountability, and change within the network, within activist and anti-violence spaces, and within our communities;
3. Provide tools for identifying and unlearning potentially unhealthy behavior(s) and/or abusive behavior within ourselves;
4. Build capacity and resources for doing this work within queer API communities;
5. Begin to lift the shame and silence around these behaviors in a constructive, direct way; and
6. Generate new norms for healthy relationships and self-motivated change in our relationships and communities.

Workshop participants used individual journaling prompts, sharing in pairs, and small action groups to reveal and work on rather than hide and deny their own problematic behaviors. They also shared experiences of their friends. One participant shared a story about an action that her friend had recently used:

*Shali emailed a group of her closest friends and classmates to share what was going on in her relationship, what her own problematic behavior looked like, where she thought it came from in her personal history, and how she hoped her friends could support her relationship and her efforts at change. In the email, Shali shared that she and her partner Mel were having a hard time, and that Mel had said that when Shali was stressed out because of school, she turned into a bully at home. But in front of her friends and classmates, Shali was funny, friendly, caring, patient, and understanding. Mel felt like no one understood their relationship, Mel's experience in it, and what Shali was like at home, because she presented such a different face to her friends and classmates. Shali acknowledged in the email that this was true about her, and that she was ashamed of it and wanted to change. Upon reflection, she could see she was behaving just like her father had, in a way that she explicitly did not want to emulate. Shali's action made a huge*

*difference in her and Mel's relationship. Shali used email to explain the situation and ask her friends and classmates to check in with her about it and support her to change. Mel felt that her experience and their relationship changed from being isolated, hidden, and unsupported, to becoming seen and held by a joint community of both her and Shali's friends.*

The "Identifying and Unlearning Our Own Violence" workshop was a first step in trying to take on this difficult work. Workshop participants found the process powerful and useful in thinking about their relationships and anti-violence work. We hope that participants will build on the work started here to further develop effective and practical tools that support community-based accountability.

## **Moving Forward**

How do we maintain the viability of this work in queer API activist communities? Most of the work on domestic violence in API LBQT communities has been initiated by progressive queer API domestic violence advocates and activists. However, many activist communities have not historically taken on intimate partner violence as a community issue, making sustainability of this work particularly challenging. Toward maintaining the viability of anti-violence work within progressive / activist communities, the TSIA network is committed to the following:

### **Linking macro and micro level analyses and action.**

We often see progressive groups or leaders articulate macro-level analyses of issues such as white supremacy, imperialism, and/or globalization without prioritizing skills and capacity building to address interpersonal violence and crisis. When interpersonal violence plays out in those same groups, they can deny or minimize the violence (at least at first) and eventually get mired in stress and dysfunction because (1) they disconnect interpersonal violence from the “real work” of social justice movements; and (2) they lack skills and practice in articulating and acting on values that support healthy communication and relationships. The ensuing drama and dysfunction harms individuals, organizations, communities, and movements. We are committed to upholding macro-level analyses and connecting them with investment and experience in facing the complex realities of interpersonal violence in our communities.

### **Bridging the divide and strengthening the relationship between direct service and community engagement.**

It is our perception that the breadth of this division has limited the vision, scope, quality, and effectiveness of both direct service and community organizing work, and subsequently weakened the overall viability of efforts to end domestic violence in queer API communities. We seek to broaden perspectives within some progressive communities that otherwise elevate the importance and value of community organizing work over direct services, which they see as “band-aid” social service models that do not take into account long-range analyses and visions for social change. We also seek to broaden the viewpoints of some within the domestic violence movement that otherwise overlook or minimize the potential effectiveness and transformative power of community-based initiatives that are not housed in traditional social service models.

### **Simultaneously building analysis, practical skills, and concrete action.**

Analyses of IPV that stray too far from the on-the-ground emotional dynamics of real situations of violence in our communities also hamper the viability of our work. For example, in TSIA discussions participants often voice an analysis of why to engage batterers and hold them accountable for their behavior while ensuring their support and integration in the community. But when sharing real and experiences and recalling the realities of people who are hurt,

defensive, aggressive, dismissive, irrational, manipulative, crushed, and/or otherwise not at their best, the same group of participants reveal responses that are far removed from their initial analyses, and skills that are disconnected from both. Somewhere in between an idealized analysis and the whirlwind of the real impacts of violence on a community is where we want to be. We seek to bridge the gaps between analysis, skills building, and action so that they increasingly inform each other.

**Creating a cultural shift toward movement-building that encourages meaningful self-reflection and change.**

Within TSIA, we believe that how we do our work is as important as the work itself, and we know that healthy relationships free of violence and oppression are, in a very real way, the foundation of strong communities and movements. We strive to equip our communities to identify and respond to domestic violence when it is happening. And we support all those who have learned to use violence as a maladaptive response to conflict or grasp at power in their lives, to grow and change.

The health and sustainability of ourselves, our communities, and our movement building efforts is strengthened when progressive activist groups take on issues of internal power dynamics and healthy interpersonal relationships as expressly linked to the “real work.” The hard part is this: critical to healthy relationships is meaningful self-reflection and change; and self-reflection and change (especially in regards to identifying and unlearning violence we use) can be challenging and uncomfortable, and counter to many activist cultures.

But we know we are on our way. We are responding to intimate partner violence in API LBQT communities, and building healthy relationships. We are infusing the network with the value and practice of self-reflection, and participants are literally transforming silence into action. And as we model and share these values and approaches in our local communities, we know that in this case, bringing the work home is a healthy thing to do.



## **Acknowledgements**

The successes of the Transforming Silence Into Action project were built upon the energy and insights of those who carried this work years before TSIA, all TSIA participants, and those who served on local organizing and national advisory committees, and who hosted gatherings in their home towns and cities. TSIA was able to thrive due to the vision and fundraising leadership of Asian Women's Shelter's (AWS's) founding executive director, Beckie Masaki, which led to a partnership with the Office On Violence Against Women (OVW) through which TSIA was funded as an AWS demonstration sites for community-driven initiatives led by underserved/underrepresented communities. OVW also supported AWS to subcontract with the API Women and Family Safety Center in Seattle, WA, PACT Family Peace Center in Honolulu, HI, and with Kalei Kanuha at the University of Hawaii in order to share funding and support other local initiatives and community research projects addressing violence in API queer communities. The authors wish to thank all of the above and more, especially Kata Issari, the staff of PACT Family Peace Center, AWS staff, and those National Advisory Committee members who were able to consistently give their time and talents across all four TSIA gatherings. Deep thanks and admiration to you all.

## Contact Us

Asian Women's Shelter and TSIA value anti-oppression based structures and practices as much as justice-oriented goals and outcomes. We were not able to expand upon these aspects of TSIA in this chapter (e.g. organizing and advisory committee structure, guiding values and process behind invitee selection and agenda development, etc.). If you are interested in learning more about these aspects of TSIA or would like to read reports or materials that have come out of TSIA efforts, please contact AWS directly. Examples of materials are listed below.

1. *“Creating Community, Hope, and Change”* (documents the background and proceedings of *Transforming Silence Into Action I*).
2. *“Relationships So Loving and So Hurtful:”* (an exploratory research project by Valli Kalei Kanuha, detailing interview respondents' understandings of their experiences of intimate partner violence in API women's relationships)  
*A Study of Intimate Violence in Asian & Pacific Islander Queer and Lesbian Relationships*
3. *Identifying and Unlearning Our Own Violence* (training curriculum)
4. *Statement on Diversity in API Communities*
5. *Gender Justice Statement*
6. *Invitee Agenda Survey*

### Contact Us:

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