

Shadow of the Pandemic: An Analysis of the Impact of COVID-19 on Violence against Asian Women in U.S.

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Abstract: *The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on marginalized communities, particularly Asian women in the United States. This paper delves into the significant increase in violence directed at this demographic during the pandemic, focusing on both the escalation in incidents and the nature of the violence endured. It explores the underlying factors contributing to this rise, from xenophobia to economic distress, and assesses the profound effects on the victims' health, safety, and economic stability. Furthermore, the paper outlines actionable strategies to address and reduce this violence, emphasizing interventions at policy, community, and individual levels.*

Keywords: *COVID-19, Asian women, violence, xenophobia, United States, pandemic response, racial discrimination*

1. Pre-Pandemic Violence against Asian Women in the U.S.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian women in the United States confronted a complex matrix of violence that spanned domestic, sexual, and racially motivated aggression. The intersection of their racial and gender identities not only heightened their vulnerability but also shaped the unique contours of the violence they faced. Historically, Asian women have been stereotyped in ways that exacerbate their susceptibility to violence—portrayed as submissive, exotic, and perpetually foreign, these stereotypes have deeply ingrained themselves within American societal perceptions, influencing both individual behavior and systemic responses to the violence against these women.

Despite the prevalence of such violence, it often remained under the radar of mainstream discourse. A 2018 report by the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum (NAPAWF) found that 23% of Asian and Pacific Islander (API) women reported experiencing intimate partner violence over their lifetimes, a figure that mirrors the national average but is often overshadowed by the racial dynamics at play. The stereotypes that depict Asian women as passive or compliant can lead to a dangerous underestimation of the violence they experience, as these traits are falsely associated with consent or acceptance, thereby minimizing the perceived severity of their abuse [1].

Furthermore, the barriers to reporting violence and seeking help are disproportionately high among this group due to several factors. Language barriers, cultural stigma related to acknowledging personal or familial issues publicly, and a lack of trust in law enforcement complicate their access to support systems. Additionally, the immigration status of many Asian women can further complicate their situations, as fears of deportation or retaliation can deter them from reporting acts of violence. This is compounded by a general scarcity of culturally competent legal and support services that understand and respect their unique needs and circumstances.

Sexual harassment and assault are also significant concerns, with Asian women often fetishized because of the same stereotypes that subject them to other forms of violence. This sexualization not only occurs in personal and social settings but also permeates media representations, contributing to a broader cultural narrative that can normalize the harassment and assault of Asian women. For instance, the hypersexual portrayal of Asian women in film and television can lead to real-world expectations and behaviors that risk the safety of Asian women daily [2].

Racially motivated violence, too, has been a persistent shadow trailing the lives of Asian women in America. Even before the term "hate crime" became a recognized category, Asian women were targets

of racially charged violence, which has roots extending back to historical events like the Chinese Exclusion Act and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. These events have helped foster an environment where Asians are viewed as perpetual foreigners, regardless of their actual citizenship status. The dual invisibility and hyper-visibility that Asian women experience—seen as neither fully American nor entirely foreign—magnify their vulnerability to both random and targeted acts of violence.

In summary, the situation for Asian women in America pre-pandemic was marked by a confluence of gender-based and racial violence, exacerbated by cultural, legal, and systemic barriers that hinder their ability to seek and receive protection and justice. Understanding this pre-pandemic context is crucial for grasping the full impact of the subsequent escalation of violence against Asian women during the COVID-19 pandemic, which capitalized on and intensified these pre-existing vulnerabilities [3].

2. Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic in U.S.

The COVID-19 pandemic, declared a global health emergency in early 2020, has since unleashed unprecedented upheavals, affecting virtually every facet of human life across the world. Its impact has been profound and multi-dimensional, extending beyond the immediate health crises to precipitate significant socio-economic and political challenges. Globally, countries grappled with the dual imperative of managing health crises and mitigating economic fallout, leading to widespread lockdowns, economic downturns, and social disruptions. In the United States, the pandemic's repercussions were particularly pronounced, reflecting and amplifying the existing inequalities and racial tensions within the society.

2.1 Global Impact

On a global scale, the pandemic disrupted international trade, travel, and supply chains, leading to economic contractions in numerous countries. The rapid spread of the virus necessitated stringent lockdown measures that, while necessary for public health, caused widespread economic disruptions. Unemployment rates soared as businesses closed or reduced operations, and the global economy faced a recession that the International Monetary Fund described as the worst since the Great Depression. The economic impact was especially severe in developing countries, where limited healthcare infrastructure and economic resilience exacerbated the hardships faced by the populations [4].

Moreover, the pandemic also highlighted and often widened existing social inequalities. Vulnerable populations, including migrants, refugees, and the poor, faced disproportionate risks, not only of contracting the virus due to crowded living conditions but also of suffering more acutely from the economic downturns. These conditions sparked social unrest in various parts of the world, as frustrations over inequality and inadequate governmental responses boiled over.

2.2 Impact in the U.S.

In the United States, the pandemic's impact was layered and complex, underscored by significant political and racial dimensions. The U.S. experienced one of the highest infection and mortality rates globally, a testament to both the virus's virulence and the varied efficacy of response strategies across different states and administrations. Economically, the U.S. saw significant job losses and business closures, with the service industries, which employ a large proportion of the minority populations, hit particularly hard. This economic hardship contributed to an increase in food insecurity and homelessness, pushing many families into precarious financial situations.

The pandemic also served as a catalyst for racial and social issues to come to the fore. Asian Americans, particularly women, found themselves victims of increased xenophobic attacks, fueled by rhetoric that inappropriately labeled COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus.” Such terminology, used by some political leaders, including former President Donald Trump, exacerbated the xenophobic backlash against this community. This situation highlighted the precarious nature of racial dynamics in America, where misinformation and political rhetoric can quickly fuel racial animosities [5].

Furthermore, the public health crisis and its management—or mismanagement—became highly politicized. Debates over mask mandates, social distancing, and vaccination rollouts overlaid existing political divisions, often reflecting deeper societal fractures along lines of race, class, and political

affiliation. These divisions were starkly displayed in varying responses to the pandemic, with some viewing the public health measures as necessary protections while others perceived them as governmental overreach, infringing on personal freedoms.

The broader societal impact in the U.S. also included a significant toll on mental health, with many Americans experiencing increased anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues as a result of isolation, ongoing uncertainties, and the direct and indirect effects of the pandemic. Healthcare systems were stretched to their limits, and many non-COVID related health issues were sidelined or went unaddressed due to the pandemic's demands on health resources.

3. Analysis of the Pandemic's Impact on Violence against Asian Women

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on global society, with specific demographic groups experiencing intensified adversities. Among these, Asian women in the United States have seen a dramatic escalation in violence, both in terms of frequency and severity. This section provides a detailed analysis of the increase in violent incidents against Asian women during the pandemic, explores the factors that contributed to this surge, and examines the consequences of such violence.

3.1 Increase and Nature of Violent Incidents

Throughout the pandemic, there was a significant increase in both the number and severity of violent incidents against Asian women. Reports from various human rights and advocacy groups indicate a disturbing rise in cases ranging from verbal harassment to physical assault. According to data collected by Stop AAPI Hate, from March 2020 to February 2021, nearly 3,800 incidents were reported, of which women were the victims in 68% of the cases. These incidents included spitting, shoving, and physical attacks, with some escalating to extreme violence such as stabbings and severe beatings.

The nature of these incidents also varied widely, encompassing a range of violent behaviors. Many victims reported being targeted in public spaces such as streets, parks, and public transit, where they were subjected to xenophobic slurs and physical violence. The racial undertones of these attacks were evident, with perpetrators often invoking terms like "virus" or "China" as they assaulted their victims. This marked a sharp increase not only in the frequency but also in the overt racial motivation behind these acts of violence [6].

3.2 Factors Contributing to Increased Violence

Several factors contributed to the increase in violence against Asian women during the pandemic:

1) **Xenophobic Rhetoric and Misinformation:** The pandemic's origin in China led to a surge in anti-Asian sentiment fueled by misinformation and inflammatory rhetoric from public figures, including former President Donald Trump's references to COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus" and "Kung Flu." Such statements legitimized prejudicial attitudes and acted as a catalyst for racial animosity, emboldening individuals to act on their xenophobic beliefs.

2) **Economic Stress and Uncertainty:** The economic fallout from the pandemic created significant stress and uncertainty, exacerbating social tensions. As businesses closed and unemployment rates soared, economic insecurities became a common stressor in many households, sometimes manifesting in domestic violence. Asian women, often employed in heavily impacted sectors like hospitality and retail, faced increased financial instability, which in turn increased their vulnerability to both public and domestic violence.

3) **Social Isolation and Vulnerability:** Lockdowns and social distancing measures, while necessary to control the spread of the virus, also played a role in increasing vulnerability to violence. Isolation from social support networks left many women trapped in abusive situations without access to help. Furthermore, the visibility of Asian women wearing masks may have also made them targets for those harboring racial resentment, associating mask-wearing with the pandemic's Asian origins.

4) **Cultural and Structural Barriers:** Cultural stigma around discussing personal and family issues publicly, combined with language barriers and a lack of culturally competent support services, continued to impede many Asian women from seeking help or reporting violence. These barriers were heightened during the pandemic as many community services were disrupted or became inaccessible due to public health measures.

3.3 Consequences of the Violence

The consequences of increased violence against Asian women during the pandemic are profound and multifaceted:

1) **Psychological Impact:** The immediate and long-term psychological impacts of this violence are severe. Victims often experience anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and a pervasive sense of vulnerability. The mental health repercussions extend beyond the individuals directly affected, impacting the broader Asian American community, which must contend with the collective trauma and fear of being targeted.

2) **Socio-Economic Impact:** The violence has also had socio-economic repercussions. For those injured or traumatized, there may be a loss of productivity or inability to work, compounded by medical expenses. Moreover, the fear of public spaces and avoidance behavior can lead to decreased participation in the economy and community life, further isolating this demographic.

3) **Cultural and Community Impact:** The rise in violence has strained the social fabric of communities, creating divisions and heightening racial tensions. It has also led to a critical re-evaluation of the Asian American experience in the U.S., prompting community advocacy and increased calls for legal and social reform to address not only the immediate issues but also the underlying racial dynamics.

4. Addressing Violence against Asian Women: Strategies and Recommendations

4.1 Policy Interventions

In addressing the surge in violence against Asian women during the COVID-19 pandemic, comprehensive policy interventions are crucial. These policies should aim to not only address the immediate incidences of violence but also tackle the underlying systemic issues that allow such violence to flourish. Effective policy interventions can provide a framework for reducing incidents, supporting victims, and promoting a societal shift towards greater equity and justice.

1) **Strengthening Hate Crime Legislation:** First and foremost, there needs to be a strengthening of hate crime legislation to ensure that it encompasses a wide range of acts of violence that disproportionately affect Asian women. This involves updating legal definitions to reflect the nuances of racially motivated and gender-based violence. Enhanced penalties for perpetrators of such crimes can serve as a deterrent, while providing justice for victims. Legislation should also mandate the collection of detailed data on hate crimes, which would help in understanding the scope of the issue and in tailoring further policy and community responses [7].

2) **Cultural Competence in Law Enforcement:** Training law enforcement officials in cultural competence can significantly improve their interactions with minority communities. Such training should include modules on the historical and social contexts of Asian communities in the U.S., as well as practical guidelines on respecting cultural differences during investigations and victim support. Establishing dedicated units within police departments that specialize in hate crimes and violence against minority groups can also improve trust and efficacy in handling such sensitive cases.

3) **Support Services for Victims:** Policymakers must ensure that there are adequate support services for victims, including access to legal aid, healthcare, and counseling services that are culturally and linguistically appropriate. Funding for community centers that provide these services can be increased, and partnerships can be fostered between government agencies and non-governmental organizations to broaden the reach and effectiveness of these services.

4) **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Implementing public awareness campaigns can play a pivotal role in changing societal attitudes towards Asian women and reducing stigma associated with reporting violence. These campaigns can focus on educating the public about the cultural diversity within Asian communities and the specific challenges they face. Additionally, campaigns can promote bystander intervention strategies, encouraging community members to support victims and report incidents of violence.

5) **Inclusive Policy-Making:** Engaging Asian women in the policy-making process ensures that their voices and experiences are reflected in the laws and policies that are meant to protect them. This can be achieved by establishing advisory councils that include leaders from various Asian communities,

women's rights groups, and legal experts. These councils can provide valuable insights into effective policy measures and help in evaluating the impact of existing policies.

6) **Interagency Collaboration:** Enhanced collaboration between different government agencies, including those focused on human rights, community safety, and public health, can lead to a more coordinated and comprehensive approach to preventing and responding to violence against Asian women. This collaboration should aim to address not just the criminal aspects of such violence but also its social and psychological impacts.

By implementing these policy interventions, the U.S. can move towards a more equitable society where Asian women feel safe and supported, both legally and socially. These strategies require commitment and cooperation across various sectors of government and society to ensure their success and sustainability.

4.2 Community Support Systems

Community support systems play a pivotal role in both preventing violence against Asian women and providing aid in the aftermath of such incidents. These systems can foster an environment of safety and solidarity, offering essential resources that empower women and educate the wider community. Strengthening these community networks is critical in addressing the unique challenges faced by Asian women in the U.S., particularly in light of the increased violence during the COVID-19 pandemic [8].

1) **Community Education and Engagement:** Educating the community about the causes and effects of violence against Asian women is fundamental. Workshops, seminars, and school programs that discuss racial stereotypes, gender-based violence, and the importance of inclusivity can alter long-held beliefs and behaviors. Community centers can serve as hubs for such educational activities, providing a safe space for learning and discussion. Moreover, these programs can be tailored to different age groups and cultural backgrounds, ensuring that they are accessible and relevant to all community members.

2) **Enhanced Community Policing:** Building strong relationships between law enforcement and Asian communities can increase trust and cooperation. Community policing efforts that involve regular interactions between police officers and community members can help in understanding community-specific concerns and improving the reporting and handling of violent incidents. Officers assigned to these duties should have training in cultural sensitivity and conflict resolution, ensuring they can serve effectively and empathetically.

3) **Support Networks and Advocacy Groups:** Networks that connect victims of violence with service providers and advocates are crucial. These networks can provide immediate resources such as legal assistance, medical care, and psychological support. Additionally, advocacy groups can amplify the voices of Asian women, advocating for their rights and ensuring that their needs are addressed in public policy and community strategies. These groups can also monitor and challenge any institutional policies that may inadvertently perpetuate discrimination or hinder the support of violence victims.

4) **Safe Spaces and Emergency Support:** Establishing safe spaces where Asian women can seek refuge and receive immediate support in times of crisis is essential. These can include shelters specifically designed for victims of racial and gender-based violence, equipped with staff trained in trauma-informed care and language services. Emergency hotlines that provide multilingual support can also assist women in crisis, offering an accessible and immediate point of contact.

5) **Community Vigilance Programs:** Programs that encourage community vigilance can significantly enhance safety. Neighborhood watch programs, community patrols, and self-defense training sessions can empower residents and deter potential perpetrators. By fostering a community culture of watchfulness and protection, these programs can help prevent incidents of violence and provide a sense of security for all members, particularly vulnerable populations like Asian women.

6) **Cultural Celebrations and Visibility:** Promoting and participating in cultural celebrations can enhance the visibility and acceptance of Asian communities within the broader society. These events can be platforms for showcasing the richness of Asian cultures, breaking down stereotypes, and building bridges across different cultural groups. Increased visibility can lead to greater appreciation and respect, thereby reducing the alienation and otherization that can fuel violence.

By bolstering community support systems through these multifaceted approaches, it is possible to create a more protective and inclusive environment for Asian women. Such community-driven

initiatives not only aid in immediate response and recovery efforts but also contribute to long-term cultural change, reducing the prevalence of violence against Asian women and enhancing their well-being and integration into broader American society [9].

4.3 Individual Coping Mechanisms

Empowering Asian women with individual coping mechanisms is crucial for enhancing their resilience and ability to respond to and recover from acts of violence. Personal strategies not only provide immediate tools for self-defense but also foster long-term psychological resilience and a greater sense of control over one's safety. Here are several key approaches:

1) **Self-Defense Training:** Providing self-defense classes can be an effective way for women to gain confidence and practical skills in personal safety. These classes should be accessible and offered in community centers or through local organizations. Training in self-defense not only equips women to physically protect themselves but also empowers them psychologically, reducing feelings of vulnerability [10].

2) **Mental Health Resources:** Access to mental health support is essential for coping with the trauma associated with violence. Asian women should have access to culturally sensitive counseling services that respect and understand their specific experiences and backgrounds. Therapy, support groups, and online resources can all play a part in helping victims process their experiences and heal [11].

3) **Legal and Rights Education:** Educating women about their legal rights and the resources available to them is critical. Workshops and information sessions conducted in community centers and online can help women understand how to report incidents of violence, what their rights are within the legal system, and how to navigate it. Knowledge is power, and understanding one's rights is fundamental to seeking and obtaining justice [12].

4) **Building Strong Social Networks:** Encouraging women to build strong, supportive social networks can provide emotional support and practical help in times of need. These networks can include family, friends, colleagues, and community members. Social connections not only provide emotional sustenance but also can offer advice, shelter, and assistance in emergency situations.

5) **Developing Personal Emergency Plans:** Having a personal safety plan can help women feel more prepared and secure. Such plans might include having emergency contact numbers readily available, planning safe routes home, and knowing the locations of community centers or police stations. Preparedness can significantly reduce anxiety and increase one's sense of control over potential threats [13].

6) **Engagement in Advocacy and Empowerment Activities:** Participating in or leading advocacy efforts can be a powerful way for individuals to regain agency and contribute to broader societal changes. Engagement can range from participating in local community meetings to leading initiatives that address violence against Asian women. These activities not only help affect change but also foster a sense of empowerment and community solidarity [14].

By adopting these individual coping mechanisms, Asian women can enhance their personal safety and well-being. These strategies not only aid in immediate situations of threat but also contribute to the broader goal of building a life of dignity and security free from violence.

5. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified the vulnerabilities faced by Asian women in America, illuminating the urgent need for targeted interventions to address the escalation in violence. Effective solutions require a concerted effort across policy, community, and individual levels, acknowledging the unique challenges this group faces. By implementing comprehensive strategies to combat and reduce violence, society can move toward a more equitable and safe environment for all.

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