

Sexual Assault at Dartmouth *Distressing Statistics Brought Silence*

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This article is an overview of research conducted by Lin last spring. In that research, over 20 women agreed to be interviewed on the condition that they were not quoted.

On February 15, 2000, about 250 Dartmouth students received a beige-colored letter in their mailbox. They were all self-identified Asian and Asian American women. For those who read it—as was the case for most of its recipients—the grounds for privacy became immediately clear.

The letter was formal notice of some alarming statistics from the Sexual Abuse Awareness Program: women in the ethnic Asian community were reporting a disproportionately large percentage of sexual assault cases on campus.

In 1996-1997, Asian and Asian American women reported 40% of sexual assault and sexual abuse cases. The following year, they reported 37% of cases; and in 1998-1999, they reported 30% of the cases. Since women of Asian descent comprised roughly 12% of Dartmouth's female undergraduate population, the statistics indicated that they were roughly three times more likely to report sexual assault.

Whether the women were more likely to *report* sexual assault or more likely to *experience* sexual assault was something the letter's authors, the Pan Asian Council's newly formed Sexual Assault Committee—could not determine on its own. But not even a handful of women who received the news attended the series of private discussions the Committee organized later that month. The issue of sexual assault, still difficult to discuss openly at Dartmouth and nationwide, proved an even more circumscribed topic within the Asian American community.

While no one was willing to interpret the silence following the statistics' release as a crisis defused, the Asian and Asian American community's reluctance to discuss the issue prevented the Committee from reaching critical answers nor clear directions for future steps. As Neena Shin '00,

one of the Committee co-chairs put it, "There's no model for this elsewhere."

Nearly all women and professionals interviewed last spring believed that the likelihood of women in the community overreporting relative to other groups was very small.* If anything, Asian and Asian American women would tend to underreport instances of sexual assault, as the community, along with other racial minorities, have been known to underutilize health resources, especially counseling. Nor has the sexual assault awareness program advertised itself especially to any racial community at Dartmouth in recent years.

Nationwide, where domestic violence is the focus of most women's shelters, underreporting by Asian communities is the norm. While statistics on sexual assault are not collected nationally, they are sometimes available at the institutional level. According to Mayumi Yamada, a survivor-advocate for The Haven program at Massachusetts General Hospital, Asians make up only 2% of all clients but comprise 10% of the Boston population. The theory that Asian women at Dartmouth were simply three times more likely to report could not hold.

A more relevant question to pursue was whether Asian and Asian American women are at a higher *risk* of sexual assault. Although the term "Asian" denotes a mosaic of languages, religions, and cultures, the consensus among nearly all Asian women interviewed is that there is an absence of dialogue in sexuality within homes and among peers even in high school. Across many Asian cultures, sex is strictly taboo subject; parents tacitly require abstinence of daughters, and look the other way for sons. Thus, the obligatory "sex talk," considered a rite of passage in American culture, rarely happens in many Asian and Asian American households. Such attitudes continue to hold sway in Asian American families, and the majority of Asian ethnic students at Dartmouth (and generally) are either first- or second-generation.

Not only were sexual attitudes *within* the community a stumbling block for Asian and Asian American women, but a look at such attitudes *toward* Asian women proved equally disturbing. Many of the women interviewed described conversations in which non-Asian men bluntly spoke of Asian women as exotics, and considered sleeping with one an end in itself. Mainstream American culture has amply demonstrated its attachment to hurtful stereotypes of Asian women, from the sexually submissive Lotus Blossom to the sexually sadistic Dragon Lady. Given the fact that the U.S. has aggressed in three major wars in Asia in the 20th century and that it is now a preferred customer of the Asian sex tourism industry, it's not surprising that the commodifying "Asian fetish" phenomenon continues to influence non-Asian college men. Asian and Asian Ameri-

Know The Facts

Safety improves with knowledge: help dispel the myths and silence surrounding sexual assault. A groundbreaking study by the National Center for Victims of Crime in 1992 revealed the true nature of rape and sexual violence in the United States. Here are some highlights from its findings:

***In the United States, 1.3 women are raped every minute.** That results in 78 rapes each hour, 1,872 rapes each day, 56,160 rapes each month, and 683,280 rapes each year. ***The United States has the world's highest rape rate** of the countries that publish such statistics: 4 times higher than Germany, 13 times higher than England, and 20 times higher than Japan. ***One out of every three American women will be sexually assaulted in her lifetime.** *61% of all rape cases are victims less than 18 years old. 22% are between the ages of 18 and 24. 78% of rape victims know the attacker. ***In a survey of college women, 38% reported sexual victimizations which met the legal definition of a rape or attempted rape, yet only 1 out of every 25 reported their assault to the police.** *One in four college women have either been raped or suffered attempted rape. ***In a study of college students, 35% of men indicated some likelihood that they would commit a violent rape of a woman who had fended off an advance if they were assured of getting away with it.** *1 in 12 male students surveyed had committed acts that met the legal definition of rape. Furthermore, **84% of the men who had committed such acts said what they had done was definitely not rape.** *75% of male students and 55% of female students involved in acquaintance rape had been drinking or using drugs. ***Rape has a devastating impact on the mental health of victims. 31% of all victims develop Rape-Related Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (RR-PTSD) sometime in their lifetimes.** *Only 16% of rapes are ever reported to the police. ***In a survey of victims who did not report rape or attempted rape to the police, the following was found as to why no report was made: 43% thought nothing could be done, 27% felt it was a private matter, 12% were afraid of police response, and 12% felt it was not important enough.**

Sexual violence is an issue that cuts across the gender line. For info on what men can do to end sexual violence, visit <http://www.cs.utk.edu/~bartley/other/10Things.html>

can men at Dartmouth have not formally held discussions about the statistics as of yet.

While the Sexual Assault Committee emphasized the privacy and self-education of the community, sponsoring a holistic, well-attended Asian Women Health Series last spring, the matter would not have surfaced in the first place without an aggregate perspective on sexual assault. When she joined Dartmouth as sexual abuse program coordinator in 1996, Susan Marine developed a new system of tracking demographic data in reports made to the Sexual Abuse Awareness Program. Unlike larger campuses, where it is nearly impossible to record basic information in reports from various sources, Dartmouth's program coordinates reports to sexual assault peer advisors, to deans, and to the program counselor herself (the majority of the women reflected in the statistics chose to visit Marine personally). Marine required all reporting sources to note (when possible) at minimum the following pieces of information: the victim's year, race/ethnicity, whether s/he was Greek-affiliated, and whether s/he was a varsity athlete. (The race of the assailant was reported in only half of sexual assault cases.)

Before the PAC Sexual Assault Committee decided to issue the letter, Shin had contacted a number of other universities, while its administrative members contacted colleagues about racially disproportionate reporting of sexual assault. But they all encountered the same fence. "A lot of schools don't break it down or won't release it nationally," said assistant dean Nora Yasumura, who was a member of the Committee. *Main Street's* efforts to contact other campus centers was similarly fruitless. One rape education director, Cornell University's Nina Campbell, spoke about the complications of such work, "I personally wouldn't want to be distracted tracking victims—I'm more interested in prevention."

Whether the efforts of the Committee succeeded in informing women is unknown. Statistics for the year the letter was released (1999-2000) showed Asian and Asian American women reporting cases at about 10%, a sharp drop. It is still unclear whether the letter successfully informed women, or whether sexual assault survivors feared greater scrutiny. Statistics for the year 2000-2001 were not kept, as Marine departed for a position elsewhere, but her successor, Abby Tassel, says she hopes to continue Marine's methodologies. Of the Sexual Assault Committee's six original members, however, only one has not graduated or moved on, and it remains to be seen whether an open conversation on sexual assault within and across communities will truly take place.

* According to the Sexual Abuse Awareness Program, white, African American, Latina, and Native American students reported "proportionately," with some groups reporting "a little lower."