



**NAPIESV**

**NATIONAL ORGANIZATION  
OF ASIANS & PACIFIC ISLANDERS  
ENDING SEXUAL VIOLENCE**

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**No One Can Tell Our Stories But Us:  
A Dialogue on Sexual Violence in Asian  
and Pacific Islander Communities**

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### ***Acknowledgments:***

We, the authors of this report, would like to express deep gratitude to our sisters in the movement across the United States and the U.S. territories, especially Condencia Brade, for encouraging us to form an organization with a focus on ending sexual violence in Asian and Pacific Islander (API) communities. We also want to acknowledge and thank the founders of NAPIESV: Imelda Buncab, Emma Catague, Nina Jusuf, Sopheak Tek and Mira Yusef who laid the foundation for this project.

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This is a snapshot of stories of more than a hundred API participants across five regions: the West, East, Midwest, South and Commonwealth of Northern Marianas Islands (CNMI). We held a total of 22 listening sessions with API advocates, women, men, elders, and youths and one strategic dialogue session. We also spoke with numerous activists, advocates and service providers outside of the participants in the sessions. We appreciate their willingness and candidness in talking about the struggle of addressing sexual violence within API communities, which we know is not easy. Our hope for this report is to carry forward our collective stories, experiences and work in service of shaping the next chapter of addressing sexual violence in API communities.

We are humbled and grateful for the trust given in holding the narrative of life experiences. It is often hard to imagine the depth of pain held within each individual and communities.

It is difficult to find words to accurately capture what has been shared by all the participants, we have tried to document the life histories as close to the originals as possible. We ask for an apology for any mistakes made, welcome suggestion and feed forward, as this report is by and for our communities.

## ***Prologue:***

This project emerged from a profound need for Asian and Pacific Islanders (API) to be able to tell our own stories of sexual assault and violence, and on our own terms. Time and time again, we found there was a lack of representation of API voices and testimonies when it came to work around sexual violence. Our stories about sexual violence went unheard, unacknowledged or at times got subsumed into other forms of violence and were never explicitly addressed on their own.

We envisioned our work and this project as a place to focus on sexual violence in our communities and an opportunity to collectively define and redefine it. To even name sexual violence as an issue within API communities is, in and of itself, work, as many in our communities deny its very existence and different communities have - different ways of identifying, defining and naming sexual violence, if at all. What does sexual violence in API communities look like? How can we both consistently identify sexual violence and collectively redefine what it means for our communities?

While this report may be new information for broader API communities, many API women, particularly and other women of color have been speaking out, writing and organizing against sexual violence and leaving a legacy of work for us to learn from. We want to honor their work and the work of so many other APIs whose names we may not know, who have been tirelessly doing work around sexual violence in our communities.

We in no way want to pretend as if this is the first naming of sexual violence in our communities or in this way, or as if this is the first time sexual violence is being connected politically to other forms of violence or oppression. We want to acknowledge the many API survivors who have taken the enormous risks of coming out in their communities as survivors of sexual violence and who have endured tremendous backlash for doing so. We hope this paper will add to and amplify the work that has come before us and is currently being done. We hope to add another voice to the chorus of voices calling for an end to sexual violence in *all of our communities*.

There continues to be a need to specifically address the issue of sexual violence in our communities because of the unique conditions and impact of sexual violence and the epidemic rates at which it happens. For example, though child sexual abuse (CSA) rates are astronomical across all communities,

*“My parents told me to concentrate on education and no conversation about sexuality.” (from one of the youth listening sessions)*

CSA is rarely talked about, and API communities are no exception. We must name and define sexual violence to truly be able to understand what it is and how it is connected to and how it perpetuates other forms of violence, and vice versa.

Even with the intense silence that surrounds sexual violence in API communities, when it *is* discussed, many times the stories we hear are not representative of the diversity of the peoples nor hold the many complexities of gender, race/ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, age, ability and cultural traditions. Again, we ask ourselves, whose voices are represented, *even within API communities?* And how can we use our responses to sexual violence as an opportunity to amplify the voices of APIs who are often ignored or left out of traditional “API” work?

*“I didn’t know that ‘it’ was sexual violence until I came to this organization seeking services.”  
(Survivor of CSA)*

Given how pervasive sexual violence is, it becomes both a strategic site to organize for the wellbeing and survival of our communities as well as a fertile ground to build alliances and solidarity with other communities, to which many of us already belong. For example, for many LGBTQ APIs who are at greater risk of sexual violence, the notions of safety and well-being mean sexual violence has to be addressed in API communities *and* in LGBTQ communities, as well as in LGBTQ API communities. Other examples are contract workers and domestic workers who face sexual violence in the workplace and may not be able to defend themselves or seek help due to fear of deportation or losing their jobs. In these conditions, safety and well-being involve understanding the deep connections between and fighting for labor rights and racial, gender, immigration, and economic justice *together*.

NAPIESV works at developing a cross-movement analysis, as well as working to build relationships and partnerships to address sexual violence in API communities. We recognize the importance of recognizing the connections between sexual violence and other forms of violence and oppression. And we believe that to effectively build a movement to end sexual violence within API communities, we must include an extensive range of API communities and voices that can speak to those connections, oppressions and social conditions.

*“Sexual violence happens everywhere, in different communities, so we have to be more vigilant.” (from one of women’s listening sessions)*

Across the board, sexual violence has been used as an effective tool of some of the most egregious forms of power and control, domination, exploitation, violence and oppression. Sexual violence has been used throughout our histories of (and current experiences with) imperialism, colonialism, war, militarization, sex trafficking, refugee and internment camps, and immigration. Some examples are the use of “comfort women” to support the colonizing and military occupation of our lands and the rape of indigenous women by Catholic priests during colonization.

There are long legacies of sexual violence within and connected to patriarchal family structures as well, and even within matriarchal family structures, where women were given some power, but men ultimately made the final decision. The cultural practices of forced marriage to control sexuality, especially when used as a “solution” for young women who have sex or to “cure” gay men, illustrates the strong ties sexual violence has with not only family structures, but with religion and policing one’s sexuality and gender as well. For example, when marriage is not an option to “fix” LGBTQ youths, many families will turn to religious ceremonies and practices. In all cases, the legacies of sexual violence are often passed down generationally, creating not just individual, but also generational pain and trauma that get woven into the very fabric of our families.

*“No one talks about sexual assault; you don’t talk about your sex life. Sex is a given when you are married.”  
(from one of the advocate listening sessions)*

For so many, specific identities and social conditions mark their experiences of sexual violence, the ways in which they are targeted and how (or if) their communities respond.

*“Identity and how identities are defined are important (who is more or less Filipina, Samoan). Our identities are like a kaleidoscope of where you were born/raised/where your people was; we introduced ourselves by introducing where our parents were from because we carry our people with us, which can get kind of heavy but is so important.” (from one of the advocates in the strategic dialogue session)*

The isolation and exile faced by many APIs who do not meet prescribed gender roles and expectations within their communities, often leave them vulnerable to many forms of violence with little to no support, particularly if they are LGBTQ APIs. Narrow gender roles and expectations have always been maintained by the use of force, domination and violence, both historically and currently.

The oppression within (and of) API communities is often illustrated by who gets to be seen and understood as a “deserving” or an “innocent” victim, whose stories get told and believed, or whose community is seen as “deserving” of support. Many times this occurs both within and outside API communities and often falls directly along lines of skin color, religion, class, geographic location or the country of origin’s relationship with the United States. White supremacy, xenophobia and racism have worked together to construct an identity of “Asian” within western cultures that lumps together entire regions of peoples with different and distinct cultures and complicated histories together.

This creates a false monolithic category and does not recognize the diversity of API communities and the ways in which our different cultures and histories of violence impact our current experiences of violence. It erases so many of us, especially Pacific Islanders, and demonizes those of us who do not fit into dangerous stereotypes of what “Asian” should or should not be. Even beyond various communities and cultures within the broad label of “API,” there are important differences between, for example, refugees, first-generation immigrants and second-generation immigrants.

Conditions surrounding immigration and immigration status can also affect an API individual’s experience of sexual violence and of seeking services and support, specifically as it relates to work, wages and whether one has a sponsored visa or is undocumented.

There are so many conditions and identities that intimately impact people’s vulnerability to and experience of sexual violence that must be part of how we understand sexual violence in our communities. Many of these same factors determine whether or not an individual is able to have access to services and support for medical, emotional or material needs that result from sexual violence.

*“With people losing jobs and forced to share a house with other families, what we see is kids that are now around 16 years old [who] have been molested since they were 10 years old.” (from one of the advocate listening*

## **Narrative: *Not to romanticize or demonize***

As APIs committed to ending violence in our communities, we need to be able to tell our own stories and name our own truths. We cannot be forced into narrow assumptions or stereotypes about our culture, ethnicity, race or histories, nor our genders, desires, bodies or families. Our testimonies of sexual violence are diverse, complex and nuanced. There is not one standard API experience of sexual violence.

Breaking the silence around our experiences of sexual violence and creating spaces where we can openly share our stories is vital to our work. Indeed, many of us would not know about the problem of sexual violence within API communities were it not for organizations and community groups who have made an effort to make space for those stories to be told and believed. Given the silence, shame and stigma surrounding sexual violence, it is a monumental risk to tell our stories of sexual violence, whether it is violence that we have survived, witnessed or committed. For some of us it may mean the difference between being able to stay in our communities or being forced out, having a roof over our heads or having nowhere to live. Many of us choose to stay silent about our experiences, sometimes only sharing them with those closest to us and often never sharing them at all.

*"I never told anyone all these years."  
(Survivor)*

*"I didn't want to talk about it because of all of the emotions. You're supposed to be strong by yourself and keep your story to yourself." (Survivor from one of the elders' listening sessions)*

*"Can you imagine what I feel when I have to take care of my ailing father who also is my perpetrator?" (Survivor)*

We must also be able to tell our stories on our own terms. Our testimonies have been used against us, our words twisted to blame survivors or carry out the ulterior motives of others. We have to be aware of who is using our stories and for what gain. Are our stories being used as tokens or are they truly valued? Because so many of our stories happen within the context of our cultures, when they get taken out of that context or told through a different cultural lens, they can be easily misunderstood, and our voices get erased.

*“When I speak, I have to identify who I am and there is no way to speak freely. Our stories get used for other agendas. This is state violence combined with partner violence.” (from one of the advocates in the strategic dialogue session)*

*(Ta) Ma Hsu is the same as (Ta) Ma Hso, but it will be clearer to use them both. Karen people use that all the time when they talk. It makes the word heavier to understand. But you can't use only Ta Ma Hso because it doesn't make sense without Ta Ma Hsu. Paw Hsu sometimes we know as “rape”. But if I say, “Mee Khu Paw Hsu,” it's more clear to understand.*

*Mu Kwah – Sexual*

*Ta Ma Hsu – Violence*

*Mee – Sleep*

*Khu – With*

*Paw – Touch*

*Hsu – Hard/strong*

*(from a Karen women listening session)*

## MIRROR ON THE WALL: HOW DOES SEXUAL VIOLENCE MANIFEST ITSELF IN OUR COMMUNITIES?

There are many ways in which sexual violence takes shape in our communities, particularly the impact of sexual violence. Because sexual violence is so prevalent, the effects of it are widespread in almost every community that we know of, and API communities are no different.

We hear about the rising rates of rape and sexual assault, CSA and sex trafficking. We can see the individual impact across our communities many times over, as many sexual assault survivors struggle with their physical, psychological and emotional health and often have very little access to culturally competent healing and support services. Mental health impacts such as depression, substance abuse, anxiety and suicide, are common for many survivors.

The result is evident not just around individual trauma but also around collective and generational trauma. Bystanders

*"Incest is a major problem."*  
(from one of the women's listening sessions)

and people who witness violence also often have little resources to turn to, and those who have sexually abused or have been sexually violent have even fewer resources for accountability, healing and transformation.

*"I had nine siblings and only I came to the U.S. Communists killed my four kids in front of me during the war. I was put in a well and my husband was separated from my other two children and me. My mother in-law helped me and my two children leave and we were able to reunite with my husband in a camp in Thailand. Once we came to the U.S., my husband met a younger woman and left me. I was asked to leave the house and now I live on my own. I gave up my son because I could no longer raise him. It's hard to get along with others; I am happier to be in the elderly center because of less isolation and I'm able to be with others." (from the elders' listening session)*

As communities continue to remain silent about sexual violence and sweep it under the rug, the impact of our responses also takes a toll on all of us. Lack of trust, isolation of those in pain, creating a culture of shame and secrets around one of the most common experience of violence, and protecting abusers and blaming survivors as well as their supporters who speak out are just some examples of the devastating effects on our communities and what we are passing on to the next generation.

*“Organizations have resettled refugees in certain apartment complexes where there are many single women with children, most of whom got divorced in their home country because of domestic violence before coming to the U.S. There is a dynamic within the community that when the woman arrives, she is a free-for-all and then sexual assault and rape occurs in these close-knit communities. Perpetrators stereotype these women as non-virgins, single status, and free for all.” (from an advocate at one of the listening sessions)*

## **INHERITANCE: QUESTIONS TO ASK OURSELVES**

As resilient people who have learned to cope with pervasive sexual violence, in this moment, we must ask ourselves critical questions for what our futures hold. What do we want our children to inherit? What kind of a world do we wish for them? What would safety and justice mean and look like for them and what does that require of us now?

How do we resist against the current world of violence even as we work to build the world we do want? How do we invest in and put into practice alternatives to the present systems that we know are not working? What would a response to sexual violence in our communities look like that was fundamentally about accountability, building trust, healing, safety and wellness instead of silence, shame, guilt, fear and trauma?

We have been burdened with historical and generational trauma and if we do not want it to continue to be passed down again and again, we must start to acknowledge what we are carrying. We must face the enormity and feel the depth of what we have been expected to hold in silence. We can no longer afford to turn away from it; the stakes are too high.

Violence is learned behavior that is usually transferred to the next generation. It is learned behavior and taught. We have a chance to begin to break this cycle. How do we start the long, challenging work of confronting, unlearning and healing from sexual violence in our homes, schools, and places of worship and work? We know it will take generations to end sexual violence and that it will take all of our efforts. In knowing this, how can we begin the work now to be able to pass on a continued commitment to end sexual violence to generations to come?

## **STRATEGIES: COMING TOGETHER and REMEMBERING WHO WE ARE**

In order to move forward in addressing sexual violence within API communities, we must move forward together. We must remember our collective legacies of survival, resistance and resilience in the face of fear and erasure. This is long-term work that we are a part of and we will need each other to do it.

We must target the root cause of sexual violence – not only on the incidences themselves, but also on the conditions that allow for sexual violence to continue. Many of these conditions actively perpetuate sexual violence, whether they are social norms about women’s sexuality, transphobia, government policies that respond to sexual violence by only pushing for more severe criminalization and punishment, moral and religious beliefs about sex and bodies, or the concrete inaccessibility and isolation that disabled APIs face, leaving them more vulnerable to victimization. It is not enough to work on only one of these factors; we must understand how they are all connected and how they together create a climate that supports sexual violence.

*“Twisted view of rape by politicians – where do politicians get ideas about women’s bodies? Anti-abortion issues. God’s will. Where did that come from?”  
(from one of the men’s listening sessions)*

We must expose the systemic nature of violence. We cannot continue to think of sexual violence as merely just “bad behavior” or “an anomaly” or “the perverse behavior of a disturbed individual.” We cannot continue to individualize acts of violence without connecting them to the larger system in which we live. Violence is systemic and requires that we organize for major systemic change at an institutional level as well as community and individual levels. The first step would be education to reveal the connections between sexual, intimate, communal and state violence to reveal how violence is encouraged and supported through laws, policies, culture and collective practices.

Much of what we will need, namely our traditions and customs, have been wrested away from us so it is crucial for us to relearn, remember and reimagine in another way. Current conditions that we live in are killing many API communities, physically, spiritually and culturally. For many of our communities, preserving our cultures has been a lifelong struggle. Many of us do not know our ancient practices for individual and collective healing and wellness, and we do not want to have to learn it from those who have stolen, co-opted and sold it back to us. We must remember and reclaim our spiritual and cultural practices as our own. In doing this, we also must reimagine them because we know that many of our practices serve to perpetuate the violence that we want to end. It is not enough to strive for

“community-based responses to violence”; we must also begin to articulate what kind of values we want our communities to practice. We must also begin to redefine the meaning of “community,” especially in relation to ending violence. How can we remember and reclaim our traditions, while acknowledging that some of our practices are not useful anymore and have also contributed to violence? How do we honor what was and transform what will be?

*“It happens to us, it’s been there ever since ... how do we call it? It’s a disease? It’s a custom?” (from one of the women’s listening sessions)*

In order to carry out any strategy that will make the kind of large-scale change we seek, we will have to build solidarity with each other not just with other racial and ethnic groups, but within and across API communities as well. We cannot keep pretending that we all fit neatly into the category of “API,” that we all get along peacefully or that we all are treated the same, or that there isn’t very real racism *within* API communities. There are very real differences between Asian and Pacific Islanders, and a vast number of differences within each of those two broad communities. In addition, among communities of color, APIs share as many similarities as differences. We must explore and examine closely the connections between how, for example, Asians in the United States and globally are treated and how Blacks and Latinos are treated, and understand why building solidarity with Black and Latino communities is important. Such solidarity is essential in our understanding of sexual violence, so that we may better fight it.

First and foremost, though, we must enable our communities to identify sexual violence. Many of the people we know and love may not fully understand what sexual violence looks like because so much of it is sold to us as “normal” and “unavoidable.”

*“When we hear the word, sexual violence, we think of victim screaming, forceful action, ,held down, typically a young girl in the street at night, dark alley ways, van, guys, men, older men, clubs, drugs.” (from one of the youth listening sessions)*

We must do the ground work to enable our communities to be able to recognize sexual violence even before they can work to end it. We must sharpen our intuitions, feelings and our connection to our bodies as well, resisting western notions that prioritize thinking over what our hearts say. We must create our own definitions about what sexual violence is

outside of what we have been taught and have internalized so that more people can identify when it occurs and whether they need support.

*“People don’t really understand what sexual assault is because it’s their husbands and they just do what they are supposed to do.” (from one of the advocate listening sessions)*

## **WE KNOW WHAT TO DO: SOLUTIONS**

When we talk about creating spaces for stories of sexual violence to be shared and learned from, we understand that this requires more from us. These kinds of spaces must be created with utmost care and deliberation.

We are talking about spaces that are not judgmental, that are about believing and respecting survivors; these are spaces where we can have a dialogue about our bodies in complex ways instead of vacant affirmation of our bodies or fixing or shaming our bodies to fit into narrow definitions of “desirable.” We are talking about intergenerational spaces, where we can discuss our experiences across age, while simultaneously understanding how different generations view sex. We encourage people of all ages to engage in conversations around sexual violence that are sex-positive and that allow for people of all ages to imagine what accountability could look like or would have looked like.

*“There is a culture that virginity and pureness is so valued; virginity is prized that you don’t want to talk about sex/sexual violence.” (from one of the advocate listening sessions)*

It is important also to be prepared for the kind of first reactions that will surface when communities talk about sexual violence, such as shame and guilt, anger and denial, or forcing everything into a “good” or “bad” dichotomy (e.g., ranking who is a “good” or “real” victim vs. who is a “bad” or “invalid” victim.)

*“People don’t report because of the shame, for example, a young woman got pregnant by the uncle, but mom did not report.” (from one of the women’s listening sessions)*

*“We see denial with mothers about incest” (from one of the advocate listening sessions)*

Part of our endeavors must also be about building our own capacity to be able to hold these reactions and responses well when they inevitably arise in overt or subtle ways. Understanding them as part of the expected, internalized, learned and taught responses to sexual violence will help us be better prepared.

*“Typical mindset: ‘I live the life that was chosen for me.’ The struggle of survivors may be switching into a mindset where decisions were made by another and now they must start making their own.” (from one of the advocate listening sessions)*

In addition to spaces where people can share their experiences with sexual violence, we want to stress the importance of also creating spaces where we teach people to not sexually assault, in service of growing a new generation where sexual assault is not an option. We don’t just want to focus on the aftermath or consequences once an incident of sexual violence has happened, but we also want to focus on preventing it from happening. This includes creating a space for offenders of sexual violence, who also may be themselves survivors of sexual violence, and cultivating a more nuanced understanding of the links among categories of “survivor,” “bystander” and “offender.”

Across the board, one thing we heard constantly is the importance of creating space for API men and boys to be able to talk about masculinity and gender. Not only are these kinds of occurrences in themselves rare, but there are also so few opportunities for

*“As a survivor I would want the people around me to know what sexual violence is, and the people I know to know how to listen to me, be around me, and know what to ask me. Some people don’t know how to respond and [they] freeze.” (from one of the advocate listening sessions)*

API male survivors of sexual violence to open up about their victimization with one another. The work of understanding the intricacies of gender roles, expectations and responsibilities within API communities and sexual violence cannot only be the responsibility of those of us who are targeted by gender oppression. Furthermore, we must talk about masculinity and gender in broader and more specific ways that acknowledge and recognize the landscape of masculinity, regardless of one’s sexual orientation, gender presentation or body.

*“API males need to step up in showing API males how to be a better person – be a role model.” (from one of the men’s listening sessions)*

*“How API/Asian men are perceived: as emasculated, asexual, very smart, obedient.” (from one of the men’s listening sessions)*

*“What we see also [is] the trend of a Hmong man going home to get a younger wife.” (from one of the advocate listening sessions)*

As we revisit and revise our efforts and look ahead to the future, we must also not forget our elders, who often hold the keys to the past. Many of them are dying with

our histories and knowledge, and API communities are losing valuable records of their roots. These elders had mostly been left out of the movement against sexual violence, so the work of intergenerational building must include them and their experiences of sexual violence, as well as support for them in healing from those experiences. We must relearn and cultivate the transferring of history if we are ever to build a healthy future.

*“I have no beauty or money, [so] I wouldn’t get sexually assaulted.” (from one of the elder listening sessions)*

*“[There were] fewer CSA cases when we were younger. Now it is like mushrooms, people get away with it.” (from one of the elder listening sessions)*

It is not only our elders we must engage, but also our youth. Over and over again, it is young people who bring attention to the issue of sexual violence in our communities and who have the unique position to be able to demand something other than the status quo. They are often educating themselves on issues and connecting the dots in new and healthy ways. We owe so much of this work to the courage and innovativeness of young people who are pushing for change while at the same time refusing to let go of their communities and where they come from. This work is not only about generations yet to come, but also about the young people who are here now and who are paving a fresh path for this movement. We must invest in and learn how to support young leadership in our intergenerational work.

As we seek to change and shift our culture, we must also aim not lose it, but rather to evolve it. As much as we want to remember and reclaim, we must also be conscious that much of where we have come from was also not free of sexual violence and was riddled with harm and trauma as well. We want to be able to respond to current incidences of sexual violence in culturally sensitive, relevant and competent ways, but we also want to be clear that we will not ignore violent or harmful aspects of our culture in the name of “tradition” or “preserving culture” anymore. It is this balance that we must work at striking and we must support one another in doing so.

We must also invest in alternatives *now*. As we attempt to educate and create spaces for each other to share and connect, we must also simultaneously be developing and experimenting with alternative responses to violence. We cannot create new awareness of sexual violence and new understandings of it while we rely on the same responses that have been part of perpetuating more violence. We must support the people (many of whom are API) who are immersed in exploring robust and empowering ways of responding to violence that do not rely on the police, prisons or vigilantism.

Much of these efforts may appear as grappling with what true individual and collective accountability looks like, working outside of nonprofits and embedding responses to violence into our lives instead of our jobs, and practicing the skills to build and maintain healthy relationships that are not violent. This work is slow but necessary in not only responding by providing services to victims but also actively *ending violence*, and we must invest in it now so that in 10 years we could actually have a viable alternative to silence and reporting or calling the police.

*“People recant their stories when it’s about sexual assault, especially in court because of the shame.” (from one of the advocate listening sessions)*

Finally, we need to value the important role of healing in our work. The healing goes beyond a medical “let’s fix what’s wrong” way, but healing for a deeper, spiritual and political need. We must value healing for the sake of our collective joy, safety and well-being. We must create spaces that go beyond offering testimonies and tackles the work of what collective healing would look like for our communities. We cannot continue to only fight a world we don’t want, but we must also heal so that we can imagine new futures for ourselves and create a world we *do want*. The work of healing is political because it will significantly shift how we are able to be in relationships with one another, how we are able to build community and movement, and what we can believe is possible. For many of us, it is hard to accept that *healing* is possible. What would it mean to begin healing from not only generational sexual violence, but also from colonization, war, imperialism or internalized oppression? Imagine the transformative effect on all of us as we start to collectively heal from the impact of sexual violence in our communities – imagine what could be possible for our peoples.

For more information, email us at [contact@napiesv.org](mailto:contact@napiesv.org)

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