

Asian Women United of Minnesota (AWUM) was founded in 1993, became a 501c3 nonprofit organization in 1996, and opened doors to its shelter, House of Peace, in 2001. AWUM was created through the energy and efforts of a group of Asian American women who became aware of gaps in service to Asian women experiencing domestic violence in the Twin Cities Metro area.

Asian Women United of Minnesota's mission is to end domestic violence by promoting safe and healthy relationships within the Asian-Pacific Islander community.

We are the leader in eliminating violence in the Asian-Pacific Islander (API) community, and share the expertise of our best practices with other domestic abuse organizations. Using the strengths of the API community, AWUM upholds an environment free of violence, promotes self-sufficiency for women, and fosters nurtured and healthy children and families. Our intention is to fill in a gap by providing domestic violence shelter and support to Asian women, including those of Hmong, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Filipina, Chinese, Lao, Karen, South Asian, Korean and Thai descent.

The House of Peace (HOP) Shelter provides a safe sanctuary to women and children who are fleeing immediate danger. HOP, which houses 24 beds in 12 rooms, is nearly always full. Our shelter provides a community living environment with a strong commitment to Asian culture and language. 18 of 20 paid staff are Asian women, and a Hmong woman provides licensed family therapy at the shelter twice a month. HOP has been responding to Asian women's unique needs and preferences for nearly ten years. Some of our own staff have shared many of the same experiences as the participants – arranged marriages in their early teens, clan pressure to accommodate a husband's desires above all and navigating a conventional American culture while remaining “good” daughters and wives at home. Our understanding of and personal experience with Asian culture – particularly Hmong, Cambodian, Chinese, Thai, Lao, Korean and Indian – helps us provide appropriate and compassionate advocacy to women to whom a “legal” marriage or divorce may be merely a piece of paper, but for whom a “cultural” marriage and divorce hold implications that will impact their and their children's lives forever. HOP provides safe shelter to approximately 250 individuals each year.

The Community Advocacy Program (CAP) is our area of growth. CAP is staffed by five advocates, who are located in community-based sites in St Paul and Minneapolis. CAP advocates work in partnership with Hennepin County's Domestic Abuse Service Center (DASC) and the City of Minneapolis' Family Violence Unit. In addition, one of the advocates works a shift at St Paul's Bridges to Safety, a collaborative among several domestic violence prevention agencies in the metro area. In all cases, AWUM's advocates are seen as critical resources for both service providers and participants. Staff hold office hours at Lao Assistance Center, housed in Minneapolis Harrison Park Center, and SEWA-Aiwf, which is located within the CAPI building. Two CAP advocates focus on outreach and have forged long-term partnerships with the University of Minnesota's Asian Sorority Interest Group (ASIG) and provide drop-in office hours at the MCTC resource center. The five advocates collectively make connections with hundreds of individuals every week.

CAP advocates help participants understand their legal rights and help them navigate the system. Simultaneously, CAP advocates help the “system” understand the importance of respecting and understanding a woman's cultural context, which includes input from clan elders (men), her family

(parents who may be offered money to return her to her husband) and the risk that not abiding by her elders' wishes could result in being ostracized by her community – an isolating and painful concept. In addition to the 1,500+ people who receive information and referral, our CAP advocates provide more intensive forms of advocacy to approximately 300 women and their families annually.

Our community advocacy work falls into two broad categories:

1. **Bring our services and message to the Asian community.** Build mutually trusting relationships with community elders and help them understand that violence against women and children is always unacceptable – that there is NO excuse for oppressing women, no matter what cultural tradition may recommend. Demonstrate alternative ways for families to live within their home cultures that do not include violence. Hold up examples of prominent families who live in peace. Highlight and encourage existing practices and cultural values that promote equality and healthy relationships. While working with community leaders, we will continue to make our presence known to women who need us – we will inform women of their rights and of opportunities to leave violent homes. We understand the need for discretion – a woman who vocalizes her desire to leave a husband may be in greater immediate danger than a woman who is quietly strategic about escaping her circumstances. We will facilitate women's departure from violent homes by providing information and support and encouraging women to avail themselves of our advocacy or shelter when they feel safe doing so.
2. **Educate service providers** (e.g., criminal justice system) on important elements of handling domestic abuse cases – from the police call to the Order for Protection to the courtroom – in the Asian community. Help people understand the implications of “cultural” marriage and divorce. Help law enforcement agents learn how to communicate respectfully with Asian immigrant families during crisis.

The women we see at AWUM are at once strong, frightened, optimistic, hurt and determined.

Asian battered women, especially those who came in recent years as refugees, face multiple barriers to safety. They often have very limited or no English skills. They are unfamiliar with and disenfranchised from the system, which is ill-equipped to deal with their specific needs. Well-meaning service providers typically don't speak the women's native language or are unfamiliar with the victim's culture. Many women, especially those who are undocumented immigrants, are fearful of deportation or their husband's deportation. Women are often distrustful of authority figures, who may have a history or reputation of ignoring women's best interests in their home country.

Cultural barriers enhance this isolation. Asian women and children who are victims of domestic or sexual violence are often extremely reluctant to discuss the details of their abuse. Many women report feeling an internal sense of guilt, which may be exacerbated by an unsympathetic, patriarchal community. Sex is a taboo topic in most Asian cultures, thereby prohibiting women from sharing critical information and escaping their situation. Some women view domestic violence as a private matter that they must endure and some consider it inappropriate to discuss family issues outside of the family, and many women fear that they would shame their family or community if they exposed the violence.

Community barriers also exist. Many Asian battered women are victimized by the lack of awareness and support from their communities. Domestic violence is a sensitive issue within the Asian community and cannot be openly discussed. Some members of Asian communities feel that domestic violence is not a serious problem or that it is an excusable symptom of the stress and depression many male refugees experience. Women of Asian descent may not want to acknowledge or report violence for fear of being judged within their own community – women can be threatened with death to themselves or family members in their country of origin if they speak out about being abused. Women who choose to leave their abusers risk leaving behind their families, cultural communities and support networks at a time when they are most in need.

AWUM also sees several women each year who have arrived in Minnesota through the sex trade. Of the 45,000 to 50,000 women and girls trafficked each year into the U.S., 30,000 come from Asia with China, Thailand and Vietnam as the primary source countries. A vast majority of these women experience violence as they are trafficked throughout the United States, forced into prostitution and exploited and ignored within their own community.