

Exploring the Cultural Contexts of Consent in AANHPI Communities

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Introduction

In March 2023, the Asian Pacific Institute sought to learn more about how the concepts of consent and boundaries are understood and experienced in Asian, Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) contexts, and what approaches to education and programming are impactful in helping AANHPI youth build healthy relationships. In video-call interviews, AANHPI advocates working with AANHPI young people aged 12-25 shared about their work and the cultural contexts around consent in their communities.

A total 11 of interviews were conducted. Organizations served South Asians, East Asians, Southeast Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Native Hawaiians, but these interviews were not intended to be representative of all AANHPI experiences. Advocates discussed their work and lived experiences in the context of their location (i.e. suburban or urban), as well as their regional location in the Midwest, West Coast, South, and in the Pacific. Many worked with youth and communities who are mostly second-generation American and later, while others work with immigrant and refugee youth and families. Youth were designated as ranging in age from middle school to undergraduate age, about 12-25 years old. Advocates discussed consent in AANHPI context across the lifespan, however.

While AANHPIs encompass diverse experiences, several themes emerged from our conversations.

Major takeaways about consent and boundaries in AANHPI contexts

- **Consent isn't just about sex.** In most interviews, conversations also encompassed what consent and boundaries look like in the context of families, friendships, or communities in addition to discussion about sexual assault. If AANHPI people under the age of 25 do not experience healthy boundaries or respect of their bodily autonomy in their families or communities, they might not be able to practice consent in their romantic and sexual relationships.
- **In many places and contexts, topics such as sex are still taboo.** A combination of cultural contexts, religion, and a conservative local climate can inform the types of sex education youth receive, if any. LGBTQ+ youth and community members may face additional stigma at an age where they might still be exploring their identities.
- **Growing up, AANHPI individuals struggle to establish boundaries in relationships because many had to go along with what parents, elder, or the community want for them.** It can be hard establishing one's own values and drawing boundaries when facing pressure from a partner.
- **AANHPI youth learn best about consent when they're able to discuss and practice boundaries with parents, siblings, and other family** —and parents are more open to sexual education that's grounded in health and respect. Young people need access to biology-based education about development regardless of gender, in addition to spaces to learn about conflict resolution, personal boundaries and safety, and healthy relationships. Parents also have to be taught how to respect boundaries and talk to their children about sex.

Language around consent, boundaries, and sexual assault

“**Respect**” was used by almost all participants to discuss the power given to elders and other authority figures in AANHPI contexts. Enforcing boundaries against others, and especially those with positional power, is perceived to be disrespectful. Similarly, several described their communities as “**hierarchical**,” with certain individuals having power due to birth, identity, or gained status.

“**Collective**” was used by nearly all participants to describe AANHPI cultures, and the idea that boundaries, perceived to be an individualistic concept, are inherently at odds with collective values.

“**Shame**” was frequently used when speaking about going against a parent, elder, or teacher; about prioritizing one’s own needs above that of the group or community; or about premarital sex.

“**Taboo**” was used to describe talking about sex. Some participants found that conversations about sex within a growth/development or educational context is less taboo, while others describe it as taboo within all contexts and situations.

Key themes

Conceptualizing consent and boundaries

Broadly, advocates emphasized collectivism and spoke about boundaries in the context of a family unit or community. Advocates described personal boundaries or comfort as things that were supposed to give way to the needs or desires of others, or of a group or community. In fact, some indicated that individual boundaries or autonomy were not really concepts in their communities: “Consent is not really a concept at all. You are expected to give, and will be shamed for not giving.”

An advocate working predominantly with East Asian and some Southeast Asian young people:

“When youth are asked about boundaries, the word they use is “confused.” They don’t want their boundaries to overstep others’ boundaries, which draws the line again between shame of not respecting your elders but also making your own boundaries heard in a way that isn’t disrespectful or seen as against the cultural norms.”

An advocate working with South Asian communities:

“Something that needs to be understood about AAPI and Desi communities when it comes to our families and immigrant diaspora: it can be difficult to have a personal definition of consent. Older folks can sometimes insert themselves in deeply personal contexts. Niceness, a certain warmth is expected. If you don’t give that, then you reflect on your community poorly.”

Another advocate discussed how some in the South Asian community saw boundaries as Western or too individualistic and therefore not applicable:

“Sometimes conversations about boundaries are seen as a Western concept by focusing on individual needs versus group needs. It looks like you are pulling yourself away from your group...Not to generalize, but sometimes in South Asian families, we see a lot of making sure each family member is okay. And then also prioritizing community needs over family needs.”

Discomfort and terminology

All advocates expressed that it is uncomfortable or taboo to talk about sex in their communities, although whether related topics such as healthy relationships, sexual health, and sexual biology were similarly taboo varied. The concept of consent has become so strongly associated with sex that it too can create wariness.

One advocate discussed how closeness within Tongan communities hinders open discussion about sexual topics:

“You can’t talk to your male family members about sex [if you’re a woman], and they do not talk to you about sex. Cultural practices and protocols keep these conversations down. Maybe a barrier is the cultural value that fellow Pacific Islanders are brother and sisters, even if not related... Sex ed just don’t happen at any age in our communities—if they talk, it will be experience based or relational.”

Another common challenge identified was that many AANHPI languages lacked terminology to describe sexual assault and consent, particularly in households where family members speak a mix of languages, at varying levels of fluency.

When asked how to discuss about boundaries being crossed, one advocate working with Hmong communities explained:

“If “SA” doesn’t resonate, we have terms in our own language. But we also have a lack of terminology. We don’t directly say “vagina” – we say chaw mos (“tender place”) in Hmong. Using gentle language so they do not shut down or feel disgusted. Women were taught this is a sacred part that belongs to someone else. There is an unconscious, sometimes internalized disgust when speaking about it. [When violence happens,] maybe they don’t see it as SA, but they feel in their hearts that something is wrong.”

An advocate working mostly with South Asian families discussed her approach to addressing language-related challenges by centering universal concepts:

“DV language is not part of colloquial language—I cannot think of the word for boundary. I would have to look up the word for domestic violence. Also, not all languages have the words for LGBTQ+ identities, but many languages have a word for love—there are ways to create space for that and give language to concepts that have always existed.”

Consent in family contexts

In collectivist contexts and in cultures where deference is expected towards certain individuals such as elders, things like bodily autonomy and privacy are less important. Because many AANHPI young people struggle to establish boundaries within their families, it became hard for them to practice consent later on with a partner.

- An advocate working with South Asian communities: “One example of a non-sexual context is a loss of consent at family events where little kids get their cheeks pulled or they get picked up. Young people are not seen as having bodily autonomy. What is the kid going to do?”
- One advocate working with Pacific Islander families: “Kids can say no if an aunt or uncle wants to greet you in [through a cultural greeting], parents are teaching their children it’s okay to say no.”
- An advocate working with South Asian families: “When I spoke to youth from high school tabling, they just wished parents would knock on their doors, or didn’t feel the need to factcheck everything they say. They would rather not have parents second guess everything. This also continues later into adulthood where young people also question themselves.”
- An advocate working with Pacific Islander families: “Sometimes elders have abused the cultural power they have to groom kids. Millennial, Gen-Z folks are the ones teaching their kids and are adamant to break that cycle for their kids.”

Patriarchy and gender roles

“Patriarchy hurts everybody, but usually women disproportionately suffer” --an advocate working with Hmong communities

Most advocates brought up gender roles. While both boys and girls struggle to establish boundaries, girls especially were expected to be giving, pleasant, and accommodating. One advocate working with Korean youth indicated that these expectations were the strictest for the oldest daughters in a family.

Many participants shared that males were expected to be strong and firm:

“They are supposed to express power over people even if someone’s boundaries are being crossed.”

One advocate observed of Micronesian family dynamics:

“Even though property is passed through women, there’s still patriarchy. Men speak and women are silent. Men have to protect their sisters, doing so protects the honor of the family. It’s a form of guardianship, but to someone outside the community, it can look like control or dominance.”

One Hmong advocate described the loss of self-identity that follows from these gender expectations:

“Women, daughters who grow up are raised to become good wives from a young age. Chores, gardening, etc. For boys, they learn how to lead, how to run a wedding, a funeral, and how to drink. It can put a mental toll and stress reinforcing these gender roles. Youth do not get to choose, which can be stressful. It takes away your sense of self.”

Advocates raised the question, how are we supposed to navigate pressure from a partner versus our own needs, if we’ve never been able to have self-determination?

Masculinity

Advocates expressed that while women are expected to be accommodating, even at the expense of their own discomfort, men also felt pressure to give in. For East Asian youth:

“They talk a lot about their toxic masculinity that they internalized. Boys can’t show emotion, boys can’t be vulnerable. They have to be the leader in the family. So when they set boundaries, they are confused about if it is something set by the cultural norms, or something they have made for themselves.”

An advocate working in a predominantly Pacific Islander community recalled a conversation among young men:

“They felt expectations of what they needed to do to maintain that manhood. It was almost the idea of, if there was someone who wanted to engage with them sexually... it would be weird for them to say no.”

Marriage

While much of our conversations focused around youth, advocates described consent as something that AANHPI individuals struggle with at any age. The concept of boundaries becomes further blurred between spouses or long-term partners.

One advocate discussed concerns for some newly married Tongan women:

“Some women were scared their first night since it was the first time having sex. They are facing something that was taboo all their life. One woman’s partner did not even know about the anatomy and logistics of sex. This fear doesn’t go away over one night. One woman talked about how she was scared but felt obligated to go through with sex because her husband was excited yet scared. They did engage and since she was uncomfortable, it probably impacted her view of sex from then on...when sex is only allowed in marriage, sometimes women don’t even realize they are being abused in their marriage.”

Marriage continued

Another explained that even later in the lifespan, women continue to be affected by rigid gender roles, religious and cultural practices, and a taboo preventing the discussion of bodies.

“There is discomfort and fear about sex education and consent. I gave a slideshow presentation about bodies with vaginas: provided health education about menstruation, menopause. Women are not taught about these things—they are only taught...that they are basically men’s property. Boundaries were crossed where some elder women did not want to have sexual activities, and were assaulted without even realizing they could say no. They had lost their sense of self—if they don’t have that sense of self, they don’t even have boundaries.”

Who has power to give or deny consent? Marriage and the power of names in Hmong communities

- When a Hmong man reaches adulthood, typically measured by marriage, they get a new name (npe laus ‘bay lowe’). Like a title, this new name warrants honor, respect, and wealth for him and his family. This ceremony/process can be done by a shaman or a family elder. Although power is not explicitly stated, Hmong women are conditioned to believe the only way to gain honor, respect, and wealth is through a man.
- Younger people, queer and trans people, people with disabilities, etc. don’t have the status, and have a hard time establishing boundaries against those with positional power.
- When a woman gets married to a man, the traditional belief is that her soul belongs to that man and his family
- Recently, Hmong women started a new tradition of divorced women calling their souls back into their bodies with the help of a shaman. This allows women to reclaim her spirit, her agency, and her identity, which previously would have been lost to them.

Concerns for LGBTQ+ youth

LGBTQ+ youth may feel especially unsafe speaking about topics related to sex with their parents or other adults. Many advocates expressed that intentionally LGBTQ+ spaces are helpful, since trans or nonbinary youth can be reluctant to participate in discussion that include their cisgender, heterosexual peers. They may feel unsafe speaking up, or they may feel that there is no point to, as none of the group will have the same experiences.

Spiritual violence against LGBTQ+ folks:

In some religious traditions, LGBTQ+ folks are seen as ill or influenced by a bad spirit. There are rituals in attempt to bring back the “right” spirit. This is often arranged by parents without the person’s consent; or, if the person refuses the ritual, they are taken to be “consenting” to be ostracized or to be subjected to violence. As a result, young people can be very easily influenced and discouraged from exploring their identity.

Advocates today are working with local religious leaders to change beliefs and practices around sexual orientation and gender identity.

Role of media

- The dominance of platforms like Instagram and TikTok has created somewhat of a “monoculture” in that all youth from across the country are exposed to the same influences. This can be a good or bad thing.
- If sex is not taught by parents or teachers, many young people will learn about it from porn. This can skew their idea of what healthy sex and consent look like.
- Ethnic media can play a role. One South Asian advocate describes how Bollywood romanticizes the idea of being married through reincarnation:

“If you listen to a lot of Bollywood songs, they say once married, you’re married for seven lives...So that’s embedded into our mind...so that’s one reason why we think we have the right over our partners fully and completely...While that can be a good thing, asking [for consent] feels like a silly concept.”

Recommendations from community

For advocates and educators

- Consider your own safety if you expect resistance. In certain conservative areas, agencies and advocates have been contacted or stalked by angry parents.
 - Get support from a trusted insider in the school, or work alongside a community champion
 - Take the time to establish a relationship with teachers, school administrators, and other personnel
 - Give parents the option of an opt out form – This will prevent many confrontations
 - At regular intervals, organizational leadership should check in with advocates to ensure that they are feeling safe and supported in their work
- Training, worksheets, and sessions that make use of non-sexual examples can make it more approachable, especially when approaching potential survivors.
 - Start with non-sexual consent: borrowing a pencil, knocking to come into a bedroom, etc.
 - Make use of modeling and acting out examples, encouraging roleplay of real-life situations such as asking before giving out someone's number
 - Frame training and sessions as healthy relationships and dating rather than teen dating violence
 - Giving young people space to process and digest material over time
 - Use stock photos that aren't binary, or that show gay couples
 - Keep terms gender fluid/neutral
 - Practice consent while teaching consent! Ask to record or take notes, ask permission before using someone in a demonstration, etc.
- Be intentional around how the groups are organized
 - Consider having men's group, a women's group, and an LGBTQ+ group
 - Having female advocates working with women and girls, etc.
 - Mixed-gender groups can help by offering another perspective

Consider group dynamics

Taking the time to build rapport with a group you are working with can be very beneficial when engaging around tricky topics like sexual assault and consent. One advocate shared the different outcomes he experienced working across several different groups.

- Mixed gender space of predominantly young men
- Group members unfamiliar with the facilitator and likely with each other
- There were potentially survivors and harm-doers in the room



The conversation was very awkward, with participants reluctant to share. Facilitator was met with a lot of blank stares.

- Young men's group
- The group had met with the facilitator several times over several months
- There was rapport, friendship, and moments of laughter



Answers were very sincere, with participants opening up about cultural dynamics and their ideas of manhood

- Group of middle school boys
- Being from the same school, the boys likely knew each other and interact daily



Conversation was exploratory. Participants raised questions around legal age of consent and human trafficking.

For advocates and educators continued

- Negotiating around consent and cultural norms
 - Approach with curiosity: learn about what consent means to the individuals in the room before jumping in to teach
 - Reframe what boundaries mean: having them is not selfish, disrespectful, or setting yourself apart from the group – which can be seen as shameful. It's making sure your needs are met.
 - Don't be afraid to advocate for cultural change or to contextualize new practices and norms within traditional cultural concepts. Collectivism can be a great strength and we need to find ways to preserve it while still upholding personal well-being and safety.

Creating safe spaces

One advocate working with an organization that predominantly serves Pacific Islanders blended an online platform and a cultural value of loving relationships to destigmatize sexual health, menstrual cycles, and menopause.

- “This isn't anything new that is Western—this is how we practice this. It might look different across generations. It can look silent. They will process and watch, maybe message us privately. Folks will listen in to our conversations online and ask us in our DMs. It doesn't feel like education. In a virtual setting, the anonymity creates a space where folks feel safer asking questions, especially in a smaller community.”

Another advocate preferred to use the term “brave space” over “safe space,” recognizing that safety is never guaranteed 100% and there will always be some discomfort.

Role of a trusted adult

If consent is not modeled in the home, children will be less successful practicing it in a relationship, making it crucial for parents and families to be part of the conversation. Parent groups are a great resource:

“Maybe not even to your own child, but knowing how to receive disclosures, knowing how to react, are key skills to develop as a human being. Everyone needs to learn these skills, and everyone can be taught if there is consistency. Focusing on the adults—sometimes youth do a lot of the work, but when they go home, they don’t have a safe space. Home sometimes isn’t supportive of the therapy or work that youth are doing. Prevention education is still important for older generations who are still in power, in charge of our laws.”

Practice accountability with compassion:

“It is not demeaning to sit and work through something with someone like parents—it’s giving them a chance. Sometimes we present things to older generations, but sometimes it can be harder for older generations to understand, but maybe they can learn to coexist with someone even if they don’t agree with how they live.”

Final thoughts

Our conversations with the advocates were illuminating and highlighted that there is already a lot of work being done to engage with youth and communities about healthy relationships. It also became clear that the topic of consent intersects in many ways with other key issues such as patriarchy, power, mental health, spiritual wellness, reproductive justice, safety for LGBTQ+ folks, and more.

We are grateful to all the advocates who lent us their time and expertise, from the young activists who are rising as peer educators in their community, to those who have done the work and been a part of its change for 17+ years. We also recognize that not all voices have been represented in these conversations and the interviews are not intended to represent or speak for the experiences of all AANHPIs. This report is not meant to be comprehensive, but rather a pathway towards deeper conversations on making healthy relationships the norm in our communities.



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