

An Interview with Monsoon United Asian Women of Iowa

by Terri Poore, RSP SASP TA

Specialist June 2013

[Monsoon](#) United Asian Women of Iowa (referred to as Monsoon or MUAWI) was formed in 2003 as a culturally specific advocacy group under the aegis of the [Iowa Coalition Against Sexual Assault](#) (IowaCASA). The group aims to provide services to ethnic Asian and Pacific Islander (API) victims and survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence in Iowa. API is an umbrella term that includes people from or with ancestry from China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Samoa, Thailand, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Burma.

In 2003, Mira Yusef was interning at IowaCASA and spoke to Executive Director Beth Barnhill about the lack of programs for API survivors, and Beth was very responsive to the need. Together, they launched Monsoon. Mira left IowaCASA a year later, and Monsoon functioned as a volunteer led organization for several years mainly focused on community education. In 2007, IowaCASA encouraged Monsoon to apply for funding from the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW), and they were successful. Mira returned to be the organization's first executive director. At this point, they created two programs. One to provide direct services and the other focused on organizing and prevention most specifically with API youth.

In 2009, Monsoon received an OVW culturally-specific grant and a SASP culturally-specific grant and this allowed them to hire additional staff. The organization is based in Des Moines, but serves the entire state with an additional staffed office in Iowa City and office space in Sioux City.

Mira studied community assessment in graduate school, and in 2008 Monsoon engaged in a major community assessment of the API community in Iowa. Mira says, "It was easy for the community to talk about domestic violence, but as soon as we started talking about sexual violence, it became very difficult." They realized that sexual violence wasn't a topic they could jump right into but would have to begin working more organically with the communities. Mira explained that many in the API community are refugees from war and conflict, that women and children are especially vulnerable both during the conflict and in refugee camps, and "there hasn't been discussion of those experiences."

Iowa has a large population of Tai Dam refugees, over 90% of those living in the United States, due to a purposeful attempt by the Governor of Iowa during the 1970's to help this refugee community, fleeing conflict related to the Vietnam War, stay together. Monsoon created an oral history project asking Tai Dam, Lao, Cambodian and Vietnamese elders, some of the first API refugees to be resettled in Iowa, about their experiences, and Mira explains that this "was a very good way for people to get to know Monsoon."

When Monsoon received SASP formula grant funding for the first time, the experience and knowledge gained through the community assessments allowed them to develop very innovative methods to provide direct services to API survivors in Iowa including a multilingual mobile advocate model. Mira explains, “We don’t expect the victim to come to us. If a victim in Waterloo reaches out to us, an on-call advocate or trained volunteer will set up a time to meet with that person in a public place like a library or an office of a sister organization.”

Outreach is a cornerstone of Monsoon’s work and Mira says, “We cannot do direct services without community outreach. People must really trust you before they can tell you something so intimate.” In Des Moines, where a number of Karen refugees from southern Burma reside, advocates will visit certain apartment buildings that house a number of Karen people. Mira stresses that their approach, “needs to be an organic conversation instead of telling them that this is our agenda for today. The advocate asks, ‘What is really important to you?’ Seeking help for mental health and trauma might not be their priority because they need a job. We need to ask them about their traditional methods for healing. They have already survived conflict and refugee camps so we try to find out what their coping methods already are, and we want to help them continue that. The advocate might take a walk with the victim, and they will discuss in advance what they will say if they see someone the victim knows. They can say they are getting exercise. And the victim doesn’t have to talk—it can just be a mindful walk with the advocate.”

Monsoon tries hard to fit their approach to the diverse population of API communities they serve. Their Iowa City program is a campus-based program. Because of the unique nature of a campus environment, they’ve been able to establish a different innovative approach there. “Sex is not something API communities can typically discuss openly,” says Mira, “so we’ve established ‘Yoni Chats’ at the university.” Yoni is the Sanskrit word for vagina, and Monsoon is just completing its first six-month series of these chats focused on various issues related to sexuality and will soon begin a second series. While this approach has been quite successful, Mira explains that it wouldn’t work in Des Moines where they are assisting a more traditional population. Instead, they are creating weekend sewing circles. They don’t push discussions of sexuality but hold an open space for those topics to surface and have found that marital sexual violence and childhood sexual abuse are of particular concern. They can also talk about the effects of trauma generally without a specific focus on sex.

Monsoon is also involved in systems advocacy, and Mira clearly sees their advocacy as critical in this context: “The victim may want to report, but they aren’t the ‘perfect victim’ so they don’t receive justice.” Monsoon can help systems professionals understand the many cultural nuances that exist in the API community. She explained that they received a call to assist a Thai woman several weeks ago, but when the advocate arrived and heard the woman’s name, she knew her ethnic background was actually Karen. This cultural knowledge allows the advocate to better help both the victim and the systemic response to the crime.

In addition to innovative approaches to direct services, Monsoon is always developing its prevention programming and has also started providing technical assistance to other ethnic groups who want to create programs. Their prevention work currently focuses on peer to peer youth advocates in one middle school and three high schools with talks focused on sexuality and identity. Recently, they’ve also

begun assisting African women in Iowa to start their own program. Mira sees a lot of similarities between the Asian and African experiences with “the combination of militarism, war and sexual violence and victims being forced to marry the rapist.” She also notes that this community is addressing “corrective rape” or women who are raped as a way to “cure” them of being a lesbian.

Mira says that Monsoon is constantly evaluating their work , “When we face challenges, we ask ‘what have we done that has made it like this?’ We have the humility of looking at where we’ve messed up, and try to approach the work in a different way. We want to improve things so we are never a stagnant program.” In this way, they’ve had tremendous success in addressing sexual violence in API communities in Iowa and are committed to continue with truly ground-breaking approaches to supporting survivors.