

Examining the Intersections of Anti-Asian Racism and Gender-Based Violence in Canada

Incidents of anti-Asian racism and violence towards Asian individuals and communities in Canada have increased significantly since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. More than 1000 cases of anti-Asian racism have been reported by community organizations in Canada, in which Asian women made up close to 60% of reported victims.¹ Canada is now reported to have more anti-Asian racism reports per capita than the United States.² In Vancouver alone, crimes against Asian individuals rose by 717% in the span of one year (from 12 incidents in 2019 to 98 in 2020).³ This increase in racist attacks has largely occurred due to pre-existing anti-Asian racism, and further exacerbated by the xenophobic and racist political rhetoric surrounding the COVID-19 virus.

Though the pandemic has brought to attention the rise in such violence, anti-Asian racism is not new and often gets dismissed in broader discussions of racism and discrimination against marginalized groups in Canada. This indifference also extends to experiences of gender-based violence faced by Asian women, where sexism and anti-Asian racism work in tandem to further harm Asian women and expose them to various forms of gender-based violence. Structural violence (i.e. systemic racism and discrimination) and gender-based violence may be intensified against some groups of Asian women including 2SLGBTQI+ individuals, women living with disabilities, women with precarious immigration status, and women engaged in sex work.

This Backgrounder seeks to contribute to the broader understanding of anti-Asian racism and gender-based violence in Canada. We begin by using an intersectional framework to help frame the unique experiences of violence and harassment faced by Asian women, often fueled by the combination of sexualized racism and racialized sexism.⁴ Second, we briefly share the historical background of anti-Asian racism in Canada and how anti-Asian racism and its intersections with gender and sexuality shaped white nation-building and resulted in discriminatory policies and laws against Asians entering and living in Canada. Third, we explore the contemporary manifestations of anti-Asian racism and gender-based violence and their harmful impacts, through myths such as the “model minority” myth, and the “perpetual foreigner” myth, negative representations of Asian women in popular culture, and through criminal and immigration law which disproportionately affect Asian women in the service and sex industries. Lastly, we present suggestions for standing in solidarity with Asian women at the individual, community, and government levels, supporting them in their resistance against violence, harassment, racism, and sexism, and joining continued efforts to end anti-Asian racism and gender-based violence.

Asian Women Face Intersecting Forms of Oppression Including Racism and Sexism

Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of Intersectionality originally emerged to examine the inseparability of race, class, and gender for Black women and to help better understand the dynamics of “victimization and oppression”, particularly for racialized women.⁵ Specifically, intersectionality posits that individuals have multiple social identities that intersect such as race, gender, and class, and that these social identities

function interdependently and impact the meaning and experiences of one another.⁶ Intersectionality theory also examines the power that is attached to different identities and how it impacts an individual's location within the social hierarchy (e.g. privileged, marginalized).

An intersectional approach can help bring to focus how the intersections of various identities (and the power or lack of power attached to these identities) can create conditions and environments that produce harm, harassment, and violence. Asian women, like other racial minority women, stand at the intersection of at least two forms of discrimination directed at them: racism and sexism. Incidents of racism may be sexualized and those of sexism may be racialized. Sexism and racism are interconnected rather than separated. As victims of racism, they are targeted because they are Asian women, women of colour, and rich or poor, and as victims of sexism, they are targeted not just because they are women, but because of their race, ethnicity, and class status.⁷ Both experienced alone and together, race and gender encompass "devaluation, invalidation, stereotypes and invisibility" within society in North America.⁸ This intersection must be recognized in order to address and prevent violence against Asian women in Canada.

It is important to recognize that Asian women live at the intersections of harm caused not just by racism and sexism, but by other forms of discrimination (e.g. ableism, homophobia, classism, xenophobia, and transmisogyny) as well (see Figure 1). These layers of social relations and identities result in additional intersections of experiences that can have compounding effects on trauma and violence in the lives of Asian women. Furthermore, Asian women in Canada are not a monolithic group; they belong to many diverse ethnic groups who have their own unique experiences related to various historical and contextual factors including country of origin realities, migration experiences, war trauma, and socioeconomic status.

Currently, there is a gap in the research that examines the experiences of sexism and racism for Asian women living in Canada. This lack of research, and particularly intersectional research, can lead to an oversimplification and homogenization of such experiences. It also assumes that Asian women share the experiences of Asian men when it comes to racism and white women when it comes to sexism.⁹ This risks further oppression as it dismisses "unique experiences and [enables] continued discrimination from the overall dominant group as well as from dominant group within the subgroups (i.e. Asian American men, white Women)."¹⁰

Asian women are placed into two marginalized gender and racial groups, and the potential harassment and violence created by this membership can result in a number of negative outcomes. Individuals who experience multiple types of harassment and discrimination face decreased physical and psychological wellbeing, including symptoms of trauma.¹¹ Research from the United States indicates that harassment associated with gender and race remains a serious concern for Asian women. Thus, further research is critical to examine these intersections, their impacts on Asian women, and appropriate responses and interventions to support mental and physical well-being.¹²

Intersections of Anti-Asian Racism, Gender, and Sexuality in White Nation-Building in the Formation of Canada

Racism and sexism against Asians were deeply embedded in discriminatory immigration policies during the late 19th century. Originally, Asian men were actively recruited to help with various growing industries including the Canadian Pacific Railway in Canada from the mid to late 1800s. However, over the next few decades, continued Asian migration and settlement was met with anger and disdain and they were viewed as a threat to white settler society.¹³ The permanent settlement of Asian men in Canada and the potential for inter-racial relations between Asian single men and white women and the creation of a “mixed race” were a notable concern for lawmakers and politicians.¹⁴ Various discriminatory policies and regulations were introduced to discourage Asian immigration to Canada, including the Immigration Act of 1885 which levied a head tax on the Chinese people, the Hayashi-Lemieux Agreement of 1908 which limited Japanese immigration to a certain number a year, and the subsequent Immigration Act of 1923 to ban Chinese immigrants with the exception of diplomats, merchants and students.

Sexualization of Asian women and the fetishization of Asian women’s bodies (tied to colonial discourses of Orientalism) constructed Asian women as exotic sexual objects with the potential to disrupt the “biological reproduction of the white nation.”¹⁵ For instance, a common assumption at the time was that Chinese women who were in Canada worked as sex workers and possessed a different moral character than that attributed to white women.¹⁶ Consequently, the 1885 Chinese Immigration Act specifically stated the exclusion of sex workers in order to prevent the entry of most Chinese women. Such policies had implications for the development of Chinese-Canadian families as the sex ratio remained significantly unequal for years to come.¹⁷ In fact, prior to 1946, the imbalance in the sex ratio in the Chinese population was the most significant among all ethnic groups in Canada.¹⁸ It wasn’t until 1947 when regulations explicitly restricting the unification of Chinese men with their wives and children were repealed.

Racist policies towards Asians continued in the 1940s when thousands of Japanese Canadians were forced to work in internment camps due to ongoing anti-Asian racism and government fears of a Japanese invasion during the Second World War. Approximately 23, 000 men, women, and children were taken from their homes, even though over 75 percent of them were Canadian-born or naturalized citizens.¹⁹ An estimated 12, 000 Japanese Canadian men lived in these internment camps, were separated from their families, and were forced to do strenuous physical labour.²⁰ Though the war ended in 1945, Japanese Canadians continued to face anti-Japanese sentiments from the government and were not allowed to return to their original homes on Canada’s West Coast until a few years later.²¹

Learn more here: [Road to Justice: the legal struggle for equal rights of Chinese Canadians](#)

Learn more here: [“A Seat At the Table” Exhibition at the Chinese Canadian Museum](#)

Learn more here: [Background to Japanese Internment](#)

Contemporary Manifestations of Anti-Asian Racism and Gender-Based Violence

The historical manifestations of sexism and racism towards Asian women in Canada have shaped how they are viewed, portrayed, and treated in contemporary Canadian society. From the “perpetual foreigner” myth and “model minority” myth, to the continued sexualization and fetishization of Asian women, to the harmful impacts of criminal and immigration law on Asian women in service and sex industries, anti-Asian racism and gender-based violence continues to threaten the safety and wellbeing of Asian women.

Perpetual Foreigner Myth

The “perpetual foreigner” myth refers to the common question many racialized peoples, including Asian individuals, get asked everyday: “Where are you from?”. This question implies that racialized peoples do not share the Canadian identity or have not fully assimilated into “Canadian” society. Although Canada has an ethnically and culturally diverse population, many members of racialized communities are denied this Canadian identity and treated as if they are “perpetual foreigners”. In fact, there is an implicit assumption that being “Canadian” is equated with being white. The “perpetual foreigner” myth has been evident during the COVID-19 pandemic where Asians in Canada were subjected to attacks as they were viewed as “foreigners” bringing diseases to Canada regardless of how many generations they have lived in Canada.

Continuing Exclusion of Asian Women Through Gendered Immigration Policy

Present-day immigration policies continue to have negative impacts on Asian women as it favours economically independent immigrants, putting women at a clear disadvantage. The current structure of the immigration system creates challenges for immigrant women to access the labour market and places them in a subordinate position as it labels what is constituted as “valuable work” and “valuable experience” in gendered ways.²² This has become apparent in the racialization of childcare and domestic labour which is often viewed as “invaluable work”.²³ For instance, caregivers are not valued as skilled workers, and they are not given permanent residency status upon arrival, and must work for two years before applying for permanent residency status. The Live-in Caregiver Program is an example of domestic labour often associated with immigrant, primarily Filipino women that “reproduces racial hierarchies and gender discrimination”.²⁴ Advocates and research have indicated that this program is often exploitative with systematic violations of labour laws, and even fundamental human rights.²⁵

Asian women continue to enter Canada as “sponsored spouses” as a main route and are often subject to abuse while they live in fear of deportation. Women who enter under this stream are dependent on their spouses to maintain their immigration status. For those who experience workplace or intimate partner abuse, this can create many barriers as they may be more hesitant to leave, get support, or report to police for fear of having their immigration status taken away. Furthermore, Asian women who wish to sponsor their parents still face challenges due to the emphasis on income as a criteria to enter Canada, as opposed to using the lens of gender equality and support for women to gain economic and other power within their families.

Check out this [infographic](#) by Migrant Mothers Project on Recognizing Signs of Migrant Caregiver Abuse & Exploitation

Learn more: [Filipino Healthcare Workers During COVID-19 and the Importance of Race-Based Analysis](#)

The Model Minority Myth Conceals the Struggles of Working Asian Women's Lives

The model minority myth is a seemingly positive stereotype that portrays all Asians as inherently successful, hardworking, and upstanding citizens. Applied to Asian women, the myth portrays them as “submissive” and “meek”. It is a myth because it does not address the reality of the majority of Asians whose lives are differently shaped based on the intersections of gender, class, sexuality, ableness, etc. However, the effects of the model minority myth are very real and impacts not only society’s view of Asian people but can also become internalized and impact Asian people’s self-perception.

The reality is that Asian individuals, like other racialized groups, do experience high poverty rates in Canada due to racism. For instance, Statistics Canada reported on the 2016 Census that racialized persons are 2 to 6 times more likely to experience poverty in Ontario. Specifically, poverty rates in Ontario were 22.2% for Chinese individuals, 18.4% for Southeast Asian individuals, and 18% for South Asian individuals. For racialized people in Ontario, poverty rates were 21.3%, for the total population, 14.4%, and for the non-racialized population, 11.5%. Racialized women were 43% more likely to be unemployed than non-racialized men.²⁶

The myth also silences the struggles of working-class Asian women and conceals the systemic barriers and challenges that often go unheard and ignored. It dismisses the racist and sexist violence experienced by Asian women who may experience “feminized poverty, violence, and exploitation due to their precarious immigration status, gender, stereotyping, and fetishization of Asian women’s bodies.”²⁷ For instance, Asian women migrants are often employed in a “feminized workforce” including domestic and care work, service industry, and the sex industry.²⁸ Those with precarious migration status are at an increased risk for labour exploitation, abuses, deportation threats, and surveillance.²⁹

In short, the model minority myth suggests that there is no racism against Asian-Canadians, it adds pressure to Asian individuals to be successful, and labels Asian women who speak out against racism and injustices as “troublemakers” since the expectation is that Asian women are “meek” and that Asian people in Canada are all treated well. Furthermore, it is also used to disrupt interracial solidarity by using the falsely perceived socioeconomic success of Asians against other racialized communities when in reality, all of these groups face classism, systemic racism, xenophobia, and discrimination.

Asian Women are Constantly Fetishized and Hypersexualized

The sexual objectification of Asian women as “exotic” and “immoral” is historically rooted in colonial ideas of Orientalism, Western imperialism in countries like Vietnam and Korea, and a long legacy of sexualized racial stereotyping. This fetishization of Asian women has continued in popular Western culture often rendering Asian women into different stereotypes, including “Lotus Flower” (feminine, meek, sexually subservient), and “Dragon Lady” (deceitful, manipulative, and using their sexuality to get what they want).³⁰

“Yellow fever” is often used to describe a sexual preference or fetish for Asian women, often held by white men.³¹ It is an example of a racial aggression that furthers the exoticization of Asian women and ties them to sexualized stereotypes, even though it sounds like a “compliment.”³² In one study, women discussed fetishization associated with being a trans woman and a woman of colour, and how that affected how they were viewed by potential intimate partners or sex work clients, primarily cisgender

white men.³³ Research has shown that racialized trans and non-binary people in Canada experience high levels of sexual harassment and sexual assault.³⁴

These racist and sexist stereotypes of Asian women lead to the normalization of racialized, sexual harassment against Asian women in schools, workplaces and private/public space, and an increased risk of violence, particularly for those who live with or in conditions that lead others to view them as vulnerable.

Impacts of Criminal and Immigration Law on Asian Women Involved in Service and Sex Work

In North America, migrant Asian massage workers—engaged in sex work or not engaged in sex work—continue to be targets of police and law enforcement surveillance, raids, and forced closures.³⁴ This focus on “Asian massage parlours” stems from a prevailing stereotype that most Asian women sex workers are trafficked and are in need of “rescuing”.³⁵ These harmful portrayals reduce Asian women to bodies who lack agency and are often embedded in Canadian immigration and sex work legislation.

Advocates argue that the overregulation and criminalization of massage parlours is more a form of control over sexuality than it is about protection and safety for Asian women.³⁶ The perception that Asian women who display femininity outside of the norm must be controlled supports the dangerous rhetoric of “control, domination, and discipline”³⁷ and promotes internalized racism and sexism.³⁸ The reality is that Asian women can make their own decisions about where they choose to work but they need the rights that all workers are afforded: labour rights, migrant rights, and inclusion within society.³⁹ Furthermore, Asian women are not a homogenous group and represent individuals from differing social locations, backgrounds, and experiences in sex work, and citizenship status.⁴⁰ This can influence how they seek supports, face barriers to justice and the legal system, and experience safety in the workplace.

SWAN Vancouver, an organization in British Columbia that provides culturally-specialized supports and advocacy for im/migrant women engaged in indoor sex work, reports that Asian businesses are disproportionately impacted by law enforcing measures, including documentation checks without providing reason, and workplace raids.⁴¹ These raids can result in abuse and harassment of sex workers, and create financial harm when women’s earnings are confiscated by law enforcement.⁴² Thus, Asian massage workers experience violence and harm largely at the hands of law enforcement rather than receiving actual support and protection. In fact, a recent Canadian study found that anti-trafficking and anti-prostitution laws are enacted and enforced along “racialized, gendered, and sensationalistic lines” and that certain populations are over-surveilled, while others are under-protected, notably Indigenous, Black, and other racialized persons, migrants, same-sex, and gender non-binary sex workers.⁴³

Ending Anti-Asian Racism and Gender-Based Violence and Considerations for Meaningful Allyship

Asian women have long been resisting violence fueled by sexism and racism in Canada. While the recent events in the mist of the COVID-19 pandemic have shone a light on the discrimination, sexism, racism, and violence aimed at Asian individuals, particularly women, in Canada, it is not enough. Structural solutions are needed first and foremost to eradicate racialized and gender-based violence against Asian women in Canada. Meaningful responses at the individual, community, and government level are also needed to stand in solidarity and in support of them and their efforts to elicit change. This includes:

Individual

- Stand with Asian women when they say they are being fetishized or harmed.
- Educate oneself on the historical and ongoing discrimination against Asian individuals and communities in Canada and how this fuels GBV against Asian women.
- Condemn misogynist racism and hateful rhetoric when witnessed. Consider taking bystander training offered by [Hollaback!](#) & [Asians Americans Advancing Justice](#).
- Educate those in personal and professional settings who perpetuate harmful views and prejudice about Asian women.
- Support advocacy groups like the [Chinese and Southeast Asian Legal Clinic](#) who focus on systemic advocacy, test case litigation, and legal services for Asian communities in Ontario.
- Be critically aware of the harms created by “model minority myth” and avoid reproducing prejudice.
- Support community grassroots organizations who are working to fight misogyny, racism, and stigma against Asian women such as [Project 1907](#), [Chinese-Canadian National Council for Social Justice](#), [Act 2 End Racism](#), and [SWAN Vancouver](#).
- Sign petitions demanding protection of human and labour rights for Asian workers. Visit [Migrant Rights Network](#) or [Butterfly Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network](#) to find out more.
- Learn about the difference between sex work and trafficking and the harms that anti-trafficking campaigns can have on im/migrant workers (e.g. enforcement, surveillance).
- Support initiatives dedicated to queer and trans Asian women such as [Asian Community AIDS Services](#).

Community

- Use an intersectional lens when providing services to Asian women who have experienced violence to understand how the lives of Asian women are impacted by their social locations and forms of oppression they may face. This will allow service providers and clinicians to recognize how such experiences will differ from those of women from other groups, and Asian men.
- Provide support services to Asian women who have experienced violence that are culturally responsive and that identify their strengths and recognize their ability to navigate life challenges.
- Promote community-based efforts to support Asian women rather than active policing measures that disproportionately impact Asian women in service and sex industries.
- Support interracial solidarity efforts to dismantle white supremacy, structural racism, bigotry, and xenophobia.
- Apply a racial equity lens and/or racial equity impact analysis to workplace policies, procedures, and practices to ensure inclusion and safety.
- Increase capacity to serve 2SLGBTQI+ Asian immigrants, refugees, and newcomers. For information and training, [check out the Positive Spaces Initiative by OCASI](#).

Government

- Ensure that anti-Asian racism is named and addressed explicitly in anti-racism strategies at municipal, provincial and federal levels. Exclusion from such strategies continue to make the experiences of Asian individuals invisible.
- Build institutional support system to dismantle systemic racism substantially.
- Collect and gather disaggregated data on hate crimes and violence against Asian individuals and in particular, women. It is critical that this data reflect experiences of all Asian ethnic groups rather than monolithic representations that contribute to the “model minority myth”.
- Increase funding for culturally responsive health, mental health and other forms of intervention focused on the needs and capacities of Asian communities.
- Decriminalize sex work in its entirety and remove immigration prohibitions on sex work to better protect workers.
- Conduct intersectional gender-based analyses of immigration policies and programs to determine eligibility for Asian women and to ensure family/humanitarian immigration streams are balanced with economic streams.

The Learning Network at the Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children produced this resource in collaboration with:

Avvy Go, Clinic Director, Chinese and Southeast Asian Legal Clinic

Dr. Jiyoung Lee-An, Instructor, School of Indigenous and Canadian Studies, Carleton University

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