

# Critical Conversations

by Isabella Masterson, Outreach Student Assistant

Content Warning: This article discusses gender-based violence, specifically, as experienced by communities of color, including systematic racism and other systems of oppression. Please take care of yourself and check-out the resources below as needed.

[Racial Trauma Resources](#) (Not all resources on this page are confidential)  
[Confidential Resources](#)

The conversation had started with the familiar awkwardness of meeting someone for the first time via Zoom. Aliya(she/her) is a fourth year undergraduate, graduating with a gender and womens' studies major. She works at the Women's Resource and Research Center as a Community Organizer and she was one of the first people I met with. Almost immediately that awkwardness faded to a shared appreciation for the work that we each do on campus. We dove into a critical conversation about the intersection of those who hold a marginalized gender identity and sexual violence.

*“Most people with marginalized gender identities fear for their safety, maybe not everyday but every time they walk alone at night. It is a widespread issue that people need to fear for their physical safety in 2021.” - Aliya Hunter, WRRC*

The weight of this statement struck me while sitting at my desk. We were speaking as part of my Critical Conversations project for the UC Davis Center for Advocacy, Resources and Education (CARE). As she acknowledged the reality of so many people, I immediately realized how internalized these feelings are in myself and many of my peers. Every time I walk at night, I tighten my grip on my phone and make sure my pepper spray is easily accessible; these feelings have become second nature. This is the reality for all gender marginalized folks, especially people of color.

My name is Isabella Masterson (she/her) and I am the student outreach assistant for CARE. When I joined the CARE team in Fall of 2020, I was (and still am) excited to be part of the important work being done on our campus. My entire life, I have been taught to bring a buddy any time I go to the bathroom, to never take a drink from someone else and that it is my responsibility to dress in ways that get the least amount of attention. Centered around risk reduction, this approach inherently places the burden on those who are at higher risk for sexual violence. Here at the CARE office our approach looks a little different, we focus on primary prevention. Primary prevention focuses on preventing initial perpetration and fostering an environment that does not tolerate sexual violence. Sexual violence prevention is an issue within every community and in order to eradicate it, we must all work together. At CARE, we take an intersectional stance on education and survivor support. Intersectionality was originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw and the term acknowledges that individuals, systems, and institutions exist at the intersection of factors such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and citizenship status. These intersections inform the way people interact with each other and the way people form judgements. When I came to campus in the fall of 2019, I was impressed by how many identity based organizations and services are available to students. With my work at the CARE office, I recognize there are many things we can learn from the people that work closely with the communities highly impacted by sexual violence. For sexual violence prevention to be effective, intersectionality must be at the center of every conversation.

This is how my project, Critical Conversations, was born. I met with student leaders and staff members of various identity based centers and organizations on campus. They shared their insight regarding barriers to accessing resources and the changes they feel need to be made on our campus. While systematic change to create a world intolerant to sexual violence is always the goal, these conversations allowed me to expand my understanding of how to make survivor centered resources more accessible to marginalized communities. All the people I spoke with represent organizations that support communities who are more vulnerable to experiencing sexual violence.

## Understand what barriers exist.

Wesley Sosa(he/him) from the Strategic Asian Pacific Islander Retention Initiative shed light on the pre existing barriers present in the Asian Pacific Islander community

*“Many families do not like talking about sex and are very strict about dating, so community members may not even realize they had gone through something.” - Wesley Sosa, API Retention Initiative*

This means that these students may not have the language to discuss their experience much less label sexual violence as such. Compounded with the Asian norm of secrecy and confidentiality, accessing a resource may seem too far out of reach. For the UC Davis community, this means educating all our students on the diversity of experiences and providing an understanding of what behavior is unacceptable. Cultural and societal norms have a large impact on dynamics of sexual violence and yet they are often left out of these conversations.

*“The LGBTQIA+ community is disproportionately impacted by sexual violence so the idea that sexual violence does not occur within the LGBTQ+ community invalidates survivors.” - Jasper Lounds, LGBTQIA Resource Center*

These norms are overlooked because they are deeply ingrained within the way we think and are inherently complex because they impact communities in different ways. This means we must actively analyze the way we think about these issues.

Tori McConnell(she/her), the Student Director of American Indian Recruitment and Retention at the Student Recruitment and Retention Center, offered another perspective on the issue of pre-existing barriers. These barriers exist as the result of thousands of years of western oppression and the constant devaluation of Native culture.

*“Native Students have a different type of generational knowledge and it is not respected as much as western knowledge. People do not view you the same because of where you come from and the way you talk.”  
- Tori McConnell, AIRR*

Tori noted that Native people are not a monolith and this experience is not universal. With a background in different generational knowledge, navigating the resources that are familiar to western raised students may not only look different but may be more challenging. Some may be first generation or from an incredibly rural setting, so they may not be aware of the resources available to them. Ignacio Alarcón(they/them/elle), the Assistant Director of the AB540 and Undocumented Student Center, also speaks on this issue. Many undocumented students are first generation (therefore denied equitable access to familiarity with the university system), so - compounded with the concern of being forced to disclose their status - they may not even try to look further into survivor support resources.

No matter how hard we try to make resources accessible, if we are unaware of what community members are facing, those attempts will be in vain. In some instances, there is a disconnect between what a community needs and what a resource offers. Detailing how our resources work allows students to be as informed as possible without having to seek out that information themselves.

Whether students are concerned with being forced to disclose their immigration status or are unaware that they are going through something because it has never been discussed, we can provide information that allows them to make a more informed decision if we are aware of these barriers. As a community we can not expect students to come from the same background and if we are truly a campus that values diversity, we must act like it and be sure to educate in a way that accommodates for those differences.

## **Understand How Marginalized Identities are Weaponized.**

In the United States, cis gender white people are privileged in a way people of color and the LGBTQIA+ community are not. Marginalized identities are often weaponized and used to oppress or manipulate them. Ignacio Alarcón spoke to me about the ways in which immigration status can be weaponized against undocumented individuals experiencing violence. They acknowledged the heightened sense of need for awareness of this issue due to the Trump Administration's explicit demonization of undocumented immigrants.

*“Immigration status is marginalized and can be weaponized against them in the case of an abusive partner(s). Our immigration statuses have material repercussions in a country build on xenophobia” – Ignacio Alarcón, AB540 and Undocumented Student Center*

Dynamics of power and privilege are relevant in all relationships but can be used in unhealthy relationships and in the perpetration of sexual violence. As Ignacio pointed out, in the United States, immigration status is a marginalized identity and can be used to manipulate people into staying in harmful situations for fear of deportation or putting their family at risk.

To heal this trauma, we must destigmatize negative association with immigration status and create accessible services to undocumented survivors (ie, offer appropriate legal+mental health services to impacted individuals or reduce residency requirements for support services)

Fetishization is a part of the conversation regarding weaponization of marginalized identities that is often overlooked. API and MENASA people, women especially, are fetishized on dating apps and in media depictions. People consistently misunderstand fetishization as a compliment rather than acknowledging it for what it is: racism and discrimination. Fetishization perpetuates stereotypes that eventually can result in violence.

*“Often times people assume that being Asian makes people submissive with the association of femininity within roles of sex. This perpetuates fetishization which also impacts dynamics of who assumes power in the relationship.” – Wesley Sosa, API Retention Initiative*

Blackness is weaponized against the black community everyday in the United States.

*“BIPOC women’s sexuality is often demonized when white women’s sexuality is viewed as pure. Black women are animalized in a way to sort of justify the violence that has been done to them.” – Aliya Hunter, WRRC*

Aliya presents another instance in which someone’s marginalized identity is weaponized to perpetuate violence against them. This issue creates a system that allows violence to continue and be accepted as part of the reality of living as a minority in the United States.

Understanding the way marginalized identities are used against community members gives us the opportunity to become better allies. Being an active bystander means not only stepping in and taking action if you see sexual violence occurring, it also means speaking up when people use language that is harmful to marginalized communities. While it is important to understand the way identities are used against marginalized communities, we must also critically look at the way white people leverage their privilege to maintain positions of power and a system that values their lives over everyone else's. This means:

*“Think about your thought patterns and your actions. What are you doing that is racist and what are you doing that is misogynistic? Note this does not have to be in big ways, think about the smaller more subtle ways.”-  
Aliya Hunter, WRRC*

## **Ensure that our spaces are representative of the different communities on our campus.**

I know what you are thinking, another person pitching the idea of representative resources. I have had dozens of conversations about how important community representation is and have seen plenty of flyers with diverse bodies and ethnicities, and yet see a predominantly white space, so I know it is easy for those attempts to come off as performative. There is a clear difference between hiring a diversity of people to all different types of positions or just saying we are a diverse community and using images of diverse students on a flyer.

As a student of color, I can tell you how refreshing it is to sit in a class with an Asian American professor or walk into a center and see someone who is mixed race. In a representative space I automatically feel more welcomed, accepted and inclined to open up.

I spoke to Radhika Marwaha (she/her) , from the MENASA (Middle Eastern, North African, South Asian) Student Resource Unit and the Other Collective, and she brought up the importance of seeing MENASA students represented. Mental health is heavily stigmatized in MENASA communities and students are often told to “spend less time on their phone” or to study harder rather than look for resources. She said that the belief that,

*“This is something only white people do.”*

permeates many community members’ thoughts on accessing mental health resources. A lack of visibility of MENASA students accessing the resource or MENASA community members leading those spaces only further discourages students from exploring their options.

As Radhika mentioned, there are a lot of stereotypes regarding who accesses resources and who they are available for. Jasper Lounds(they/them) from the LGBTQIA Resource Center brought up the idea of stereotypes regarding who is a survivor and who is a perpetrator.

*“We must push against the societal understanding of survivors being cis white women. And, we must also dispel the myth of men and masculine presenting people of color being the sole perpetrators of violence. Sexual and Gender Based Violence affects us all.” - Jasper Lounds, LGBTQIA Resource Center*



This idea invalidates anyone who falls outside of those two categories. As they mentioned, sexual violence impacts everyone. This idea can be expanded to discuss all violence because

***“violence is seen as an individualized concept - one person committing violence against another person - when most commonly, violence is perpetrated by government structures.”***

This point brings me to the final message of this project, change has to occur on an individual level to impact the system but we can not ignore the role of governmental systems and societal norms in the perpetuation of this violence and all violence. Sexual violence is perpetrated at alarmingly high rate on college campuses and yet not enough people seem to be alarmed.

Throughout each interview I had the privilege of hearing directly from community members about how we need to change our campus community. Across the board, I would say the main takeaway would be, we must actively seek out knowledge that expands our understanding of the experience of marginalized communities and if you hold privilege, you must use it to advocate for the issues they are facing.

To everyone who took the time to speak with me and answer my questions, thank you for working within our community towards change. And thank you for helping me learn and for participating in a project I am very proud of.

For more information, please check out @ucdcare on Instagram for direct quotes & takeaways from each interview.

[If you are interested in continuing your learning process, check out the resources everyone shared with me.](#)