

Sharon S. Wang  
Broader Impact Statement

Growing up in a predominantly white, conservative, Evangelical Christian town in Indiana, I rarely fit the mold. My hair was too black, my eyes were too small, and my skin was too dark. At a young age, I learned the art of shrinking myself in new, creative ways to fit in, to be non-threatening. I dyed my hair, I asked my mother to buy Lunchables instead of packing Chinese food in my lunch, and I wore SPF 100 in the summers in an effort to remain porcelain pale. I hoped that, if I changed myself in exactly the right ways, I too would experience the freedom and luxury of those who fit the mold.

When I joined Teens for Change, a teen dating violence advocacy group, it was the first time I felt like I fit in. Their mission was to promote healthy relationships and to advocate against intimate partner violence and relationship violence. I quickly learned how pervasive dating violence was, even in the halls of my high school. As I educated my peers about healthy relationships, I also learned how to stop shrinking myself and to start speaking up. I found an empowering community and a cause that gave me a voice. I went on to chair our local dance marathon as my senior project, which educated high school students about intimate partner violence while raising funds for the local domestic violence shelter. By the time I had graduated high school, I had discovered that I was passionate and committed to combating intimate partner violence.

My work in this field continued when I matriculated at Northwestern University. I joined Sexual Health and Assault Peer Educators (SHAPE), a student activism organization. I worked to address rape culture and sexual assault on campus while promoting healthy sexuality. I eventually became the events chair, educating the wider Northwestern community through informative events. Through SHAPE, I finally met people who looked like me and even more people who didn't. It was the first time I felt there was no mold. It was our unique experiences that strengthened our group and our cause. We celebrated our differences and used them to inform our strategies for supporting survivors. I learned about intersectional feminism and began to make sense of the fragments of my own identity. It was also through SHAPE that I met mentors who guided me in my own exploration and ultimate celebration of my intersectional, marginalized identities. By the time I graduated college, I happily embraced my too-black hair, too-small eyes, and too-dark skin.

I am now extremely passionate and committed to combating gender-based violence. My experiences in high school and college have solidified my dedication to this cause. Sexual violence and intimate partner violence disproportionately affect women, people of color, folks in the LGBTQIA community, people with disabilities, and low socioeconomic communities. It is my hope that the work I do now and in the future will go toward combating the cultural norms and institutions that uphold unequal systems of power that contribute to sexual violence and intimate partner violence. Those who have been historically disenfranchised deserve structural systemic change.

I believe a career as a clinical psychologist will best position me to support and give back to survivors of gender-based violence, particularly in marginalized communities. I plan to apply my own experiences as someone with marginalized identities and an extensive background in social justice and activism to my research. My experiences in Teens for Change and SHAPE have informed my research interests by providing me with an understanding of the institutional and systemic factors that perpetuate gender-based violence. Just as my experiences will inform my own research, the identities and lived experiences of survivors of gender-based violence provide a crucial piece of the puzzle to understanding sexual violence and intimate partner violence as a whole. The foundation of my approach to research is based in community-driven, survivor-centered strategies and underscored by intersectional feminism. I hope that, by nature, my research will benefit traditionally underserved and underrepresented communities.

Ultimately, my long-term career goals are to give a voice to those who have historically felt silenced. Through academic research, I hope to provide empirically-based solutions to survivors in underserved communities. Academic research should not exist solely for those who have been traditionally granted access, nor should it operate in a vacuum. It should reflect the needs of those who would most benefit from it and, furthermore, should incorporate the voices of those individuals. With a clinical psychology PhD, I believe I will be able to leverage academic research to enact change for survivors of gender-based violence.