Abusive International Marriages

Hmong Advocates Organizing in Wisconsin

Report by Chic Dabby-Chinoy, Asian & Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence
In partnership with Wisconsin Refugee Family Strengthening Project.

2012

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Hmong advocates on the Planning Committee who conceptualized and designed the Wisconsin Dialogue on Contemporary Family Relationships wish to thank the Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault and the Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence for providing funding, staffing, and for supporting their leadership. Thanks also to the Department of Health and Family Services, Domestic Abuse Program, for its support.

The Planning Committee extends a sincere thank you to Ms. Bo Thao-Urabe for expert facilitation, thoughtful and practical input during the planning stage, and outstanding commitment to our process.

Wisconsin Dialogue on Contemporary Family Relationships

December 2007, Wausau, WI
September 2008, Wisconsin Dells, WI
October 2009, Wausau, WI
October 2010, Stevens Point, WI

About the Author

Chic Dabby-Chinoy has been working with Hmong advocates to address gender-based violence since the Asian & Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence was established in 2001. As a long-standing non-Hmong ally, she was invited by Hmong advocates to document the proceedings and prepare a report that they could use to organize their communities.

For Information and Technical Assistance:

Asian & Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence
450 Sutter Street, Suite 600, San Francisco, CA 94108
Phone: 415-568-3315
Email: info@apiidv.org
Website: www.apiidv.org

Wisconsin Refugee Family Strengthening Project
Freedom Inc.
601 Bayview, Madison, WI 53715
Phone: 608-217-7754
Email: refugeeproject@hotmail.com
Website: aboutfreedominc.com

This publication was made possible by Grant Number 90EV0396 from the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD 7

I. BACKGROUND 12

II. UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM | IDENTIFYING THE ISSUES 13

1. International Marriages 13
2. Abusive International Marriages 14
3. What is Happening and What is the Impact? 15
4. Why Is This Practice Happening? 19

III. CULTURAL CHANGE | ACTION STEPS 23

1. Gender & Cultural Change: Frameworks and Definitions 23
2. Community Assets 24
3. Action Steps 25
4. Collective Vision of Change & Collective Action 31

APPENDIX A: Summary of Action Plans Developed at Second Meeting in 2008 by Pa Vang 36

APPENDIX B: Excerpt from "New Laws Implemented Involving Older Men Marrying Young Wives" by Elizabeth Thao, 37

APPENDIX C: List of Meeting Participants 39

FOREWORD

Since I first started to speak out and provide support for Hmong women and girls, many things have changed. In the last 22 years, the movement to end domestic violence in Wisconsin has altered tremendously to include many more communities and voices, and I am happy to have been a part of that force of change. In the past 12 years, I have been blessed and honored to work alongside many Hmong advocates and sisters in Wisconsin, and nationally. As part of the Refugee Family Strengthening Project in Wisconsin, we have provided services for domestic violence and sexual assault victims/survivors, offering support, education, and prevention services to hundreds of Hmong women, children, and community members.

Organizing In the U.S. In the past five years, Hmong women advocates in Wisconsin have been making history by redefining and creating solutions to end violence against women and children. One major effort has focused on *abusive international marriages* for which we have created terminology and developed strategies and solutions. This issue surfaced when Hmong women throughout the state of Wisconsin started privately sharing the same stories – husbands leaving, sometimes disappearing, for weeks and then returning home with news of a second wife in Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, or China.

Without a common language and analysis around this issue, Hmong advocates were unable to strategize and provide effective services and advocacy to our sisters and our community. Although several components of the practice were similar to those of *trafficking*, Hmong advocates agreed that it was *not* the appropriate term to use because trafficking did not describe all the cultural, social, and community components of this practice, and, more significantly, it would stigmatize young brides. Our initial conversation in 2007, which is documented here, helped shape the discussions and strategies to address this issue, which we named as "**abusive international marriages**."

Many features of abusive international marriages have evolved since our first gathering in 2007. At that time, very few victims (and even fewer advocates) were willing to speak publicly about abusive international marriages and how it was impacting their families. Since our first gathering victims have permitted advocates to record and read their stories. There was a sense of shame and secrecy around the issue – so much so that advocates who were experiencing it within their families or their own personal lives did not disclose their connection to the practice. Now, advocates are openly talking about how it directly impacts their marriages, families (in America and overseas), and the community. Today, literally every Hmong family has been directly impacted by abusive international marriages. Whereas advocates used to serve wives and victims who are the first wives (U.S. wives), we are now also providing services to second wives (most of whom are international brides). In the early years, we saw a large number of men in their 50's and older engaged in this practice; however, in recent years, men in their early 30's are also going overseas to marry underage girls. Lastly, we are seeing *transnational abandonment*, sometimes referred to as "**marry and dump**," where Hmong American men marry women and girls abroad with no intention of sponsoring their brides to live in the U.S. This is creating a new class of unwanted Hmong girls who are the abandoned or divorced second wives in Laos, living in shame or isolation from their community.

Trends Observed in Laos. In 2012, I spent three months in Laos to better understand the trend of abusive international marriages. I observed and spoke to many individuals about their lives. It was an eye-opening experience. What I saw and learned is that international marriages, abusive or not, are big business. Hmong women and girls in almost all villages are affected.

For young girls, finding love and a way out of poverty have become intertwined in a complicated game where even married women are now involved. Additionally, I witnessed elderly Hmong American women looking for love in all the wrong places. For example, a Hmong elderly woman from the U.S. whose husband in America is still alive but in a coma, marries a young man in a village who is also married. The young man's first wife orders this elderly woman not to return to Laos next year unless she brings gifts of gold and money.

Some husbands and wives are even competing with each other to see how much money they can get out of Hmong Americans. Young couples are encouraging each other to talk to someone in America so that "our children can get something out of them [Hmong Americans]." I heard stories of Hmong American men and women in international marriages who overstayed their visas or ran out of money and were prevented from returning to the U.S. unless their families in America first sent money for the spouse they had married in Laos.

It seems that older Hmong American men behave shamelessly when they get to Laos. People tell me that no matter how young the girls are these older men walk around as if their wives in the U.S. do not have "eyes and ears" in Laos. Others shared with me that Hmong American men claim that younger Hmong girls and teens cannot satisfy their needs, so older and married Hmong women are the ones who are doing the "dirty phone talking." I sat next to Laotian relatives who have two or three phones, waiting for people from the U.S. to call them for daily conversations.

Advocates have analyzed the trend correctly all along – it is a business of love, lust, and money where older women return to Laos looking for love, older men return looking for sex, but where money is involved in every transaction.

No matter whom we blame for abusive international marriages, "extreme poverty is the main reason for this practice" says Nou Lor Biliayao, Project Director of *Viv Ncaus Laos*, an organization working for the social and educational advancement of Hmong girls and women in Laos. "Follow Hmong teens involved in this practice to their homes and you will see the reason why they have chosen this path," she adds. She is clear that we must create educational and social opportunities for Hmong people in Laos so they have other means of providing for themselves.

What Does All This Mean for our Community? One of the most harmful impacts for the community is the lasting effect on children born to mothers in the U.S. and abroad. Children feel abandoned, unwanted, and neglected, thus creating a new wave of issues relating to poverty, mental health, and social values. Often Hmong American teens who have parents engaged in abusive international marriages feel ashamed because their step-mother is their age or younger. Hmong international teen brides feel like outcasts, isolated because they are an "old" man's wife — it is worse when their Hmong American husband has no intentions of sponsoring them to come to the U.S.

Perhaps the most devastating impact of abusive international marriages is the fact that they have become a normal part of our lives. So many people are engaged in the practice that the community has become desensitized to the issues and no one wants to publicly shame, criminalize, and demonize those engaged in it because the impact is so personal for everyone.

In 2007, advocates knew of a handful of men in the community who engaged in abusive international marriages. We were concerned that this trend would become normal in our community, so we sought to find solutions that create social change and address root causes. We understood that abusive international marriages resulted from oppression caused by a combination of globalization and patriarchy, so our analysis and solutions had to address these root causes. We also knew that because this was an international and intergenerational issue, coming up with solutions was even more complicated. Looking back now, what we were afraid of – that abusive international marriages would be normalized, we cannot help but wonder if we underestimated their appeal and their impact on Hmong communities in the U.S. and abroad. The way this issue has shaped and changed Hmong families and communities may be more devastating than we anticipated, and much remains to be done.

A Call to Action. In fact, a significant amount of work *is* being done. As Hmong Laotians identify solutions that address poverty and promote education as a means to decreasing abusive international marriages, we as Hmong Americans, are also doing our piece. There are many core Hmong values that cherish and love children, family, and community and we must look deep into these values to renew them. We must see children as future leaders, not brides and grooms. As Hmong Americans, we must create and build healthy ties to our international families – supporting them to escape from poverty so that family relationships, children and young people are not exploited for sex, love, and personal gratification.

As community organizers, the Hmong American advocates who attended these summits recommended **core principles** for a call to action:

- Those who are most impacted by abusive international marriages should name, identify and analyze the problem and guide the development of culturally relevant solutions.
- Community members and leaders must become engaged in creating individual and community accountability.

- Multiple voices, spaces, and methods must facilitate cultural shifts: from gender-specific spaces to story-telling; from centering survivors to recognizing advocates' leadership; from owning and identifying privilege to changing social norms.
- Collaboration amongst community leaders, allies, funders, and service providers must sustain culturally and linguistically specific services designed by Hmong advocates.
- Patriarchy and other root causes must be analyzed and addressed.
- Gender equality has to be at the center of all strategies, the core of cultural change work.

In closing, I want to say there is hope for our community. Hmong youth, families, and advocates on both continents, through international educational and social exchanges, and community organizing built on the above principles, are taking action to strengthen their shared identities and values.

During my first year as an advocate for survivors of domestic violence, I met Chic Dabby, Director of the Asian & Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence (API Institute) at a national conference. It was then that we started our conversations about domestic violence. Over the years, Hmong advocates in Wisconsin and the API Institute have continued to work together on many issues including sexual assault, domestic violence related homicides and homicides-suicides, abusive international marriages, and most importantly, celebrating the courage and lives of hundreds of Hmong sisters/survivors. The API Institute has been supportive of the innovative and ground-breaking work Hmong advocates in Wisconsin have done to address abusive international marriages. This document is a collaboration of our work today. Chic Dabby has captured the essence and struggles of our movement to end violence in our community.

Kabzuag Vaj, Director
Freedom Inc.
Madison, Wisconsin
Fall 2012

I. BACKGROUND

Hmong women working in domestic violence programs organized a series of meetings starting in 2007 to understand the trends and issues in international marriages and to begin exploring possible actions to address **abusive international marriages**. They saw its connections to sexual and domestic violence against women and harms caused to the community; and wanted to find out what was happening. Working collaboratively with and supported by the Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Hmong women activists and victims/survivors identified key advocates, community leaders and allies to learn and strategize together.

As this report clearly shows, Hmong advocates emphasized understanding the complexities of abusive international marriages and articulating a vision of and strategies for community change. It takes courage to address difficult problems in an open forum: the importance of being protective of one's culture and community has to be balanced with speaking out against harmful practices. These discussions demonstrate how deeply Hmong advocates are invested in their communities and in cultural change work. Their powerful activism is a testament to culture as a dynamic, ever-changing force that mobilizes community assets to prevent sexual and domestic violence. This report belongs to Hmong advocates, activists, survivors, and the extraordinary women who are community leaders; the inspiration their work offers belongs to all of us.

II. UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM | IDENTIFYING THE ISSUES

1. International Marriages

The term "**international marriage**" is used to refer to the practice of Hmong men and women, residing in the U.S., traveling to Laos, Thailand or China to marry, and bringing their spouse back with them to the U.S., or leaving them in the country of marriage and travel back and forth to spend time with them. This is a relatively recent practice, increasingly so in Laos, as the country has become more accessible. As a "torn people", Hmong refugees in the U.S. are now able to return to meet family members who stayed in Thailand and Laos and achieve some measure of family reunification. International marriages have followed from some of these renewed contacts.

Advocates are clear that international marriages between U.S. -based Hmong men and women to individuals in Laos, Thailand or China who are adults of similar age or with a reasonable age gap and therefore fully consenting, are not problematic. Similarly, internet dating increases transnational contacts and is not necessarily predatory or abusive. Arranged marriages, a tradition in many Asian cultures, are a contract between two families where the intended bride and groom may be strangers to each other, are also not criticized by advocates as long as both members of the couple can give consent. International marriages and arranged marriages can be viewed as way of unifying families separated by war and/or immigration.

2. Abusive International Marriages

As international marriages have grown from a trend into a practice that touches almost all Hmong families, individual community members and advocates have observed and started speaking out about the ways international marriages are abusive and cause harm to families and communities. International marriages can contain different types of abuses, many of which are severe and cause for concern amongst advocates addressing sexual and domestic violence and building women's empowerment. Some of these abuses are described below.

PRACTICE	DESCRIPTION
Old men marrying under-age girls	Older men, up to the age of 90, are marrying girls under 18 years of age.
Age differences of 20 to 70 years	Men who are 60, 70, 80, 90 years old are engaging in international marriages, with brides ranging in age from 13 to 17.
Older men acquiring under-age wives through their own sons	Fathers may pressure their adult sons to marry a teen wife from their home country, but she is really intended for the father.
Forced marriages	Women who are not underage, but still very young (18 years to early 20's) are forced by their family or by harsh economic circumstances to marry a much older man.
Misrepresenting marital status to under-age or adult brides	Men are lying about already being married, or claiming they are widowed, or divorced, or that their wives have left them. A woman or girl may thus be unaware that she is actually the "second wife" and her new husband is still married to his first wife who resides in the U.S.
Forced divorces	Husbands are forcing their wives to divorce them so they can proceed with an international marriage. These wives can often lose child support, other economic support, their homes and their connections to the community and clan. Sometimes, they are forced to legally divorce but stay with the ex-husband, taking care of the home and children. They are also stigmatized by her family, his family, and the larger community.
"Marry–and-Dump "or transnational abandonment	This is the practice of abandoning a new bride soon after marriage, within 2 to 3 months, without providing her (or a child conceived in the marriage) any economic support. Untraceable husbands then return to the U.S. on the pretext of filing immigration papers for the new bride, but these women are essentially permanently abandoned.
Business transactions	Younger or unmarried men are paid to legally marry a young girl in Laos, Thailand or China and bring her to the U.S. to be the 'wife' of an older man; or fake relationships are declared to bring in marriageable girls.
Marriage brokers promoting under-age brides	Marriage brokers are selling videos, photographs, phone numbers and contact information of potential (under-age) brides at events where Hmong men congregate, such as funerals, clan meetings.
Arrangements driven by poverty	Poverty pushes parents to actively promote their children to overseas suitors, even when they may be aware of the negative consequences.

Abusive International Marriages Defined

"Abusive international marriages" refers to the practice of older men residing in the U.S. marrying under-age girls in Asian countries. Abusive criteria include: age differences between the couple that can range from 20 to 70 years; men's duplicity in declaring their true marital situation in the U.S.; wives in the U.S. coerced into divorce; and the sexual victimization of young girls. The practice of abusive international marriages causes physical, emotional, sexual and/or economic harms. Its victims include underage brides from Laos, Thailand and China married to significantly older men; first, previous and/or current wives in the U.S.; young, teenage and adult children in the family; relatives such as siblings and in-laws on both sides; and friends and family in the U.S., Laos, Thailand and China.

"Survivors are here to teach us, so their story becomes our story."

3. What is Happening and What is the Impact?

(A) SURVIVORS TELL THEIR STORIES

Women, young adults and community members recounted their stories and the impact of abusive international marriages on their lives. Although survivors told their stories in detail, some facts have been altered and the stories summarized so survivors are not identifiable. Community members also discussed their own experiences, and again to preserve their confidentiality, some facts are changed. "Survivors" is used as an inclusive term to embrace all those harmed by abuses in the practice of international marriages.

A married at 15, after meeting her husband in Laos, and came here as an international bride. He used physical, sexual, emotional and economic violence, escalating around her first miscarriage. But with the help of advocates, she eventually left and became independent, although she still struggles with her fears. **"I think that in some way, shape, or form, I will always fear a relationship with a man. But my biggest fear now is making it in the world on my own. The English language is very hard. My story is a never ending story of sadness and hardship but I am glad that the violence has stopped."**

B describes how her husband abandoned her after almost 30 years of marriage. For years, he had been taking their joint earnings, her jewelry, and money from relatives to support his girlfriend, before finally leaving with all their savings and moving to Laos to marry his girlfriend. She struggles alone, without any child support, to care for their 10 children.

C describes herself as **"a good wife, a good mother, and a good daughter-in-law; making sure that the clan will not be ashamed."** When her husband wanted to marry someone in Laos, she appealed to their clan leader who told her that as a woman, she should have a "big heart." Her husband's relatives pressured her to give him a legal divorce, but stay married according to Hmong culture – also demanding she have a "big heart." His new wife came to live in the same household, and started a family. After receiving her husband's death threat and after he withdrew all their assets, she has been silenced, more so by the inaction of the clan leaders and his relatives.

D recounts in detail how as a teen she and her eight siblings have experienced the arrival of their father's second wife from Asia: trying to deal with the knowledge that he may have told her his first wife, their mother, was dead. She challenges her father for missing their birthdays and graduations; for ignoring her youngest brother's needs. Her story describes the trauma and abandonment that children feel, and how they try to cushion their mother's suffering.

E has been repeatedly raped by her husband since she married at 17. He made regular trips to Laos, China and Thailand, leaving his family without financial resources; and coming back with a second wife. In addition to the economic and sexual violence, he now stalks her. **"At first, the kids missed him a lot. I saw the kids smell his clothes, touch his clothes, hold his clothes so they can sleep. Now they are afraid of him."** She too lives in fear.

F has been married for 40 years. When her husband intended to marry his girlfriend in Laos, she told their eight adult children, his brother, other relatives and the clan. "Be patient, the world is changing," the clan told her. "Dad, don't do this, she will die," their children told him. He divorced her anyway, but refused to move out of the home until his international bride came. **"When your children hurt you, you recover. When your husband hurts you, you don't."**

G has her own business, two homes, and many grandchildren. She also went to her clan elders for help when her husband said she was too old and he was getting a young wife; but they failed her. Her husband did not listen, he stopped going to church. **"Who should we turn to? When we go to white people, they tell us to enforce their laws – but who will give us justice?"**

(B) STORIES FROM COMMUNITY MEMBERS

As participants shared personal stories about how international marriages affected them, it was clear that this practice has touched large segments of the Hmong community – almost everyone knew someone or had a story; and every story had an impact on several lives.

A man with a wife and children in the U.S. has acquired a teen wife in Laos. He travels back and forth, ignoring his family in America when he is in Laos, and makes monthly money transfers to the second wife and her family in Laos.
IMPACT Economic hardship for his family in the U.S. because of his travel expenses and international money transfers; betrayal and lying to maintain his teen wife harms family here; and his wife in the U.S. cannot truthfully explain to their children why their father neglects them.
A 67-year old man married to a 16-year-old brings his teen wife to the U.S., all his children (teens and adults) are older than their new step-mother.
IMPACT Teen and adult children have to accept a new mother; having to relate to her makes them feel conflicted because they are attached to their mother; and the teen wife cannot fit into this new step-mother's role and there is a mutual lack of communication.
A man sent his wife to Laos to look for teen wife for him, and he now keeps the teen wife isolated in the home in the U.S.
IMPACT First wives are forced to do what husbands want and live with a teen wife in the home; teen wives suffer severe isolation.
Community members express interest, excitement and curiosity about new teen brides: "Is she pretty? Who is she?"
IMPACT Such reactions create new norms of acceptance in the community.
Family members encourage a widowed father or an unmarried brother to go to Laos and find someone from there to marry. They may or may not explicitly encourage marrying a teen wife but since that is the dominant practice, it is who the men are marrying.
IMPACT Such efforts reinforce the community's ideas that if you are married, it adds to your status, and if you are not married, your value is diminished.
Some Hmong leaders practice polygamy and marry teen wives and because of their powerful positions, they are effectively condoning both practices. Community members admire their leaders and those who want to speak out about these practices are silenced.
IMPACT Community enforces and supports male privilege.

When a sister's 65-year-old brother married a 14-year-old girl in Laos, she called the girl's mother to ask why she was allowing this marriage, to which the mother in Laos replied, "Because we are so poor and we need the money he sends."

IMPACT Poverty in Laos, especially women's and girls' poverty, is being exploited, making this an acceptable practice in the home country.

Wives are forced to divorce, accept a teen wife, and generally agree to their husband's demands. After a legal divorce, wives are sometimes expected to stay in the marital home and take care of the household, children, ex -husband and other family members, with the new teen wife in the home.

IMPACT First wives feel they are held hostage by their husbands; suffer severe economic loss due to the change in their status; have little legal recourse; and have to endure continued humiliation.

Stories from and about teenage and adult children describe the impossibility of having to relate to a step-mother or second mother who is a teenager and in many instances younger than any of her newly acquired step-children; of relating to their father who now has a young wife; and viewing their mother's misery at being forced to leave and/or accept the new wife.

IMPACT Children experienced a range of emotions: confusion over role changes – their teen step-mother is more like a peer and at times they even help her to acculturate. They experience low self-esteem and depression, which could in turn lead to substance abuse. They feel torn by love and loyalty to their mothers, but unable to speak out against paternal authority and family pressure to accept the new family arrangements. They also have to deal with the knowledge that their father lied about his wife and children in order to contract the international marriage. Like their mothers, they felt betrayed.

(C) WOMEN CONTRACTING INTERNATIONAL MARRIAGES

Stories about women seeking younger men in Laos, Thailand or China to marry described mostly non-abusive arrangements. Most notably, there is not a huge age difference; and the women are divorced or widowed and are looking for companionship, sex and a relationship. Some community members have been quick to negatively label women who have international marriages as problematic, but overall, Hmong women in the U.S. who initiate international marriages are not practicing its abusive aspects. For recent trends, see Foreword.

(D) SEXUAL & DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN ABUSIVE INTERNATIONAL MARRIAGES

Advocates enumerated the types of gender-based violence showing up around abusive international marriages:

- Forced divorce;
- Forced marriage;
- Domestic violence by husbands towards first wives who oppose a second wife;
- Domestic violence towards first wives by their in-laws or new wives;
- Increased risk to wives in the U.S. of sexually transmitted infections;
- Marital rape of teen brides;
- Sexual exploitation of young girls;
- Statutory rape;
- Emotional abuse: Families "feeling sickened" by the betrayal and lies men have told about their wives and children in the U.S.;
- Exploitation of women's work in the home;
- Financial abuse: depriving wives and children in the U.S. of economic support;
- Abandonment;
- Isolation; and
- Victim-blaming.

As this issue receives increased attention, and victims/survivors speak out in greater numbers, its negative impacts will be further revealed.

4. Why Is this Practice Happening?

Hmong women, Hmong men, and non-Hmong allies at the meetings had separate discussions to understand and analyze the practice. Everyone agreed that international marriages between consenting adults of similar ages is an acceptable practice and only abusive international marriages are problematic.

(A) DISCUSSIONS AMONGST HMONG WOMEN ABOUT CAUSES

This group discussed the changing role of Hmong women, who now had more choices and could make decisions about what they wanted out of relationships and were not blindly accepting the cultural norm that marriage is the only route to happiness. Women advocates also discussed the reasons they thought Hmong men were seeking young, under-age brides from Laos, Thailand and China.

According to the Hmong women of the group, men were engaging in international marriages to young girls because they:

- Complained that their Hmong wives in the U.S. were getting too old and "uppity," and this was sometimes a means of taking revenge and exercising power and control over them;
- Were excited by the "game" of international marriage, including the sexual excitement, of satisfying their fantasies for young girls, and perhaps even the excitement of danger;
- Felt entitled, emotionally and economically, now that they had been in the U.S. for two or three decades and had some money and personal power. "$10,000 buys these men much more power and control in Laos, Thailand or China than it does in the U.S.";
- Could exploit the vulnerability of young girls and poor families in Laos, Thailand or China; and
- Could blame women for men's behavior (e.g., "Hmong American women are not keeping the uniqueness of Hmong culture").

(B) DISCUSSION AMONGST HMONG MEN ABOUT CAUSES

Hmong men thought men in the community were marrying young girls in Laos, Thailand or China because:

- Elderly men were looking for young women or girls for personal fulfillment and sexual gratification; some of these men have low self-esteem and some are "self-medicating" themselves – they are using marriage as a way to avoid dealing with other concerns in their lives;
- Seeking young wives served as "rejuvenation, a game, or part of a midlife crisis"
- Hmong women in the U.S. were not following the cultural protocols of courting, were not readily marrying Hmong men, were lacking in personal hygiene and that was driving men away, and they were not as submissive as wives who had grown up in Laos, Thailand or China;
- Men had sexual concerns and found a lack of communication between them and their spouses;

- Hmong community members support the practice so men do not see what is wrong with it, and furthermore they see these marriages as a way of creating a support system for themselves;
- Middle-aged men were having a midlife crisis;
- Men can use their finances to have relationships or maintain wives overseas;
- Men between the ages of 24 and 36 found that because many of their concerns were related to marriage, they should look in Laos, Thailand or China for brides; and
- Families in Laos, Thailand and China are taking advantage of Hmong men in the U.S.

(C) JOINT DISCUSSION BETWEEN HMONG MEN & WOMEN ABOUT CAUSES

The above reports on women's and men's perceptions led to a discussion on how the larger Hmong community views and upholds some of its norms about marriage. Firstly, marriage is clearly seen as leading to happiness. Traditionally, marriages are not by choice and are an arrangement between families. This has broken down somewhat as more avenues and choices for marriage have emerged, but elders see this as a breakdown of cultural protocols.

Leaders in the community who have power and privilege, exercise it to reinforce tradition. Changes in practice are considered to threaten the uniqueness of Hmong culture. Since some community leaders are also involved in the practice of marrying young girls in Laos, Thailand and China, they are not going to criticize it.

In fact, the larger Hmong community does not recognize the negative aspects of international marriages. Generally, men and women participate in the buzz created by an old man acquiring a young bride, and their eager excitement to welcome her, or to see what she looks like, is viewed as support for this practice.

Women's advocates are left then with the task of pointing out the harm caused to families, and their efforts are also resulting in some victims, such as first wives, speaking out against the abuses of this practice. They are drawing attention to sexual and domestic violence, the abuses and harm caused both to first wives and their children and to the young, isolated, new brides who leave behind their homes and families in Laos, Thailand or China.

On a related matter, there is an increase of Hmong sex workers in the large cities in Laos to service Hmong tourists. This increases women's vulnerability to exploitation and sexually transmitted infections. It also increases the risk of transnational infection as returning male tourists who have utilized prostitutes infect their wives when they are back in the U.S. Hmong advocates were clear about calling out the practice of arranging sexual contacts for group tours to Laos as another indicator and exercise of male privilege.

In summary, root causes included:

1. Male entitlement and impunity;
2. Exercising power and control – economic, sexual, physical and emotional - over families in Asia and the U.S.;
3. Devaluation of women, and preference for submissive women;
4. Rejecting equality between women and men, viewing independent women as a threat to male authority;
5. Enforcing male privilege by abandoning family responsibilities for sexual excitement; and
6. Reinforcing traditional norms through a new practice.

III. CULTURAL CHANGE | ACTION STEPS

Cultural change and gender analysis form the basis for designing and taking action steps. These issues were framed by identifying culture and gender; the spheres of influence community leaders have; a collective vision of individual and community changes; and Hmong assets or social capital at the individual, organizational and community levels. Participants were challenged to think of new solutions, to avoid thinking there is a single answer, and to ask what they can do in their own lives and in their family homes.

1. Gender & Cultural Change: Frameworks and Definitions

Presented By Bo Thao-Urabe, Meeting Facilitator

GENDER:	The state of being male or female, typically in reference to social and cultural characteristics, as opposed to "sex" which relates to biological characteristics. *Gender roles* refer to a set of socially constructed and culturally specific qualities, behaviors, and expectations for women (femininity) and men (masculinity). Gender roles are learned and can be taught through social institutions (i.e. media, schools, religion, politics, and legal system) and individuals. These roles can evolve over time.
GENDER-BASED LENS:	A framework that pays attention to the discrimination and oppression of people based on gender. This framework considers how gender roles within communities are influenced by the following spheres: biology, social institutions (i.e., family, religion, legal system, education), cultural, political, and economic factors. A gender-based lens incorporates multiple approaches where the factors of race, class, and sexuality intersect with gender.
CULTURAL CHANGE FRAMEWORK:	A way of working that seeks lasting change, that results in a collective shift to a shared way of thinking or a shared set of beliefs, values, procedures, and/or relationships to stakeholders. Cultural change results from work within an organization, a sector, a field, a community, or among a set of organizations or communities, and it implies lasting structural and social change. Cultural change work also assumes that a community is willing to question and transform its oppressive practices, with an understanding that this transformation impacts society at large.
CULTURAL COMPETENCE:	The developmental processes whereby organizations and individuals assess themselves, acquire skills and knowledge, and work with diverse communities. Elements of cultural competence include: cultural knowledge, cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, and operational effectiveness combining all elements. Culturally competent practices recognize community assets and appreciate historical and cultural contexts in creating solutions towards a just society.

2. Community Assets

The entire group consisting of community leaders (women and men), Hmong women and survivors, Hmong advocates (women and men), and non-Hmong allies enumerated the assets they all bring to invest in community change work.

"So many people meeting to gather our strength and dedicated to change."

INDIVIDUALS	ADVOCATES	COMMUNITY	ALLIES
✓ Skills; ✓ Desire to learn; ✓ People who can give/ deliver the message; ✓ Men & women who uphold values of fairness, equality, justice; ✓ Young leaders; ✓ Strong Hmong women who can emerge from their difficult circumstances and be activists; ✓ Good education for many U.S. born women and men; ✓ Individuals who lead by example; ✓ Survivors speaking out about their stories.	✓ Advocates offering services, and having access to victims; ✓ Advocates with expertise & knowledge about Hmong families that clan leaders must learn from; ✓ Understanding of Hmong community/ culture; ✓ Courageous advocates speaking out about abuse and stopping victim-blaming; ✓ Advocates who have taken 3 major steps on this issue (i) raised awareness, (ii) organized, and (iii) strategized; ✓ Domestic violence teams with trained female and male advocates; ✓ Strong state and national allies: Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault; Asian & Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence.	✓ Strong family bonds between parents & children; ✓ Strong community identity and cohesion; ✓ Aunts and uncles whose traditional roles are to help; ✓ Youth who want to learn about traditions, and honors their elders; ✓ Professionals; ✓ Radio/TV (media); ✓ Churches/pastors; ✓ Clan leaders and a democratic structure; ✓ Values that emphasize families, celebrations, fun; ✓ Men overseas who are also angered by the situation; ✓ Community self-help values, *siab dawb siab dav*, we love our community!	✓ Great willingness to let Hmong advocates lead; ✓ Responsibility to educate themselves and gather information; ✓ Using assets to provide support; ✓ Strategic partners; ✓ Self-reflection; and ✓ Willing to share power.

"The clan system would be the most powerful element for change if the clan leaders adopted a non-violent, non-controlling mind set."

3. Action Steps: What Steps Can We Take to End Violence against Women Resulting from Abusive International Marriages?

> ***"When I hear remarks about sexual and domestic violence I will engage in conversation, challenge my community, and call out the wrongs."***

(A) COMMUNITY LEADERS: ACTION STEPS WE CAN TAKE

"I Will..."

- Bring Hmong women to hear and understand Hmong social systems and engage in fixing these systems.
- Practice a new way of being (e.g., as women, we don't kneel, we sit) and be the first to act.
- Ask appropriate, influential leaders to step up, speak out, act differently.
- Establish new paradigms of family life where wife and husband, not just the husband, participate in decision-making and responsibilities.
- Listen to and hear mothers, sisters, women; and validate their stories.
- Increase visibility of Hmong issues amongst non-Hmong allies.
- Sit down, talk with, and educate our fathers, our siblings, our Hmong brothers.
- Educate our families to talk about culture, youth, elders.
- Provide services, support and guidance to Hmong youth.
- Learn more about the 18 clans and think about how to influence and change their structure.
- Stop and rid our clans of the bride price practice.
- Re-evaluate the process of marriage negotiation.

- Collect data in service programs on girls who are new brides.
- Increase student awareness about the issues and abuses of international marriages through classroom discussions.
- Continue working with other leaders and check-in with them to discuss challenges and successes.

> ***"How do we confront our own brothers, uncles, fathers? How can we judge the decisions of young girls and their families in Laos given their conditions of poverty?"***

(B) HMONG WOMEN: ACTION STEPS WE CAN TAKE

"I Will..."

For Myself and My Family...

- Live my life by example, not live as a bystander; question and challenge others, including my family.
- Talk to my mothers and cousins about sexual assault and domestic violence to make sure they are aware of the problem.
- Ensure my own safety and protection.
- Start with my own sons and educate them to not use domestic violence; teach my sons to love and respect their sisters.
- Keep my ears and heart open, treat the young brides with compassion.
- Be an advocate in my own home and challenge my own biases.
- Increase my communication with my father, ask for his opinions on the practice, on issues about woman-abuse; urge my father to be a community leader and speak out.
- Call out the uncles and relatives who exclaim over an old man who has a new, young wife, because they are supporting the practice.
- Empower my nieces and nephews to talk to me.

- Confront the situation in my own family when it happens and refuse any financial support that will be used to go to Laos, Thailand or China for an international marriage.
- Urge my husband to serve as a role model, speak to other men about abusive international marriages; make my husband support me in my work to prevent sexual assault and domestic violence.
- Seek good role models for my brothers because my father is not one.

> ***"I have been through this so I will show other women I am a strong survivor and encourage them to be who they are and take care of themselves."***

For the Abused Women I Serve…

- Help women identify community resources for sexual assault and domestic violence so they can use them when needed.
- Educate women on what they can do after they leave an abusive international marriage.
- Listen, give comfort, support women's decisions, engage in safety planning with individual victims.
- Help victims write letters to the Laotian consulate about men engaging in abusive international marriages to prevent the abusive aspects of the practice.
- Educate youth so they are not confused and can help young brides.
- Provide counseling and services for the perpetrators and someone for the kids to talk to.
- Advise all women how to decide about dating; how to identify sexual violence, dating violence, other abusive behaviors; how to say no and be assertive.

For Girls and Families in Laos, Thailand, and China...

- Collaborate with and encourage development of women's programs in all three countries.
- Educate young women, teens and their family members about what awaits them here and alert them to the issues they may face in the U.S.
- Expose the lies these men use (e.g., that they are widowed or have no children) both here in the U.S. within their own community and in Laos, Thailand or China.
- Create a hotline for girls in all three countries where they can get more information and possibly run background checks on prospective husbands.
- Organize a women's trip from the U.S. to Laos to share stories and educate.
- Start educational funds to help Hmong girls in all three countries; and establish schools for them to show that marriage isn't the only road to economic opportunity.
- Engage parents, especially mothers, to see how the practice of marrying their young daughters to old men is abusive.

For My Larger Community...

- Have women at the table with men, train women to mediate.
- Change the 18-clan system to resolve divorces better.
- Educate youth, our parents and elders through media, conferences, peace rallies.
- Help women be more independent.
- Educate my family, friends, and community from a human rights perspective on how to organize to empower women, and about how much power women can and do have.
- Identify male advocates and allies to make changes together; identify allies at church, community and family levels to change how men see this issue.
- Establish forums for discussions on the meaning of marriage; let others in the community hear men openly admit they are marrying for sex.
- Challenge visitors from Laos, Thailand and China who advertise young girls.

(C) Hmong Men: Action Steps We Can Take

"I Will…"

For Myself and My Family…

- Educate my family to know and learn the risks, the advantages and disadvantages they face in international marriages, especially with my young sons so they make informed choices and the right decisions.
- Encourage my family to learn about Hmong cultural guidelines so they know men's and women's responsibilities and limits.
- Try to be a role model so my sons and others can follow and hope it can positively affect us all.
- Change my own behaviors and attitudes towards women and gender equality.
- Encourage women in my family to learn more about their roles and not jump into mainstream American roles so fast.
- Change and adjust what does not work for me in Hmong culture, especially those parts that are practiced by men.
- Look into myself first and let go of my ego.
- Be more involved in daily tasks for my home and family.
- Stop any inappropriate behavior that can be misinterpreted as supporting an act of violence towards the person overseas who marries a Hmong U.S. citizen.
- Not engage in extramarital affairs here or overseas.
- Ensure that my wife, daughters and daughters-in-law are educated about Hmong cultural practices and U.S. laws.
- Promote fairness and attention to human dignity.
- Listen to my female counterparts, my wife and children, about their points of view.

For the Women & Girls I Advocate for…

- Take steps to gain more awareness and self-education and identify the issues.
- Be open-minded, so women can count on me as an ally.
- Create a network and identify allies to address this problem, develop resources for victims and educate the community.
- Educate the whole community, not singling out anyone, to let them know about the resources we offer.
- Promote my values and actions as an advocate and help others as I would help myself.
- Handout flyers at community events and hope female relations pick up the information and pass it on to young brides.

For My Larger Community…

- Assist in planning pros and cons of how international marriages can be fruitful.
- Provide education about Hmong culture – what to expect and what not to expect.
- Follow the protocols of divorce, be aware of Hmong cultural protocols.
- Assist in the mediation of abusive international marriages, assist in developing alternative options.
- Promote Hmong women in various leadership roles.
- Take risks to make changes.
- Reject practices and comments that men make at gatherings that encourage abusive international marriages. We have to consider our own individual reputations and the importance of a good collective reputation.
- Study our culture and values and make appropriate adjustments to improve community perceptions about this issue and related cultural values.
- Create opportunities for gender equality and a willingness to lead the community on these values and practices.

4. Collective Vision of Change & Collective Action

(A) VISION OF CHANGE

What is the Hmong community's vision of change? Advocates pointed out that both systems – the clan system of the Hmong and the criminal legal system of the U.S. – are failing to address problems of gender violence. With leadership comes responsibility and Hmong women leaders have taken on the task of drawing attention to domestic violence, sexual assault and other forms of gender violence.

Participants drew up a vision ten years hence, for the year 2017.

They answered two questions:

1. **If successful in your work, what will healthy families look like?**
2. **If successful in your community, what will the changes look like?**

Three themes emerged. Here are their visions for change:

VISION 1: Transformation of clan leaders and therefore of the clan system.

- Clans support equality and do not collude with violent family members.
- Women will not be afraid to speak; men will not be afraid to ask for help and will listen to women.
- Proud to be *Hmoob*.
- Easy access to clan system, efficient clan system.
- Community norms and practices that bring in women's viewpoints.
- Women's voices will be equal to men's voices.
- Men and women will be sitting together on the Hmong clan leaders' seats.
- Be more open-minded.
- Work better together for a better tomorrow.

VISION 2: Gender equality in Hmong homes and communities.

- Understand that women are equal to men.
- Recognize many ways to find harmony in families.
- Equal status and rights for women and men.
- Hmong women and men will be treated the same.
- Equality and respect between husband and wife, both at the same level.
- One husband, one wife — loving, caring and nurturing themselves, each other, and together caring for their children in a loving home.
- Boys and girls will be equally valued and appreciated.
- Hmong men stop using male privilege to define Hmong culture.
- Families where women are respected and treated as equals.
- Men and women have mutual respect, value the roles each play, and both have the same decision-making power.
- Children are not forgotten: sons and daughters will have equal value and equal rights in the eyes of their parents
- Divorce will be recognized as a couple's choice, not just a man's, a family's, or a community's choice.
- Strong cultural traditions that reflect new beliefs.
- Women will be valued and have all the opportunities men have to lead happy lives.
- Love in the family! A community filled with happiness!

VISION 3: A violence-free society for everyone.

- Women will have safety and equality without sacrificing their connection to Hmong culture and community.
- A culture of valuing gender and intolerance for violence.
- No murders, no abuse, no rape.
- Domestic abuse, spousal murder, and suicides and will have decreased.
- Children will be proud to be Hmong and feel safe in their homes.
- No more violence.
- Advocates free to work without fear, that they are safe and respected.
- Less domestic violence, less homicides, no polygamy, no bride price, no dowry, no teen brides.
- Women find culturally sanctioned ways to be safe physically and emotionally.
- Better dialogue and understanding that will reduce domestic violence against and sexual exploitation of Hmong women and girls.

(B) COLLECTIVE ACTION TO ADDRESS ROOT CAUSES

What community beliefs do we need to challenge and replace?

1. Challenge Gender Privilege | Build Gender Equality

Gender privilege needs to be challenged and replaced with values of gender equality.

GENDER PRIVILEGE: At the end of the day, men "join hands and support each other."	**GENDER EQUALITY:** "Treasure all lives"
The view that: • Men are entitled to their privileges and do not have to give them up. These privileges can include daily matters like not doing any household or childcare work to claiming that domestic violence is justifiable. • Women are not seen as equals, and can be seen as property to be controlled by men. It is therefore important to re-evaluate cultural practices and their historical reasons (e.g., the bride price was paid as a way to value women, as a promise from the man to love and treasure his wife.) Now it is used to devalue women. • Women are kept out of clan systems and kept ignorant of them by clan leaders and male family members. • Furthermore, gender privilege means men do not have to take responsibility for the abuses of their position, or for opposing gender inequality.	The view that: • Re-establish the value of Hmong women through a variety of actions ranging from integrating women into the clan system to more equitable distribution of housework. • Gender equality also means women supporting women and not letting men have permission to justify women's devaluation, abuse, or even the killing of women (e.g., when women having affairs are killed, homicide is seen as justified, but men's affairs are accepted). • Men have to exercise less control over women, lower their male pride, create ways for women to enter male-dominated systems and welcome them as equals. • Men need to recognize the value of anti-domestic violence advocates' work: that the advocates' exposure to battered women's suffering has deepened their understanding of the problem; and that they want the clans to listen, be educated, and invest in change instead of investing in and sticking to protocols.

2. Challenge the Belief that Domestic Violence is a Family Problem | Assert that Domestic Violence is a Community Problem

Domestic violence cannot be treated as a family problem; it is a community problem.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AS A FAMILY PROBLEM:	DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AS A COMMUNITY ISSUE:
This approach means that: • Domestic violence is seen as normal, with extreme victim-blaming components, where even in domestic violence related homicides, battered women are blamed. • Clans do not speak out against domestic violence, they engage in victim-blaming and covertly or overtly support men's entitlement to using domestic violence. • Everything is kept in the family and the emphasis on "saving face" make problems worse because family privacy is used as an excuse to do nothing. • Women advocates who speak out about domestic violence face threats on their personal safety from community leaders.	This approach requires that: • Clans are educated about domestic violence. If they are made to understand the harms caused to the community, they may become more gender sensitive. • Clan leaders need to take an anti-violence position and support women who are victims of sexual assault, domestic violence, abusive international marriages, etc., instead of supporting perpetrators. • Advocates are recognized for the programs they established and are supported to expand their advocacy, so women can get support, have access to services, and are not isolated by traditional attitudes. Advocates expressed how valuable this is to the larger Hmong community. • Domestic violence is not be seen as a women's issue but a community issue; and the community must be part of the solution, not part of the problem.

3. Challenge Generational Traditions of 18 Clans | Make Generational Changes

Clan transformation is a crucial element to changing power between women and men and across generations.

GENERATIONAL TRADITION:	GENERATIONAL CHANGE:
Leaders in the community and in the clans hang on to their power and are unwilling to integrate women into the clan structures. Male clan leaders do not recognize the leadership of advocates addressing violence against women as a significant contribution to the well-being of Hmong families. Traditional practices that harm women are continued and justified in the name of preserving culture.	It is important to understand the values of a new generation and its new leaders and support them to make changes and be recognized as leaders. Old generations needs to trust the new ones. Women need to be included in clan meetings and integrated into the clan system. Practices need to be re-examined and change seen as strengthening families.

What bold steps are necessary to end the abusive aspects of international marriages?

1. Define abusive international marriages, clearly identifying the physical, emotional, sexual and economic harms caused to victims which include first wives and their children; under-age brides from Asian countries; and family members of all parties.

- Educate community and clan leaders.
- Educate families, youth, elderly and the larger community.
- Educate Hmong advocates and programs as well as allies to recognize the problem and define it accurately.
- Conduct outreach, establish services and identify remedies that address the legal, economic, health and safety needs of its various victims.

2. Conduct outreach and develop materials so victims, female relatives, and others who come in contact with them, like teachers, are aware of services and can make referrals or provide information.

- Strategize about reaching young brides who are very isolated, and educate the community in order to identify and reach out to them.
- Change societal attitudes about abusive international marriages.
- Cut demand for under-age girls to marry over-aged men.
- Hold men accountable.

3. Change societal attitudes about abusive international marriages.

- Cut demand for under-age girls to marry over-aged men.
- Hold men accountable.

Advocates, community members, and allies strongly believe that those most impacted by abusive international marriages should identify and name the problems and gendered harms, and design solutions that are culturally appropriate. Gender equality has to be at the center of all our strategies.

APPENDIX A. Summary of Action Plans Developed at Second Meeting in 2008

By Pa Vang

A: POLICY

AWARENESS	INITIATIVES	ACCOUNTABILITY
1. Hmong and mainstream communities need to recognize and care about the problem. 2. Gather statistics.	1. To show how abusive international marriage benefits men and causes harm to women, children, families and communities. 2. To stop clans from failing women and children.	1. To stop the practice. 2. To have men deal with the consequences of their actions. 3. For first wives and family to be able to hold husbands accountable.

B. LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

AWARENESS	INITIATIVES	ACCOUNTABILITY
1. Raise community awareness. 2. Equip community to talk about the problem/issue.	1. Statewide training for every clan leader and Hmong elder.	1. Partnership development. 2. Reduce number of victims. 3. Create community guidelines for clan leaders.

C. SERVICES FOR SURVIVORS

AWARENESS	INITIATIVES	ACCOUNTABILITY
1. Increase survivors' awareness of services. 2. Educate clan leaders, mediators about referrals to services. 3. Make community aware of support services.	1. Train Hmong and other advocates to respond to all the victims of abusive international marriages. 2. Increase access to services to break the cycle of violence.	1. Create safety and stability for women. 2. Ensure that battered women's needs are met.

D. ADVOCATE SUPPORT

AWARENESS	INITIATIVES	ACCOUNTABILITY
1. Recognize advocates' skills, knowledge, leadership, cultural competency, and expertise in understanding Hmong culture.	1. To increase collaboration on addressing abusive international marriages.	1. To be part of the decision making on abusive international marriages and promote safety for advocates.

E. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

AWARENESS	INITIATIVES	ACCOUNTABILITY
1. Find out the views of the community. 2. Ensure messages convey the extent of the problem. 3. Bring advocates' understanding and analysis of the problem to the same page.	1. Reach some middle ground towards peace and understanding. 2. Plant seeds of change. 3. Create partnerships. 4. Start building leadership in all places. 5. Organize grassroots.	1. Establish balanced gender representation. 2. Build healthy, happy Hmong community.

APPENDIX B. Excerpt from "New Laws Implemented Involving Older Men Marrying Young Wives"

By Elizabeth Thao

It has been reported that a growing trend sweeping through Southeast Asian nations is that elderly male foreigners are no longer allowed to marry young women from their respective countries. According to new marriage regulations, the Cambodian Government issued an age limit for male foreigners over the age of 50 to be outlawed from marrying Cambodian women in the country, under new rules designed to crack down on sham marriages and human trafficking. Cambodia, which is a country home to a small population of Hmong, has enforced this law in an effort to prevent fake marriages and human trafficking. The Cambodian government has been aware of cases documented by rights groups where Cambodian women were sent into prostitution or used as slaves in their husband's home country. In addition, foreigners who earn less than $2,550 per month are also barred from wedding local women.

Koy Kuong, spokesperson from the Cambodian Foreign Ministry, says that marriages between old men and young women are considered "inappropriate," and foreign men who wish to marry nationals, "must earn a high salary to ensure that Cambodian women can live a decent life." The regulations will hopefully discourage local marriages in which a foreign husband and local wife look like "a grandfather and a granddaughter." The new regulations were issued in response to a recent rapid increase in the number of foreign nationals, particularly South Koreans, who have married and subsequently abused Cambodian women, Kuong said. Reports of scandals involving marriages between young Cambodian women and older South Korean men have been surfacing, including one case where Korean authorities filed charges against a man who murdered his Cambodian wife to collect $1 million from a life insurance policy. According to the Korean newspaper *Joong Ang Daily*, the 45-year-old Korean husband fed his 20-year-old Cambodian wife sleeping pills before setting their house on fire. Prior to the event, he took out six life insurance policies on her. The Cambodian foreign ministry has since sent a diplomatic note to all the embassies and consulates in the country informing them of the new regulations, which came into effect on March 1, 2011.

Similar laws have been echoed in Laos as well, which is home to one of the largest overseas populations of Hmong. Members of the Lao National Assembly, who are calling for stricter screening of marriages between Lao nationals and foreigners, argue that those marriages are not, in many cases, purely based on love. According to the U.S. Lao Embassy website, should a man want to marry a woman from Laos, he cannot be more than 20 years older than his future bride. "This idea has definitely been addressed with the Lao government," said a spokesperson from the Lao Embassy. Similarly to the regulations of Cambodia, men must prove that they are not married in another country, meaning that legitimate divorce papers must be presented before he is allowed to marry a woman from Laos. They also have to prove they have steady jobs, a bank account with savings, a place to live, and also pass a medical exam as to not pass along disease to their future brides. "These issues may have been overlooked in the past because of the sensitive nature of the topic," the spokesperson said, "but it is a serious issue now."

Additionally, there are people who profit from promoting and arranging such marriages, as an unidentified National Assembly member commented: "There are companies who do businesses as matchmakers and marriage brokers. In some cases, you see some really young Lao women — and maybe some older ones but no more than 28 years old, marrying a Lao man from overseas in his 60s or 70s. How can you believe that that is true love? So we need to really investigate and check out their backgrounds before approving because such marriages hurt Lao women's honor and dignity."

Thailand, another country with a significant Hmong population, has also followed suit: the Ministry of Interior are bringing a new proposal before the Cabinet prohibiting foreigners over the age of 50 from marrying Thai nationals. According to a Ministry spokesperson, statistics show that many older foreigners are marrying much younger Thai women, which is not appropriate and often leads to many problems. "Many older foreigners seem to marry Thai women so they can stay in Thailand under less strict requirements. Many of these people seem to come to Thailand simply to marry much younger girls. In many cases they are old enough to be their father. I am concerned that these people are attempting to circumvent the rules by marrying innocent Thai women. If these people don't have enough money to retire then they shouldn't be here and become a burden to Thailand. For those people already married, the income must be also 800,000 Baht," said Tawatchai Suksoom of the Ministry of Interior.

And *ceev fab nawb*: most of the other Southeast Asian countries have also caught wind. The proliferation of elderly foreign men marrying much younger local women has been a prevalent problem in Burma, China, the Philippines, and Vietnam—all countries with Hmong populations. But while human trafficking is a problem in each of those countries, where thousands of foreign men may have settled into genuine relationships, none have implemented outright bans on cross-cultural marriages. "We need to focus on the core values of what a marriage is," a spokesperson from the U.S. Cambodian Embassy. "We need to focus on tradition and family. If this continues, who will it benefit? Definitely not the respective nations each person hails from."

Thao, Elizabeth. "New Laws Implemented Involving Older Men Marrying Young Wives." Hmong Pages." Txoova Publications, Inc. n.d. Retrieved 16 March 2012.

http://hmongpages.com/index.php/world-news/4-world-news-/217-new-laws-implemented-involving-older-men-marrying-young-wives

APPENDIX C. List of Meeting Participants

Listed in alphabetical order by surname. Please note: individuals' organizational affiliations listed below reflect the time of their participation in the meeting(s) and may not represent their current organizational affiliations.

Monica Adams, Freedom Inc. (Madison, WI) – 2010
Tracy Benson, Freedom Inc. (Madison, WI) – 2010
Barbara Biebel, Catholic Charities - Catholic Diocese of Green Bay (Green Bay, WI) – 2007
Cheryl Breit, CAP Services, Inc. (Stevens Point, WI) – 2007
Ann Brickson, Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence (Madison, WI) – 2007, 2008
Sarah M. Cha (Milwaukee, WI) – 2010
Chong Chang, Freedom Inc. (Madison, WI) – 2009, 2010
MayTong Chang, Hmong American Women's Association (Milwaukee, WI) – 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010
Mysee Chang, Wilder Center for Communities, Amherst H. Wilder Foundation (Saint Paul, MN) – 2010
Chic Dabby, Asian & Pacific Islander institute on Domestic Violence (San Francisco, CA) – 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010
Lori Dauria, CAP Services, Inc. (Stevens Point, WI) – 2009
Danielle Duncan, Safe Harbor of Sheboyhan County (Sheboygan, WI) – 2009
Jane Graham Jennings, The Women's Community (Wausau, WI) – 2007
Joanna Gurstelle, Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault (Madison, WI) – 2007
Ian Henderson, Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault (Madison, WI) – 2007
Andrew Her, Hmong American Friendship Association (Milwaukee, WI) – 2007
Chaitua Her (Wausau, WI) – 2008
Ilean Her, Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans (St. Paul, MN) – 2008
Arline Hillestad, The Family Center (Wisconsin Rapids, WI) – 2007, 2008, 2009
Lina Juarbe-Botella, Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault (Madison, WI) – 2007, 2009
Ann Kappauf, New Horizons Shelter and Women's Center (La Crosse, WI) – 2009
Mao Khang, The Women's Community (Wausau, WI) – 2007, 2009
Pang Khang (Stevens Point, WI) – 2010
Mimi Kim, Creative Interventions (Oakland, CA) – 2007
Mao Kong, Domestic Violence Intervention Project (La Crosse, WI) – 2007
Mor Kong, Catholic Charities - Catholic Diocese of Green Bay (Manitowoc, WI) – 2007, 2008
Jeanie Kurka Reimer, Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault (Madison, WI) – 2009
Susan LaFlash, Wisconsin Department of Health Services (Madison, WI) – 2008
Graciela Laguna, Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence (Madison, WI) – 2008
Vivian M. Larkin, Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence (Madison, WI) – 2009
Bruce Lee, Hmong American Community Association (Manomonie, WI) – 2007, 2008
Catherine Lee, Safe Harbor of Sheboyhan County (Sheboygan, WI) – 2009
Hlee X. Lee, The Women's Community (Wausau, WI) – 2009, 2010
Kristal Lee (Madison, WI) – 2010
Mai Xia Lee, Hmong American Women's Association (Milwaukee, WI) – 2010
Mao Lee, Hmong American Friendship Association (Milwaukee, WI) – 2008, 2009

Mary Lee, Eau Claire Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association (Eau Claire, WI) – 2010
Maymao Lee, Hmong American Women's Association (Milwaukee, WI) – 2007, 2008
Pana Lee, St. Paul Intervention Project (St. Paul, MN) – 2007
Saejung Lee, Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence (Madison, WI) – 2007, 2008
Shao Lee (Wausau, WI) – 2010
Annika Leonard, Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault (Madison, WI) – 2009
Sharon Lewandowski, Wisconsin Department of Health Services (Madison, WI) – 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010
Bo Lo, University of Wisconsin–Madison (Madison, WI) – 2010
Mai Cheela Lo, The Family Center (Wisconsin Rapids, WI) – 2010
Vachinzong Lor, Hmong ABC Radio (Milwaukee, WI) – 2008
Tess Mauer, Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence (Madison, WI) – 2007, 2008
Linda Morrison, Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault (Madison, WI) – 2007
Chai Moua, CAP Services, Inc. (Stevens Point, WI) – 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010
Helen Moua (Sacramento, CA) – 2009, 2010
Koua Moua, Shades of Yellow (St. Paul, MN) – 2010, 2008, 2009
Mai Ger Moua, Bureau of Migrant, Refugee and Labor Services, Department of Workforce Development (Madison, WI) – 2007
Yia Moua, The Women's Community (Wausau, WI) – 2009
Yong Kay Moua, Eau Claire Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association (Eau Claire, WI) – 2008, 2009
Zon Moua, Freedom Inc. (Madison, WI) – 2010
Valerie Nash, Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence (Madison, WI) – 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010
Karen Perkins – 2010
Tom Powell, Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault (Madison, WI) – 2007
Katy Pruitt, Safe Harbor of Sheboyhan County (Sheboygan, WI) – 2008
Nataliya Runte, Task Force On Family Violence (Milwaukee, WI) – 2008
Patti Seger, Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence (Madison, WI) – 2007, 2008
Nicole Sengkhammee, Catholic Charities - Catholic Diocese of Green Bay (Green Bay, WI) – 2007, 2008, 2010
Marianna Smirnova, Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault (Madison, WI) – 2009
Bo Thao-Urabe (Jersey City, NJ) – 2007, 2009, 2010
Joua Thao (Wausau, WI) – 2008
Kia Thao (Wausau, WI) – 2010
Kong Thao, Freedom Inc. (Madison, WI) – 2010
Mai Chang Thao, Eau Claire Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association (Eau Claire, WI) – 2008
Nhia Lee Thao, Freedom Inc. (Madison, WI) – 2008, 2010
Pa Thao, The Women's Community (Wausau, WI) – 2008, 2009, 2010
Pheng Thao, Asian Women United of Minnesota (Minneapolis, MN) – 2008, 2009, 2010
So Thao, Catholic Charities - Catholic Diocese of Green Bay (Green Bay, WI) – 2007, 2008
True Thao, Freedom Inc. (Madison, WI) – 2008, 2007, 2010
Mai Thoj, The Women's Community (Wausau, WI) – 2007
Kabzuag Vaj, Freedom Inc. (Madison, WI) – 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010
Amy Vang, Hmong American Friendship Association (Milwaukee, WI) – 2007
Chia Vang (Madison, WI) – 2010

Gao Vang (Stevens Point, WI) – 2010
Joua Thai Vang, Eau Claire Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association (Eau Claire, WI) – 2008
Karissa Vang, St. Paul Intervention Project (St. Paul, MN) – 2007
Lang Vang (Plover, WI) – 2009
LorMee Vang, Sexual Assault Center of Family Services (Green Bay, WI) – 2009
Ly Vang, Association for the Advancement of Hmong Women in Minnesota (Minneapolis, MN) – 2008
Mai Vang (Wausau, WI) – 2009
Mai Chou Vang (Wisconsin Rapids, WI) – 2009
Mai Tia Vang (Madison, WI) – 2010
Maiker Vang, The Family Center (Wisconsin Rapids, WI) – 2007
Mailor Vang, Safe Harbor of Sheboyhan County (Sheboygan, WI) – 2007
May Vang, Portage County Health and Human Services Department (Stevens Point, WI) – 2010
Mee Vang, Freedom Inc. (Madison, WI) – 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010
Nenglee Vang, Catholic Charities - Catholic Diocese of Green Bay (Green Bay, WI) – 2007, 2008, 2009
Nou Vang, Hmong National Development (Washington, DC) – 2008
Pa Vang, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, School of Continuing Education, Center for Urban Community Development (Milwaukee, WI) – 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010
Padawb Vang, Freedom Inc. (Madison, WI) – 2007, 2008
Pahua Vang, Freedom Inc. (Madison, WI) – 2010
Patshiab Vang (Madison, WI) – 2010
Phong Vang, Hmong American Association of Portage County (Stevens Point, WI) – 2008, 2009
Soua Vang (Madison, WI) – 2010
Sy Vang, University of Minnesota, Community-University Health Care Center (Minneapolis, MN) – 2008
Yangmee Vang, Hmong American Women's Association (Milwaukee, WI) – 2007, 2008, 2010
Yer Vang – 2010
Ying X. Vang, Eau Claire Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association (Eau Claire, WI) – 2008
Zongsae Vang, Hmong American Friendship Association (Milwaukee, WI) – 2007
Yeu Vu, La Crosse Area Hmong Mutual Assistance (La Crosse, WI) – 2007, 2008
Kia Vue, Safe Harbor of Sheboyhan County (Sheboygan, WI) – 2009
Mai Vang Vue, Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (Milwaukee, WI) – 2008
Mai Zong Vue, Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development (Madison, WI) – 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010
Sandy Vue, Freedom Inc. (Madison, WI) – 2010
Thai Vue, La Crosse Area Hmong Mutual Assistance (La Crosse, WI) – 2007, 2008
Diane Wolff, Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence (Madison, WI) – 2007, 2008
Andrew Xiong (Madison, WI) – 2009
Chamao Xiong, Catholic Charities - Catholic Diocese of Green Bay (Appleton, WI) – 2007, 2010
Kelly Xiong (Stevens Point, WI) – 2010
Kevin Xiong, Shades of Yellow (St. Paul, MN) – 2010

Leng Xiong, Dakota County Department of Community Corrections/Social Services (Shakopee, MN) – 2007
Lily Xiong, Sojourner Family Peace Center (Milwaukee, WI) – 2007, 2009
Mai Xiong, Safe Harbor of Sheboyhan County (Sheboygan, WI) – 2007, 2008, 2009
Mee Xiong (Wausau, WI) – 2010
Mee Vang Xiong (Madison, WI) – 2010
Nhiahser Il Xiong, Catholic Charities - Catholic Diocese of Green Bay (Oshkosh, WI) – 2007
Nhiasher Xiong, Boys & Girls Club of the Fox Valley (Appleton, WI) – 2008, 2009, 2010
Sheng Xiong, The Family Center (Wisconsin Rapids, WI) – 2008, 2009, 2010
Thao Mee Xiong – 2010
Xong Xiong, New Horizons Shelter and Women's Center (La Crosse, WI) – 2008, 2009, 2010
Hli Xyooj, Association for the Advancement of Hmong Women in Minnesota (Minneapolis, MN) – 2010
Chong Yang, Eau Claire Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association (Eau Claire, WI) – 2010
Holly Yang (Madison, WI) – 2010
Lilly Yang (Wausau, WI) – 2010
Mai Yang (Wausau, WI) – 2008
Mai Lee Yang, Eau Claire Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association (Eau Claire, WI) – 2010
Malila Yang, Hmong Mutual Assistance Association of Sheboygan (Sheboygan, WI) – 2008
Nor Yang, Hmong Bilingual Access & Counseling (Milwaukee, WI) – 2008
Nou Yang, Wilder Center for Communities, Amherst H. Wilder Foundation (Saint Paul, MN) – 2010
Va Yang, Hmong American Women's Association (Milwaukee, WI) – 2009, 2010
YerMay Yang, Catholic Charities - Catholic Diocese of Green Bay (Oshkosh, WI) – 2007, 2008
Helen Zong Moua (Fresno, CA) – 2007

api idv
Asian & Pacific Islander
Institute on Domestic Violence

450 Sutter Street, Suite 600
San Francisco, CA 94108
T 415.568.3315 F 415.954.9999
E info@apiidv.org W www.apiidv.org

Wisconsin Refugee Family Strengthening Project

Freedom Inc.
601 Bayview, Madison, WI 53715
P 608-217-7754
E refugeeproject@hotmail.com
W aboutfreedominc.com