



Hmong Women's Dialogues Project
Our Voices Create Our Future
A Project of the Hmong Women's Action Team (HWAT)

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Funded by the Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence

Formerly, Asian & Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence

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The Hmong Women's Giving Circle and the Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women

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I. BACKGROUND

In 2005, the Hmong Women's Action Team (HWAT) began its *Dialogues Project* to re-engage Hmong women in conversation about their future. This document offers some background information, provides a summary of the conversations, and makes recommendations for action based on the voices of Hmong women. The principal author of this report is Bo Thao with contributions from MayKao Yangblongsua Hang and members of the Hmong Women's Action Team.

The First Hmong Women's Retreat

In 1998 *Hmoob Thaj Yeeb* (the Hmong Violence Prevention Initiative) convened a group of Hmong women leaders from across the Twin Cities metropolitan area to talk about the root causes of violence against women and girls. At the retreat women identified the following factors they believe lead to violence against women and girls:

- ❖ Treating daughters and sons differently,
- ❖ Not valuing women and their contributions to family and community,
- ❖ Valuing marriages above physical and emotional safety in an abusive relationship,
- ❖ Valuing many children above the reproductive health or rights of women,
- ❖ Believing that males are born with more power than females, and
- ❖ Supporting marriage structures that set the stage for violence.

Out of this first retreat, the **Hmong Women's Action Team (HWAT)** was formed to further the mission of preventing violence against women and girls by ending sexism in the community. HWAT's projects, such as the Hmong Women's National Leadership Awards, the Hmong Women's Oral History Project, the *Hnub Tshiab* (New Day) newsletter etc. have focused on bringing awareness and a deeper understanding of how sexism devalues and hurts women and girls. Though much progress has been made, HWAT believes that transformative work is still needed to bring systematic lasting changes that raise the status and quality of life for Hmong women.

Re-Engaging Hmong Women

Almost a decade after the first retreat, HWAT sought support to enable Hmong women to gather again to reflect on our past, to discuss our current realities, and to dream our future. To re-engage Hmong women in this process we began by creating a safe space where we could safely speak our truths and voice our hopes for the future. Our goals for this planning process were to: (1) deepen our understanding of the current realities (challenges and assets) of Hmong women; (2) better understand the comfort level Hmong women have to address sexism in their families, clans, and community; and (3) identify a shared vision that Hmong women have for themselves with recommendations of strategies for action.

Engagement Process

The planning members made conscious efforts to dialogue with the community of Hmong women who actively work on Hmong women and girls' issues to ask about their support of and interest in participating in such a process. After affirmation from the women that this was an appropriate time to re-engage Hmong women, HWAT cast the net widely in its invitations to Hmong women to participate in the retreat. Invitations were sent to over 100 women in St. Paul/Minneapolis area to get the word out about the gathering resulting in positive responses from 50 women. Ultimately 38 women participated in the retreat, and additional learning circles were held to gather the input of those who could not attend the retreat.

II. SUMMARY OF THE CONVERSATIONS – VISION, GUIDING PRINCIPLES & STRATEGIES

Deepening Our Understanding of the Challenges / Obstacles Facing Hmong Women

The Hmong faced major acculturation challenges as a population that immigrated to America as refugees. Because community needs were great, Hmong women joined in efforts to find solutions, and have been integral parts of the community's advancement. However, Hmong women have found it more difficult to focus on their issues as women. The convergence and intersection of race, gender and culture has translated into a complex maze for Hmong women. Thus, Hmong women who work to bring about gender equity are either viewed as traitors of the culture by some community members, or seen as powerless by a mainstream community whose perspective may be that Hmong women and Hmong culture are not changing quickly enough.

To deepen our understanding of the complexities facing Hmong American women who wish for transformative systems changes that will bring gender equity, participants in this project were asked to identify challenges they face as individuals, collectively as Hmong women, as a Hmong American community and challenges they face with the external community (those outside of the Hmong community). The following is a summary of the remarks offered by Hmong women.

⌘ **Before talking about challenges and obstacles, Hmong women want it known that they have been a part of the tremendous progress Hmong Americans have made in America.**

Hmong women have fully embraced the new found opportunities in America. They realize they are the beneficiaries of a people that have struggled throughout history for their freedom. Pre-1975, there were no Hmong women who had completed college; today thousands are enrolled in higher education institutions, and a growing number are represented in major professions. Hmong women have played important leading and supporting roles in helping the community progress. In addressing the challenges, we must also celebrate the leadership and accomplishments of Hmong women in visible and lasting ways, and future actions should build upon Hmong women's strengths, assets, and leadership.

⌘ **Hmong women say that sexism is prevalent in families and communities* preventing them from creating the kind of future they see for themselves.**

Though tremendous progress has been made for the community, Hmong women identified that sexism is a major factor prohibiting them from fully determining their futures, and sexist practices and norms silences their decisions in certain situations. Hmong women have found new freedoms and choices in America, but systems often don't support them or carve out spaces for them.

Women recognized the following practices and cultural norms that they observe in their families, clans, and communities that perpetuate sexism.

* Women who participated in various conversations defined community to include both the Hmong and mainstream communities in which they live and interact.

1. Consistent messages that devalue women.
 - Women constantly receive messages that in a marriage they have to be “good wives.” This usually implies that women should be submissive to their husbands.
 - Young women are told and often feel that they are not accomplished or complete until they are married and have a husband.
 - Though often unspoken, polygamy still exist in some families because widowed or divorced women are treated as unworthy without a husband, or a woman accepts that polygamy is okay because she cannot have children (especially a son).
 - Young women who have accomplished certain levels of education are told that their accomplishments would be celebrated more if they were a son.
 - Daughters feel less valued than sons.
 - Married women are pressured to have children and are often made to feel unworthy if they do not have a son.
2. Socio-cultural structures/Systems do not support or recognize Hmong women’s decisions, talents, and rights.
 - The clan structure subjects women to systematic sexist treatment, especially when there are marital problems.
 - When a woman is abused by her husband, blame is automatically placed on her, and the act of violence is not condemned right away; rather elders and family leaders often resolve domestic violence by asking that the wife be loving and patient (*ua siab ntev*).
 - Women still don’t feel safe and protected enough to speak out about sexism. When they do, they are shunned, and seen as male bashers, or are told that they don’t understand Hmong culture.
 - The work that women do, particularly family care, is work considered to have no market value.
 - In wedding ceremonies, only men are allowed to be the marriage negotiators.
 - Bride price is a widely practiced tradition that is sometimes used to build submissiveness in women.
 - Hmong women’s organizations are seen as threatening to Hmong families. There are those who believe that Hmong women’s organizations are only created to destroy marriages.
 - Hmong women are often missing from the leadership circles in the community.
 - The mainstream American women’s movement does not feel welcoming and inclusive to Hmong women.
 - Mainstream America stereotypes Hmong culture without analyzing the intersections between race, culture, and gender – creating a double edged sword for Hmong women and resulting in fewer services that support the leadership and talents of Hmong women.
3. Societal norms and stereotypes perpetuate sexism.
 - Younger Hmong women feel that they were raised more equally, and were treated the same as their brothers, but when they interact with their extended families, clans etc. they are subjected to sexist treatment. Additionally, young women who are educated are not consulted about clan affairs – this means their talents and insights are often overlooked and underutilized.
 - In a patriarchal society, the belief is that only sons can carry on the “family name.”
 - There is a cultural norm that educated Hmong American women will not make good wives, and some men find it acceptable to go overseas to marry young women.
 - Mainstream America stereotypes Hmong culture – these stereotypes often feed into the view that “Hmong culture” has stagnated. Stereotypes feed into a belief that the Hmong are not changing fast enough to be “American”, and sees Hmong as outsiders of American culture. Therefore, when community problems are complex, cultural stereotypes easily gets blamed.

Challenges Facing Hmong Women Addressing Sexism: *(The following is not an exhaustive list, but rather a compilation of the challenges that were expressed by the women who have participated in the conversations so far.)*

| Individual Challenges | Challenges for Hmong Women | Challenges in the Hmong Community | Challenges in External Communities |
|--|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A woman may be unable to voice concerns or make changes, because it is easier to be part of the norm than to challenge it. - A woman may not be aware of sexism, and will not know what personal actions she can take. - There is not a system of support for a woman who wants to voice her concerns and experiences. - Self-censorship – Young women are paralyzed as they attempt to walk the fine line between remaining loyal to a culture badly badgered by racism and publicly challenging the gender inequalities embedded in Hmong culture. - Lack of support systems outside of family to address domestic violence or sexual assault. - A woman may not report DV/SA because she believes the man will be treated unfairly in the American system. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hmong women have excelled in mainstream leadership roles, but within the Hmong community the “cultural roles” are used to define a woman’s place in rituals and traditions and often bar a woman from public leadership within the Hmong community. - Unlike the mainstream women’s movement, Hmong women don’t have a movement they feel reflects them; thus, they don’t collectively work on decreasing sexism. - Some times Hmong women perpetuate sexist practices by becoming a second wife, or by accepting their husband’s decision to marry a second wife. - There are generational differences between older and younger women about how to deal with sexism. - Lack mentors and role models. - Women’s voices are not taken seriously. - Classism – education and the economic ladder have created new classes for Hmong women between those who are educated and see themselves as professionals in their field – this leads some to feel disrespected, misunderstood, and excluded. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The community reinforces sexism through cultural traditions of patriarchy and institutions like the clan system. E.g., certain rituals/traditions are not taught to women. - Hmong culture is used as an excuse to keep things the same. For example, when the community is challenged about why Hmong women cannot serve as marriage negotiators, the answer is simply that it is Hmong culture. - Hmong women are identified as not being the holder of culture or having the ability to change it when they expose the elements that devalue women. - A hierarchy of “isms” is created so if Hmong women choose to work on sexism they are accused of being traitors to the Hmong community and are seen as putting themselves before their community, because some feel that working on gender issues detract from work on racism, for example. There is lack of acceptance that women’s lives and experiences of violence and oppression could in fact be reality. - There is pressure to present a united front because of the Hmong community’s relationship to the mainstream community. - When domestic violence happens in families, there is a lack of community accountability. - There is a hierarchy of leadership and single women are at the bottom. - There is fear of making changes in gender roles. - There are few Hmong men who are willing to take a stand for Hmong women. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The environment and support system does not exist for those who experience violence and/or challenge their prescribed gender roles in society. - Sensationalizing and/or romanticizing Hmong culture. - Historically, there were few systematic means to include women of color in the larger women’s movement. Currently, Hmong women in the U.S. encounter barriers to their participation and still feel like outsiders when and if they can participate because the women’s movement has not been intentional enough about creating spaces for women of color. - Little support for Hmong women’s services. - A hierarchy of “-isms” is created, so women of color are made to feel that if they address sexism they are not addressing racism and so on. - Though culture changes over time, and is defined by all who make up that culture, people often forget this, so when Hmong women want to lead and make cultural changes that include gender agendas it is often not supported. - When issues and problems are complex, culture is blamed. - Hmong women are not in leadership or at decision making tables – hence their roles are too often tokenized. - External communities may do nothing because they don’t want to offend the Hmong. - Stereotypical thinking by mainstream Americans are double-edged: contradictorily reinforcing the model minority myth and yet as one of the poorest group of Asian Americans, attracting negative visibility in the media. - Lack of intentional external efforts that put Hmong women in leadership and decision making roles. - External communities may lack understanding of the intersectionality of race, gender, and culture (forcing fragmented perspectives). |

We Dream A Future Where...

Hmong women were asked to dream about their future. They were given space to brainstorm, and together they envision a future where “Hmong women can realize their full potentials in an equitable society that embraces women’s voices, choices, and talents.” They envision that “Hmong women will have led a cultural norms transformation that increases the status and value of women in partnership with systems and institutions that support and recognize women’s lives, leadership, and contributions to society.” To achieve the vision, Hmong women were asked to begin shaping key strategies, for which they offered the following guiding principles.

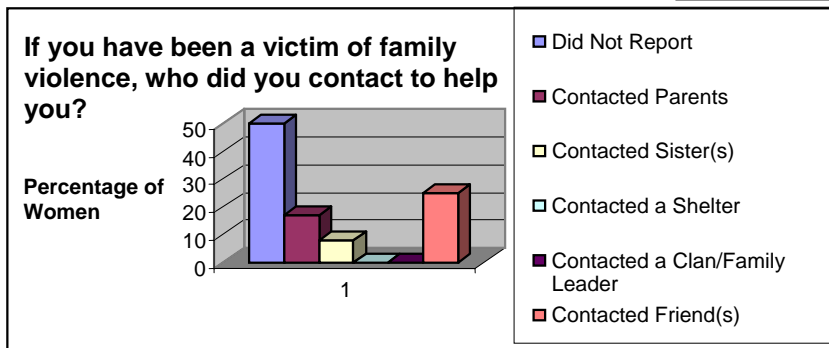
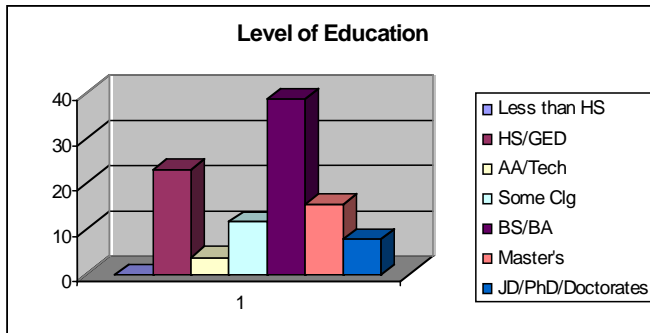
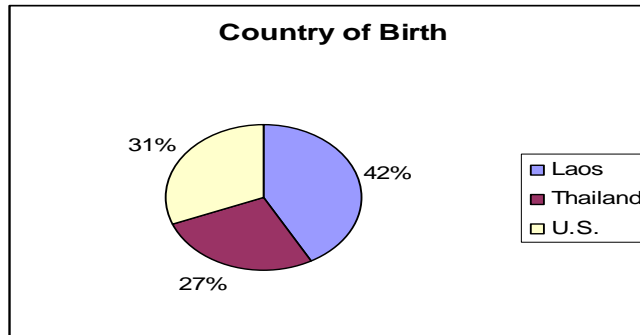
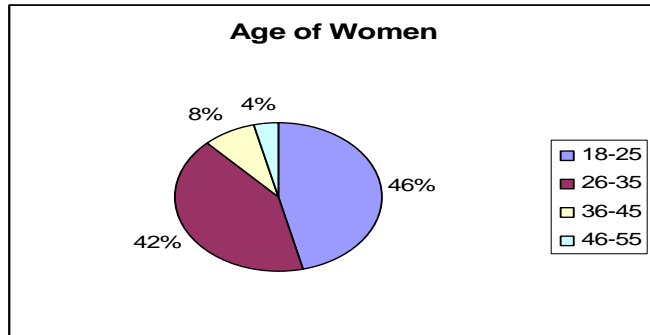
Key Guiding Principles:

- ⌘ Strategies must build upon Hmong women’s strengths, assets, and leadership.
- ⌘ Strategies to address gender issues must be incorporated at each stage of the lifecycle from pre-birth to elderly.
- ⌘ Those with power must be intentional about closing the gap between women and men’s access to and control over opportunities and resources.
- ⌘ Stakeholders must recognize that gender inequity exists at all levels and in all sectors of a patriarchal society – all action must empower women to take part in affecting society’s governance and decisions.
- ⌘ Where possible and appropriate, strategies must work in partnerships.
- ⌘ Treating women and men identically will not ensure equitable outcomes – strategies must cross issues and be comprehensive, and it is equity that must be built.
- ⌘ Strategies must eventually be institutionalized.
- ⌘ Strategies must address perceptions of “male marginalization”, because this will affect efforts to advance women’s lives.
- ⌘ Women should not bear the burden of change alone; thus, the participation of men is encouraged and necessary in order to achieve gender equity.

Strategies: *(These strategies are not definitive, but rather offer a beginning for those who are interested in working together to achieve gender equity.)*

| Individual Strategies | Strategies for Hmong Women | Strategies for the Hmong Community | Strategies for the External Community |
|--|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Be willing to take a public position. – Take action about your values and tell others about why you are doing it. – Tell your stories. – Learning about sexism and how it impacts you in your families, clans, community. – Each mother has an important role in educating her children. – Tell children it’s inappropriate when they say something that they may have heard that is sexist. – Serve as examples in your families and clans for other women. – Donate/give monetarily to support women’s leadership and work. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Develop methods and ways to support Hmong women professionally and personally to address gender equity. – Build a movement and concrete actions that Hmong women can take together. – Support organizations that have programming for Hmong women and girls. – Parenting to have strong daughters. – Increase data collection to see how Hmong women are actually doing. – Be clear and understand the function of Hmong traditions and what purpose they serve. – Organize Hmong women to teach each other about sexism. – Develop intergenerational approaches for Hmong women to address gender equity. – Support Hmong women’s leadership. – Support Hmong women’s organizations and urge them to expand their programs for women and girls. – Be explicit about women’s rights to their bodies. – Have messages about how sexist practices hurt women and girls and therefore families. – Extend ourselves outside of the Hmong community to other women of color and the mainstream women’s efforts to address gender equity. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Teach Hmong women and girls about traditions and rituals, and open these up for women to participate in a leadership role. – Acknowledge the gender inequity that exists in the community. – Teach all our sons and daughters equally. – Celebrate Hmong women and recognize their successes and leadership. – Talk about sexism in the Hmong community without blaming or shaming but learning about it so that we can create gender equity. – Include both genders in change efforts. – Encourage parenting that includes both mothers and fathers in care-taking roles. – Participation of men in gender equity efforts. – Talk about the value of family care, which is often considered women’s work. – Open up clan leaderships to women. – Develop internal and external strategies to bring gender equity. – Find ways to fully utilize talents of Hmong women. – Address gender equity, without pitting women against men. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Stronger messages about the value of both men and women. – Include Hmong women at the decision making tables of efforts focused on helping the Hmong community. – Challenge Hmong male leaders when Hmong women are not present. – Use power to leverage changes with the Hmong community. – Support organizations that provide services for Hmong women and girls. – Work with the Hmong community to garner support for policies that improve the lives of women and girls. – Women’s movements should ensure their leadership includes women of color, including Hmong women. – Gender training, collecting and utilizing gender-based data, developing progress indicators, and incorporating gender analysis and gender planning in all sectors. |

APPENDIX: Demographics of the 2005 Retreat Participants



Hmong Women's Action Team Dialogues Project -- Demographics Questionnaire Results

1. Age:

46% of participants were between the ages of 18-25
42% of participants were between the ages of 26-35
8% of participants were between the ages of 36-45
4% of participants were between the ages of 46-55
0% of participants were 56 or over

2. Country of birth:

42% of participants were born in Laos
27% of participants were born in Thailand
31% of participants were born in the United States
0% of participants were born in other countries.

3. Highest level of education completed:

0% of participants had less than a high school education
23% of participants completed High School or received their GED
4% of participants obtained a vocation/technical/or associate degree
12% of participants have completed some college
38% of participants obtained their bachelor's degree
15% of participants obtained their master's degree
8% of participants obtained their JD/Ph.D./Post Doctoral degree

4. Have you ever been a victim of family violence?

46% of participants have been a victim of family violence.
54% of participants have not been a victim of family violence.

4a. If you have been a victim of family violence, who did you contact to help you?

| | |
|--|---|
| <i>I did not contact/report it to anybody</i> | |
| x | x Of those who have been a victim of family violence, <u>50%</u> did not contact/report it to anyone. |
| <i>My in-laws</i> | |
| Of those who have been a victim of family violence, <u>0%</u> contacted their in-laws. | |
| <i>My brother(s)</i> | |
| Of those who have been a victim of family violence, <u>0%</u> contacted their brother(s). | |
| <i>My husband's clan leader</i> | |
| Of those who have been a victim of family violence, <u>0%</u> contacted their husband's clan leader. | |
| <i>My parents</i> | |
| x | Of those who have been a victim of family violence, <u>17%</u> contacted their parents. |
| <i>My sister(s)</i> | |
| x | Of those who have been a victim of family violence, <u>8%</u> contacted their sister(s). |
| <i>My friends</i> | |
| x | Of those who have been a victim of family violence, <u>25%</u> contacted their friends |
| <i>A shelter</i> | |
| Of those who have been a victim of family violence, <u>0%</u> contacted a shelter. | |
| Other(s), please list: | |
| N/A | |