



Gender and Culture in Transition: A Community Conversation

Report on Domestic Violence Forum with the
Fresno Hmong Community

October 4, 2014

Organizer
Central California Asian Pacific Women (CCAPW)

Host
Clovis Community College Center

Sponsor
Centro La Familia Advocacy Services, Inc.

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Background

On October 4, 2014, Central California Asian Pacific Women (CCAPW) convened a forum on domestic violence, *Gender and Culture in Transition: A Community Conversation*, in Fresno. The groundbreaking gathering, co-sponsored by Centro La Familia Advocacy Services Inc. and hosted on the Clovis Community College Center campus, brought together for the first time legal, social services, education professionals, and Hmong advocates to begin to address the problem of domestic violence in the Hmong community.

CCAPW, a Fresno-based nonprofit organization and convener of diverse Asian and Pacific Islander American (APIA) communities, led the event coordination efforts. Since its inception 35 years ago, CCAPW empowers and advances the leadership of APIA women and their communities. The CCAPW board was strategic in both the planning of the forum as well as the process of selecting and working closely with an experienced facilitator who is both knowledgeable about the issues of domestic violence and its intersection with gender and cultural norms in the Hmong community.

The planning committee solicited the expertise of Bo Thao-Urabe, Senior Director of Capacity Building and Organizational Learning at Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy (AAPIP). Ms. Thao-Urabe shared lessons learned from her work with Hmong domestic violence advocates and institutions in Minnesota and Wisconsin to help inform the work in Fresno. Her guidance helped organizers think through the facilitation of the forum as a tool to help participants understand the larger context of the issue of domestic violence and begin to have productive conversations about solutions.

The planning focused on three key guiding questions: (1) What structures (i.e., social networks, clan systems, conflict resolution protocols, etc.) within the Hmong community create barriers for solutions to the problems of domestic violence?; (2) How do we begin to address the domestic violence problem in the Hmong community in Fresno? (e.g., If this is the first time leaders have come together to explore ways they can support Hmong victims and survivors, they need to begin to understand their roles in the community); and (3) In consideration of their respective professions, what are forum participants willing to do? Are they willing to challenge the systems if the systems do not work? (e.g., If victims will not show up in the mainstream shelters, are participants willing to challenge the process?). These questions guided the formation of the program agenda with the purpose to spark conversations among forum participants to collectively examine the problem of domestic violence and encourage open discussion of solutions.

What is your overall assessment of the success of today's event in addressing the issue of domestic violence in the Hmong community?

“Good first step for community dialogue. Appreciated the emphasis on the complexity of the issue within the Hmong community.”

“The event was profound and powerful. The domestic violence survivor's story was eye opening to hear that domestic violence occurs in the Hmong community.”

“It was great to have a discussion that was open and allowed everyone to voice their opinions and thoughts of how to address DV in the Hmong community.”

Forum Overview

The primary goal of the forum was to examine domestic violence within the context of gender equity as a larger societal problem and how it impacts the local Fresno Hmong community. The forum objectives were to: (1) bring together open-minded individuals to develop a critical understanding of the role of gender and culture in domestic violence within the Hmong community; (2) foster engaging conversations on how to begin to address the problem of domestic violence in Fresno; and (3) explore ideas to increase access to resources. The program agenda consisted of a keynote address, along with two panels of speakers that included a domestic violence survivor and field experts.

The keynote address, *A Global Perspective on Gender Equity in the Hmong Community* by Bo Thao-Urabe, framed the issue of domestic violence from a global perspective on achieving gender equity, and

how gender-based violence manifests in the Hmong community. In addition, the address emphasized the importance of generating a foundation of increased awareness around a shared language and understanding of domestic violence among participants.

The first panel, *A Survivor's Story*, demonstrated a case from the perspective of a Hmong domestic violence survivor. One of the forum's planning committee member served as moderator and worked closely with the survivor to tell her story about how the relationship with her abuser began, what led up to the first incidence of abuse, the challenges she faced, and how she eventually became free of violence. It was important to have individuals she trusted, in this case her lawyer and District-Attorney Elect Lisa Smittcamp, be present at the forum to provide emotional support. In addition, the committee developed a set of questions to engage Lisa Smittcamp in a conversation to help audience members understand her role in regards to the legal system and the Hmong community. The questions included: (1) Can you share your experiences of how Hmong domestic violence cases have generally ended up in your office?; (2) What are some disconnects with using a legal framework to address domestic violence in the Hmong community?; (3) What do you think are some of the challenges for the system if it strives to be responsive to the community?; and (4) What do you think are opportunities to work together to prevent and address domestic violence in ethnic communities?

What structures (i.e., social networks, clan systems, conflict resolution protocols, etc.) within the Hmong community create barriers for solutions to the problems of domestic violence?

The second panel, *An Exploration of Domestic Violence, Gender Equity, and Culture in the Hmong Community Today*, allowed for a focused and engaged conversation among an expert panel moderated by Bo Thao-Urabe. Given the limited amount of time, this panel's purpose was to educate and prepare participants for the roundtable conversations later in the day. The speakers were:

- *Song Evelyn Lee, Ph.D.*
Faculty, Counselor Education and Rehabilitation
California State University, Fresno
- *Kong Vang*
Hmong Resettlement Officer
Fresno County District Attorney's Office
- *Cher Teng Yang (Bee Yang), MSW*
Faculty Liaison/Lecturer, Title IV-E Child
Welfare Stipend Program, Social Work Education
California State University, Fresno
- *Bao Yang*
Domestic Violence Victim's Advocate,
Legal Department, Fresno Police Department
Marjaree Mason Center

The panel highlighted the knowledge and experiences, along with the challenges and barriers that experts face when working to address the problem of domestic violence in the Hmong community. The questions asked during this panel were: (1) From your experience, can you share an example that demonstrates how Hmong culture and its systems create barriers to resolving domestic violence?; (2) In your profession or field of expertise, what kinds of challenges have you faced that you believe inhibits your ability to effectively address, reduce, or end domestic violence in the Hmong community?; and (3) Can you offer some concrete suggestions for Hmong individuals and community leaders who are committed to addressing and ending domestic violence?

Participants

Over 50 participants attended the forum, ranging from professionals in social work, education, health care, human and social services, victim advocates, law enforcement, to community members and leaders. Because of the sensitive nature of the subject of domestic violence, the planning committee was deliberate in creating a safe environment conducive to meaningful conversations. Thus, participation in this event was by invitation only. The primary goal for selecting these individuals was to build leadership among a core group who could then lead the way to offer new perspectives, ideas, and alternatives to address the problem of domestic violence. In addition, it was extremely important to engage individuals who were: (1) willing to have difficult yet critical conversations about the problem of domestic violence in the

Hmong community; (2) open to discussing how its systems help or perpetuate the problem; and (3) ready to explore ideas and alternatives to best help Hmong victims and survivors access support services.

Findings

Community Conversations Summary

The afternoon group conversations encouraged participants to identify shared aspirations for achieving gender equity and to explore the problem of domestic violence in the Fresno Hmong community. Bo Thao-Urabe moderated the conversations using the World Café method that involved three rounds of conversations prompted by key questions followed by a large group sharing session. This method provided a space for participants to openly explore the issues while utilizing their shared knowledge to generate ideas and solutions on domestic violence. Organizers identified and trained facilitators to moderate the group conversations and document responses (below).

Question 1: How can we achieve gender equity? What would gender equity look and feel like for Hmong men and women?

- **Open and Transparent Communication:** There is a great need to value everyone's voice, particularly, the practice of open and transparent communication and conversations about the sensitive issue of domestic violence in the Hmong community (e.g., If elders lecture young people about having healthy relationships, they should model that behavior for their children and family).
- **Redefine and Rethink Gender Roles:** There needs to be acceptance among both genders that Hmong women and girls can lead and are equally valuable as Hmong men and boys. The Hmong are now in America and Hmong women have just as much access to education and career opportunities.

Family needs to be involved in redefining manhood and what it looks like for Hmong boys and young men. This includes the shared responsibilities of both genders. Men need to share privileges. Mothers have an important role in the behavioral development of boys and young men and how they learn to treat girls and women.

Community and systems (such as the legal system) need to work together and learn about each other's roles.

Traditional roles must be challenged. Gender roles of boys and girls, men and women, in the family need to be redefined. There should be no pressure to be traditional and no gender categories. The community should aspire towards power equity and equal access. That means, redefine the power dynamics of men and women. For example, there needs to be spaces for Hmong women in the traditional Hmong 18 Clan council systems. Women need to be at the table with men.

Question 2: What is the role of community and systems in helping to raise awareness, improving service for those who are impacted by domestic violence, and redefining gender values and practices?

- **Family Strengthening:** Families need to be courageous and confront the root of the domestic violence problems within Hmong households. Families and clan leaders need to follow through on promises to help daughters who become victims even if it means having to put traditions aside. Families need help to become equipped with the education, the skills, and awareness of resources to intervene in domestic violence cases. In addition, families need to rethink the ways they can invest equally in boys and girls. Mothers have an important role to play in educating children

about domestic violence, and healthy relationships between boys and girls. What children learn from their mothers, they can use to educate their peers.

- **Awareness and Acceptance:** The community needs to recognize that domestic violence exists and harms Hmong families. One significant step is to increase awareness of the domestic violence issue among Hmong elders, leaders, and those who can influence change in the family. Another strategy is to invite the elders for leadership training on domestic violence and how they can be supportive to the needs of victims and abusers. Elders involved in the traditional practice of Hmong marriage rituals can inform and educate the couple and their family about domestic violence during the wedding ritual.
- **Education and Training:** Safe spaces must be created for those who need to learn about the issues of domestic violence, want to talk about it, and want to know where to seek support. Parents and community leaders need to be trained on the impact of domestic violence on the family, particularly, the long-term effects on children who witness the abuse. Children and young adults should be educated on the signs of domestic violence so they can recognize it when it happens and can seek the necessary intervention services. In addition, there should be more emphasis on prevention strategies that teach young people to build strong, healthy, and loving relationships based on respect.
- **Holistic Services:** Existing systems need to practice holistic coalition building among individuals, organizations, and agencies to effectively address domestic violence victims and perpetrators. Although there are many systems, there is still a tremendous need to educate the community on how to best utilize the systems to be effective in the prevention and intervention of domestic violence. There is a great need for more diverse staff who are qualified, trained, and culturally and linguistically competent to bridge the gap between systems and the community. Wrap-around services need to be improved and more responsive to meet the gaps and needs of the Hmong community. In addition, the visibility and accessibility of domestic violence services and resources must be increased within ethnic communities.
- **Collaboration:** Both the community and systems need to recognize that domestic violence exists in all cultures. Education about the issue is critical to ending gender-based violence. Community and systems (i.e., the legal system) need to cooperate, pool resources, and share the responsibilities to learn about each other's roles in order to effectively address domestic violence. The Hmong community needs to learn the functions of the legal systems to better understand how to successfully navigate it. The systems have much to learn about the Hmong community, its historical and current struggles and challenges with the various systems so it can be better accountable to the community's needs. The community can play a role in educating the mainstream systems about Hmong culture and its practices in order to generate mutual understanding, respect, and collaboration.

One significant step is to increase awareness of the domestic violence issue among Hmong elders, leaders, and those who can influence change in the family.

Question 3: What's possible to do here in Fresno to address domestic violence in the Hmong community? Specifically, what role(s) can you play personally? Also, who are the existing organizations that you believe can do something? Who are the leaders that you believe should be involved and how should they be involved?

- **Ongoing Conversations:** There should be more safe spaces to foster conversations and increased education and awareness on domestic violence and its impact in the Hmong community.
- **Community-Wide Engagement:** Ongoing conversations about domestic violence need to target diverse stakeholders that include youth, elders, parents, community leaders, clan leaders, allies and those who understand both Hmong culture and the systems. Young people who are often seen

as “invisible” yet who are deeply affected by victims of domestic violence should also be included. It is important to involve families as a whole to create sustainable change.

- **Education and Awareness Building:** Conversations about domestic violence should emphasize family empowerment, strong parenting skills, and education on the negative impacts of violence and abuse on children. The messages need to be clear—Hmong culture does not tolerate gender-based violence. Hmong male leaders need to serve as champions in this movement to shift the narrative within a traditional cultural system for long-term change. Also, elders can champion public awareness campaigns to influence the cultural norms and introduce new perspectives on domestic violence. Other key messengers and champions include mothers and youth who have strong social networks. The messaging needs to target hard-to-reach individuals and groups—those who will not reach out for services or those who are resistant to new ideas as to how to end domestic violence. Youth media and ethnic media (e.g. Hmong TV, radio, Facebook, etc.) are good messaging mediums.
- **New Approaches and Strategies:** Unconventional approaches to educate and create awareness must be utilized. Forums and conferences on the subject should occur on school campuses, at family functions, and in cultural awareness classes at the junior colleges. Education also needs to focus on helping victims understand their rights. Young people need to be educated to know their rights. More education and awareness on healthy relationships, starting with young people in their teens and college-age, should be made available. This should not wait until they get married.
- **Access to Resources:** Resources and services must be readily accessible to victims. Support systems are in place to help victims who come forward to report abuse. Intervention services for couples and children must be readily available, meaning staff and advocates must speak the appropriate language and should be culturally competent.
- **Systems-Wide Change:** Hmong cultural practices and traditions need to be adjusted to the current times to support healthy relationships and the systems (outside the community) to appropriately respond to domestic violence cases. Agencies need to explore new strategies to improve the delivery of domestic violence services to the Hmong community. For systemic improvement to occur, change should start with those already in the system. For example, in Merced, advocates are working with a respected judge to convene Hmong elders to do a community training on domestic violence.
- **Shared Learning:** The Fresno community can learn from other ethnic communities and the strategies and practices used to address domestic violence. What are the current best practices in the field? What approaches can the Hmong community modify to address the problem of domestic violence and support victims and abusers in a meaningful way?
- **Research:** There is a tremendous need for data and research to further demonstrate and validate the domestic violence problem as a crisis and create a sense of urgency for the community to collectively address the issue. Such data should include number of victims, demographics on who the victims and abusers are, information on where and what cases are surfacing, along with what is being done and who is doing what to address the problem.

Evaluation

Participants completed an evaluation form and provided feedback on the forum. The feedback will help organizers in planning a follow-up event. Overall, participants expressed appreciation for such an event that brought together a segment of the community to begin analyzing the problem of domestic violence in the Hmong community.

Recommendations

Moving Forward

The *Gender and Culture in Transition: A Community Conversation* forum accomplished the primary goal to convene Hmong community leaders to begin to have critical conversations about domestic violence. As the roundtable discussions resulted in the shared desire to continue to facilitate more conversations, event organizers have explored the following opportunities to further support the Hmong community:

- **Ongoing Conversations:** Continue to create safe spaces to foster meaningful conversations in the community and involve diverse groups (Hmong elders, clan leaders, youth, women, men, etc.) on an ongoing and annual basis to encourage shared understanding of the problem. Involve allies that include organizations, groups, and agencies knowledgeable and sensitive to the topic of domestic violence. Organize and facilitate forums and events with the community.
- **Resources Development:** Develop additional funding sources and resources to convene Hmong community members and stakeholders to further analyze the problem of domestic violence and explore ways to create more access to resources and support systems. Resources should support ongoing education and training on domestic violence for youth, professionals, and the community, while being accessible in multiple languages and different venues.
- **Education, Awareness, Training:** Recruit and train key stakeholders from the Hmong community to commit to organizing and facilitating conversations at least on an annual basis. Encourage Hmong men and women to take part in planning and participating in the gatherings. Provide educational opportunities for increased awareness around the prevention and intervention of domestic violence to help families, youth, clan leaders, elders, and professionals. This allows for a community-wide campaign that engages everyone to consciously take part in solutions toward ending domestic violence.
- **Shared Learning:** Create opportunities that allow local advocates, stakeholders, and service providers to learn from others in the field in order to better inform their local efforts to combat domestic violence. Explore other models such as [The Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence](#) that works with ethnic communities, shelters, and various agencies to end domestic violence. The Wisconsin state legislature allocates funding to support collaborative efforts, education, and campaigns on domestic violence that engages refugee and immigrant groups.
- **Research:** Conduct research to track data on the occurrence of domestic violence, victims, and abusers, and document the stories to demonstrate the impact of this problem on women, children, and families. Research should include focus groups, testimonies based on lived-experiences from domestic violence survivors, victims, and those individuals who work closely with the Hmong community. The research should explore the mental and emotional implications of domestic violence on victims and children who witness this abuse. There is an untold story about the true impact of domestic violence in the Hmong community.