



Reflections on Social Change

*A Report on the Community
Engagement Process of Hnub Tshiab:
Hmong Women Achieving Together*

Published By

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Acknowledgements

Hnub Tshiab: Hmong Women Achieving Together would like to thank our supporters, community engagement participants, and funders for their contributions to our community engagement process. Through their support and the donation of their generous time, our organization was able to share the information within this report to our communities.

Colleagues

This project was supported by individuals who served as “gatekeepers” to several of the focus group and individual interview participants. We would like to thank the following:

Jesse Kao Lee, *Hmong Program Manager* at Ready 4 K offered guidance in the project and introduced us to the male participants in this research.

Sheng Lee, *Director of Economic Development* at Hmong American Partnership for connecting us to female participants in this research, as well as conducted the interviews.

Funder

Asian American Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy

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Executive Summary

Hnub Tshiab: Hmong Women Achieving Together (HWAT) is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization based in Saint Paul, Minnesota. For over ten years, HWAT has been instrumental in improving the lives of Hmong women and girls by working on social change projects in the Twin Cities and its metropolitan area.

In the fall of 2007, HWAT was awarded a gender and equity grant from the Asian American Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy to conduct research on the effectiveness of its operations, and to identify key areas of strengths and challenges around organizational growth and capacity building as it related to gender and equity work. The research consisted of reviewing organizational documents, conducting focus groups and personal interviews with stakeholders, and conducting dialogue sessions with HWAT's board of directors.

Data collected over a period of three months revealed several critical issues for HWAT's engagement of the Hmong community in gender and equity work, including the perception of HWAT's operations and services. Key themes from the research included the following:

- Double-bind messages around gender roles and responsibilities.
- Fear issues as it relates to gender and equity.
- The power of language in promoting gender and equity work.
- Build coalitions of support from Hmong men and non-Hmong allies.
- Support the work of Hmong men in gender and equity.
- Define gender and equity within the Hmong community.

As a result of these themes, the following recommendations were discussed and noted as critical to HWAT's future work by the board of directors:

- Develop and implement strategies to cultivate community supporters and allies in HWAT's work.
- Create targeted key messages on gender and equity work to deliver to HWAT communities, partners, and stakeholders.
- Explore education and information forums, talking circles, or dialogues to increase visibility and participation in HWAT activities, and to inform HWAT's stakeholders about gender and equity issues.
- Support Hmong men in their work to address gender and equity issues within the community and assist them in the most appropriate ways.
- Create an organizational brand identity that includes marketing, communications, and public relations messages that speaks to the successes and benefits of HWAT's work in the community.

Introduction

Hnub Tshiab: Hmong Women Achieving Together (HWAT)¹ is a volunteer-driven nonprofit organization founded in 1998 when a group of Hmong women leaders from around the Twin Cities metropolitan area gathered at a retreat to talk about issues affecting Hmong women and girls. This gathering came as a result of the socio-cultural issues prevalent in the Hmong community at that time in Minnesota.

Several incidences of domestic abuse and violence, especially the cases of Bao Lor² and Khoua Her³ in 1998 drew attention to the increasing conflict related to gender roles, and what was considered at that time a lack of response from the Hmong community to addressing violence against Hmong women and girls. From this gathering, the Hmong women in attendance concluded that violence against women and girls was a result of a patriarchal system that supported the differential treatment between Hmong men and women. This difference they attributed to sexism, “a discrimination or prejudice based on sex and includes a set of behaviors, attitudes or conditions that foster stereotypes of social roles based on sex.”⁴ As a result of this behavior, conscious or not, Hmong women’s human rights were threatened. Because family is central to Hmong society, including Hmong women and girls, this differential treatment would come to impact the whole community, not just victims and survivors of these actions.

From this gathering, a core group of individuals discussed the formation of a formal group to address the “unspoken” issue of violence against Hmong women and girls. Thus, the Hmong Women’s Action Team was formed with the mission to prevent violence against Hmong women and girls by ending sexism in the community. For a period of eight years, HWAT took on projects that specifically addressed the elimination of sexism in the community. These

In the community action planning process that led to the development of HWAT in 1998, the following were identified as factors that contribute to sexism and subsequent violence against women and girls in the Hmong community:

1. Treating sons and daughters differently.
2. Not valuing educated wives and women and their contributions.
3. Valuing marriage above physical and emotional safety in an abusive relationship.
4. Valuing many children above the reproductive health or rights of women.
5. Believing that males are born with more power than females.
6. Supporting marriage structures that set the stage for violence.

These root causes are addressed with various projects that have changed from year to year.

¹ Hnub Tshiab: Hmong Women Achieving Together was originally called the Hmong Women’s Action Team. In 2006, Hnub Tshiab: Hmong Women Achieving Together became the current agency name.

² “Tragedy Gives Rise to Hmong Women’s Antiviolence Action,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 12 March 1999.

³ *Women Who Kill Their Children: Case Study and Conclusions Concerning the Differences in Fall From Maternal Grace by Khoua Her and Andrea Yates*, http://goliath.ecnext.com/coms2/gi_0199-3321818/Women-who-kill-their-children.html (June 2003)

⁴ Merriam Webster On-Line Dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sexism>

projects engaged men and women, Hmong and non-Hmong, and individuals and organizations to build a coalition of support in changing patriarchal systems within the community.

HWAT projects have included the following in its ten year history:

Oral History Project captured the voices and stories of intergenerational Hmong women that included their stories and challenges.

The Tips Project provided educational information and statistics about prevention measures in addressing violence and sexism.

Leadership Institute and **Leadership Banquet** empowers and develops Hmong women leadership skills as well brings a recognition to Hmong women's leadership.

Dialogues Retreat engaged Hmong women from multiple generations to dialogue on issues of gender, sexism, and privilege.

Hmong Women Speakers Series engages and educates a wide audience about the Hmong culture and its strengths and challenges from the perspective of Hmong women.

Many projects and years later in 2005, HWAT held another large retreat to talk about the progress Hmong women, including themselves as an organization, made since 1998. In August 2005, over 38 Hmong women participated in a 2-day *Dialogues Project* retreat to share and discuss their concerns as Hmong women and to strategize ways to take action on the issues expressed.

The project illustrated that more work around gender equity was needed to eliminating sexism and to empowering women within the community. The core group of HWAT women learned that the social change they wanted to address, eliminating sexism, was still in fact a long term goal that could not materialize with the current group activities and effort. It was apparent that in order to accelerate the social change process and to have a wider impact on the community, the organization needed to take immediate action in several areas.

First, it was critical that HWAT expanded its notion of social change including its mission and purpose. Secondly, the group knew that in order to improve the lives of Hmong women and girls, a much stronger organizational structure including systems and processes needed to be in place for creating effective social change. Finally, it needed to target specific areas of social change work and

be more strategic about its message, its purpose, its services, and how it would continue to do its work when one of the greatest barriers to the agency was the lack of attention paid to gender and equity.

It was this retreat that sparked HWAT to undergo a strategic planning process that included plans for incorporation, a revision of the mission statement, and a name change from the Hmong Women's Action Team to its current name, *Hnub Tshiab*, which means "a new day" in Hmong, and in English *Hnub Tshiab* is also called *Hmong Women Achieving Together*. The new mission of HWAT is to **be a catalyst for lasting cultural, institutional, and social change to improve the lives of Hmong women.**

Additionally, through this process, HWAT developed four “cornerstone” areas; these areas also serve as a foundation for programming and service delivery, and are rooted in a systems and social change philosophy. This philosophy incorporates core guiding principles related to the agency’s thinking on change and systems.



Diagram 1. HWAT’s Four Cornerstones

The guiding principles of HWAT when working with individuals, organizations and communities are:

- Sexism leads to violence against women.
- It is OK for Hmong women to focus on Hmong women.
- Collective action focused on systemic changes is required to raise the status of women and must be led by women.
- Strong Hmong women contribute to the growth and health of families and community – the strengthening of one does not disempower the other.
- We recognize that a byproduct of change is fear and conflict. We are here because we are committed to building the capacity of and improving the lives of Hmong families by increasing the status and value of Hmong women.
- Making social changes at the systems level requires organizing and mobilizing of individuals to take action.

Background and Scope of Research

In the summer of 2007, the Asian American Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy (AAPIP) sent out a request for proposals to engage Asian Pacific Islander (API) organizations and organizations who serve API communities to engage in a reflection process that would illuminate the impact of gender and equity in social change and social justice. The grant was an opportunity for organizations to reflect on what it means to be a social justice organization; what it means to create social change; and, to reflect on their organization's history as it related to doing gender and equity work.

The grant came at an opportune time in that HWAT had completed its strategic planning process, as well as it had started to pilot a program in leadership development for Hmong women. The agency was looking to grow its programs and rethink the way it could serve its communities in a way that could differ from previous activities and projects. Given that the history of HWAT activities focused on social change and creating systems change within the Hmong community, HWAT applied for and was awarded a grant to conduct research and a reflection of the agency's work in social justice issues.

It was determined from the strategic planning process and Dialogues Retreat of 2005 that in order for HWAT to grow and create true systems change, it needed to engage an audience generally not targeted and/or served. This meant that grant dollars awarded to the agency would focus on researching and discovering the ways in which Hmong men, elder Hmong women, and Hmong women who were not currently engaged in HWAT work thought about gender and equity issues. This goal was and still serves as a tremendous challenge, although not entirely impossible to achieve.

The Overall Goal of the Community Engagement

Evaluate through multiple forms of community dialogues how effective *Hnub Tshiab: Hmong Women Achieving Together* has been in carrying out its work. More specifically and importantly to the organization's future, identify ways in which HWAT can improve on its ability and capacity to engage key stakeholders, who have not been as engaged, in order to do social change work on a more systemic level.

Goal One

Attain a comprehensive understanding of the various key stakeholders' perceptions of HWAT and the work it does.

HWAT proposed three activities in the engagement; each was aligned with specific goals to engage marginalized key stakeholders.

To meet the first goal, HWAT reviewed, collected, and studied written documents and oral works produced by the media for public consumption pertaining to HWAT and the Hmong woman's

experience. HWAT's purpose for implementing this activity was to identify any gaps between the agency's understanding of the work it does and the Hmong community's perceptions of what it does. The documents reviewed in this study included newspaper articles, editorial pieces, and evaluation surveys HWAT designed and implemented. While this was not an activity that directly engaged the community in dialogues, this component was a systematic look at past community dialogues HWAT had either been a part of or had led. The findings from this activity were used to inform other parts of its community engagement project.

HWAT expected that the activity would yield the following:

- A comprehensive understanding of stakeholders with interest and power to contribute to creating social justice for women and girls in the Hmong American community.
- The history of and the current state of affairs between HWAT and the broader Hmong American community.
- Gaps in various outreach methods or approaches to engaging difficult-to-reach Hmong stakeholders.

The second activity HWAT conducted was to interview women who were already engaged in gender work in the Hmong community; this activity built on the information learned from the review of organizational and media documents. The goal was to conduct interviews with women from each the following groups: HWAT's Leadership Institute, the Hmong Women's Giving Circle, the Professional Hmong Women Association, the Association for the Advancement of Hmong Women in Minnesota, current and past members of Hnub Tshiab, and women who put together the Hmong Women's Conference in the fall of 2005. These stakeholders were Hmong women who were currently engaged or had past involvement in gender and equity work in the Hmong American community.

Goal Two
Hear from Hmong women why they are engaged in gendered work and identify outreach strategies to engage key stakeholders who are missing from the gender equity movement.

Through the interviews, HWAT hoped to acquire a more nuanced understanding about the reasons of engagement in gendered work; how the women framed gender and equity issues and the impact of it on their success; the level of participation in gender and equity work; the impact of this type of work on their relationships with family, friends, and other community members; and how they understand their work within a social justice framework.

HWAT expected that the interviews would:

- Contribute to agency knowledge about the impact of various outreach methods on key Hmong stakeholders' willingness to engage in dialogues about women's leadership and gender equity.

- Identify the many various outreach methods and ways HWAT could adapt the strategies to engage nontraditional stakeholders.

Goal Three

Share information with and learn from marginalized stakeholders why they are not engaged and how HWAT could change this situation.

For its third goal, HWAT proposed conducting focus groups with Hmong stakeholders who were marginally engaged or not engaged in the movement to bring about social justice for women. The purpose behind these focus groups was to share information with and to attain information as to what participants were thinking; specifically, how they frame the gender and equity problem,

what they believe defined gender and equity, and how to engage them in more gender and equity work.

HWAT believed that the engagement process would contribute significantly to the organization's thinking about its work and specifically shed light on how the organization could effectively engage a more diverse group of Hmong community members in social justice work.

METHODOLOGY

There were several methods used in the agency's community engagement process. This section outlines the different methods used for the activities related to the process.

Organizational Leadership Dialogues

It was important to understand the history of HWAT through the lens of past and current leadership. Thus, the method chosen to engage organizational leadership was to conduct two dialogue sessions to review the findings and come to a conclusion about the information. Each session lasted approximately one hour and occurred during monthly board meetings.



Participants in the 2007 Hmong Women Leadership Institute

In the first dialogue session, the group (consisting of 5 board members) reviewed the data collected from the interviews and focus group. Members addressed the questions mentioned in Appendix B and responded with their thoughts and comments about the findings. Members were given the opportunity to analyze the findings from other data gathered prior to the dialogue session, and to make meaning from the information. As a result, the recommendations listed in this report were developed.

A second dialogue session conducted provided the opportunity for organizational leadership to review any final learning and to produce key next step items. In this session, members provided their final thoughts regarding the data and commented on future tasks for the agency. Included with this was a discussion about organizational intentionality to align strategic goals with activities.

Literature Review of Internal and External Documents

An exploration of documents to understand HWAT's ten year history around gender equity work in the community was reviewed. These documents included: the Oral History Project, files and paperwork related to the leadership banquet, strategic plans and work plans for projects initiated and implemented, HWAT newsletters and articles. Additionally, a review of the research literature on Hmong women was conducted.

Focus Group of Hmong Women Engaged in Gender and Equity Work

The key methodology used for this constituency was a focus group. HWAT originally wanted to conduct three separate focus groups with the following: women engaged in gender equity work, Hmong men, and women who had an interest in gender and equity work or were participants of HWAT's work in the past. Because of timing and scheduling conflicts, the group was able to conduct one focus group and decided to interview available participants from the other two groups.

For the focus group, HWAT contacted Hmong women's agencies (past and present) that served or currently serves Hmong women in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. This list consisted of the following agencies: participants from the *Hmong Women Leadership Institute*, the *Hmong Women Circle*, the *Hmong Women Giving Circle*, *Women Association of Hmong and Lao*, the *Association for the Advancement of Hmong Women*, the *Professional Hmong Women Association*, and the *Ntxhais Hmoob* (Hmong girls) of the *College of St. Catherine*. A total of fifteen women were invited to attend the group; two to three from each group mentioned above were invited. In the end, five women were able to attend the scheduled focus group. Those in attendance represented the following groups: the *Professional Hmong Women Association*, *Hmong Women Giving Circle*, *Hmong Women Leadership Institute*, *Hmong Women Circle*.



Photo Courtesy of Professional Hmong Women Association

HWAT was most interested in gathering these women's groups together to address gender and equity and to have a conversation about steps that all women's agencies in the Hmong community could take to helping elevate the status of Hmong women. Thus, participants were invited to address the questions mentioned in Appendix B. Although the session was guided by the questions, the session itself was an informal structure; individuals who participated also were able to ask questions of each other and share openly the challenges and strengths of women's groups in the community.

Individual Interviews: Hmong Women and Hmong Men

For the individual interviews, HWAT took a snowball sampling approach to identify key interviewees. Additionally, a stakeholder analysis was conducted with the board to determine initial contacts for the interviews. It was decided that men who were involved or supported the work of Hmong women would be easier to find and interview than men who did not support

gender and equity. The consultant firm contacted one Hmong man who then provided names of other men who had an interest in the process.

It was important to get a wide range of Hmong men interviewed, thus a total of nine Hmong men were interviewed. The men interviewed were between the ages of 20 and 50 years. Four men were in their 40s, four men were in their 20s, and one was in his 30s. Because of time and access to participants, HWAT was not able to interview individuals over 50 years of age or the youth population.

Each man was approached either by phone and/or email. Questions were sent ahead of time to them. Approximately one hour was set aside to interview each of them, either face to face or on the phone.

For the interviews with Hmong women, a snowball sampling method was also used. HWAT wanted to interview a diverse set of Hmong women who had participated in HWAT's activities in the past or had interest in gender and equity work. Of the seven participants, two were in their 30s, four in their 20s, and one in her late 40s. Because of time and scheduling conflicts, HWAT did not interview those over 50 or the youth population; although, these two groups would be important in future work.

The **snowball sampling** approach is described as finding an initial group of appropriate informants who are then asked to identify other informants who they believe are knowledgeable about the issues.

Each woman was approached by email and/or phone and was given questions ahead of time to review. Interviews were conducted either by phone or face to face. These sessions lasted approximately one hour.

It should be noted that two of the challenges to engage stakeholders was the timing of the project and limited financial resources available. The agency wanted to hold more focus groups and engage a larger population in a discussion about HWAT's work; however, the interviews conducted ultimately served the agency better because it allowed the organization to gather deeper data and perspectives on a one to one basis.

FINDINGS FROM THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

This section describes the findings from each of the methodology approaches for the stakeholders invited to participate.

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

As mentioned earlier in the report, five Hmong women from different formal and informal Hmong women’s groups participated in HWAT’s focus group. They were first asked to provide reasons for their interest in helping Hmong women around gender and equity. All participants noted that it was because of the complexity of issues facing Hmong women living in the United States. These issues, they mentioned, are often ignored and brushed aside as “women’s issues” even though the issues are community issues.

For example, they mentioned issues such as, domestic violence, polygamy, divorce, or teenage marriage.

For these women, working with Hmong women provided an opportunity to find a network of like-minded Hmong women. These networks can include role models and mentors that help them to navigate changes or issues that are similar to their own. They agreed that by participating in these issues and the groups, it is taking action in changing systems for women;

“showing others that we can do it” even though there are obstacles or people who do not believe that the system can be changed or addressed by Hmong women.

“When I work for Hmong women’s groups, I am showing others that we can do it. It’s like challenging the system and the people who think we can’t. It’s showing them we do have power and a voice.”

Secondly, they felt that issues could be addressed better if Hmong men and others were involved in the movement. One participant said, “We don’t engage Hmong men and others outside of the group” in the issues. The “other” this group referred to was elders and younger individuals in the community. Although they commented that they felt the elders in the

Focus Group Questions

1. What attracts you to the work you do for Hmong women?
2. Why do some of the issues you mentioned around gender and equity still exist in our community?
3. How can we engage a diverse audience of women in the work of HWAT?
4. How do we engage a broader audience?
5. Who should we engage?

Why Do Issues in Gender and Equity Persist?

The group discussed the reasons they believe issues related to Hmong women existed in the community. They noted first that although these issues continue to exist, it is important to acknowledge the successes of Hmong women’s groups and their efforts in creating change.

community were more accepting than individuals their own age. Third, the group indicated that culture is often used as an excuse for currently held beliefs and value systems, and the resources to create change around this area takes a lot of time.

The participants suggested that for HWAT to continue to do its work and to create change, the group would need to focus on “key things that interest a larger community” or to transform the issues that Hmong women face into messages that the community can understand. Carefully, crafted key messages about issues such as domestic violence or sexism should be

“translated” into words that meet the community audience’s needs. In this way, the organization can “bring men into the process” rather than alienate them. For women who are not involved in the issues, Hnub Tshiab can help them to “understand to challenge the system.” This challenge of the system includes getting oneself a seat at the table, especially during rituals and ceremonial feasts. Additionally, they felt that the timing to involve a bigger community in these issues is now, and that a focus on key things that interest a larger group should be explored and integrated into the organization’s work. One participant suggested that Hnub Tshiab develop a “deliberate philosophy, long term views, and impact areas” to help focus its attention.

Gender Role Issues Exist because...

1. Hmong men are not targeted and asked to support the issues.
2. Elders and youth are not engaged and targeted to support gender and equity.
3. Culture is used as an excuse to reinforce beliefs and values.
4. Limited resources to support organizing.
5. Social change does not happen overnight.

Challenges to Engaging Diverse Audiences

A challenge to engage a diverse group of women in the work of HWAT were emphasized in three key areas:

1. Lack of knowledge and resources in cultural systems.
2. Isolation and increasingly diverse demographics and perspectives of Hmong women.
3. A complexity of a bicultural identity.

Participants noted that because Hmong women are not vessels for the transfer of cultural systems, for example, knowledge of ceremonial rights, it is difficult to engage women in understanding the systemic changes that need to occur. Several participants pointed to understanding the ways that the clan system works, their lack of knowledge of these systems, and how this impacts the creation of strategies to address the issues they face with clans. They felt that HWAT and other women’s groups will face challenges from other women, especially elders.

Secondly, in this area of engagement, they noted that Hmong women are incredibly diverse in age, socio-economically, politically, and culturally. HWAT would need to understand the different needs and issues of women and their lifestyles to meet a wider audience. For example, how would HWAT engage those who married early and are now divorced or separated from their husbands? These individuals would face a lifestyle that is different from women who marry later in their lives, and different from married or widowed elder women.



Hmong women participants of the Leadership Institute

Finally in this area, participants indicated that the bicultural identity of Hmong women can be a challenge to engaging diverse women in the agency's work. Bicultural individuals face a pull in two directions and challenges that come with working with a bicultural identity are pressures that are more imminent for women. Biculturalism needs to be a facet of HWAT programming and services, in particular as a perspective or framework for looking at Hmong women and girls' issues.

"Our knowledge as women in cultural situations is limited because it is not *kev cai* for us to learn about cultural traditions. But we should not use that as an excuse. We need to be more vocal that we are the vessels of culture for future generations. If we can't have this information and the young Hmong males are not interested in learning the rituals and cultural traditions, then the culture will disappear."

When asked about engaging a wider audience in HWAT's work, the individuals noted that the activities thus far in HWAT's history have been "good, but more outreach is needed" to demonstrate the need for change. They liked the idea of a speakers' series and a leadership institute. They also felt the projects in the past such as the oral history project have been beneficial for the community. Secondly, they expressed the importance of engaging and "asking" for

Hmong men's support and involvement. Again, it was noted that Hmong men need to be a part of the process in order for change to occur. Additionally, they wanted to see HWAT engage support from elders and young Hmong persons, including those in suburban areas. Engagement of the community also included partnering with non-Hmong and Hmong agencies. Finally, a couple of participants expressed the need for the revitalization of a group similar to *Hmong Women Peace*, particularly because of the training and education component of the program.

INTERVIEW THEMES: HMONG MEN

In the interview with Hmong men, each was asked to respond to specific questions that would highlight areas of understanding around gender and equity. The following are summaries of the responses for the questions asked.

Challenges Facing Hmong Women in Gender and Equity

When asked to describe the challenges that Hmong women face in gender and equity, Hmong men responded that the following were barriers:

Quotes on Challenges Facing Hmong Women

One of the challenges but also a strength is education for Hmong women. Educational attainment is encouraged by all and brings about more analytical thinking skills for Hmong women, and for them to better themselves and not just to be the "ideal Hmong daughter." They are no longer expected to take care of the home and raise the kids. Education gives them what they want and what is available in America – *independence*.
- *Participant*

The biggest concern is that Hmong men are intimidated. Women are up and coming.... From my perspective, I see a lot of women executive directors and in leadership positions and there are men out there but not striving as advocates or pushing for specific issues and we see them but they are far and few between. Men are intimidated and they are concerned. The women these days are doing very well for themselves.
- *Participant*

1. An understanding of the concepts of gender roles and responsibilities, including attitudes and beliefs about gender roles in the Hmong community.
2. Some Hmong men are likely intimidated by the success and visibility of Hmong women.
3. A lack of understanding gender issues and its dynamics fully in the community.
4. Challenges in developing positive relationships in marriage and family.

Men noted that gender roles have been clearly defined; thus a Hmong woman trying to create paths to gender equity or address gender issues would face a large system that is difficult to change. These attitudes and beliefs are strongly rooted in Hmong culture and would be a challenge for any Hmong woman. One participant noted the following about this challenge:

"I know that Hmong women still face threats as well as tension from their families and the community about women's work and gender equity issues.... Hmong women have done so much good work but they still face social stigma that hinders them to speak their minds freely."

As the quote indicates, social and cultural barriers facing women are prevalent in family and community systems. The men noted that these barriers likely come from clearly defined social structures; these structures impact women in the family systems the most. All of the men noted that family and clan systems have impacted the growth of Hmong women, thus impacting the growth of the Hmong community in the United States. As a result, positive family and marital relationships

have been challenged. As an example, some noted a more visible increase in divorce rates, single family households, young marriages and inter-generational conflicts.

How Can Women Engage Men in Gender and Equity Work?

When asked to describe how Hmong women can engage Hmong men in gender and equity work, the following were the common themes:

1. Engage the entire Hmong family.
2. Bring male supporters to events or “to the table.”
3. Engage men in topics they would like to discuss and make it appealing.

Hmong men participants noted that singling them out would not be appropriate. If women could make a connection between gender and equity issues and family concerns, this would bring out more support. For example, one participant said it is important to talk about polygamy issues, but not specifically point out men as responsible for polygamy. If women wanted to talk about polygamy issues, they need to make the connection to the impact this has on family members and the clan system, not just “placing the blame” on men. This is because Hmong women, as noted by the participants, are also responsible for “turning the other cheek.” By doing this, the entire family is the topic of conversation, not polygamy.

Additionally, the men felt that women can improve the ways they engage men during events. They noted it is important for women to identify and bring supporters to their events. Thus, cultivating key supporters is vital to the movement of gender and equity issues. This cultivation would include designing key messages geared towards specific audiences. Cultivating supporters would also include designing events and topics that interest Hmong men and/or reach a wider audience than just Hmong females.

Quotes on Engaging Men in Gender and Equity Work

It would be good to have a group or program for Hmong men. Whoever is going to run the program must be able to work in small groups. If Hmong men don't trust you then they don't share what is going on.
- Participant

Those issues like domestic violence, sexual assault are things that men will feel you target them. You don't talk about those issues as things that they do wrong – you bring that up and they will think you are attacking them. You've already painted shame on their face and so why will they want to talk to you about it? In the men's minds and hearts they will know that you are challenging them.

The best approach is to say, “*How can we work with Hmong men and women so we can all share responsibility*” instead of asking them what they think needs to be done with domestic violence.
- Participant

Barriers Facing Men in Gender and Equity Work

When asked to describe what barriers exist for Hmong men in gender and equity work, the following were the common themes:

As a Hmong Christian it saddens me that my two daughters cannot grow up and be a pastor at my church if they should find the need and desire to do so...Men made laws which prohibited women's participation, and now the community is left helpless. If I speak up about this, then I am the rotten one.

My main concern is for us Hmong and especially those of us that are parents to really start to see the gender and equity issue and really embrace it to provide some hope that it will improve our community in the far distance future.

- Participant

1. Men do not generally discuss gender and equity issues.
2. Men do not want to “break out” of their social and cultural roles.
3. Men are not aware of the issues and events that Hmong women have regarding gender and equity.
4. Men’s ego, fears and comfort in talking about gender and equity issues.

Hmong men participants noted that gender and equity issues are not generally discussed in the Hmong community, especially among men. A barrier for men to engage in this work would then be for men to begin conversations and dialogues about gender and equity; first, to discuss what does gender and equity mean and how does it impact the community.

Secondly, Hmong men felt that “breaking out” of their social and cultural norms would be challenging and there is no clear path to initiating conversations on this. For example, one participant noted that engaging the clan in breaking these social and cultural barriers would be a start, but even starting

the conversation with the clan would be a challenge because “the [male] leaders need to support this process because they are the primary decision makers.” If male leaders do not support changing the system, then the barriers for men in having these types of conversations will continue. Some participants noted here that men can be intimidated and there is a fear that changes to the social and cultural systems would bring out unknown consequences. A few participants explained that this fear is driven by the unknown as well as by the male ego; a want for continued power. However, the participants also stated that not all men are driven by their need for power or their egos.

Finally, men expressed that their engagement in gender and equity issue could be vastly improved if they were aware of the events and gatherings facilitated by women. Here they pointed out that it is critical for Hmong women to be more open and inviting in their coalition building.

Suggestions for Discussion on Gender and Equity

When asked to provide suggestions for creating discussions on gender and equity, the following were the common themes expressed:

1. Educate the Hmong community about gender and equity.
2. Conduct research on gender and equity issues.
3. Be mindful about the use of language in gender and equity.
4. Create a men's group to discuss issues on gender and equity.
5. Emphasize the impact on the family and not just women.

Hmong men participants noted there needs to be community wide education on the topic of gender and equity. They expressed that the issue is one that is not talked about and must be discussed if the community wants to survive in a new cultural environment. Education can be in the forms of dialogues, small group gatherings, workshops, seminars, lectures, and so on.

Along with education would be a need for conducting research on gender and equity issues. The men expressed that research will help Hmong women in their cause by providing factual and/or statistical information that supports the issues they fight for. Research can also provide a "fighting tool" for the community to recognize the impact of these issues on the family system, and the importance to finding ways to create solutions. Without research, the men noted that it would be difficult to engage and garner support for gender and equity issues.

Finally, the men stated that in all of this work, Hmong women must be careful in using language that is not demeaning or "blaming" of men, otherwise women cannot engage men in their efforts. To begin any type of dialogue with men, it was stated that there must be "trust" and a solid relationship. If men do not trust women and their agendas, then changes cannot occur.

Quotes on Suggestions for Discussion on Gender and Equity

Really identify and reach out to your significant others, your loved ones, your family and relatives and use them as spokespeople to bring in other males. Then, craft a message that hooks or brings in the entire community. Frame it not as women's issues or gender issues but as a community issue or a cultural issue.

- Participant

Women need to do some education of these issues. Use opportunities like the Hmong National Development Conference to do workshops on these issues.

This format is the least controversial thing. They need to use the media and frame the issues properly.

- Participant

INTERVIEW THEMES: HMONG WOMEN

In the interviews with Hmong women, each was asked to respond to specific questions that would highlight areas of understanding around gender and equity. The following are summaries of the responses for the questions asked.

Challenges Facing Hmong Women in Gender and Equity

When asked to describe the challenges that Hmong women face in gender and equity, responded that the following were barriers:

We lack the respect from men and we place ourselves in situation where we can't get that respect, for example, when we become the second wife. This is an issue and it brings up a lot of issues for women. We have to learn how to carry ourselves and place a value on ourselves. We must have worth first then they can see it too. We must respect ourselves first.

- Participant

1. An understanding of the concepts of gender roles and responsibilities, including attitudes and beliefs about gender roles in the Hmong community.
2. A lack of respect from men and women about women's roles and value.
3. Power and fear about the changes to women's roles in the community.

Similar to Hmong men, the women participants noted that gender roles have been clearly defined; thus anyone trying to create paths to gender equity or address gender issues would face a large system that is difficult to change. They also noted that these attitudes and beliefs are strongly rooted in Hmong

culture and are reinforced both by Hmong women and men. One participant noted the following about social boundaries in the community:

"Since I been married, I have come to see how my husband and brothers are bound by boundaries as we (women) have. My brother had a baby and wants to stay home with the baby. What does that mean for Hmong men to want to stay at home? There are certain expectations around what it means to be a leader of the family whether that's as a male or female."

As the quote expresses, changing social boundaries can be a challenge for both sexes. Strong social boundaries that dictate gender roles combined with attitudes and beliefs that reinforce these norms can result in a lack of respect for the sexes. Many of the women interviewed stated that they did feel and saw differential treatment of men and women in the community. They acknowledged that both men and women were at fault for the current state of gender and equity in the community, yet they said that more women in the community were disrespected and undervalued. Women, according to them, seemed to be treated as second class citizens. The value accorded to them is not the same as the value accorded to the men in the community. This value perception, according to some participants, was a result of fear and loss of power.

One participant noted that the fear around changing social boundaries and the lack of respect can disadvantage the community. She said,

“We are losing a lot of talent by not drawing from women. They bring a lot of value to professional and personal life and we are losing the opportunity for innovation and creativity whether in work life or society because there’s no woman’s voice. Not getting a different voice will not help the community.”

Overall, the women commented that women’s voices could be more prevalent in the gender and equity movement, including other issues, but women needed to let go of their own fears related to gender and equity changes. In other words, many of the participants expressed that it is not only Hmong men who have fear of changes, it is also women. Participants expressed that the community needed to have conversations on gender and equity in order to dispel the fears and perceived loss of power (mostly male power) that comes with issues like this.

How Can Women Engage Men in Gender and Equity Work?

When asked to describe how Hmong women can engage Hmong men in gender and equity work, the following were the common themes:

1. Do not play the “blame” game.
2. Engage families first; make it a family issue.
3. Change the language used in gender and equity issues.

Similar to the men interviewees, the Hmong women participants noted that singling men out would not be appropriate; thus, blaming a specific sex for certain issues would not engage that audience. Additionally, the women felt that a stronger connection between gender and equity issues and family concerns could bring out more support.

One participant said it is important for women to start with their own families first, then garner support from there. She said,

“We have to start with our own families – our husbands, our sons, our fathers, our uncles, or brothers. We have to engage them first, and then have them engage others. We must address these problems and this is one way to do it.”

Another suggestion that women had to engaging men in gender and equity is to change the language and key messages. Similar to the men, these women stated that it is important to use language that men understand and speaks to them. The language should also be neutral in tone that does not place blame on either of the sexes. This, they felt, would encourage more men to initiate conversations on gender and equity.

In the past, women have been attacked on supporting issues of gender. They, the men, feel we are attacking them. We have to engage them but come from their perspective.

- Participant

Barriers Facing Men in Gender and Equity Work

When asked to describe what barriers exist for Hmong men in gender and equity work, the following were the common themes from the women participants:

There are semi-barriers to men's participation in this. There is an invisible wall of communication such as a lack of communication and etiquette of interacting and communicating with each other. But, the barriers are less than they used to be. Right now, more and more men are educated about some of these issues. They are aware and more open-minded. Yet, I would like to see more Hmong husbands out there supporting their Hmong wives.

- Participant

1. Perception of loss of male power and authority.
2. Lacks of support groups for men.
3. Standards of relationship norms between men and women.

The women participants felt that men seem to fear a loss of power and authority if they were to support issues of gender and equity. They noted that this perception is an illusion that is supported by social and cultural rules and norms. One participant noted that this perception of the loss of male power and authority will continue to serve as a barrier to men. She said,

"They have been brought up with male entitlement and they aren't aware of it. If you have been brainwashed in

all that, your ego can become big. Then, if anyone challenges you, then it seems like the end of the world. It is a barrier for them. We need to have conversations with them about power and authority."

These conversations, as expressed by the women, can begin in support groups for men; however, there are no known support groups. The women stated that the lack of support groups furthers the disconnection between the sexes and widens the gap in the community's understanding of gender and equity issues. Additionally, the disconnect increases because of the social norms associated with how men and women have relationships, in particular how they interact with one another. Relationship norms between men and women serve as a huge barrier because conversations on topics like this would naturally change the relationships in terms of power, authority, social rules and norms, as well as others.

Suggestions for Discussion on Gender and Equity

When asked to provide suggestions for creating discussions on gender and equity, the following were the common themes expressed:

1. Educate the Hmong community about gender and equity.
2. Be mindful about the use of language in gender and equity.
3. Build male allies to support gender and equity issues.

Very similar to the male participants, these women noted that discussions on gender and equity can be furthered in the community if women were more mindful about their use of language. Women, they said, should be careful in creating key messages that do not blame men or women, rather ignites a community to take action on the issues. This, they noted, would require education of both sexes on gender and equity. This type of education can take the place of forums, workshops, and seminars. Finally, the women stated that the greatest leverage Hmong women can have to engaging and initiating dialogues on gender and equity is to build a coalition of support from Hmong men; to strategically find allies in gender and equity and to cultivate this base of support.

OVERALL THEMES AND FINDINGS

Through this community engagement process, HWAT found six key themes:

- Double-bind messages around gender roles and responsibilities.
- Explore fear issues as it relates to gender and equity.
- The power of language in promoting gender and equity work.
- Build coalitions of support from Hmong men and non-Hmong allies.
- Support the work of Hmong men in gender and equity.
- Define gender and equity within the Hmong community.

Double Bind Messages

HWAT discovered in the interviews with Hmong men and women that they were interested in and wanted the agency to address gender and equity issues, but these individuals also expressed concerns about the impact gender and equity changes may have on the Hmong culture. The stakeholders responded with what can be considered a “double-bind” message to HWAT’s work.

A double-bind message is a “dilemma in communication in which a group or individual receives conflicting messages and that one message negates the other – a situation if the individual succeeds at responding to one message would fail with the other message communicated; the person is wrong no matter how they respond.”⁵ Stakeholders wanted solutions but asked HWAT to not be forceful in their work. This forcefulness would “scare” key stakeholders and supporters. They noted that coming across in the most appropriate manner, with the right language, timing, and skills would benefit HWAT. The double-bind message is



⁵ Definition is adapted from Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double_bind

also evident in the dilemma that faces both men and women in initiating conversations on gender and equity. Just the *act of initiating* a conversation is a double-bind for both sexes.

Explore Fear Issues as it Relates to Gender and Equity

Overall, this “double-bind” message creates a fear which serves as a barrier to holding discussions on gender and equity. There is a certain comfort level that both men and women have to talking about this concept. One participant interviewed noted the following about male initiatives in gender and equity conversations:

“They (the men) don’t want to talk. They think these are taboo issues; it goes against their traditions, norms, mentality, authority, and challenges their power as a man.”

This is similar to other participants, whether male or female, that discussed the *social stigma* attached to addressing such issues. This social stigma comes about because of the lack of understanding within the community related to change and gender. The majority of participants noted that the fear could be alleviated if there were opportunities for educating the community as well as stronger advocacy work to support the changes in gender and equity.



Dr. Gary Yia Lee discusses leadership in the Hmong community

The Power of Language in Promoting Gender and Equity

It was evident from the participants of the research that HWAT needed to pay attention to developing key messages and stories that brought in the voices of all stakeholders, not just those who currently are engaged or interested in gender and equity. These messages and stories must be told to and catered to the right audience.

Over and over again, the participants from the focus groups and interviews noted that if HWAT was more mindful of the language used and when to use the language, this would disarm those who already fear the changes and make lighter the challenges and consequences.

Build a Coalition of Support from Hmong Men and Non-Hmong Allies

Another key finding in this research was for HWAT to be more intentional in building a coalition of support from Hmong men and non-Hmong allies. Especially noted from the interviews was the notion of building coalitions to further the education around gender and equity; that coalition support from Hmong men and non-Hmong allies would help communicate the

appropriate messages around the topic and to garner the right support in moving the issue forward. Building a coalition of support would mean intentional usage of key messages to the right audiences, initiating conversations within one's own family and friends for support, and "getting the message" out about gender and equity issues in the community.

Support the Work of Hmong Men in Gender and Equity

It was clear that there needed to be support groups or spaces for men and women to have conversations about gender and equity. Hmong men, especially, spoke about cultivating a space that was open and safe to conduct dialogues. They did not have a medium to discuss openly and freely about the changes related to gender and equity. One of the gaps expressed is that Hmong men did not feel they were personally supported in their efforts to create change for women in the community.

For example, one of the participants mentioned that he attended a woman led event but there were no men there; he felt uncomfortable. He also noticed that the women did not speak to him or make an effort to make him comfortable; he



Hmong community members speaking on leadership and gender issues

attributed this to interpersonal skills and the ability to be a good "host" no matter who is in attendance. He expressed that if he is always the only Hmong men in attendance, he would likely not attend any more female centered events. Although he wants to support the work, he would have to do it in a different way.

In many ways, the men expressed a frustration and feeling that they were just as silenced as Hmong women, albeit in a way that only Hmong men could understand. Support then was critical to engaging men and breaking down barriers to male participation.

Define Gender and Equity within the Hmong Community

Throughout the process of gathering information, the participants were asked to define gender and equity and provide examples of what they thought were gender and equity issues. Many of the participants spoke about gender issues as if they were related only to women's issues, for example domestic abuse, sexual assault, women's work. Equity was expressed in terms of equality. When both "gender" and "equity" were used together, the participants spoke about the equality for women.

All the participants expressed that defining gender and equity was something the Hmong community needed to do in order to have conversations on the topic. They felt that many Hmong persons were unclear about what constituted gender and equity issues, and they noted

that some may not even know what the terms stood for. It was important then for agencies such as HWAT to help the community to explore definitions of gender and equity and to examine gender and equity examples.

REFLECTION OF THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

From the findings of this study, the agency learned many things about the role it has in the community, the challenges facing men and women in gender and equity work, and the steps it needs to take in addressing this topic. This section outlines the key learning and reflection notes from this process as discussed by the board of directors.

Learning #1: Clarity in Presenting HWAT to the Community

The agency discussed that there needed to be more clarity about HWAT's work in the community, which would hopefully help to create better support systems for the agency. There was recognition in this study about the ways in which individuals perceived HWAT. The perceptions were based on rumors about the agency's work such as, the agency was considered as an "anti-male" agency or "too radical." For this to change there needs to be a lot of education about HWAT to different audiences and the issues it addresses in order to gather the support for social change work. If Hmong men – regardless if they were supporters or not – were able to understand how HWAT defined the issues facing the community, men could have more understanding for the cause.

Through this engagement process, HWAT recognized that people who want to be a part of HWAT's work may have good intentions and want to support the agency, but may often have a different message than the agency itself. Individual messages and agendas have been confused with organizational messages, thus creating an erroneous perception of the agency.

Learning #2: The Importance of Language

The engagement process enabled HWAT to understand the importance of language, including its forms and usages to engaging a diverse audience and to creating effective social change. HWAT now recognizes that it may not be the best vehicle to deliver messages to Hmong men, thus it needs Hmong male allies to support it in delivering these messages. It also recognizes that it may not be the best platform to deliver messages to elder Hmong women, who the agency wants to engage in the near future.

Learning #3: Creating More Support for Hmong Men

One of the key learning from this process that became quite obvious in the review of the data was the ability of the group to secure allies in its work. It was not enough that HWAT secured women allies; it needed men to help promote its work. The group has known for a while that securing men in its work is important, but this engagement process emphasized the importance of creating strategic alliances with the male population. It also recognized more deeply the impact of social changes on Hmong men and the importance of supporting them in their work.

HWAT now understands the value of providing support to Hmong men and that it has to think about addressing them in different ways than how it would work with women.

Learning #4: Engagement of Diverse Stakeholders

HWAT was able to obtain information from those it does not normally engage (Hmong men) to describe what the agency can do to improve its work. It was able to discuss with Hmong women agencies in the Twin Cities about their needs and how all Hmong women agencies can work better together. It learned from women (those active and non-active with HWAT) about the challenges that continue to face women, as well as how they thought HWAT could engage them and others. Finally, the agency delved into research that, as far as it knows, has not been conducted before within the community. To engage Hmong men in the gender equity movement was important and the first step that the agency believes the community has taken to address gender issues prevalent in the Hmong community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and learning mentioned above, the following are recommendations and next steps to consider for the growth of *Hnub Tshiab: Hmong Women Achieving Together* as discussed by the HWAT Board of Directors.

- Develop and implement strategies to cultivate community supporters and allies in HWAT's work.
- Create targeted key messages on gender and equity work to deliver to HWAT communities, partners, and stakeholders.
- Explore education and information forums, talking circles, or dialogues to increase visibility and participation in HWAT activities, and to inform HWAT's stakeholders about gender and equity issues.
- Support Hmong men in their work to address gender and equity issues within the community, and assist them in the most appropriate ways.
- Create an organizational brand identity that includes marketing, communications, and public relations messages that speaks to the successes and benefits of HWAT's work in the community.

The agency hopes that these recommendations will open up opportunities for addressing gender and equity issues with diverse audiences. It is hoped that these action steps will serve as growth strategies for the agency and its community by developing ways to engage Hmong men and other community members in their work. To do so would require creating spaces where community members feel safe to explore, talk, and strategize about gender issues. The agency feels that these next steps would help to address the issues and learning captured in this report.

Appendices

Appendix A

Leadership Paradigms, Inc.

Leadership Paradigms, Inc. is a consulting firm specializing in leadership and organization development. It works with people, organizations, and communities on a local, national, and global level **to bring conscious awareness to challenge, renew, and transform one's ways of knowing and being**. It works to illuminate different paradigms of "knowing and being" and that an appreciation for differences and similarities in "knowing and being" will ultimately lead communities to new forms of leadership thinking and practices.

Leadership Paradigms, was founded by Mai Moua, Ph.D., a Hmong-American who came to the United States in 1979 as a refugee from Thailand. Dr. Moua received her doctorate degree in leadership studies from Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington. She has presented her research and conducted workshops on leadership and organizational effectiveness to an internationally diverse audience consisting of leadership scholars and academics, executives and directors, practitioners, and students on a national and international level including the Middle East, Europe, and Canada.

Her work is in the areas of cross cultural leadership, women's leadership, leadership development – especially in communities of color, cultural competency and intelligence, and nonprofit and public management and leadership. She currently serves as adjunct faculty at the University of MN Humphrey Institute, Concordia University, and the College of St. Scholastica, where she teaches graduate level courses in public and nonprofit management and leadership and management communication.

Appendix B

Community Engagement Process Questions

Questions for Board of Directors and Staff

Staff reviewed HWAT's history as it related to gender equity work. The questions asked were:

- What type of gender equity activities took place in HWAT's history?
- Who was involved in HWAT's work?
- How did community respond to HWAT in its ten year history?

With organizational leadership, we reviewed the data gathered and explored the following:

- What is our key learning from this engagement process?
- Do we think we achieved what we wanted to achieve in this process?
- How has this learning influenced our thinking about our organization?
- Are there any areas that we will be exploring based on our learning?
- Did we explore social justice issues and what did we learn?

Focus group Questions for Hmong women engaged in gender and equity work

1. What attracts you to the work you do for Hmong women?
2. Why do some of the issues you mentioned around gender and equity still exist in our community?
3. How can we engage a diverse audience of women in the work of HWAT?
4. How do we engage a broader audience?
5. Who should we engage?

Individual Interviews with Hmong Men

- What is your experience working with Hmong women groups?
- What would you say are issues of concerns you see for Hmong women in our society – both in the American and Hmong cultures?
- Tell me your thoughts about the work that Hmong women do around gender and equity in our community.
- How can women engage Hmong men in addressing issues important to Hmong women, e.g. domestic violence, polygamy, education, marriage?
- Are there barriers to Hmong men participating and supporting Hmong women's work?
- What are suggestions you have for bringing Hmong women and men together to talk about gender and equity in our community?
- Any other comments you may have that will help us to understand gender and equity in the Hmong community?

Individual Interviews with Hmong women

- What is your experience working with gender and equity in the Hmong community?
- What would you say are issues of concerns you see for Hmong women in our society – both in the American and Hmong cultures?
- Tell me your thoughts about the work that Hmong women do around gender and equity in our community.
- How can women engage Hmong men in addressing issues important to Hmong women, e.g. domestic violence, polygamy, education, marriage?
- What are the strengths that Hmong women bring to gender and equity work?
- Are there barriers to Hmong men participating and supporting Hmong women’s work?
- What are suggestions you have for bringing Hmong women and men together to talk about gender and equity in our community?
- Any other comments you may have that will help us to understand gender and equity in the Hmong community?