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Political Commitment of Hmong Americans: A Study of a Grassroots Feminist Movement Against Abusive International Marriages 2007-2022.

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POLITICAL COMMITMENT OF HMONG AMERICANS:
A STUDY OF A GRASSROOTS FEMINIST MOVEMENT AGAINST
ABUSIVE INTERNATIONAL MARRIAGES, 2007-2022

by

Ni Made Frischa Aswarini

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

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May 2023

ABSTRACT

POLITICAL COMMITMENT OF HMONG AMERICANS: A STUDY OF A GRASSROOTS FEMINIST MOVEMENT AGAINST ABUSIVE INTERNATIONAL MARRIAGES 2007-2022

by

Ni Made Frischa Aswarini

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2023
Under the Supervision of Professor Chia Youyee Vang

This thesis examines the Hmong American community-led movement against abusive international marriages (AIM) in Wisconsin as an instance of activism or resistance related to marriage-migration phenomena in the 21st century. Through an analysis of oral histories of Hmong American community activists, Hmong American community media, archival materials, born-digital sources, and other contemporary sources, this study incorporates experiences underexplored in U.S. historical scholarship. The findings unearth that the feminist movement against AIM emerged not solely as an active response to a trend of gender-based violence cases in the early 2000s but also as a resistance to the persisting stigmatization from the dominant American society and institutions. The gendered perspective, intersected with awareness of race and class issues, has been a central element in the movement as part of its strategy to foster a gender justice agenda. I argue that the Hmong American grassroots feminist movement against AIM is based on a political commitment to a liberation struggle against sexism, racism, and classism rather than being solely grounded on shared victimization. This political commitment has created an alternative form of belonging among Hmong American community advocates and organizers, which extends to the Hmong transnational community.

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Introduction

Background

In the fall of 2010, Zon Moua, a young Hmong American fresh out of high school, attended a community gathering in Stevens Point, Wisconsin. She had been an activist since she was 16 years old and believed in gender justice, just like all individuals who participated in the meeting. As she listened to others in the room where many Hmong Americans had gathered, she sensed an immense amount of emotion permeating the space: a mixture of sadness, relief, and resilience.

Moua was part of a historical gathering in Wisconsin where predominantly Hmong American advocates and community members met to converse about a community movement against a burgeoning and complex issue that they called abusive international marriages (AIM). Moua recalled her immediate feeling being in that moment: “This almost like a relief that it wasn’t just you that was carrying it yourself... We’re all experiencing this. We all have witnessed this. To have that moment where we were able to have that conversation...I think it was amazing and powerful, because you could see the shift in energy.”¹ Moua joined the last meeting of a series of four annual gatherings. That day, the Hmong American advocates and community members coined the term AIM to address the gender-based violence trend they began noticing in the early 2000s.

The trend of AIM within the Hmong American community occurred in the backdrop of globalization and the aftermath of the U.S. Secret War in Laos (also called the Laotian Civil War). The border of Laos was still closed to the United States until diplomatic relations were

¹ Zon Moua, interview by author, Teams meeting, April 10, 2023.

normalized in 1992. Following the open border, former Hmong refugee men with economic privilege visited Laos and other Asian countries such as Thailand and China. Many had recurring trips to reunite with their families or find Hmong women from the “old world.” Sexual relationships and marriages happened in this process, and some of these relationships between consenting adults were not legally or culturally problematic. However, in many cases, the brides were underaged and the men were middle-aged. Some brides were forced to marry by their parents or by indigence to help their families escape poverty. A segment of these men lied about their marital status, pretending to be single despite already having wives and children in the United States. Marriage brokers sometimes facilitated this transnational dynamic by selling videos of women, photos, and contact information. This complex issue was often followed by other problems, such as husbands coercing their first wives to file for divorce, enabling them to bring their new brides to the U.S., where laws prohibit polygamy. Some Hmong American men forced their sons or paid other single men to marry the brides just so the women could apply for a fiancée visa. In some cases, the marry-and-dump practice happened, where men abandoned their new wives in Asian countries after two to three months and returned to the United States.² Besides the young brides, AIM has impacted many first wives and children in the United States through mental, financial, and even physical abuse. Because this violence occurs within marriages, the practices are often reported as domestic violence cases.

It is important to note that gendered violence in marriage-migration is not unique to Hmong Americans. It has happened in other communities worldwide alongside the pattern of

² Chic Dabby-Chinoy, Asian & Pasific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence In partnership with Wisconsin Refugee Family Strengthening Project, “Abusive International Marriages: Hmong Advocates Organizing in Wisconsin” (San Francisco: Asian and Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence, 2012), 14, <https://www.api-gbv.org/resources/abusive-international-marriages-hmong-advocates-organizing-wisconsin/>. (hereafter: Chic Dabby-Chinoy, “Abusive International Marriages.”)

migration that has been an integral part of human history. Marriage-migration has significantly accelerated in modern history, facilitated by global factors such as imperialism, wars, capitalism, and technological advancement. Alongside this backdrop, marriage-migration as a highly gendered process has often been influenced by cultural attitudes infused with patriarchal beliefs.³ In the context of the United States, historian Suzanne Sinke mentioned that people in the late nineteenth century began to label marriage across the border as an “international marriage market,” where “young women might receive a specific marriage proposal and thus migrate.” Sinke also pointed to a segment of Dutch immigrant men—like many other men—in the early 20th century who had particular cultural perceptions that led them to prefer marrying wives from the “old world” not influenced by American gender ideology. One of the men’s preferences was for women to obey their husbands.⁴ In the largely patriarchal world, wife-beating in the marriage-migration context had already existed for centuries. Historian Elizabeth Pleck noted that Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth colonies had laws that criminalized wife abuse, even though the judges typically refused to penalize wife-battering using family privacy as the justification.⁵ In the Asian American context, historian Ji-Yeon Yuh mentioned that a segment of Korean military brides who married American men and arrived in the U.S. from 1950-1989 also endured domestic abuse and demonstrated resilience.⁶ The dynamic of marriage-migration has also been shaped by the intervention of the matchmaking industry in the 1970 and internet

³ Other factors that has shaped marriage migration are an imbalanced sex ratio, laws, and advancement of information technology. Suzanne Sinke, “Migration for Labor, Migration for Love: Marriage and Family Formation across Borders,” *OAH Magazine of History* 14, no. 1 (1999): 17–21, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25163323>.

⁴ Sinke.

⁵ Elizabeth Pleck in Kathleen J. Ferraro, “The Dance of Dependency: A Genealogy of Domestic Violence Discourse,” *Hypatia* 11, no. 4 (1996): 77–91, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3810393>.

⁶ Despite the fact about the abuse, to avoid stigmatization, it is imperative to recognize the military brides’ resilience and resistance and the fact that another segment of the brides had successful marriages. Ji-Yeon Yuh, *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown: Korean Military Brides in America* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2004), 152-153.

technology in the subsequent decades, which have further facilitated American men's desire to marry foreign women who were perceived as more amenable to traditional domestic roles.⁷

A portion of women involved in the so-called mail-order marriages endured exploitation and abuse, encouraging the U.S. government to sign the International Marriage Broker Regulation Act (IMBRA) of 2005, which aimed to regulate the matchmaking industry and protect women. The law utilized a 2003 survey to show that the programs providing legal services to abused immigrant women had assisted immigrants abused by American men whom they met through international marriage brokers. The Bill mentions explicitly two cases that received massive media attention: the murders of Susanna Remerata Blackwell of the Philippines and Anastasia Solovieva King of Kyrgyzstan by their American husbands. While scholars have criticized IMBRA for its potential contribution to the stigmatization of foreign women as perpetual victims⁸, I reference this law to highlight the persistence of gendered violence in marriage-migration that extends beyond the Hmong American community. This point is crucial to eschew the racialized and sexist stigmatization of the Hmong American community and culture.

Hmong American gender justice advocates and organizers have attempted to combat AIM since the early 2000s. Beyond providing direct services through community-based and mainstream institutions, Hmong American activists have fostered a collective and public community campaign that has contested the patriarchal culture in their community while simultaneously challenging the racial and sexist prejudice from the dominant American culture.

⁷ Sinke, "Migration for Labor, Migration for Love." It is necessary to acknowledge that not all men involved in so-called mail-order marriages seek submissive partners, and not all foreign women fit the stereotype of being submissive victims of male domination and economically disadvantaged. Nicole Constable, *Romance on a Global Stage: Pen Pals, Virtual Ethnography, and "Mail-Order" Marriages* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 1-90.

⁸ Marcia A. Zug, *Buying a Bride: An Engaging History of Mail-Order Matches* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2016), 196-199.

As with many other social groups in a largely patriarchal world, Hmong traditional structure is infused with the patriarchal culture that has become one of the foundations for its patrilineal system, where families are closely knit and led by clan members who are typically men. Community activists view this as both a challenge and an asset, especially in the attempt to foster gender justice. Like other Asian groups in the U.S., Hmong Americans have confronted marginalization and discrimination, which is not unique as the dominant culture and structure have historically held anti-Asian immigrant sentiments. Hmong American community advocates and organizers have advocated for cultural transformation to combat marginalization while developing a more inclusive movement.

This thesis explores the Hmong American grassroots feminist movement against AIM in Wisconsin from 2007 until 2022 as an instance of the ways in which Hmong Americans construct alternative forms of belonging. This study demonstrates how a collective attempt to foster gender justice has resulted in a new sense of belonging among a segment of the community. This process primarily involves interaction among actors from the marginalized group along with their collaboration with and resistance towards the members of the dominant power. By examining the development of a specific aspect of the movement against AIM in its first sixteen years, this thesis argues that a political commitment to gender justice as the foundation of the movement has shaped an alternative form of belonging among Hmong gender justice activists.

While this research focuses on the birth and development of activism in Wisconsin, it also acknowledges the broader interconnectivity of the movement. The movement has been organized in different states, with a significant role of Hmong American activists in Wisconsin,

especially in its early stages. The community campaign has been maintained through a cross-state network of Hmong advocates and organizers, making it essential to recognize the role of activists from other states as they work alongside Hmong activists in Wisconsin on shared projects. Moreover, Hmong advocates and organizers in Wisconsin have extended their support for the movement by traveling across the country and overseas; thus, this research incorporates their experiences because their activism in other regions is rooted in their work in Wisconsin. Furthermore, it is essential to note that the community also used an online platform. Additionally, this thesis includes issues that have arisen in other states and overseas but, in a way, have impacted the Hmong American community in Wisconsin. Overall, this paper limits its scope by accentuating the events that took place in Wisconsin and actors living in Wisconsin while also embracing events and actors from outside of the region, which has inextricably linked with activism in Wisconsin.

Historiography, Literature Review, Theoretical Framework, and Methodologies

A few historical discussions have brought together conversations on activism or resistance and marriage-migrations. Among the existing studies are *Transnational Women's Activism* by Rumi Yasutake and *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown* by Ji-Yeon Yuh, that has inspired this thesis. The former dedicates a section in the book to focus on the activism related to so-called "picture marriages" between Japanese "picture brides" and Japanese immigrant men in North California in the first quarter of the 20th century.⁹ The latter concentrates on the resistance of so-called "Korean military brides" who married American men between 1950-1989. Both historians point to the power relations that had regulated Asian women's gender roles and

⁹ Rumi Yasutake, *Transnational Women's Activism: The United States, Japan, and Japanese Immigrant Communities in California, 1859-1920* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2004), 6, 116-126.

expectations. They investigate dominant American narratives about Japanese and Korean women and the dominant narrative among the Asian immigrant communities and how all these shaped the activism or resistance. Both studies are transnational in scope and methodology. Unlike Yuh, who delved into the brides' experiences as the main actors, Yasutake focused on the major role of an American missionary woman and the minor role of Japanese churchwomen in assisting picture brides.¹⁰ While Yasutake highlighted gender ideology contestation among an American missionary woman activist, first-generation Japanese immigrants (*Issei*) churchwomen, and *Issei* men in California,¹¹ Yuh emphasized the brides' everyday resistance to American mainstream culture domination and marginalization from the Korean immigrant community.¹² Furthermore, Yuh's work touched on an alternative form of belonging that the military brides found through their shared experiences.¹³

My thesis builds upon the frameworks utilized in the above historical works while offering new contributions. Drawing upon Yasutake and Yuh's approaches, this study recognizes the dominant powers and narratives that have constructed Hmong Americans' gender ideologies and ignited the resistance. Following the authors' works, my research situates the movement against AIM in the context of American mainstream culture's domination and the internal dynamics among the Hmong American community to examine nuances of perceptions. Yuh's framework on alternative forms of belonging also reflects the dynamic among Hmong American gender justice activists. Unlike previous studies, which focused on direct services (Yasutake)¹⁴

¹⁰ Rumi Yasutake, 6, 120-126.

¹¹ Yasutake, 6, 111-126.

¹² Ji-Yeon Yuh, *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown: Korean Military Brides in America*, 4, 84-221.

¹³ Ji-Yeon Yuh, 188-221.

¹⁴ Rumi Yasutake, 122-126.

and everyday resistance (Yuh)¹⁵, this thesis explores a public movement, incorporating voices of more diverse actors, including Hmong American women, men, and queer community activists whose knowledge and experiences have not adequately represented in historical scholarship on activism and marriage-migration. Through this approach, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of the Hmong American community-led movement against AIM and the impact of gender ideologies on the resistance.

There has been little scholarship discussing the Hmong American movement against abusive international marriages. Two works that mention the activism are historian Chia Youyee Vang's book chapter titled "Negotiating Cultural Change: Professional Hmong American Women" (2020) and Kong Pheng Pha's dissertation, "Queer Refugeeism: Constructions of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Hmong Diaspora" (2017). In her writing, Vang briefly touched on the movement against AIM and highlighted the social entrepreneurship effort in Laos as part of the movement. However, the discussion is limited as it only represents a small fraction of her main topic about the role of Hmong American women leaders.¹⁶ I learned about the community's social entrepreneurship effort from Vang's writing and developed this information into a more comprehensive discussion in Chapter 2. Unlike Vang, Pha dedicated a specific section to discuss the racial, gender, and sexual configurations surrounding the issue of AIM and the movement. Using gender and sexuality analysis, the author examined the conversations around AIM to accentuate the discourse of hyperheterosexuality from a white supremacist standpoint that has shaped essentialist perception that marginalizes "Hmong culture" by associating it with crimes

¹⁵ Ji-Yeon Yuh, *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown*, 7-8, 84-221.

¹⁶ Chia Youyee Vang, "Negotiating Cultural Change: Professional Hmong American Women," in Shirley Hune and Gail M. Nomura, eds., *Our Voices Our History: Asian American and Pacific Islander Women* (New York City: New York University Press, 2020), 754-755, Kindle for Mac edition.

and oppression of women. Pha also emphasized that the movement against AIM was an effort to “de-link ‘Hmong culture’ from pathology and criminalization.”¹⁷ My thesis aligns with Pha’s points about the movement, which in itself rejects the essentialist idea about Hmong culture and people. Furthermore, my study also touched on how the activists grappled with the dynamic among Hmong American communities as “Queer Refugeeism” has done. In addition to Pha’s work, my thesis incorporates more diverse actors, comprised of Hmong American women, men, and queer activists. In contrast to Pha’s analysis that characterizes the *Building Our Future* movement (which is part of the movement against AIM) as a “transnational feminist link” that reflects “a collaborative suffering,”¹⁸ my study argues that this transnational relationship extends beyond the notion of shared victimization. Using historical analysis to investigate the movement’s birth and development, I find that the Hmong American activism against AIM is rooted in a more robust foundation than shared victimization, which is a political commitment.

In light of the above statement, this thesis is in debt to feminist theorist bell hooks’ ideas in *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (1984), and *Feminism Is for Everybody* (2000). The books display the continuation of hooks’ notion of political commitment as the solid base for sustaining a feminist movement. Through her critiques of the white feminist movement, hooks proposed a conception of sisterhood that transcends the shared experiences of victimization. She argued that this narrow understanding of sisterhood is exclusionary towards people with different experiences and weakens feminist solidarity because the feeling of being victims can be

¹⁷ Kong Pheng Pha, “Queer Refugeeism: Constructions of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Hmong Diaspora” (PhD Dissertation, Minnesota, University of Minnesota, 2017), 35-36, 130-134, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2315584477?parentSessionId=LgW9OaSaPPo49%2B0r9AUGoEj%2BOKuV0kiwM2Z8n9y2AUA%3D&pq-origsite=primo&accountid=15078>.

¹⁸ Pha, 134.

temporary.¹⁹ Moreover, hooks suggests a feminist movement that eschews “a false sense of common enemy,” which risks further exclusion of people from particular gender and sexual identities to support the activism.²⁰ hooks advocated for a shared political commitment as the foundation of a feminist movement that will allow a solid foundation and more inclusive members. Thus, the political commitment sets forth collectivity over individual identity,²¹ and it requires a broader purpose, which is a liberation struggle against sexist, racist, and classist discrimination.²² These ideas on political commitment have informed the interpretation of my research’s findings.

This study utilizes historical research methods to gather data, primarily through oral history interviews, archival research, and online research. Specifically, I conducted interviews with eight Hmong American community advocates and organizers who attended at least one of the four-year community gatherings in Wisconsin to discuss abusive international marriages. Archival research was conducted at the Hmong Archive and Hmong Resource Center Library in Minnesota, where I reviewed the Women’s Association of Hmong and Lao (WAHL) collection and several Hmong community magazines and newsletters. More Hmong media were found at the Wisconsin Historical Society Library, including a series of *FutureHmong* magazines and *Hmong Community Journal*. To supplement these sources, online research was conducted to find data from broadcasting media, news portals, U.S. statutes, reports, and relevant secondary sources.

¹⁹ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984).43-63; bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000), 1-18.

²⁰ hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 47; bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, 1-18.

²¹ hooks, *Feminist Theory* 28; bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, 1-18.

²² hooks, *Feminist Theory* 40, 55, 61; bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, 1-18.

In recognition of the Hmong community's campaign in online platform, this thesis utilizes born-digital sources, and therefore a digital methodology is necessary to examine the sources' credibility. To address this, I adopted an approach offered by historian Helen McCarthy. McCarthy was concerned about the burgeoning of e-government and personal digital archives that could be useful but also challenging for political historians. In terms of analyzing sources such as Twitter, McCarthy suggests historians pay attention to: the subject who produced the tweet, the time it was published, the webpages it linked to, the device used to post the tweet, and whether this has any impact on the way historians interpret its significance, the target audience of the tweet, the readers and their reactions of the tweet, the hashtags and its possible meaning and interactions with other tweets.²³ I considered most of McCarthy's suggestions when verifying and analyzing my sources. As a point of clarification, this paper does not utilize numerous random commentaries on social media platforms. Instead, I collected my born-digital sources from specific Facebook pages owned by legitimate institutions and a Facebook page used for the community campaign, which was maintained by Hmong American gender justice activists that I interviewed. The advocates recommended that I look into these sources as they often relied on these platforms to spread campaign messages to the community members. In some cases, I emailed and talked to the activists to verify the digital sources I found online. In addition to Facebook, I also used a series of sources from YouTube and blogs.

My thesis also adopts the feminist approach throughout the research process. Feminist epistemology and methodology challenge traditional research based on assumptions of objectivity, neutrality, and universality, which have led to the marginalization of women and

²³ Helen McCarthy, "Political History in the Digital Age: The Challenges of Archiving and Analysing Born Digital Sources.," *Impact of Social Sciences* (blog), March 31, 2016, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2016/03/31/political-history-in-the-digital-age-born-digital-sources/>.

other oppressed groups.²⁴ Feminist research practice emphasizes a more inclusive research process by using multiple voices and standpoints of different actors, especially those that have been historically marginalized, rather than solely relying on the researcher's perspective. In this vein, the feminist approach accentuates issues and lived experiences of women and other marginalized groups as the research participants in knowledge production.²⁵ Utilizing the feminist methodology also entails recognizing the research participants' diverse and situated experiences,²⁶ where women and other marginalized groups are not "always already oppressed"²⁷ as they are also active agents with the intention and power to act.²⁸ Their knowledge and experiences are not objective but shaped by multiple factors, including class, race, gender, and power relations, and subject to interpretation.²⁹ This idea also applies to the researcher whose knowledge and experiences are products of certain social, cultural, economic, and political backgrounds. In light of this, feminist research tenets highlight the importance of practicing self-reflexivity, where the researcher reflects on how their backgrounds have impacted their worldview, beliefs, potential biases, and intellectual inclination.³⁰ From the beginning, all these principles in feminist methodologies have shaped and informed my research organization and writing process about Hmong American grassroots feminist movement against AIM.

²⁴ Sandra Harding, "Introduction: Is There a Feminist Method?" in *Feminism and Methodology*, ed. Sandra Harding (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 1–13.

²⁵ Sandra Harding, "Introduction: Is There a Feminist Method?"; Sharlene Hesse-Biber, *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2014), 4-6.

²⁶ Sharlene Hesse-Biber, *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*.

²⁷ A borrowed phrase from Camilla Hawthorne who uses the words to emphasize the multiformity of Black spatial life. She suggests that "Black Geographies cannot be reduced to just the study of racism." Camilla Hawthorne, "Black Matters are Spatial Matters: Black Geographies for the Twenty-First Century," *Geography Compass* 13, no. 11 (2019): p. 7, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12468>.

²⁸ Sandra Harding, "Introduction: Is There a Feminist Method?" 5.

²⁹ Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991): 773–97, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343743>.

³⁰ Sandra Harding, "Introduction: Is There a Feminist Method?"

As part of my self-reflexivity practice, I have examined my positionality and how it may have influenced my study and shaped my bias. I was born and raised in a Balinese family, one of the ethnic groups in Indonesia, and I am a first-generation college student. As a heterosexual woman living in a largely patriarchal world, I have observed and experienced sexist oppression. These experiences have motivated me to participate in several collective direct actions and campaigns to promote gender equality and combat gender-based violence in Bali since 2017. Through my interaction with Nengah Budawati, a lawyer and activist who advocates for gender justice and is the Director of the Legal Aid Institute Bali Women's Crisis Center (LBH BWCC), I deepened my knowledge of women's and gender issues. I first connected with her when I joined a street protest in 2017 to advocate for protecting minors involved in a sexual violence case in the Tabanan Regency. Since then, I have supported several programs of LBH BWCC, including a non-profit pre-marriage course that educates its participants about customary law and challenges related to Balinese marriage as well as domestic violence and pre-production of a film project documenting the stories of Balinese divorced women who confronted gender-based violence. Due to my direct experiences with gender inequality, I became interested in examining how ethnic minority communities in the United States have organized feminist efforts to combat sexist oppression. Specifically, I am interested in exploring how Southeast Asian American communities in Wisconsin have organized and mobilized to resist marginalization and promote gender justice. I am cognizant that my research questions are partly aimed at understanding how members of ethnic groups, such as a segment of the Hmong American community, have developed and sustained their grassroots feminist movement. I shared these backgrounds of myself in my correspondence and conversation with most of Hmong American community advocates and organizers who participated in this research. I also explained to them that the

purpose of my study was to listen and learn from their knowledge and experiences as community members, leaders, and activists who have been working for gender justice for many years. When some interviewees asked the reasons behind my interest in studying the Hmong Americans' experiences, I occasionally also disclosed how to some extent, Hmong culture reminds me of my cultures in Bali, such as the patrilineality and certain spiritual beliefs and social impacts surrounding the divorce process and the liminal status of divorced women.

Throughout the process of organizing this research, I found that my subjectivities significantly influenced the research process. During my initial readings, I noted that women predominantly led the Hmong American feminist movement against abusive international marriages (AIM), and consequently, I tended to prioritize interviewing participants who identified as women. Furthermore, my research proposal highlighted the role of Hmong women leaders in the movement. However, after gathering more sources and speaking with some interviewees, I recognized the importance of delving more into the role of Hmong activists from other genders. In retrospect, my gender identity as a cisgender woman created a bias in the early stages of my research.

Initially, I planned to include victims/survivors of AIM as my interviewees and ensure their confidentiality by processing the consent form from the UWM Institutional Review Board (IRB). However, as my research progressed, I shifted my focus to solely highlight the voices and experiences of the community advocates and organizers who have worked towards gender justice. As a result, the consent forms are no longer necessary, especially because the activists are public figures with significant contributions to the movement's history. Their names and contributions are important to be recognized. Nevertheless, I still asked my interviewees if they preferred to remain anonymous in this project.

I learned about my potential participants from the 2012 Hmong American community advocates' meetings report, which includes a complete list of the participants of the four-year gatherings. With the assistance of my advisor, who is also part of the Hmong American community, Dr. Chia Youyee Vang, I selected individuals I could contact for interviews. I obtained their emails through my advisor's network and online searches. In some cases, interviewees also assisted me in recruiting participants by recommending key figures in the movement I should connect with. Following their suggestions, I recruited some activists to participate in my research. Most of my interviewees are founders and main leaders of the movement who continue to actively work toward gender justice.

Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour, was conducted in English, and was audio recorded. Despite having an agenda to collect facts and activities, conducting oral history interviews using a feminist methodology encouraged me to pay attention to other aspects that matter to my interviewees, such as their subjective experiences, feelings, values, and meanings they reflected from certain events or experiences.³¹ To some extent, I used a list of questions and potential probes as a guide. However, I also followed my interviewees' lead by listening to them and adapting my questions or probes based on their statements. In this sense, the participants had some opportunities to direct the flow of the interview processes. At times, I asked my interviewees to clarify the meaning of certain words and phrases they mentioned,³² such as "sisterhood," "victims/survivors," "community organizers," and words in the Hmong language. In this way, my interviewees had some power to determine the use of certain

³¹ Kathryn Anderson et al., "Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History," *The Oral History Review* 15, no. 1 (1987): 103–27, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3674961>.

³² Anderson et al.

terminologies, and I incorporated the terms they used into my thesis. All these processes may have reduced the power imbalance between the researcher and research participants.

Most of the interviews were conducted virtually through platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. While online interviews have advantages, such as being less time-consuming, I prefer in-person interviews. I was fortunate to conduct three in-person interviews: one in St. Paul, Minnesota, and two in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. During these sessions, I felt I could build a stronger rapport with my interviewees and establish a more casual and comfortable environment. Additionally, I could observe their nonverbal cues and better assess the "emotional climate" during the interview process.³³ These sessions also allowed for more personal conversations beyond the scope of my research. I felt such natural interactions built connections and trust between myself and the interviewees.

The analysis of the interviews was conducted in different phases. Early analysis occurred simultaneously while the participants and I were generating data.³⁴ The practice of memoing allowed me to capture my initial impressions of the data and observations, including nonverbal cues.³⁵ My handwritten memos aided me in formulating follow-up questions or clarifications during the interview process. Additionally, I utilized my memos when coding the interview transcriptions. I manually coded the transcripts by highlighting phrases and topics that were mattered to and emphasized by each participant, and common themes emerged in different interviews. Based on this information, I investigated the cultural, social, and historical aspects that may have influenced the participants' decisions, feelings, and experiences.

³³ Being able to assess emotional climate of the situation allows researcher to assess if they have "built up rapport and trust during the interview process as a way to reduce some of the power dynamics between researcher and researched." Sharlene Hesse-Biber, *Feminist Research Practice*, 221.

³⁴ David Karp in Sharlene Hesse-Biber, 223.

³⁵ David Karp in Sharlene Hesse-Biber.

Throughout the research preparation and process, I was constantly reminded of my “outsider” and “insider” statuses in relation to my interviewees. Scholar Sharlene Hesse-Biber explains how the “outsider” and “insider” statuses shape the researcher’s positionality to the research participants and their ability to establish rapport and understand the participants’ experiences.³⁶ During my research, I frequently grappled with the feeling of being an “outsider.” This was due to a variety of factors, including my ethnicity and citizenship, the fact that English is not my native language, and my inability to speak Hmong. However, my struggle and concern for gender justice allowed me to establish an “insider” position and rapport with my interviewees. I acknowledged that my “insider/outsider” status was fluid.³⁷ While I had an insider relationship regarding shared goals with my interviewees, there were limits to this position, for instance, when it came to my request to access raw documents related to the 2016 Global Hmong Women’s Summit. As one of my informants explained, “I was not able to share other documents with you. I do not solely own them, so it would not be appropriate for me to share.” As a non-Hmong woman who was not involved in the Summit or the Hmong American feminist movement, I recognize that I do not have ownership rights to these documents. Consequently, I relied on information obtained during the interviews and online sources. Reflecting on my experiences outside of the interview sessions, I realized that despite my efforts to learn Hmong through online resources, I primarily gathered sources in English. At one point, Choua Vang, a Hmong American staff from the UWM Southeast Asian American Student Center, assisted me in translating a few statements in online videos from Hmong to English.

Besides guiding me through data collection and analysis, the feminist methodology also motivated me to design and write research that accentuates an “activist stance” where the

³⁶ Sharlene Hesse-Biber, 210.

³⁷ Sharlene Hesse-Biber, 213.

"research act is recognized as inherently political."³⁸ This thesis has the possibility to serve as a socio-political act that aims to amplify the voices and experiences of marginalized communities, particularly Hmong American community advocates and organizers. As little historical scholarship documents their experiences and contributions, my research aims to contribute to the underexplored historical narrative of the Hmong American grassroots feminist movement against AIM. I hope my work will stimulate further discussion and research in this area. In praxis, my study seeks to serve as a documentation source for the Hmong American community's activism against AIM and a resource for individuals and non-Hmong communities interested in developing and sustaining a grassroots feminist movement.

Historical Context

The history of Hmong Americans is inseparable from their mass migration as political refugees to the United States during and after the Cold War era. In 1961, amidst the U.S. attempt to limit the spread of communism, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) met the Hmong military leader Vang Pao in Laos to recruit Hmong men to serve as soldiers in a covert military operation.³⁹ The Hmong people—an ethnic minority in Laos—collaborated with the CIA in what became known as the U.S. Secret War(1961-1975).⁴⁰ After the U.S. lost the Secret War and the American War in Vietnam, many Hmong escaped the threat and persecution from the victorious

³⁸ Judith A. Cook, "An Interdisciplinary Look at Feminist Methodology: Ideas and Practice in Sociology, History, and Anthropology," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 10, no. 2 (1983): 131, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23262322>.

³⁹ Paul Hillmer, *A People's History of the Hmong* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2010), 3.

⁴⁰ Professor of history, critical race and ethnic studies at the UC Merced, Ma Vang, contends that the war was intended to operate in secret because it breached the 1954 Geneva Accords that set Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam neutral from military intervention by foreign countries. Vang further says that the "U.S. government deemed the war a "secret" primarily to conceal the U.S. covert bombing missions in Laos on enemy sites and to disrupt the North Vietnamese Army supply route." See: Ma Vang, *History on the Run: Secrecy, Fugitivity, and Hmong Refugee Epistemologies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 5.

communist regime that took over Laos. They were forced to flee their homeland and sought refuge in camps in Thailand. A significant number eventually moved as exiles to several countries, including the United States. Since 1975, hundreds of thousands of Hmong refugees have resettled in American land.⁴¹ Many have relocated from their initial settlement areas to other locations in the country. One reason for this secondary migration was to reunite with their relatives and rebuild their communities as a survival means in the new host country.⁴² These multiple displacements reflect a portion of the history of political and social marginalization of the Hmong refugees.

Upon resettling in the U.S., many Hmong people still faced exclusion and discrimination. Several factors contributed to their marginalization, including some Americans' ignorance and racial prejudice towards the Hmong community, which resulted in resentment and accusations. Even worse, American mass media perpetuated harmful stereotypes about the Hmong people, potentially stigmatizing the community. Scholar John M. Duffy examined letters from community members in Wausau, Wisconsin, that contained multiform accusations and hate speech towards Hmong refugees.⁴³ The letters were published in *The Wausau Daily Herald* in the 1980s. The writers accused the Hmong people of doing things that rendered them as backward and misusing welfare funds. They called for the termination of the welfare and sending the refugees back to Asia.⁴⁴ Anti-Hmong sentiments also appeared in some mass media in the

⁴¹ Kou Yang, "The American Experience of the Hmong: A Historical Review," in *Diversity in Diaspora: Hmong Americans in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Mark Edward Pfeifer, Monica Chiu and Kou Yang (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013), 3-5, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wqfg4.4>.

⁴² More about the practice of secondary migration among the Hmong refugees in the U.S. read: Chia Youyee Vang, *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 47-53.

⁴³ John M. Duffy, *Writing from These Roots: Literacy in a Hmong-American Community*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 170- 189.

⁴⁴ This anti-immigrant discourse is not unique to Hmong and to the American public. It holds a long root in the United States history and the traces are still present today.

following decades.⁴⁵ Stigmatization as a result of the rhetoric along with lack of representation in mainstream history, and the cultural and language differences contributed to the marginalization of many of Hmong refugees. While they attempted to establish a sense of belonging and a new identity in the host country, all of these circumstances coupled with the trauma of war and displacement may have deepened some Hmong people's longing for their homeland.

The notion of "returning to home" often permeates the stories of the Hmong American community. This idea can be tied to a geographical definition or a cultural meaning leading to the search for identity. The desire to return to roots have been expressed in many ways. Some have translated the idea metaphorically, for instance, as an act of remembering and contextualizing the history and cultural practices of the homeland and making them part of their new identity.⁴⁶ Others have chosen to physically return to Laos for a root-seeking pilgrimage. To explain the latter, anthropologist Louisa Schein reported that a large number of Hmong Americans began to travel to Asia in the 1990s to travel to their "motherland" following the open border in Laos.⁴⁷ Many tried to reconnect with their long-lost family members left behind after the war. In this root-seeking journey, a segment of male travelers also reconnected with what they fantasized about as "homeland women," symbolizing the men's nostalgic idea of Hmong femininity that is not yet Americanized.⁴⁸ Gendered relations such as marriages happened in this circumstance, involving Hmong American men and Hmong women in Asian countries.

⁴⁵ Chia Youyee Vang, *Hmong America*, 145-149.

⁴⁶ This expression for instance pervades in various Hmong Americans' literary works.

⁴⁷ The diplomatic relation between the U.S. and Laos reinstated in 1992. "U.S. relations with Laos," last modified May 21, 2021, accessed February 24, 2023, <http://www.google.com/intl/en/privacypolicy.html>.

⁴⁸ Louisa Schein, "Marrying out of Place: Hmong/Miao Women Across and Beyond China," in *Cross-Border Marriages: Gender and Mobility in Transnational Asia*, ed. Nicole Constable (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 54, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uwm/detail.action?docID=3441421>; Louisa Schein, "Homeland Beauty: Transnational Longing and Hmong American Video," in *Media, Erotics, and Transnational Asia*, eds. Purnima Mankekar and Louisa Schein, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 215.

Hmong transnational marriages have continued until today, loaded with gendered issues. It is important to note that not all of the marriages were problematic. Some served the purpose of reuniting family members and brought couples together in the name of love.⁴⁹ The Hmong advocates have clearly stated that there are no issues with marriages between consenting adults “of similar age or a reasonable age gap.”⁵⁰ Nevertheless, abusive practices within the Hmong transnational marriages are pervasive and disturbing reality. Older Hmong American men married underaged girls where in many cases the marriages were forced. Brides’ abandonment upon the marriages were also common issues. There were many other patterns of abusive practices where the victims were not just the brides but also the men’s first wives and families in the U.S. With all the risks, one may ask why the young Hmong women in Asian countries would still be willing to marry middle-aged Hmong American men. While this research does not specifically aim to answer this question, some historical context may help to provide a partial answer.

Hmong people have historically faced marginalization in Asian countries such as China, Laos, and Thailand. The Hmong displacement began in the nineteenth century where they fled from their land of origin in China to avoid imperial persecution and found refuge in the mountainous areas in some Southeast Asian countries.⁵¹ Historian Paul Hillmer emphasized that wherever the Hmong lived, they were “independent but marginalized, living apart from mainstream society.”⁵² Louisa Schein in her work about Hmong/Miao women in China highlighted similar point while adding that the places where the Hmong resettled were also

⁴⁹ MayTong Chang, interview by author, St. Paul, Minnesota, December 8, 2022; Chai Moua, interview by author, Teams meeting, November 23, 2022.

⁵⁰ Chic Dabby-Chinoy, “Abusive International Marriages,” 13.

⁵¹ Ma Vang, 11-12; Duffy, 24-26; Hillmer, 15; Schein, “Marrying out of Place,” 53.

⁵² Hillmer, 15.

“remembered as a site of oppression by dominant ethnic group.”⁵³ In the case of Laos, Duffy exemplified the marginalization by digging upon the education policy of the Royal Lao government that neglected formal education for most Hmong in the country. While Duffy highlighted the exclusion of most Hmong from Lao schools, it does not mean that the Hmong people were uneducated. The Hmong children were taught “in the context of home and village.”⁵⁴ Duffy implied that the lack of access for Hmong may be rooted in anti-Hmong sentiments where a segment of Laotians in independent Laos saw the Hmong as the “other.” According to a letter of a government official in 1964, the Hmong were viewed as “foreigners” and “parasites on Laos.”⁵⁵ Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) supported by the Congress of World Hmong People (CWHP) reported that the marginalization of Hmong in Laos has persisted decades after the end of the CIA’s Secret War.⁵⁶ Such marginalization also occurred in Thailand. As mentioned earlier, part of Hmong people also sought refuge in camps in Thailand after the war. Subsequently, many of them were relocated to other countries, including the United States. After the resettlement process was halted, refugee camps in Thailand were closed in mid-1990s. As a result, some refugees returned to Laos, while others constructed a village near Wat Tham Krabok in northern Thailand.⁵⁷ In 2003, the U.S reopened another resettlement opportunity, but not all refugees had the chance to seek asylum in America. In 2009, those who remained in Thailand were compelled by Thai military to return to Laos.⁵⁸ All these marginalizations may have contributed to why some Hmong women in Asia were willing (or

⁵³ Schein, “Marrying out of Place,” 54.

⁵⁴ Bliatout in Duffy, 70.

⁵⁵ Quotes from Yang Dao in Duffy, 71.

⁵⁶ Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), *Alternative Report Submitted to the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women Lao People’s Democratic Republic*, October 4, 2018, accessed February 27, <https://unpo.org/article/21143>.

⁵⁷ Chia Youyee Vang, *Hmong America*, 11.

⁵⁸ Amnesty International, *Urgent Action: Refugees Forcibly Returned to Laos*, 13 January 2010, accessed by February 27 <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/36000/asa260012010en.pdf>.

were manipulated to agree) to marry middle-aged Hmong American men. In the context of a global political economy that produced disparities between the U.S. and Asian countries, the brides sought to create an opportunity for themselves and their families to escape the adversities. Testimony from a Hmong American community advocate Kabzuag Vaj, who made observations in Laos for three months, confirmed how transnational marriages have become a common way for Hmong women (and men) to exit poverty.⁵⁹ The trend was also facilitated with strong patriarchal culture, among other factors, that allowed men to have multiple wives and exploit women.

Although no statistical data records the total number of the Hmong (abusive) transnational marriages, yet, the stories about this issue are prevalent within the community and have been documented in various media despite social taboo surrounding the topic. In 2006, Hmong American women voiced their concern about Hmong American men cheating on their wives and marrying young girls in Asia in a community magazine, *FutureHmong*, published in Appleton, Wisconsin. In the May edition, Hou Vang and Yer Yang stated their strong opinion in an article entitled "Polygamy: A Call for Change":

Almost every Hmong person knows of someone who went back to Laos/Thailand to marry a younger wife and completely neglected his obligations and responsibilities financially and emotionally here in America... Today, there are countless Hmong men with families who made a conscious decision to leave their wives and children and travel halfway around the world to Thailand, Laos, or China to marry young girls (aged 14-18 years old). Many of these trips are also to simply experience sexual encounters with young Hmong girls.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Kabzuag Vaj, "Foreword," in Chic Dabby-Chinoy, "Abusive International Marriages," 8-9.

⁶⁰ Houa Vang and Yer Yang, "Polygamy: A Call for Change," *FutureHmong*, May 2006, 1, Archives, Hmong Resource Center Library, Saint Paul, Minnesota.

The authors further exemplified a case involving a Hmong American man traveling to Laos to illegally marry a 16-year-old girl who became his third wife. When the man returned to the United States, he asked his first wife to "fake a divorce" and "refuse child support, so it will make him appear financially ready for his third wife."⁶¹ This family had almost 20 children who were neglected emotionally and financially. Another case was a 45-year-old man whose multiple trips' costs to Laos have destroyed his family's financial condition. The man sacrificed his business and retirement fund to send money abroad to his 17-year-old new wife. His first wife, threatened with divorce by her husband, worked multiple jobs to support the family. Their underage children were lost to drugs and gangs. The authors contend that unsupervised children from these polygamous families are also prone to trauma, early marriages, school dropouts, suicidal thoughts, and prostitution.⁶² Vang and Yang highlighted the term polygamy⁶³ to name and examine the phenomenon, which is a common way in the community to address such problems because the term "abusive international marriage" had not been invented yet.

The issue around Hmong American men's polygamy with brides from Asian countries has been discussed years earlier in *FutureHmong*. The magazine has a letters-to-editors section called *Speak Out!* dedicated to the community members to voice their opinion. In one edition of *Speak Out!* in 2003, J. Vang (age 20) from Wisconsin shared their personal story as a child in a polygamist family with a stepmother from Thailand. Vang asserted that such a family practice resulted in child abuse and neglect. The author believed that polygamist households brought

⁶¹ Houa Vang and Yer Yang, "Polygamy," 10.

⁶² Houa Vang and Yer Yang, 10-12.

⁶³ Some Hmong American scholars also use the term polygamy or polygyny (which specifically refers to men having multiple wives), and marital affairs. For instance, read: Kit Chang, "How Hmong American Men Engaging in Marital Affairs in Laos Have Impacted Their Relationships with Their Children" (Master's thesis, California State University, Stanislaus, 2012); May-Ci Xiong, "The Effects of Growing Up in a Hmong Polygamous Household" (Master's thesis, California State University, Stanislaus, 2010).

emotional damage and trauma to the children affected.⁶⁴ The publication of the aforementioned article and Vang's letter stemmed from their apprehension and likely frustration over the prolonged and taboo issue.

To further illustrate the prevalence of abusive international marriages in the late 1990s and early 2000s, one can excavate one of Hmong Americans' most popular cultural products in that era. Schein examined a widely popular Hmong drama *Yuav Tos Txog Hnub Twg*,⁶⁵ released in 1995 by Hmong American director Ga Moua. The movie portrays the story of Dr. Tom. This Hmong American janitor travels to a refugee camp in Thailand with his economic privilege as an American and brags about his fake business and educational background. In the first film, Dr. Tom marries a young woman named Nkauj Iab after promising wealth and migration opportunities to America to the bride's family and lying that he was single. Dr. Tom eventually abandons his bride and returns to the U.S. when he runs out of money. In the second film, he travels back to Thailand with loan money, but Nkauj Iab has realized all of Dr. Tom's lies. He wants to prey on other women but fails because the women know that he is a fraud. The women are too smart to be deceived by Dr. Tom. He returns to America in desperation. At home, Dr. Tom abuses his first wife out of his frustration.⁶⁶ In her 2002 article, Schein asked several Hmong why the movie became popular. Most of her interviewees said because "it's a real story," alluding that Dr. Tom's story was relatable because it represents a common phenomenon in their

⁶⁴ J. Vang in "Speak Out!" section in *FutureHmong*, April 2003, 8, Archives, Hmong Resource Center Library, Saint Paul, Minnesota.

⁶⁵ Watch the first part of the movie in: NasEj, "Yuav Tos Txog Hnub Twg | Dr. Tom 1 | Hmong Movie," directed by Ga Moua, YouTube, May 16, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EwvT_-bHIkk&list=PLi8b7SqMgLLtKHEufjJJbOLcju_Z4KfWT.

⁶⁶ Louisa Schein, "Homeland Beauty," 210-219.

community.⁶⁷ The film's success likely highlights how deeply ingrained the issue of abusive international marriages was within the Hmong American community.

Chapter Descriptions

Chapter 1 delves into the emergence and development of the movement against abusive international marriages. Based on oral history interviews and Hmong American community media, this chapter explores a series of events and the cultural backdrop of Hmong Americans in the early 2000s that culminated in the community's first gathering in Wisconsin in 2007, which marked the beginning of the movement against AIM. Subsequently, Chapter 1 scrutinizes the report of the meetings and incorporate the voices of the community advocates and organizers to understand the movement's ideology and the cultural and political factors that influenced it. Lastly, the chapter traces the development of the community campaign called *Building Our Future* from 2013 until 2022. Overall, the study's results reveal the consistency and changes in the movement, solidarity and conflict among the activists, the resistance towards the dominant power in the Hmong community and mainstream society, and the impact of the movement on a segment of the community. Chapter 1 concludes on how the grassroots movement against AIM embodies a political commitment that has nurtured a strong bond among the activists.

Chapter 2 comprises two reflections that aim to provide further insight into the impact of the movement. The first reflection examines the recent trend of abusive international marriages in the Hmong American community in Wisconsin. Despite progress, this section reveals that AIM remains prevalent in the community. Finally, the second reflection focuses on the

⁶⁷ Louisa Schein, "Mapping Hmong Media in Diasporic Space," in *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrains*, eds. Faye D. Ginsburg, Lila Abu Lughod, and Brian Larking (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 226.

transnational dimension of the movement since its inception. It traces the factors that contributed to the emergence of transnational ideas in the 2012 report and examines the impact of the activism on the development of transnational solidarity among Hmong advocates and organizers.

Chapter 1: Emergence and Growth of the Movement

In the early 2000s, a trend was noticed within the Hmong American community where men engaged in marital affairs with Hmong women in Asian countries, forcing their wives in the U.S. to file for legal divorce. In May 2006, out of a deep concern for what had happened in their community, Houa Vang and Yer Yang wrote an article in *Future Hmong* challenging polygamy. The authors expressed their frustration over the persistence of Hmong American men's sexual desire to have more than one wife and seek new brides—many of them were underaged—in Asian countries. The article featured several stories, including that of a Hmong American wife coerced to file for legal divorce by her husband.¹ The man needed to change his marital status from married to single so he could bring his new bride to the United States.² This was due to U.S. laws such as the Edmunds Act that forbids the practice of polygamy.³ He also forced his wife into denying child support to make the husband appear as a single man who could afford to sponsor a foreign fiancée. Although the article was created in 2006, this dynamic was prevalent in the community years earlier.

Some Wisconsin Hmong American community advocates became aware of the forced divorce trend in 2004 and 2005. These advocates subsequently had multiple meetings with women experiencing such a situation.⁴ They assisted the women through their work with Hmong American community-based organizations or local institutions concerned with domestic

¹ Houa Vang and Yer Yang, "Polygamy: A Call for Change," *FutureHmong*, May 2006, 10.

² MayTong Chang, interview by author, St. Paul, Minnesota, December 8, 2022; Xong Xiong, interview by author, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, March 14, 2023.

³ The Edmunds Act of 1882 clearly states that polygamy is a criminal offense punishable by fine and imprisonment. "Image 15 of The Edmunds Act," image, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA, accessed March 12, 2023, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/gdcmassbookdig.edmundsact00unit/?sp=15&st=image>.

⁴ MayTong Chang, interview by author; Xong Xiong, interview by author.

violence. Woman after woman came in desperation, asking the advocates in different counties in Wisconsin to assist them in initiating legal divorce proceedings. The advocates said the women knew why their husbands wanted the divorce. Despite knowing and abhorring the men's real motive, many wives still decided to continue the legal procedure, complying with their husbands as long as they remained culturally married. In some cases, husbands threatened the wives that they would culturally divorce them if they did not agree to file for legal divorce.⁵ In light of this, one may ask why these women would be afraid of cultural divorce compared to legal marriage dissolution. To better understand the factors that shaped these women's decisions, one may delve into the way the Hmong American community perceived culturally divorced women during that time period.

Several editions of *FutureHmong* magazine in early 2000 captured some common notions surrounding the issue of women and divorce. In August 2003, *FutureHmong* published a cover story titled "The Stigma of a Divorced Woman." Three pages in this edition contained a series of commentaries from Hmong people, including elders (both men and women). The anonymous elders perceived culturally divorced Hmong women as less valuable than single women. Divorced women were often viewed as "secondhand material," as one older man put it. According to an elder woman living in a polygamist family⁶, they were perceived to have "very little value" to Hmong men. A 46-year-old Hmong man even viewed female divorcees as trash, "when you are done using them you throw them away." Hmong men were generally expected to marry single women because they believed doing so "makes them feel good about themselves,"

⁵ Xong Xiong, interview by author; Houa Vang and Yer Yang, "Polygamy," 11, Hmong Resource Center Library.

⁶ The cultural acceptance of polygamy was evident in some societies, including Hmong. In polygamous arrangements, where a Hmong man takes multiple wives, only one of these marriages is typically recognized as legal.

said the man. Even though these opinions did not represent all traditional Hmong thinking and all Hmong people, these thoughts existed and perpetuated the stigma surrounding culturally divorced women. David Sengkhammee, at that time a 25-year-old Hmong executive in Appleton, Wisconsin, expressed regret over the stereotype where “many Hmong people group all divorced women under one category—disobedient, deceiving, lazy, and evil” and the perception that divorced women brought shame to their families. Another commentary from Dr. Cha Lee of Lee Medical Clinic in Milwaukee underscored the perpetuation of the stigma and how it had made many women suffer. Lee witnessed a lot of battered Hmong women as his patients were reluctant to divorce their husbands because they were scared of the stigma. Lee also shed light on how divorced Hmong men did not receive the same wrong image.⁷

The August 2003 article incited reactions from community members as published in *Speak Out!* segment in *FutureHmong* editions in September 2003 and November 2003. In the former edition, Xeng Yeng Lee of Sheboygan, Wisconsin, expressed their agreement with Sengkhammee. Lee testified about their family, who repeatedly gossiped about divorced Hmong women. The writer went on to critique how the community often blamed the female divorcees for bringing shame to their families but freed the divorced men from judgment even though many were abusive to their ex-wives.⁸ As if proving Lee’s point, Maiyia Lor of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, called upon the divorced women to “not go after someone else’s husband!” Although Lor acknowledged that not all widows initiated such affairs, their overall statement suggested that the divorced women were the problem and not the cheating husbands. This viewpoint made it plausible for many women to eschew cultural divorce to save them from losing face.

⁷ “The Stigma of a Divorced Woman,” *FutureHmong*, August 2003, Wisconsin Historical Society Library (hereafter: WHSL).

⁸ Xeng Yeng Lee, “Speak Out! Excerpt from You to Us,” *FutureHmong*, September 2003, 8-9, WHSL.

Community advocates and scholars reported how some Hmong American women were scared of the negative implication of being divorcees. Xong Xiong, who worked at New Horizons Shelter and Women’s Center in La Crosse, Wisconsin, around the 2000s, witnessed and heard about many Hmong American women who complied with their husbands’ request to file for legal divorce so that they could eschew the cultural one. “When it’s cultural divorce, there’s a lot more at stake,” said Xiong, now the Executive Director of Cia Siab. Inc. She explained how women might fear marriage dissolution’s social and spiritual consequences. Divorced women risked being undervalued by society. Many of them also believed that, spiritually, a female divorcee would have “a really bad funeral,” which could negatively impact her reincarnation.⁹ Ma Nhia Vang, Founder and Interim Executive Director of the Hmong Museum, examined Hmong American divorced women’s experiences in her Master’s thesis. Vang highlighted how divorced women—if they were not remarried—were often viewed as outsiders by their former husbands’ families and could not regain their insider status within their birth family and “reconnect” with their ancestral spirits.¹⁰ Female divorcees were perceived as “rootless” and often associated with promiscuity and immorality. They were, in certain ways, treated as strangers by their families and a segment of their community.¹¹ This situation was allowed by, among others, the patriarchal culture prevalent within the Hmong social structure.

Patriarchy played a role in placing women in difficult situations where they felt compelled to comply with their husbands’ legal divorce plans to avoid being ostracized by their families and community. The belief that polygyny was acceptable among many Hmong people

⁹ Xong Xiong, interview by author.

¹⁰ Mai Nhia Vang, “The Good Wife: A Study of Hmong American Women’s Transient Status and Their Experiences in the Formal Hmong Marriage and Divorce Process” (Master’s thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2010), 91, 98, 119.

¹¹ Mai Nhia Vang, “The Good Wife,” 107-131.

was infused with patriarchal values—which were indeed not unique to the Hmong community only. Yang See Koumarn, a Hmong refugee who was educated in Vientiane and worked for the U.S. and General Vang Pao back in Laos, wrote an article published by National Indochinese Clearinghouse in 1984 mentioning polygyny was necessary due to three factors. First, it was traditionally aimed at political reasons to maintain support among clans. Second, when a man passed away and left his widow, it was customary for his brother to marry the woman as his second or third wife. This was done to assume control over the deceased man’s property and offspring and to avoid breaking the clans’ relationship to the deceased man’s wife and children. Third, Koumarn argued that polygyny further spread during the war, which left many widows and children behind who also needed to be protected by men.¹² Long after the war ended, the practice of polygyny remained, and tradition was often used as justification. Such an excuse could be reflected in some commentaries published in *FutureHmong* magazine. In January 2003, Blong Yang set forth “Polygamy...Right or Wrong” as the title of his editorial. The editor pointed out Hmong men who warned him not to speak against polygamy in mass media because it would give Hmong a bad reputation. The men suggested Yang speak to older people first when he wanted to talk about “culture.”¹³ The attitude of the Hmong men in Yang’s story may have been a reaction resulting from prolonged stigmatization towards the Hmong people, encouraging them to want to appear as respectable people in front of mainstream culture. Alternatively, it may have been the Hmong men tried to utilize cultural reasons to justify polygyny.

Two months after Blong Yang’s article, Song Yang, a proud supporter of polygyny from La Crosse, Wisconsin, wrote two pages in *FutureHmong* claiming that resistance against

¹² National Indochinese Clearinghouse, Center for Applied Linguistics, “Glimpses of Hmong History and Culture” (Wisconsin Dept. of Public Instruction, 1984), Madison, Wisconsin, WHSL, <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/search.asp?id=1292>.

¹³ Blong Yang, “Polygamy...Right or Wrong?,” *FutureHmong*, January 2003, 6, WHSL.

polygyny was discrimination. He defended polygyny but opposed polyandry because the number of women in the population exceeded that of men. He promoted Hmong families against “government intrusion” into their private space and to trick the U.S. law by only registering one marriage. To justify his opinion, Song Yang underscored the importance of preserving “the old proven Hmong family system in the past.” For him, polygyny was a solution, and divorce was deemed unacceptable as it would break families apart.¹⁴ Song Yang’s article incited heated reactions from multiple readers who wrote their responses in subsequent editions of *Speak Out!* One of them was Mai Xiong, whose letter in April 2003 argued that polygyny was a means of control over women to make men feel powerful.¹⁵

Song Yang dared to speak up publicly probably because a segment of Hmong people was also reluctant to take a stand against polygyny. According to a Hmong Milwaukeean Ab O. Yang’s statement in the September 2003 issue of *FutureHmong*, many ended up with “a quiet disapproval but willing to accept it (men’s polygamy).”¹⁶ The writer explained that these people were afraid to be shunned by their clans if they challenged polygyny. The discussion about the topic reappeared in 2006 in Houa Vang and Yer Yang’s article in *FutureHmong*, showing the situation had not changed. They pointed out the tendency of a segment of community leaders to avoid controversial issues and that they did not want to be “the Ones to crack the egg.” Vang and Yang claimed that they talked to the leaders, and many of them said they did not “want to hurt their polygamist friends’ feelings and don’t want to be threatened by them and their supporters.”¹⁷ The community leaders’ complicity may have been another form of control over

¹⁴ Song Yang, “Polygamy Is Right, Discrimination Is Wrong,” *FutureHmong*, March 2003, WHSL.

¹⁵ Mai Xiong, “Speak Out! Excerpt from You to Us,” *FutureHmong*, April 2003, 8, WHSL.

¹⁶ Ab O. Yang, “Speak Out! Excerpt from You to Us,” *FutureHmong*, September 2003, 8, WHSL.

¹⁷ Houa Vang and Yer Yang, “Polygamy,” 12, Hmong Resource Center Library.

Hmong women's lives, which discouraged many from challenging their husbands' patriarchal attitudes.

All these highly gendered situations may have led many Hmong women to think that they had fewer options to survive without their husbands' companionship and the status of culturally married women. Moreover, unlike the American-born Hmong,¹⁸ women who were former refugees were potentially more vulnerable and susceptible to experiencing alienation upon divorce. Compared to the second generation, the former refugees lacked resources and networks outside the Hmong community due to cultural and language barriers, racial discrimination, and other factors. Given all these conditions and the trauma and challenges of living as a marginalized community in America, it is understandable why some Hmong women decided to comply with their husbands' request for legal divorce in the 2000s.

The Hmong American community advocates' role in assisting Hmong women filing for legal divorce became crucial at that moment. As mentioned earlier, the advocates usually worked for mainstream institutions concerned with domestic violence or Hmong community-based organizations. The institutions needed women advocate to assist Hmong victims/survivors¹⁹ navigate the U.S. legal or criminal justice system. Many Hmong victims/survivors with cultural and language barriers worked with the advocates to learn about their rights and the consequences of their actions based on U.S. laws. In the case of women filing for legal divorce, the advocates

¹⁸ Some divorcees who are second generation Hmong Americans tend to have a better social and cultural capital to survive in the U.S. Mai Nhia Vang, "The Good Wife," 117.

¹⁹ Some Hmong American community advocates and organizers and the 2012 meetings report utilize the term "victims/survivors." A Hmong American gender and social justice activist Bo Thao-Urabe explains that "victims" refer to individuals who have experienced gender oppression. When individuals lack the empowerment to identify and comprehend a problem, they become primarily victimized by it. On the other hand, "survivors" are individuals who have overcome their challenges and acknowledge that they have lived through such incidents, but actively advocate for themselves and their families. Although some individuals use the terms "victims" and "survivors" interchangeably, Thao-Urabe employs both terms based on the context and the specific individuals she addresses. Source: Bo Thao-Urabe, interview by author, Zoom meeting, November 30, 2022.

assisted the women in understanding the legal process and ramifications of the divorce. The advocates also provided services that helped victims/survivors navigate access to public services to meet their basic needs and be more financially self-sufficient. In some cases, the women's decision to meet the advocates was possibly an "impact" of the negative image projected toward the advocates and their institutions. Some community members perceived the advocates as "people that break families apart."²⁰ Some also called their workplaces the "divorce houses."²¹ Xong Xiong said this stigma may have made the advocates and their institutions better known by the women in the community; thus, when something happened, the women knew where to go.

The advocates' intervention in assisting the women who experienced forced divorce later fueled the beginning of a new movement against gender-based violence within the Hmong American community. While helping the women, the advocates in Wisconsin began to notice the repetition of similar cases within their area of work. Through the network of community advocates, they realized that this trend had also occurred in different counties, which made the issue more concerning. In their own words, the advocates explained:

[The case of forced divorce] wasn't just (in) one community in Wisconsin... this is also happening in Eau Claire, and this is all so happening in Milwaukee, and Appleton, and Green Bay...this is a trend that's going on in our community.²² – Xong Xiong

The reason how we found out is that, as you know, we're a small community...When you're in community, you notice these things, and you see them because you see people in your community...it wasn't just happening in Milwaukee, where I was working. It was happening in every county.²³ – MayTong Chang.

Pheng Thao, who is a Hmong American male advocate, added that another phenomenon noticed by the advocates was the trend of Hmong American husbands disappearing for weeks or

²⁰ Xong Xiong, interview by author; MayTong Chang, interview by author; Bo Thao-Urabe, interview by author.

²¹ Xong Xiong, interview by author.

²² Xong Xiong.

²³ MayTong Chang, interview by author.

months.²⁴ These trends, combined with the story of husbands returning to America with news about their second wives in Asian countries, were also widely conversed among Hmong Americans throughout Wisconsin.²⁵ The Hmong American advocates from different organizations in the state began to talk about this phenomenon in their regular meetings that were held quarterly. The forum aimed to discuss ongoing cases that they were struggling with and collaborate on finding the best way to solve the issues. During one of the gatherings, various advocates came up with cases related to forced divorce and Hmong divorcees remaining culturally married despite legal dissolution.²⁶ To address these problems more seriously, the advocates supported by their organizations' funders organized a special meeting in 2007. This meeting differed from their regular quarterly gatherings. It aimed to further investigate what was actually happening in their community and strategize to find solutions.

Four-Year Meetings in Wisconsin

The Hmong advocates formed a planning committee that conceptualized and designed the meetings in a way that would ensure active participation of all stakeholders involved. The committee worked together with a Hmong gender justice organizer Bo Thao-Urabe to plan the meeting that aimed to bring together Hmong men and women, elders, children, victims, and survivors to share their stories. Thao-Urabe also served as a facilitator for the conversations during the gatherings.²⁷

²⁴ Pheng Thao, interview by author, Teams meeting, February 21, 2023.

²⁵ Chic Dabby-Chinoy, Asian & Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence in partnership with Wisconsin Refugee Family Strengthening Project, "Abusive International Marriages: Hmong Advocates Organizing in Wisconsin" (San Francisco: Asian and Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence, 2012), <https://www.api-gbv.org/resources/abusive-international-marriages-hmong-advocates-organizing-wisconsin/>. (hereafter: Chic Dabby-Chinoy, "Abusive International Marriages.")

²⁶ Xong Xiong, interview by author; MayTong Chang, interview by author; Pheng Thao, interview by author.

²⁷ Chic Dabby-Chinoy, "Abusive International Marriages," 3.

Since its inception, the meetings have involved participants from various backgrounds and institutions, as documented in the meetings' report published in 2012. The first gathering in Wausau, Wisconsin, in December 2007, was attended by at least 54 Hmong advocates and non-Hmong allies. They were from Hmong American community-based organizations and mainstream institutions focused on gender-based violence, education, and a religious-related association. Almost all the organizations were based in Wisconsin. Only a few participants came from out of state. One came from Jersey City, New Jersey, and two others from the cities with large Hmong populations, such as St. Paul, Minnesota, and Fresno, California. Some of the participants were not affiliated with organizations. Most institutions sent their representatives to join the meeting in the subsequent years. The number of participants fluctuated but without significant variation. The second meeting, held in Wisconsin Dells in September 2008, had a minimum of 58 participants in attendance, whereas the third meeting, which took place in Wausau in October 2009, had 44 attendees. The final meeting held in Stevens Point in October 2010 had the highest number of participants, with 60 individuals in attendance.²⁸ While non-Hmong allies were present at the gathering, their primary role was to listen and support the Hmong community advocates and leaders. The gathering aimed to provide a space for Hmong advocates and leaders to voice their perspectives and concerns.²⁹ Besides, the meetings' report highlighted the participation of the people referred to in the document as "survivors."

From the first meeting onward, the survivors shared their stories to provide other participants with information so they could identify their community's real problems. The survivors were women and young adults harmed by cross-border marriages. The survivors permitted the advocates to record their stories. The meetings' report documented these stories,

²⁸ Dabby-Chinoy, 39-42.

²⁹ Chai Moua, interview by author, Teams meeting, November 23, 2022.

which had been summarized and published without the survivors' real names. At least seven survivors' stories were recorded in the report, telling the perspective of a bride from Asia, first wives in America, and children impacted by the marriages. The stories were told in third-person narration but included quotations from the survivors' own words. The first one was about an underage bride who married a Hmong American man in Laos when she was fifteen. The following passage describes her experiences:

...after meeting her husband in Laos, and came here as an international bride. He used physical, sexual, emotional and economic violence, escalating around her first miscarriage. But with the help of advocates, she eventually left and became independent, although she still struggles with her fears. "I think that in some way, shape, or form, I will always fear a relationship with a man. But my biggest fear now is making it in the world on my own. The English language is very hard. My story is a never ending story of sadness and hardship but I am glad that the violence has stopped."³⁰

The story above represented the phenomenon of underage marriage involving multiple abuse practices and subsequent problems that occurred after the woman escaped her husband. The woman experienced mental health issues and cultural barriers as she navigated her "new life" in the United States. The excerpt further showed that the advocate's role was not limited to assisting the woman exiting her abusive marriage but also supporting her upon the separation.

Stories of the first wives were dominant in the report, revealing abusive practices impacted the women and their children and the Hmong clan leaders' complicity in the men's cross-border marital affairs. One story told a Hmong American man who married a second wife after making recurring trips to Laos, China, and Thailand and financially abandoned his family in America. Other stories unpacked how their clan leaders failed the first wives, whom the women asked for help in addressing the problem with their husbands' marital affairs with Hmong women in Laos. In one story, a woman described herself:

... as "a good wife, a good mother, and a good daughter-in-law; making sure that the clan

³⁰ Dabby-Chinoy, 16.

will not be ashamed.” When her husband wanted to marry someone in Laos, she appealed to their clan leader who told her that as a woman, she should have a “big heart.” Her husband’s relatives pressured her to give him a legal divorce, but stay married according to Hmong culture...After receiving her husband’s death threat and after he withdrew all their assets, she has been silenced...³¹

This excerpt reflected the strong patriarchal culture that allowed the clan leaders and the husband’s extended family to silence the woman and ask her to sacrifice despite the unfair situation. The description clearly exemplified a forced divorce case where the woman was expected to remain culturally married to her husband. From the excerpt, we learned that the woman was further silenced through coercion and financial abuse.

Akin to the previous story, other survivors told similar cases where they were discouraged by their clan leaders. If in the last excerpt the woman was suggested to have a “big heart,” in this case that involved a first wife of 40 years of marriage, identified as “F,” her clan told her to “be patient.” Such discouragement was also experienced by a survivor, identified as “G,” who was disappointed because the clan leader could not stop her husband from getting a second wife. The husband told her that she was “too old.” The woman further stated, “Who should we turn to? When we go to white people, they tell us to enforce their laws—but who will give us justice?”³² This statement situated the problem beyond the Hmong community and linked it with the American mainstream culture. The quote may represent the woman’s frustration over traditional and mainstream structures perceived as incapable of giving proper solutions. While many clan leaders were permissive towards abusive cross-border marriages and marital affairs, the U.S. legal system could not simply fix the problems. To better comprehend the gravity of the issues, the meetings gave space for other community members who were not survivors to share their personal stories.

³¹ Dabby-Chinoy.

³² Dabby-Chinoy.

According to Thao-Urabe, in the first meeting in 2007, the community members tended to shy away from telling their experiences. She recalled:

[The] first year when I facilitated the conversation, nobody wanted to admit that this was happening in their families because it's a source of shame... they didn't feel like they wanted to talk about it because their father was engaged in it or their brother or their uncle.³³

In a similar vein, advocate Kabzuag Vaj, who at the time was the co-Founder and co-Executive Director of Freedom Inc., in Madison, Wisconsin, observed “a sense of shame and secrecy around the issue—so much so that advocates who were experiencing it within their families or their own personal lives did not disclose their connection to the practice.”³⁴ Only a few of the advocates shared their stories in the first meeting. Nevertheless, the meeting organizers and facilitator persisted in their attempt to encourage people to speak up because they recognized the significance of making this sensitive problem not a source of shame.

The community members’ stories revealed more dimensions of the issues. The community members, including the advocates who participated in the meetings, told their observations and how cross-border marriages and marital affairs had impacted their lives and the community in general. The meetings’ report emphasized that “almost everyone knew someone or had a story”³⁵ related to the practices of international marriages. The meetings’ participants discussed some real cases and their impacts on the community as listed below:

Table 1. Stories from Community Members Reproduced from the 2012 Meetings’ Report³⁶

A man with a wife and children in the U.S. has acquired a teen wife in Laos. He travels back and forth, ignoring his family in America when he is in Laos, and makes monthly money transfers to the second wife and her family in Laos.
IMPACT Economic hardship for his family in the U.S. because of his travel expenses and international money transfers; betrayal and lying to maintain his teen wife harms family here;

³³ Bo Thao-Urabe, interview by author.

³⁴ Kabzuag Vaj in Chic Dabby-Chinoy, “Abusive International Marriages,” 8.

³⁵ Dabby-Chinoy, 17.

³⁶ Table and content were reproduced from Dabby-Chinoy, 17-18.

and his wife in the U.S. cannot truthfully explain to their children why their father neglects them.
A 67-year-old man married to a 16-year-old brings his teen wife to the U.S., all his children (teens and adults) are older than their new step-mother.
IMPACT Teen and adult children have to accept a new mother; having to relate to her makes them feel conflicted because they are attached to their mother; and the teen wife cannot fit into this new step-mother's role and there is a mutual lack of communication.
A man sent his wife to Laos to look for teen wife for him, and he now keeps the teen wife isolated in the home in the U.S.
IMPACT First wives are forced to do what husbands want and live with a teen wife in the home; teen wives suffer severe isolation.
Community members express interest, excitement and curiosity about new teen brides: "Is she pretty? Who is she?"
IMPACT Such reactions create new norms of acceptance in the community.
Family members encourage a widowed father or an unmarried brother to go to Laos and find someone from there to marry. They may or may not explicitly encourage marrying a teen wife but since that is the dominant practice, it is who the men are marrying.
IMPACT Such efforts reinforce the community's ideas that if you are married, it adds to your status, and if you are not married, your value is diminished.
Some Hmong leaders practice polygamy and marry teen wives and because of their powerful positions, they are effectively condoning both practices. Community members admire their leaders and those who want to speak out about these practices are silenced.
IMPACT Community enforces and supports male privilege
When a sister's 65-year-old brother married a 14-year-old girl in Laos, she called the girl's mother to ask why she was allowing this marriage, to which the mother in Laos replied, "Because we are so poor and we need the money he sends."
IMPACT Poverty in Laos, especially women's and girls' poverty, is being exploited, making this an acceptable practice in the home country.
Wives are forced to divorce, accept a teen wife, and generally agree to their husband's demands. After a legal divorce, wives are sometimes expected to stay in the marital home and take care of the household, children, ex-husband and other family members, with the new teen wife in the home.
IMPACT First wives feel they are held hostage by their husbands; suffer severe economic loss due to the change in their status; have little legal recourse; and have to endure continued humiliation.
Stories from and about teenage and adult children describe the impossibility of having to relate to a step-mother or second mother who is a teenager and in many instances younger than any of her newly acquired step-children; of relating to their father who now has a young wife; and viewing their mother's misery at being forced to leave and/or accept the new wife.
IMPACT Children experienced a range of emotions: confusion over role changes — their teen step-mother is more like a peer and at times they even help her to acculturate. They experience low self-esteem and depression, which could in turn lead to substance abuse. They feel torn by love and loyalty to their mothers, but unable to speak out against paternal authority and family pressure to accept the new family arrangements. They also have to deal with the knowledge that their father lied about his wife and children in order to contract the international marriage. Like their mothers, they felt betrayed.

The table accentuated that the victims/survivors were not just the first wives and young brides but also the children who were impacted mentally and financially. Some stories also alluded to situations in the community that contributed to normalizing polygamy with underage brides. These situations included leaders practicing polygyny and people being permissive and excited towards the practice.

Aside of the stories mentioned on Table 1, another type of violence noticed by the advocates was widely known as “marry-and-dump” or transnational abandonment. The report described marry-and-dump as “the practice of abandoning a new bride soon after marriage, within 2 to 3 months, without providing her (or a child conceived in the marriage) any economic support.” Hmong American men left their brides in Laos and returned to America under the pretense of filing for a fiancé visa, when in reality they had no intention to do so. This practice had resulted in the emergence of “a new class of unwanted Hmong girls” in Laos who had become stigmatized and marginalized in their own community.³⁷

All the stories discussed in above only involved Hmong American men as the ones who traveled abroad to find women, whereas Hmong American women also travel to seek Hmong men in Asian countries. The 2012 report included a section that specifically addressed this issue and asserted that the case with Hmong American women traveling to Asia usually did not result in similar abusive impacts compared to the common practice between Hmong American men and young Hmong women from Asia. Most women who went to Laos were reported to be divorcees or widows who looked for a real relationship and did not abuse their partners.³⁸

The table and the special section above seemed to show how the community members

³⁷ Kabzuag Vaj in Dabby-Chinoy, 8.

³⁸ Dabby-Chinoy, 18.

dissected reality from a gender perspective. The information presented earlier alludes that Hmong women were likely negatively impacted by the abusive practices in transnational marriages. In contrast, adult Hmong men were likely to hold more power and became the perpetrators. Regarding children, only teens in Asian countries were mentioned as girls, wives, or brides. On the other hand, the Hmong American children were not described from a gendered standpoint. A later observation from Vaj, who went to Laos in 2012, revealed that some Hmong American women were being exploited while looking for companionship from Hmong men in Laos.³⁹ Similarly, Xong Xiong posited that although certain Hmong American women exhibited greater financial stability and emotional maturity than their young husbands, they remained impacted by patriarchal culture. She asserted that the young husbands likely made important family decisions due to societal expectations of male leadership in households. Xiong assumed that some Hmong American women might be emotionally abusive as they become insecure in their relationship with younger partners and worried that other young women may take their place. Still, there were no reported cases where women conducted different types of violence.⁴⁰ In the case of divorce, Pheng Thao noted that young men would be easier to have access to support systems in the U.S., for instance, through connection with others who share their last name. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Thao also mentioned that divorce would have more severe implications for young women compared to young men.⁴¹

The meeting organizers further utilized the gender standpoint when they divided the Hmong participants into different discussion groups based on their gender to separately analyze

³⁹ Vaj in Dabby-Chinoy, 8-9.

⁴⁰ Xong Xiong, interview by author. Pheng Thao also said he never heard of cases with Hmong American women as the culprit of abusive international marriages. Thao mentioned that a few years after the 2012 report was published, advocates started to hear stories of 50 to 60 years old Hmong American women marrying young men from Asia, but the men were not underage; Pheng Thao, interview by author.

⁴¹ Pheng Thao.

the root causes of the problems that they had identified. A Hmong women's group concluded five points highlighting men's privileges and entitlement over women in the transnational community. A Hmong men's group described the problems in a similar tone. Akin to the women's group, they also pointed to Hmong men's sexual desire, hiding behind Hmong culture, and blaming Hmong women in the U.S. as excuses for their marriages with underaged brides. Additionally, the men's group mentioned other factors such as Hmong men's expectations towards submissive wives, their midlife crisis, the normalization of marrying young girls by some community members and leaders, and the perception that families in Asian countries took advantage of Hmong American men. Most of these gendered factors were rooted in the patriarchal culture entrenched within the community. A joint discussion between the groups resulted in an understanding that a segment of Hmong people, especially the elders, supported polygamy and marriages with young girls because these practices were part of their traditions. The advocates thought that many elders might view "changes in (marriage) practice are considered to threaten the uniqueness of Hmong culture."⁴²

Realizing how gender and culture played significant roles, the advocates formulated action plans that utilized a gender-based lens and cultural change framework to confront the problems of abusive transnational marriages. In the meeting, Thao-Urabe presented the importance of gender analysis to illuminate the "discrimination and oppression of people based on gender" and the factors that shaped this situation. Thao-Urabe also explained the cultural change framework as a means to cultivate long-term solutions that would result "in a collective shift to a shared way of thinking or set of beliefs, values, procedures, and/or relationships to stakeholders." To achieve this goal, she recommended the community be "willing to question

⁴² Dabby-Chinoy, 19-22.

and transform its oppressive practices” by assessing and utilizing its cultural knowledge, awareness, and sensitivity, as well as the community assets.⁴³

The advocates generated the movement’s action plans during the second meeting in 2008.

Pa Vang from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Center for Urban Community

Development, summarized the action plans as follows:

Table 2. Summary of Action Plans by Pa Vang⁴⁴

A: POLICY		
AWARENESS	INITIATIVES	ACCOUNTABILITY
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hmong and mainstream communities need to recognize and care about the problem. 2. Gather statistics. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To show how abusive international marriage benefits men and causes harm to women, children, families and communities. 2. To stop clans from failing women and children. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To stop the practice. 2. To have men deal with the consequences of their actions. 3. For first wives and family to be able to hold husbands accountable.
B: LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT		
AWARENESS	INITIATIVES	ACCOUNTABILITY
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Raise community awareness. 2. Equip community to talk about the problem/issue. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Statewide training for every clan leader and Hmong elder. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Partnership development. 2. Reduce number of victims. 3. Create community guidelines for clan leaders.
C: SERVICES FOR SURVIVORS		
AWARENESS	INITIATIVES	ACCOUNTABILITY
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Increase survivors’ awareness of services. 2. Educate clan leaders, mediators about referrals to services. 3. Make community aware of support services. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Train Hmong and other advocates to respond to all the victims of abusive international marriages. 2. Increase access to services to break the cycle of violence. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Create safety and stability for women. 2. Ensure that battered women’s needs are met.
D: ADVOCATE SUPPORT		
AWARENESS	INITIATIVES	ACCOUNTABILITY
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recognize advocates’ skills, knowledge, leadership, cultural competency, and expertise in understanding Hmong culture. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To increase collaboration on addressing abusive international marriages. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To be part of the decision making on abusive international marriages and promote safety for advocates.
E: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT		
AWARENESS	INITIATIVES	ACCOUNTABILITY

⁴³ Dabby-Chinoy, 23.

⁴⁴ Dabby-Chinoy, 36.

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Find out the views of the community. 2. Ensure messages convey the extent of the problem. 3. Bring advocates' understanding and analysis of the problem to the same page. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reach some middle ground towards peace and understanding. 2. Plant seeds of change. 3. Create partnerships. 4. Start building leadership in all places. 5. Organize grassroots 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish balanced gender representation. 2. Build healthy, happy Hmong community.
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The action plans promoted execution of the grassroots movement by various actors beyond the network of the advocates. It envisioned collective actions with the Hmong people in general, including the community leaders, and collaborations with non-Hmong allies. The advocates encouraged collaboration with mainstream institutions, which representatives consistently attended the advocates' gatherings since 2007. Statewide non-profit institutions such as the Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault and Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence provided funding and other services to support the meetings in 2007-2010. Table 2 also shows that the gender approach is still apparent, especially in alluding to women as the victims/survivors and men as the culprits. Nevertheless, the advocates refused men vs. women discourse as they envisaged a future of Hmong culture that promoted gender equality through collective actions. These plans aligned with the more detailed action steps formulated by the advocates, which still highlighted a gender-based approach and utilized community assets as critical actors in nurturing cultural change in the Hmong American community.

The action steps that endorsed changes to gender roles consisted of three portions with bulleted points that contained specific methods that community leaders, Hmong women, and Hmong men could take. The portion for community leaders advocated for women's engagement in the Hmong social system's leadership and for leaders' active participation to stimulate paradigm change where women's voices are more acknowledged, and their roles become equal

with men. This section also recommended evaluating traditional practices such as bride price and marriage negotiation. The next portion urged Hmong women to promote gender equality and educate anti-gender-based violence in their female and male family members; to emotionally and practically empower other women, including existing young brides and the victims. This section also encouraged them to contribute to the larger Hmong community in the U.S. and expand the movement to help girls and families in Asian countries. The last portion of the action steps was dedicated to Hmong men.⁴⁵ Most of the recommended actions were being open-minded and acting as role models who promoted gender equality in daily life in family and community. Some action steps pointed to men educating others about Hmong culture, U.S. laws, the consequences of international marriages, and creating a network to support victims.⁴⁶ By embracing the potential of the community assets (leaders, Hmong men, and women), the meetings' participants hoped to challenge existing beliefs such as male privilege, the perception that domestic violence is a family problem⁴⁷, not a community problem, and the generational traditions of Hmong clans that excluded women in the clan structure, marginalized the advocates, and perpetuated "traditional practices that harm women...and justified in the name of preserving culture."⁴⁸

Overall, all the action steps reflected the advocates' visions for a future with gender equality in

⁴⁵ Hmong American community leader Kevin Xiong who attended the gathering in 2010 as the representative of Shades of Yellow (a support group for Hmong LGBTQ), emphasized how Hmong men as the privileged members of the community should use their leverage to impact change. Kevin Xiong, interview by author, Zoom meeting, November 16, 2022.

⁴⁶ Dabby-Chinoy, 25-30.

⁴⁷ Hmong married couples traditionally sought counsel for marital issues from their families and clan members. If the wife had a complaint, she typically approached her husband's family because based on the patrilineal system, the wife was a part of the husband's clan after leaving her natal family. The husband's parents or elders resided with the couple would decide who was at fault. The perceived wrongdoer would then be "spoken to" by other patrilineal elders. If the meeting(s) did not work, the women's birth family may be involved later. If the wife and husband's families failed to reach consensus, they would decide whether to divorce. Nevertheless, divorce was highly discouraged because it may disrupt the families and clans' relationships. See: Sandra E. Hall, "Hmong Kinship Roles: Insiders and Outsiders," *Hmong Forum* 1 (1990): 30–32, <https://wisconsin.hosts.atlas-sys.com/illiad/GZN/illiad.dll?Action=10&Form=75&Value=3005675>.

⁴⁸ Chic Dabby-Chinoy, "Abusive International Marriages," 33-34.

the clan systems, in homes, and in communities that foster just cultural sanction to minimize gender-based violence.⁴⁹

In addition to the gender perspective, the ideas discussed in the meetings also reflected concern about Hmong identity and its relationship with American mainstream culture. The action steps recommended community leaders “increase the visibility of Hmong issues amongst non-Hmong allies,”⁵⁰ which included the activists and stakeholders from mainstream structures. The action steps for men also incorporated a point where Hmong men must empower women in their families “to learn more about their roles and not jump into mainstream American roles so fast.”⁵¹ This point suggested maintaining the Hmong cultural identity while absorbing mainstream values. Protecting the community also strongly appeared in constructing the term “abusive international marriages” to refer to all gender-based violence surrounding Hmong transnational marriages.

The community advocates’ strategy to name the problems held a practical and political meaning. After the series of meetings, the community collectively came up with the term abusive international marriages, which refers to:

The practice of older men residing in the U.S. marrying under-aged girls in Asian countries. Abusive criteria include age differences between the couple that can range from 20 to 70 years; men’s duplicity in declaring their true marital situation in the U.S.; wives in the U.S. coerced into divorce; and the sexual victimization of young girls.⁵²

This definition was crucial to set a common understanding among Hmong American people. Vaj argued that “without a common language and analysis around this issue, Hmong advocates could not strategize and provide effective services and advocacy to our sisters and our community.”⁵³

⁴⁹ See the advocates’ visions for change in Dabby-Chinoy, 31-32.

⁵⁰ Dabby-Chinoy, 25.

⁵¹ Dabby-Chinoy, 29.

⁵² Dabby-Chinoy, 15.

⁵³ Kabzuag Vaj in Dabby-Chinoy, 7.

This perspective aligns with Pierre Bourdieu’s idea about naming, which plays a significant role in “creating the structure of the world.”⁵⁴ The term “abusive international marriages” helped to frame the advocates’ efforts and to gather collective support from other Hmong and non-Hmong allies. The terminology also holds a symbolic political meaning as it was a collective act of the Hmong community to create the framework to understand the complexity of problems and solutions while reclaiming their power from stereotypical notions propagated by mainstream structure. To further elucidate this point, one may situate the invention of the terminology amidst the U.S. government's campaign for a war against trafficking in the 2000s, a timeframe that parallels the abusive international marriage movement. The subsequent analysis will uncover how race has shaped the movement against abusive international marriages.

The U.S. policy on human trafficking emerged and developed in the 2000s partly as a response to globalization that has spurred the growth of international criminal networks. On October 28, 2000, President Bill Clinton signed into law the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA), which aimed to “combat trafficking in persons, especially into the sex trade, slavery, and involuntary servitude, to reauthorize certain Federal programs to prevent violence against women, and for other purposes.”⁵⁵ The TVPA established the basis for U.S. policy on trafficking that birthed the creation of subsequent laws in the years that followed. Pulitzer prize-winning journalist Anthony M. Destefano in *The War on Human Trafficking*, argued that political agenda of the religious right “saw trafficking primarily as a phenomenon involving sex migration,” resulted in the narrowing of the discourse primarily around anti-

⁵⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1991), 105.

⁵⁵ “Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000,” Pub. L. No. 106–386 (2000), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-106publ386/pdf/PLAW-106publ386.pdf>.

prostitution and sex trafficking issue.⁵⁶ During President George W. Bush's era, the anti-prostitution agenda heavily shaped U.S. policy and led to enacting the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2003. This law stipulated that institutions would only receive federal funding for anti-trafficking missions if they “publicly affirm their opposition to the legalization or practice of prostitution.”⁵⁷

President Bush signed into law the International Marriage Broker Regulation Act of 2005 (IMBRA) on January 5, 2006, as a response to the trend of violence against so-called “mail order-brides” in the U.S. While IMBRA aimed to safeguard foreign women from being victims of their American spouses, anthropologist Nicole Constable argued that the discussion around the legislation has resulted in the marginalization of the very group it sought to protect.⁵⁸ Constable critiqued the statement of John R. Miller, Director of the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons at the U.S. Department of State. During the Senate hearing in 2004, Miller’s statement highlighted women from rural villages in Asia who dreamed of a better life abroad but were deceived through a trafficking scheme where traffickers utilized different means, including negotiation “through a member of the family” to trick the women.⁵⁹ He highlighted trafficking cases in Asian countries and illustrated a Cambodian woman who underwent fake marriage and ended up in sex trafficking.⁶⁰ According to Constable, Miller’s point mimics the stereotype of foreign brides “as poor, vulnerable, potential trafficking victims

⁵⁶ Anthony M. Destefano, *The War on Human Trafficking: U.S. Policy Assesed* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2007), xxi.

⁵⁷ Anthony M. Destefano.

⁵⁸ Nicole Constable, “International Marriage Brokers, Cross-Border Marriages and the US Anti-Trafficking Campaign,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38, no. 7 (August 2012): 1137–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2012.681457>

⁵⁹ “Human Trafficking: Mail Order Bride Abuses,” July 13, 2004, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-108shrg96804/pdf/CHRG-108shrg96804.pdf>.

⁶⁰ “Human Trafficking: Mail Order Bride Abuses,” 11.

enticed by the lure of better lives in the West.”⁶¹ This notion has influenced how mainstream structures view foreign brides from Asia who came to America through international marriages.

Against the backdrop of the discourse on sex trafficking, Hmong American community advocates coined the term “abusive international marriages” to safeguard their community. The protection aimed explicitly at the victims/survivors so they could avoid stigmatization. The advocates asserted that this naming responded to the mainstream community and institutions that lumped Hmong community problems into the human or sex trafficking category. “That was kind of the only term they had for what was happening,” Thao-Urabe noted, pointing to the mainstream organizations that suggested she and other advocates call the Hmong issues trafficking.⁶² “Many people were telling us that what was happening in our community was actually human trafficking. And we knew that it wasn't human trafficking... white systems continue to come in and tell us how to frame things, what justice looks like for us and criminalize our communities,” community advocate and organizer Chai Moua explained.⁶³ “We pushed back, and we said that's not, it's not trafficking,” said co-founder of the four-year gatherings MayTong Chang who at the time led the Hmong American Women’s Association in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.⁶⁴ In the words of Xong Xiong, representatives from institutions such as the statewide and national Coalition Against Domestic Violence and statewide Coalition Against Sexual Assault “were the agencies that said that what we were dealing with was trafficking.” Such a suggestion was given, for example, concerning case reporting purposes.⁶⁵ Xiong concurred that national policies on trafficking might have affected funding for agencies such as

⁶¹ Nicole Constable, “International Marriage Brokers,” 1142.

⁶² Bo Thao-Urabe, interview by author.

⁶³ Chai Moua, interview by author.

⁶⁴ MayTong Chang, interview by author.

⁶⁵ Xong Xiong, interview by author.

the Coalitions mentioned above. This may also explain why the Coalitions suggested the term “sex trafficking” to Hmong American advocates, especially before the 2007 gathering when mainstream institutions were unaware of the actual situation in the Hmong American community.⁶⁶

The 2012 report and the interviewees’ statements explained why sex trafficking is not a suitable label for Hmong cases. TVPA of 2000 defined sex trafficking as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act.” It also proclaimed that in the commercial sex act, the victim is “induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age.”⁶⁷ Even though some elements in abusive international marriages are similar to trafficking, such as victimizing underage women, according to the 2012 report, the term trafficking did not fit because it “did not describe all the cultural, social, and community components of this practice (in Hmong community).” MayTong Chang underscored that in contrast to the modus operandi of trafficking, Hmong American men who went to Asian countries actually married the Hmong women. Chang further explained,

...they have a cultural feast, a cultural ceremony of marriage, and they pay a dowry to the woman's family, and then bring that person here to the United States as their wife... it's also not sex trafficking because they (the Hmong American men) don't bring these victims here and sell them or traffic them. They bring them here and they marry them as a part of their family. And then sometimes what happens in those relationships is there's abuse in that relationship. That is why we call it abusive international marriages.⁶⁸

Akin to Chang, Thao-Urabe also emphasized the marriage relationship and family formation

⁶⁶ Xong Xiong.

⁶⁷ “Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000,” Pub. L. No. 106–386, § Sec. 103. Definitions (2000), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-106publ386/pdf/PLAW-106publ386.pdf>.

⁶⁸ MayTong Chang, interview by author.

involved in Hmong cases.⁶⁹ Thao-Urabe further explained that some women felt their marriages were “one of the very limited things they could do to help their families.” Some Hmong women in Laos, Thailand, and China decided to marry Hmong American men to assist their families amidst poverty and marginalization in their countries.

The term “abusive international marriages” were invented, among others, to protect these women and Hmong American community in general from further stigmatization⁷⁰. Calling the problem sex trafficking would label Hmong women from Asia as sex trafficking victims. This labeling could incite a detrimental impact on them. To this, the advocates asserted that:

For Hmong women “wife” and “bride” still offer more dignity and community and familial support than “sex worker,” “prostitute,” or “exploited worker.” The latter labels devalue her in the community, and may unintentionally take away her communal and familial support. This further exposes survivors to community-generated risks causing victim blaming and shaming, public ridicule, shunning, harassment, and additional sexual violence.⁷¹

Such labeling could place the women as outsiders instead of part of family members, which would further marginalize them and make the perpetrators look innocent because the blame would be on the perceived immoral women.⁷² The term abusive international marriages could also protect the Hmong American women and the community. According to Kong Pheng Pha, Professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at UW-Eau Claire, Hmong American women have been negatively portrayed by the dominant culture as “perpetually unwilling

⁶⁹ In the case of marry-and-dump, Hmong American men abandoned their new brides 2-3 months after marriages. The men returned to the U.S. leaving their brides in their country without financial support.

⁷⁰ Aside of the stigmatization as victims of sex trafficking, Hmong women has also been impacted by existing western stereotypes that racialize and sexualize Asian women. Asian women are stigmatized as the “lotus blossom,” who are submissive and sexually available for men, or as the “dragon lady,” who uses their sexuality to deceive and take advantage from others. Kong Pheng Pha’s dissertation illuminated this issue and revealed how the stereotypes do not accurately portray Hmong American women. See: Pha, “Queer Refugeeism.”

⁷¹ Bo Thao-Urabe et al., “On Topic: Abusive International Marriages, Sex Tourism, and Trafficking,” 2, accessed September 2, 2022, <https://api-gbv.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/OnTopic-abusive-international-marriages-trafficking-sex-tourism-brief-FINAL.pdf>.

⁷² Bo Thao-Urabe et al., 2.

victims who are refugees, unsophisticated, and most importantly, stuck in a hyperpatriarchal culture.”⁷³ Pha went on to analyze that in dominant American culture, “non-white communities are positioned as *more* primitive in their enactments of gender and sexuality because of the lack of resistance from its members in the face of exploitation and dehumanization that its culture ‘permits.’” In light of this, I concur with Pha, who later stated that the Hmong American people had been actively engaged in combating these racist representations while taking action within their own community to bring about cultural transformation.⁷⁴ Thus, the new terminology and the corresponding movement against abusive international marriages may carry political and symbolic significance, confuting the stigma while empowering the community to articulate their concerns in their own language based on their knowledge and experiences. Overall, the term AIM and the entirety of the four-year meetings exemplify the political commitment of Hmong American community advocates and organizers in the struggle against sexist and racist oppression.

Building Our Future: A Community Campaign

Following the Wisconsin meetings, the Director of the Asian & Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence (API Institute), Chic Dabby-Chinoy, composed a report to document the essence of the forums based on the notes she took. Dabby-Chinoy attended all the meetings since 2007 and has been an ally for Hmong American advocates since 2001 when API Institute was first established.⁷⁵ The advocates, including Thao-Urabe, also assisted in the writing process. As Thao-Urabe mentioned, along the way, after a series of discussions, they decided to release the

⁷³ Pha, “Queer Refugeeism,” 82.

⁷⁴ Pha, 122-123.

⁷⁵ Chic Dabby-Chinoy, “Abusive International Marriages,” 3.

report publicly on the API website on the condition that they needed to have a public conversation across the country.

In 2012 and early 2013, Thao-Urabe, Vaj, and Pa Vang traveled to different states in the U.S. to discuss abusive international marriages with the Hmong community there. They visited California, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Washington D.C., and North Carolina. The dissemination of the report sparked conversations among the advocates and the wider Hmong public. The participants expressed the same concern about abusive international marriages. This reaction and growing solidarity encouraged the advocates to establish a community campaign called *Building Our Future* in 2013.⁷⁶

In its first year, *Building Our Future* (BOF) collaborated with community organizers from different states in the U.S. and abroad, such as Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. The organizers, who were predominantly women, did not limit to individuals whose works focused on women or gender-based violence issues. However, many have been impacted by abusive international marriages or relationships.⁷⁷ The organizers became active agents that worked directly with the broader community.

BOF focused on grassroots organizing to spread awareness among the Hmong community about abusive international marriages and domestic violence through various means. Its founders, Thao-Urabe, Vaj, and Kaying Yang picked October 25 as the Day of Action, where they and community organizers will create programs to raise awareness, stimulate discussions, and develop strategies to confront abusive international marriages.⁷⁸ October was chosen because

⁷⁶ Bo Thao-Urabe, interview by author.

⁷⁷ Bo Thao-Urabe, Kabzuag Vaj, KaYing Yang, "Building Our Future: A Community Campaign (Day of Action Events Evaluation & Reflection Report)," December 2013, 5, <https://www.api-gbv.org/resources/building-future-day-action-events-evaluation-reflection-report/>.

⁷⁸ Bo Thao-Urabe, Kabzuag Vaj, KaYing Yang, 1.

this month is Domestic Violence Awareness Month in the United States. In 2013, BOF, supported by local organizers, conducted activities radio talk shows, community vigils, teach-ins, kitchen table discussions, meetings with the community, and campaigns through social media. Community organizers held at least twelve events in four states in the U.S. and Laos in October 2013. The events occurred in California, Minnesota, Hawaii, Washington DC/Virginia Area, Wisconsin, and Laos.⁷⁹ Although all these events were open to the public, most attendees were Hmong people, who comprised the primary target audience. Those identified as community members (adults), clan leaders, youth, and survivors attended the events. The report showed that over 330 individuals ranging from community members (adult), youth, and survivors, to clan leaders participated in these events, and this figure did not account for people whose attendance was not documented.

BOF utilized colorful posters created by Kao Lee Thao to disseminate their campaign messages, which were presented through a gender lens. Figure 1 shows the first poster, which portrayed a marital affair involving a seemingly middle-aged Hmong American man (adorned in a suit and tie and wrinkles indicating age), a young woman on the left and the first wife on the right carrying a baby, and possibly her other children on the right. The young woman was depicted facing the first wife and her children, with the husband positioned between them. The poster illustrated how abusive international marriages could create a situation that builds tension between these women, which “hurts everyone,” as the accompanying text on the poster emphasizes. Keywords written below the figures underscored the negative impacts and structural factors that caused abusive international marriages. One of the keywords said “patriarchy,” representing one of the root causes of the problem where the man has more authority, resulting in

⁷⁹ Bo Thao-Urabe, Kabzuag Vaj, KaYing Yang.

the exploitation of women and gender inequality. Patriarchy afforded the man a sense of entitlement, and he abandoned his kids because it was assumed that bearing children was his wife's job, as illustrated in Figure 1. Besides challenging patriarchy, the poster asserted that the young woman is not the only victim; the first wife and the children (both sons and daughters) also suffered from this abusive practice.

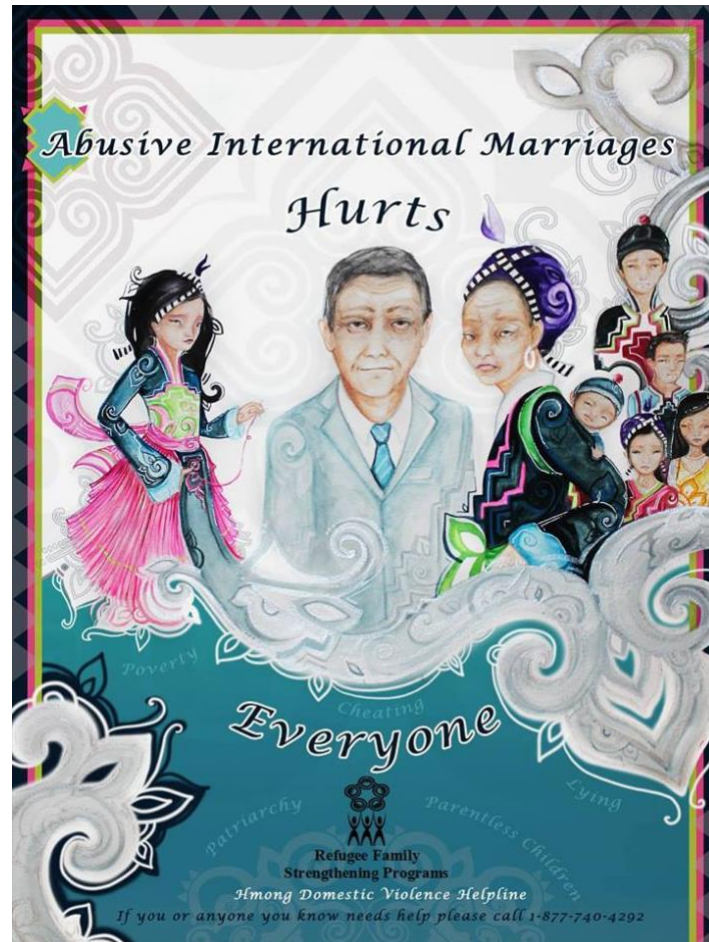


Figure 1. *Abusive International Marriages Hurts Everyone*⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Building Our Future: A Community Campaign, Facebook, October 18, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/buildourfuture/photos/oa.713927918636249/157385941137688>.



Figure 2. Children are to Be Loved Not Exploited⁸¹

The second poster highlighted two figures, depicting a seemingly Hmong woman and man dressed in ethnic clothing. Below them was a globe displaying the American continent and an airplane with its cockpit facing towards the right. The depiction of the airplane symbolized a movement from the American continent to a village that was painted below the aircraft. Several people in the village engaged in *pov pob*, a Hmong courtship ritual involving ball tossing. The two figures exhibited jaded facial expressions, possibly implying sadness or disappointment. The text around these characters read, “Children are to be Loved not exploited.” The word “children” appeared right above the woman figure, giving the impression that the woman was a child. The

⁸¹ Building Our Future: A Community Campaign, "Find an event near you on Friday Oct 25, 2013," Facebook, October 23, 2013. <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=158626634346952&set=a.461813482639509>.

depiction of the woman's face as slightly bigger than the man's may suggest a deliberate effort to give Hmong women more prominence and visibility, which aligns with the movement's vision. Compared with the first one, this poster offered a sense of transnationality where Hmong children in America and Asian countries must be loved. The message about gender equality, protecting younger generations, and transnational solidarity became the main themes in the BOF campaign. Perhaps this was why the second poster was more closely connected with BOF identity, given its prominent appearance as the cover of their 2013 community campaign report on the API website. Moreover, it was used as the profile picture on their blog, buildingourfuture.tumblr.com, and their Facebook account, Building Our Future: A Community Campaign. Furthermore, community organizers often modified and utilized the design as part of their campaign materials.⁸²

The social media campaign has played a role in BOF's strategy to spread awareness and be connected with a larger Hmong audience. The social network data from their Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr accounts were highlighted on the first page of BOF's 2013 campaign report to demonstrate the extent of their campaign's reach. Compared to other online platforms, BOF's Facebook page was the most frequently updated social media to disseminate information about their programs and campaign messages. In contrast, their Twitter account ceased posting on December 19, 2016, and their Tumblr account's last post was in 2017. In 2013, co-founder of BOF, Vaj, announced and invited all Hmong people and allies to follow their Facebook page to stay connected and updated about the movement.⁸³ BOF also utilized Facebook's live streaming

⁸² For instance see: "If You Will Be in Eau Claire, WI on Oct 28 (5-8pm) Please Join Their Building Our Future Event.," *Building Our Future (BOF)* (blog), 2014, <https://buildingourfuture.tumblr.com/post/100623885531/if-you-will-be-in-eau-claire-wi-on-oct-28-5-8pm>.

⁸³ Building Our Future: A Community Campaign, "Welcome to Building Our Community: A Community Campaign community page," Facebook, October 1, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/buildourfuture/videos/10151884160261539/?idorvanity=152778278265121>.

service to facilitate real-time conversations about the campaign against abusive international marriages and other forms of gender-based violence. These discussions were recorded and automatically archived on their Facebook page's home feed and in the page's videos section upon completion of the sessions. Besides, BOF also uploaded campaign videos that contained information or messages stated by their founders and organizers. To maintain the credibility of the source materials, this research mostly limited its focus to the statements made by community organizers and survivors who spoke in the video.

The videos generally documented the Hmong community's knowledge and experiences in the United States and beyond, with campaign messages that often accentuated women's solidarity. The first video uploaded on the BOF Facebook page featured Vaj, who invited the audiences to join the movement and participate in activities during the Day of Action on October 25, 2013. In the video opening, Vaj emphasized the actors involved in the Day of Action. She said, "and this month, activists, Hmong sisters, community organizers, and sisters throughout the U.S. have decided that we would use this month to bring attention to a practice that has been deeply impacting our whole community; it's called abusive international marriages." This statement mentioned the words "sisters" twice, suggesting an emphasize to women's role as active agents and women as another shared identity that united many actors in the movement. Until 2013, it was apparent that more women participated in the movement. Overall, 64% of the audiences of the BOF campaign were women, and 32% were men. According to the number of participants in BOF events in Madison, Wisconsin, and Vientiane, Laos, the attendees were 279 women and 51 men.⁸⁴ The BOF report in 2013 highlighted that women still led the movement. In their article, Chic Dabby and professor of social work at the University of Michigan Mieko

⁸⁴ Bo Thao-Urabe, Kabzuag Vaj, KaYing Yang, "Building Our Future: A Community Campaign (Day of Action Events Evaluation & Reflection Report)," 1-2.

Yoshihama underlined that BOF is a “testament to Hmong women’s leadership and the strength of their commitment to their community.”⁸⁵ Nevertheless, the BOF report asserted that men’s participation remains valuable.

To further its gender ideology, BOF released videos on October 5, 2014, featuring Hmong men expressing their opinions. One of the videos was titled “Building Our Future: Hmong Men PSA,” available in the Hmong language and English. In this video, the seven Hmong men uttered key points suggesting how an ideal Hmong man should act. Their statements contrasted common gender roles and expectations—which also existed in many communities around the world—such as Hmong men should “help around the house,” Hmong men “are loving, kind, and gentle,” and “know how to let go their egos.”⁸⁶ One statement asserted men not to exercise their power by hitting their partners. In the end, all of the men expressed a repulsion towards Hmong men engaged in abusive international marriages, emphasizing that such an act was not acceptable for the ideal Hmong men concept. A repetitive statement that they said: “I stand against abusive international marriages,” seemed to suggest to their men’s target audience that there were men out there who were publicly and vehemently against this practice.

Protesting A Patriarchal Power

On November 5, 2014, BOF Wisconsin and Wisconsin Hmong Advocates contested the election for the President of the Wisconsin Hmong 18 Council which would be held in the next three days. To respond to the candidacy of one of the candidates for the election, which was Bli

⁸⁵ Chic Dabby and Mieko Yoshihama, “Gender-Based Violence and Culturally Specific Advocacy in Asian and Pacific Islander Communities,” in *Handbook of Interpersonal Violence and Abuse Across the Lifespan: A Project of the National Partnership to End Interpersonal Violence Across the Lifespan (NPEIV)*, ed. Robert Geffner et al. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 2675–2703, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-89999-2_239.

⁸⁶ Building Our Future, “Building Our Future: Hmong Men PSA (English Version),” YouTube Video, October 5, 2014, 0:00-01:30, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IeI_v-2mrl4.

Yao Lo⁸⁷ of Waunakee,⁸⁸ the Hmong American Women's Association released a statement signed on behalf of BOF-Wisconsin and Wisconsin Hmong Advocates. The letter urged the Hmong community not to vote for Lo as the new President for the Hmong 18 Council, a non-profit organization known for preserving Hmong traditional values and practices in America. It stated, "Voting for Blia Yao Lo will endanger and increase violence against Hmong women and girls." The advocates described Lo's track record as a supporter of abusers and perpetrator of abusive international marriages, adultery, and sexual and domestic violence. The letter also contended that some of Lo's agendas were problematic such as supporting Hmong *Mejkoob*, clan members who negotiate the terms of the marriage between families. The advocates strongly believed that Lo's mission would cause harm to victims/survivors. One of the reasons was that the agenda would perpetuate traditional gender expectations of husband and wife. The advocates argued that this approach had been proven ineffective and enforced gender injustice.⁸⁹ Advocate Zon Moua of Freedom Inc. who was part of this protest emphasized that "When he was wanting to run for the president, we were like, no, that can't happen...His (Blia Yao Lo) whole entire platform was on domestic violence."⁹⁰

Earlier on October 26, 2014, Hmong Student Association at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) organized a debate for the Presidential Candidates of the Wisconsin Hmong 18 Council, during which Hmong advocates and organizers and their non-Hmong allies made a protest against Lo. *Suab Hmong*, a Hmong community broadcasting media, made a report on the

⁸⁷ Some media wrote Blia Yao Lo, some others wrote Blia Yao Lor.

⁸⁸ "Hmong Council Names Presidential Candidates," *Sheboygan Press Media*, September 17, 2014, <https://www.sheboyganpress.com/story/news/local/2014/09/17/hmong-council/15776021/>.

⁸⁹ Hmong American Women's Association, Inc., "Standing in Solidarity with our Fellow Hmong Advocates," Facebook, November 5, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/HmongAmericanWomensAssociation/posts/pfbid0NWRydgCEaiWtvefKhmGKP7Ki6qrj7rHSGHyRHMMCsDPyC11rTnSdr91JDxM3zeh2l>.

⁹⁰ Zon Moua, interview by author, Teams meeting.

debate that showed only Lo and his team who attended the debate. Two other candidates decided not to come. *Suab Hmong* showed the speech of Pao Choua Vue, Director of Hmong Human Rights UWM, who read an email from one of the candidates saying that he did not believe the debates represent the public as the reason why he did not come.⁹¹ It was unclear which candidate Vue referring to. Lo attended the debate with his team comprised of the Treasure Candidate Junior Vue and two Vice President candidates for Lo: Wang Meng Lee, a police detective,⁹² and Mao Khang, a Hmong American woman known as an advocate for victims of domestic and sexual violence. Khang worked at the Women’s Community and a participant of the community meeting discussing abusive international marriages in 2007 and 2009. *Suab Hmong* showed some protestors who sat on the audience chairs in their *Building Our Future* white shirts uniform. Some photos from Hmong American Women’s Association (HAWA) Facebook pages showed that founders of the 2007-2010 Wisconsin meetings Pheng Thao of ManForward⁹³ and Chai Moua of Freedom Inc.⁹⁴ attended the event. The documentation also showed the protestors hold protest signs with texts that reads “You Can’t Preach What You Don’t Pra(c)tice,”⁹⁵ and “Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Ca(n’t) be Mediated”⁹⁶ among others.

On November 9, 2014, *Suab Hmong* released special coverage of the election result,

⁹¹ Beside Bliia Yao Lo, there were two other presidential candidates: Nao Vai Yang of Milwaukee and Xou Khang of Wisconsin Rapids.

⁹² Keith Uhlig, “Wausau Woman Makes History in Hmong Council Election,” *Wausau Daily Herald*, November 10, 2014, <https://www.wausaudailyherald.com/story/news/local/2014/11/10/hmong-council-election/18822851/>.

⁹³ Hmong American Women’s Association, Inc., “in Milwaukee,” Facebook, October 26, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=748441155243926&set=a.748437995244242>.

⁹⁴ Hmong American Women’s Association, Inc., “in Milwaukee,” Facebook, October 26, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=748441245243917&set=a.748437995244242>; Hmong American Women’s Association, Inc., “in Milwaukee,” Facebook, October 26, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=748442698577105&set=a.748437995244242>.

⁹⁵ Hmong American Women’s Association, Inc., “in Milwaukee,” Facebook, October 26, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=748442541910454&set=a.748437995244242>.

⁹⁶ Hmong American Women’s Association, Inc., “in Milwaukee,” Facebook, October 26, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/HmongAmericanWomensAssociation/photos/a.748437995244242/748442625243779/>.

declaring Lo as the winner. Out of the 1,372 total ballots cast in twelve cities across Wisconsin, Lo secured 589 votes, representing 43% of all ballots. Lo's victory meant he would serve as the President for the 2015-2019 term alongside his two Vice Presidents.⁹⁷ On November 10, 2014, *Wausau Daily Herald* posted a news recognizing Mao Khang's appointment as a Vice President in the Council, which was considered a historic moment as she became the first woman to hold that position. The reporter Keith Uhlig mentioned that Khang assisted the organization of training sessions on matters of domestic and sexual abuse and relevant U.S. law to the clan leaders. In the news, Khang also mentioned her support to make the State legislation legalize *Mejkoob* to "perform legally-binding weddings" to reduce early marriages in Hmong community.⁹⁸ As mentioned earlier, one of Lo's agenda that was contested by BOF Wisconsin and Wisconsin Hmong Advocates in their letter was the idea to legalize Hmong *Mejkoob*. Khang and advocates of BOF had conflicting idea on *Mejkoob*, which was a product of a highly polarizing debate resulted from the discourse around so-called Hmong Marriage Bills that had been existed since years earlier.

A series of bills aimed to legalize *Mejkoob* was proposed around 1991 to 2006 in the state of Minnesota,⁹⁹ which had incited a divisive argument among Hmong Americans, especially in Minnesota. In March 2003, *Hnub Tshiab*, a Minnesota-published newsletter with the tagline "A Hmong Women's Publication" released a short article by Pa Der Vang titled "Hmong Marriage Bill," which explained two opposite poles in Hmong community. Some community members

⁹⁷ *Suab Hmong News: Exclusive Special Coverage RESULTS of 2014 Wisconsin Hmong Community Election*, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bwy8V-6vuEI>.

⁹⁸ Keith Uhlig, "Wausau Woman Makes History in Hmong Council Election."

⁹⁹ In 1991, Representative Andrew J. Dawkins, introduced House File (H.F.) 91 continued by Senator Linda Berglin who proposed Senate File (S.F.) 107; In 2002, Senator Moua proposed S.F. 3368; In 2003, Senator Mee Moua "reintroduced an updated version" S.F. 827 followed by Representative Cy Thao who proposed H.F. 707; In 2006, Senator Wesley Skoglund introduced S.F. 2403 followed by a companion bill proposed by Representative Michael Paymar, H.F. 3674. All bills failed to pass. Pha, "Queer Refugeeism," 141-172.

posited that the bill would “promote patriarchal practice...by endorsing a cultural practice that is dominated by Hmong men.” Some others argued that the bills would “hold the community accountable, thereby, preventing underage and polygamous marriages.”¹⁰⁰ Those who favored the bills also argued that the bills would reduce unnecessary expenses from conducting two separate marriages (the traditional and the one carried out by American judge or clergy).¹⁰¹ In 2014, sociologist Jeremy Hein and historian Nengher Vang mentioned that male Hmong elders tended to support the bill while Hmong women advocates against it because for them the bills could be used to hide forced marriages of underage brides.¹⁰² Although the bills failed to pass in Minnesota, the initiative to propose the bills and discourse around it seemed to be persisting in Wisconsin, which may have resulted in the different stance between BOF Wisconsin and Lo’s team on viewing the issue of *Mejkoob*.

No official responses were found that showed the BOF’s reactions toward Lo and Khang’s winning. Nevertheless, on November 17, 2014, St. Paul Neighborhood Network (SPNN) a community media for St. Paul city Minnesota, published a video by Dorothy Her as part of SPNN’s Doc U program, a mentorship project for low-income adults to learn basics documentary film technique. In one part of the video that specifically raised the issue of abusive international marriages and BOF, appeared a scene from the Presidential Debate in UWM showing Lo and his team including Mao Khang. The scene was used to illustrate the statement of BOF co-founder Kabzuag Vaj who talked about the complicity of Hmong leaders. In the video, Vaj said “Men do it (AIM) because they can and nobody’s willing to hold them accountable, and

¹⁰⁰ Pa Der Vang, “Hmong Marriage Bill,” *Hnub Tshiab*, March 2003, Hmong Resource Center Library, Saint Paul, Minnesota.

¹⁰¹ Jeremy Hein and Nengher Vang, “Politicians and Social Movements: The Impact of Electoral Victory on Local, National, and Transnational Activism by Hmong Americans in Minneapolis–St. Paul,” *Social Movement Studies* 14, no. 2 (March 4, 2015): 170-171, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2014.945159>.

¹⁰² Hein and Vang.

those who have voice and power, and our leaders are silent and that's part of the problem."¹⁰³

The video implied that the stance of BOF and Wisconsin's advocate like Vaj was remained the same towards Lo's leadership in Hmong 18 Council.

Despite the loss in their battle, at least four things could be reflected from BOF protest against Lo's candidacy. First, their campaign's consistent message of contesting the patriarchal culture and centering on gender equality. Second, the protest indicated how a public debate, even though located in different state, had shaped Wisconsin's advocates' campaign rhetoric. Third, the conflicting opinion between Khang and BOF suggested that conflict occurred and undeniable within the movement against AIM. Although they joined the same gatherings, they chose different paths to achieve what each of them thought were the right way. Fourth, the protest clearly showed that BOF did not against a male figure. As mentioned earlier, men such as Pheng Thao also joined the demonstration on behalf of BOF. Thus, it was safe to say that their dissent was not directed to Hmong women vs. Hmong men discourse. Furthermore, Mao Khang's position as Lo's team clearly showed that the community's struggle was not between different sexes, rather, it was a protest against people in the position of power that were seen as problematic for them.

“Misogyny and Patriarchy Happens in All Communities”

On May 8, 2017, *Wausau Daily Herald* wrote a long news article describing a shocking murder incident involving a Hmong American man Nengmy Vang who shot four people at Marathon County, Wausau, Wisconsin. The article was written from the eyes of Vang's wife, Naly Vang. On March 22, Nengmy Vang went to Naly Vang's workplace to force her to sign a

¹⁰³ MySPNN, “Doc U: Building Our Future: Ending Abusive International Marriages,” YouTube Video, November 17, 2014, 9:05-9:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBiieHou8Sw>.

divorce paper, but she refused it. Furious with the rejection, her husband took his gun and shot Vang's co-workers. Naly Vang, who survived the incident, later found out that her attorney too was murdered. The media did more stories from Naly Vang to gather information regarding some incidents that led to the killing. Vang said that her husband had an affair with a woman in Laos. Vang went on to explain her husband's plan to live in Laos, how his phone bills noted recurring calls to a woman, and how he was financially broken. Nengmy Vang died after a confrontation with the police.¹⁰⁴

In November 2017, Kabzuag Vaj was invited to talk about domestic violence in the Hmong community for a mainstream media *Wisconsin Public Radio* program. Before the conversation with Vaj, a reporter Glenn Milburn narrated a reportage on Nengmy Vang's incident and mentioned that Everest Metro Police Chief Wally Sparks pointed to "unfortunate old cultural" practices that "plagued" some Hmong men. Sparks argued that "there are some mindsets that needs to be changed." The reportage also included a recording of a statement of Tong Yang, former board president of Wausau Hmong American Center, who said Sparks' statement was offensive and not represent over 7,000 Hmong American people in Wausau.¹⁰⁵ Even though Sparks' comment earlier mention "some mindsets," which referred to some elements (and not all aspects) of Hmong culture, the way he centered the focus to Hmong culture and not individuals' bad decisions may risk to further stigmatization to Hmong culture. Sparks held a strategic position as a police chief; thus, his opinion would be heard by the public. Sparks' opinion emerged amidst a long history of anti-Hmong sentiments in Wisconsin, particularly

¹⁰⁴ Keith Uhlig, "Wife Details Troubles before Her Husband Gunned down 4 People," *Wausau Daily Herald*, May 8, 2017, <https://www.wausaudailyherald.com/story/news/2017/05/08/wife-details-troubles-before-her-husband-gunned-down-4-people/100164526/>.

¹⁰⁵ "Addressing Domestic Violence in The Hmong Community" (Wisconsin Public Radio, November 13, 2017), <https://www.wpr.org/listen/1189361>.

Wausau.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, it was plausible why Hmong person like Tong Yang critiqued the comment as offensive.

After the reportage finished, the interview with Vaj began with a first question from the host that directly asked, “are there any unique cultural issues that you feel need to be addressed?” Vaj answered the question by emphasizing that domestic violence also occurred in other communities and other culture, “When you talk about Hmong culture, and how it contributes to domestic violence, you can actually talk about many other cultures and their cultural practices and how that can also contribute to domestic violence,” she said. Vaj went on to underscore that “there’s nothing in particular about my culture that makes it more likely to have domestic violence than any other culture.” Throughout the conversation, Vaj kept diverting the narrative that centered on Hmong culture towards a more general context. “Misogyny and patriarchy happen in all communities... because our cultural practices are quite different from mainstream practices...it’s really easy for people to say, oh it’s because they practice this and that...but if you look in white communities, domestic violence looks very different,” she said near the end of her interview.¹⁰⁷

Vaj seemed to try to shift the mainstream narrative about some practices in Hmong culture as the source of problem that caused violence. The way Vaj directed the conversation to the fact that other cultural practices can also be problematic to gender-based violence suggested an attempt to challenge the stigmatization. Vaj’ rhetoric seemed to align with scholar Kong Pheng Pha’s point about the movement against AIM as an effort to “de-link ‘Hmong culture’ from pathology and criminalization.”¹⁰⁸ Vaj may have used this rhetoric when talking in a

¹⁰⁶ Read: John M. Duffy, *Writing from These Roots: Literacy in a Hmong-American Community* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007).

¹⁰⁷ “Addressing Domestic Violence in The Hmong Community.”

¹⁰⁸ Pha, “Queer Refugeeism,” 35-36.

mainstream media like *Wisconsin Public Radio*. Such a decision could be interpreted as an act of resistance towards the mainstream culture.

“We Can’t Do Gender Justice Work without Queer and Trans Justice”

Even though established in a heteronormative fashion, the 2012 report saw participation from LGBTQ advocates such as Zon Moua and True Thao of Freedom Inc, and Kevin Xiong of Shades of Yellow (SOY). Hmong American advocates had been actively working on LGBTQ issues way before the movement against AIM emerged in 2007. SOY itself was established around 2003 as a support group for queer Hmong American youth in Minnesota.¹⁰⁹ According to Moua, queer analysis did not prominently feature in the report probably because most of individuals they worked with at the time were predominantly Hmong cisgender heterosexual women. Additionally, she conveyed that the Hmong American queer and trans advocates took their time to study queer analysis and politics before publicly claiming that they engaged in queer and trans justice work. “We can’t actually do gender justice work without Queer and Trans justice... but doing queer and trans justice work isn’t just identity based” said Moua, suggesting that personal identity as a queer or trans person is not sufficient to support the solid movement.¹¹⁰

Moua emphasized how her discussion with other queer and trans folks in *Building Our Future* network had further solidified the commitment among them to do queer and trans justice work more systematically. Their conversation resulted in a common understanding that each of their gender justice organization needed a dedicated person or team that focused on developing material, training, and language to help other people better understand the idea of queer Hmong

¹⁰⁹ Pha, 249.

¹¹⁰ Zon Moua, interview by author.

feminism.¹¹¹ As a result, organizations focused on gender justice in Wisconsin, such as Freedom Inc., began to have a Queer Justice Director position in 2021 where Moua became the first one holding this leadership in her institution. Around the same year, other organizations in Wisconsin also declared the same position of leadership in their structure.

On March 10, 2021, Queer Justice Director of Hmong American Women's Association (HAWA) who was also part of ManForward Wisconsin, Zong Yang, became a speaker and moderator for a virtual conversation with other members of the group. ManForward was a non-profit organization that focused on building a network among Southeast Asian men in America and masculine individuals to challenge patriarchy. Pheng Thao pioneered ManForward in 2010 in Twin Cities, Minnesota. The organization had grown its network and had chapters in other states, including Wisconsin. Thao, through ManForward, organized and engaged men and masculine individuals to support gender, queer, and racial justice. As the organization became nationwide, it often conducted virtual conversations¹¹², and the events were open to the public, where men and masculine folks became their campaign's target audience. Some talks were held through Facebook live-streaming service, and the video was archived on their Facebook page named ManForward. In the case of the Hmong American movement against gender-based violence including abusive international marriages, ManForward encouraged its members to speak up and reflect on their experiences as privileged members in their community and how to support Hmong women, queer, and trans' leadership to combat the violence and create cultural change.

The conversation on March 10 was organized by ManForward in collaboration with the

¹¹¹ Zon Moua.

¹¹² In addition, they also held an in-person annual meeting among their leadership team, capacity building trainings, and presenting in conferences. Pheng Thao, interview by author.

Hmong Family Strengthening Helpline in Wisconsin, and was supported by Hmong women, queer, and trans-led Hmong gender justice organizations. The meeting was titled “Hmong Men engaging Hmong Men to End Gender-Based Violence.” To open the conversation, Yang said, “our conversation today is a strategy on how we can also engage men and really honoring the leadership of women and queer and trans folks who have been doing this work for a long time.”¹¹³ This acknowledgment was stated several times during the conversation, suggesting a commitment to set forth Hmong women, queer, and trans individuals’ roles in the movement. Such an attempt was in itself promoting gender justice and thus furthered proving that the campaign was highly gendered. Other speakers talked in this meeting alongside Yang were Phooj Ywg Moua (ManForward Wisconsin), Jon Vang Thao (ManForward Minnesota), Justin Cha (ManForward California), and Leefong Vang (ManForward California). Yang invited the speakers to embrace their vulnerability while sharing their stories and memories. This attitude further contested the gender expectation towards men, demanding them to suppress their emotions and vulnerability.

Vang Thao began the talk by recalling his memories of the women in his life. He remembered his mother not being supported by clan members, although her husband made her feel unsafe. Vang Thao recalled that his aunts and grandmothers worked hard for the families, gave their money to their husbands, and gave birth to many kids. But instead, some of his uncles and grandfathers left these women for second wives. “Some of them have sent money that they've saved for the kids’ colleges, to you know, women overseas, and it's just really heartbreaking to see a lot of our families in the Hmong community go through this,” said Vang Thao. He went on to criticize patriarchy that devalues women. Moua added that patriarchy

¹¹³ ManForward, “Hmong Men engaging Hmong Men to End Gender-Based Violence,” Facebook, March 10, 2021, <https://fb.watch/jEhua8-HZi/>.

constructed “a façade, a fake image of men being...in charge of everything.” In a similar vein, Vang reflected on his male privilege that made him not feel threatened in the community even though he was an activist. He emphasized the importance of men using their power to engage with and educate other men to reframe the patriarchal mentality while centering women, queer, and trans individuals’ role in the movement. Cha added that “it’s a necessity to engage other men to do this work...because they have their pride and egos, they (tend to) listen to other men.” These ideas of disrupting patriarchy, being a role model, and men empowering men were aligned with the action steps written in the 2012 report. Collective action among men was deemed essential to accelerate the movement.

When discussing collectivity and men’s accountability, Vang Thao touched on the relationship among the Hmong Americans community members while also situating it within the larger mainstream community. Yang articulated his concern about the defensive reactions of certain Hmong men when confronted with calls for accountability. In Yang’s words, these men often retorted with the statement, “not all Hmong men.” They deflected responsibility by using the good guy-bad guy analogy. In response, Vang Thao touched on mainstream society’s stigmatization of the Hmong people. He said,

We, as a community, need to see this as a whole community because we have shared responsibility in the development of our community...when you see something happen on T.V., it’s another murder-suicide. And who is it? It’s Hmong people. They’re not looking like, oh, is that the bad Hmong guy? Or is that the good Hmong guy? It’s looking at our whole community as a whole....And they’re looking at us not just like, oh, yeah, it’s only that guy. But it’s they’re looking at us as a whole community. So, we all have a shared responsibility.

This statement engaged with another dimension of the movement: resistance to the mainstream’s stereotype of the minority. Vang Thao was aware of the prolonged racist sentiment towards the Hmong community by the dominant society, and it seemed that he wanted to transform this

negativity into a motivation for Hmong men to do something.

At the end of the meeting, the speakers' discussion on the meaning of following the leadership of women, queer, and gender non-conforming folks illuminated some essential points. As Yang argued, while ManForward's efforts represented a strategy towards gender justice and combating gender-based violence, it was important to acknowledge that it was not the ultimate solution. The speakers agreed that Hmong women, queer, and trans leaders were the experts of this activism because they have been the most impacted by gender-based violence and have been working on this issue for so long; hence, they deserve the credit. Nevertheless, as Vang said, men should still jump in when there were backlashes from other men.

Conclusion

Through examination of primary sources, this paper analyzes several factors that contributed to the emergence of the movement against AIM among the Hmong American community in Wisconsin. First was the growing trend of forced divorce cases, which had become a public discourse through publications in *FutureHmong* magazines. Social commentaries in the media indicated a correlation between the divorce cases and Hmong husbands' affairs with young women in Asian countries, particularly Laos. The debate surrounding polygamy and divorce was highly gendered, which fueled with conversation around gender roles and expectations. These commentaries represented conflicting gender ideologies among Hmong American community members in Wisconsin in the early 2000s.

The genesis of the movement also cannot be separated from the pre-existing strong network of gender justice advocates who have been active in Wisconsin for a considerable period of time. The four-year gatherings marked the beginning of a concerted attempt to create a

cultural change imbued with a gender ideology that counter the patriarchal structure's gender norms. Hmong advocates at the time recognized a dilemma, where they critiqued the sexist oppression in the community openly, they also needed to protect the community from the prolonged stigmatization from the mainstream American society and structure. Analysis of the primary and secondary sources showed that similar struggle against the dominant power within and outside the community remained occurred in the subsequent years.

To confront these challenges, the advocates developed action plans outlined in the 2012 report. As an answer to highly gendered problems, the activists concocted highly gendered strategies in the form of action steps, which emphasized different roles for Hmong women and men in fostering gender justice in the community. In addition, the 2012 report also demonstrated an initiative to assist a segment of Hmong women and families in Asian countries who faced poverty and marginalization. To counter the mainstream notion of sex trafficking, the advocates coined the term "abusive international marriages" as a means to protect AIM victims/survivor from further stigmatization. This act of naming may have also been a symbolic political gesture to shield Hmong American people and culture from further negative association.

Over time, the movement's political commitment has evolved but remained focused on fighting for gender justice. It was also active in resisting stigmatization. The activists have consistently utilized a gender lens as a strategic approach, which appeared in most of their campaign messages. One notable change in the movement was the increased public recognition of queer and trans' leadership. While queer and trans individuals have been actively involved in the movement against AIM since its inception, their leadership has been more publicly recognized in recent years. This recognition reflects the advocates' political commitment to

fighting against multiple forms of discrimination, including the marginalization of sex and gender minorities.

Overall, although the movement's impact on eradicating gender-based violence would require further research, its impact on community activists was already evident. The shared commitment among the network had encouraged more community members to speak up about their stories and ideas regarding gender justice, as exemplified in Manforward's virtual talk and Zon Moua's experiences. The movement against AIM has presented a grassroots movement to influence social and cultural change, and its legacy continues to inspire new generations of Hmong American activists.

Chapter 2: The Impacts of the Movement

The Recent Trend of Abusive International Marriages in Wisconsin

While the Hmong American community-led movement has created progress in spreading awareness to cultivate cultural change, abusive international marriages continue in the community. Community advocates and organizers have come to this realization based on their observations in their workplaces and their own community in Wisconsin and beyond. Regarding this, it is essential to note that the advocates and organizers possess two experiences: first, as a gender justice activist and second, as a community member who was born and raised in a Hmong family. As gender justice workers, they continue to witness domestic violence victims/survivors seeking help, many of them impacted by abusive international marriage cases. As community members, they have witnessed and heard how the trend of Hmong American men seeking underaged partners in Asian countries continues to persist. By utilizing these experiences, this reflection shows how AIM cases persist despite years of activism.

Interim Executive Director of Hmong American Women's Association (HAWA) Tammie Xiong has witnessed the twists and turns of handling cases of abusive international marriages in Milwaukee since 2013. Xiong observed that she and other advocates in her workplace sometimes did not immediately notice the victims involved in abusive international marriages until after further questioning their situation. They would detect some "red flags" after listening to the victims' answers. For instance, some women approached her organization seeking help because they could not afford monthly utility or mortgage bills. The advocates would ask more questions about the victims' husbands and their whereabouts. Some victims said

their husbands had left for Southeast Asia, leaving the women without access to money. These husbands withheld money from their wives because the women did not support their husbands' new relationships with other women. According to Xiong, such cases usually came from the first wives. When asked about the pervasiveness of abusive international marriage cases in Milwaukee in 2022, she said,

I would say it's pretty pervasive. It really is pervasive. I mean, I would say, if I had to kind of quantify it somehow, I would say one in every three cases, probably a case of AIM (abusive international marriages).¹

This conclusion was based on her observation during her discussions with her team at the organization's advocacy team meetings. At times, Xiong and her team realized that after a couple of years, the "new wives" also came to her organization seeking help as victims of the same perpetrators reported by the first wives. "And we've seen a lot of that happen too throughout, at least, my time here," said Xiong, who has been working for the organization for the last ten years.

Some second wives experienced isolation in the United States for several reasons, making some more susceptible to abusive practices. In her words, Xiong explained:

We are seeing, you know, them being really isolated, and being here in a new country where they don't speak the language, right, where they don't actually have any kind of community connection, right, and so they're oftentimes very isolated and therefore very fearful to like ask for help from anybody, and so that's how we specifically are seeing it (abusive international marriages) being impacted specifically with women. For the women here, whose partners are doing these things, we're seeing violence show up in their relationships because of financial abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse.²

This quote explains how a segment of Hmong American husbands neglected their responsibilities and were abusive to their wives. These new wives became even more vulnerable

¹ Tammie Xiong, interview by author. Milwaukee, Wisconsin, December 20, 2022.

² Tammie Xiong.

due to their isolation.³ After marriage, the women culturally integrated into their husbands' families. If they did not maintain any connection with their natal families, nobody would likely "claim" them as their daughter or sister if there was trouble in the marriage.⁴ Since the women's families often lived across the ocean, they might have needed to self-navigate themselves amidst the abuse and isolation.⁵ Sometimes the second wife and the first wife in the household might have inadvertently hurt each other⁶ without realizing they were both victims,⁷ and this could have further exacerbated an already challenging situation.

In La Crosse, Wisconsin, according to Executive Director of Chia Siab, Inc., Xiong Xiong, the phenomenon of second wives began seeking help from community advocates primarily occurred after 2010. The young wives realized that their husbands cheated on them through phone calls with women across the ocean, and they endured neglect and domestic abuse from their husbands. Sometimes they came to the advocates asking for assistance in filing for food assistance programs such as FoodShare, healthcare programs such as BadgerCare, or help to pay their rent. Some second wives were already seeking help in 2007, but the number of those seeking help increased in the period after 2010.⁸

Nowadays, abusive international marriages still exist in the Hmong community. Through her observation of her family, extended family, and network among Hmong American friends,

³ To avoid the stereotype that Hmong women from Asia as merely victims, it is important to peruse Schein's research that uncovers a few Hmong/Miao women in the United States who were able to navigate their isolation. One of Schein's informants said she continued her education in the U.S. Another one said she set up classes for Hmong American children to learn dancing and singing. Read: Louisa Schein, "Marrying out of Place," 74.

⁴ Pheng Thao, interview by author.

⁵ Pheng Thao.

⁶ MayTong Chang, interview by author.

⁷ MayTong Chang explained how in this type of case the husband usually controlled the narrative where the wives did not realize they both were victims. As bell hooks puts it: "sexism teaches women woman hating, and both consciously and unconsciously we act out this hatred in our daily contact with one another." bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984), 47.

⁸ Xiong Xiong, interview by author.

Tammie Xiong concluded that such practices persist in her community. “For sure, I don’t think it has decreased,” she said. Xiong further mentioned that she often heard in different spaces in the community some men informally gathered to strategize on finding the best way to bring young brides to the United States. “Whether it’s just like sitting at the funeral home and like listening to some of the elders talk to like I said, family gatherings... And it’s kind of like common conversations that you would just kind of hear in the community,” she said. She went on to illustrate the kind of strategy some Hmong American men utilized. One of the strategies was using their sons and nephews to apply for a fiancée visa for the brides, but when the young women arrived in the U.S., they actually became other married men’s new wives. Such a modus operandi was done by married men who, according to U.S. law, cannot practice polygamy.

In the last six years, the practice of (abusive) international marriages has been disrupted by a series of changes in U.S. foreign policy. On January 25, 2017, President Donald J. Trump issued Executive Order 13768, titled “Enhancing Public Safety in the Interior of the United States,” which was followed by the issuance of the Department of Homeland Security’s memorandum on February 20, 2017, titled “Enforcement of the Immigration Laws to Serve the National Interest.” These policies resulted in the deportation of immigrants from the United States, including those from Laos, in 2017 and 2018.⁹ In response to the refusal of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR) government to accept citizens who had been ordered removed from the U.S., the Trump administration suspended the issuance of visas to citizens from this country based on U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) Section 243(d).¹⁰ In

⁹ ICE Enforcement and Removal Operations Report mentioned five Laotians was “removed” from the U.S. in 2017 fiscal year and 8 people in 2018 fiscal year. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, “Fiscal Year 2018 ICE Enforcement and Removal Operations Report” (ice.gov, 2018), <https://www.ice.gov/doclib/about/offices/ero/pdf/eroFY2018Report.pdf>.

¹⁰ “DHS Announces Implementation of Visa Sanctions | Homeland Security,” July 10, 2018, <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2018/07/10/dhs-announces-implementation-visa-sanctions>.

November 2021, when the sanction was still effective¹¹, long-time gender and social justice advocate KaYing Yang mentioned that this foreign policy had impacted the Hmong American community who attempted to apply for fiancée visas and family reunification. According to her, such a situation also impacted how abusive international marriages operated. Yang emphasized that the sanction prevented Hmong American men from bringing their new wives to the U.S. She contended that some relationships were continued where the men kept wiring money to Laos and renting a place for their women to stay. In this case, some men may choose to have recurring trips to the country to visit the women as it was not feasible to relocate them to America. Yang assumed the sanction may “further coercing women to engage in the commercial sex industry.”¹² This assumption could be based on the fact that the issuance of fiancée visas from Laos for entry into the United States remained suspended. Regarding this, Yang expanded the term abusive international marriages to include abusive international relationship, as Hmong American men often maintained relationship with Hmong women from Laos, whom they could not legally marry. Yang also mentioned the use of social media platforms such as Facebook Messenger to continue the communication and exploitation.¹³ Unlike in the early 2000s, when many chose to utilize phone calls, letters, and emails as media to communicate,¹⁴ the invention of Facebook Messenger in 2011 and its development have made cross-border communication way easier in 2021.

¹¹ Most of the visa sanctions were lifted by President Biden’s administration on February 7, 2022. Kimmy Yam, “Biden Administration Lifts What Critics Call ‘Backdoor Immigration Ban’ on Laos,” NBC News, February 8, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/biden-administration-lifts-critics-call-backdoor-immigration-ban-laos-rcna15429>.

¹² Maiv PAC, “Maiv PAC Facebook Live Series: Domestic Violence & Public Safety,” Facebook, November 7, 2021, https://fb.watch/kdRWD_hYX4/.

¹³ Maiv PAC.

¹⁴ Louisa Schein, “Marrying out of Place: Hmong/Miao Women Across and Beyond China,” in *Cross-Border Marriages: Gender and Mobility in Transnational Asia*, ed. Nicole Constable (Philadelphia, US: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 53, 64, 69, 71, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uwm/detail.action?docID=3441421>.

Virtual spaces became a primary choice during the global COVID-19 pandemic that began to spread around 2020, impacting the practice of (abusive) international marriages. Due to travel restrictions, social media platforms have become more commonly used to connect with young people across borders. In the case of Laos, in April 2021 the Lao PDR Government announced a lockdown of Vientiane capital province that not only prohibited entertainment and travel and limited hotels' operations but also impacted the U.S. Embassy in Laos to suspend all visa and routine services for U.S. citizens except for an emergency purpose.¹⁵ The number of tourists arriving in Laos had already plummeted since 2020, with only 886,400 tourists visiting the country, compared to 4,791,000 in 2019.¹⁶ Although people's movement across borders was disrupted due to the pandemic, many Hmong Americans were already accustomed to using virtual spaces to communicate with young people overseas.¹⁷

After months of lockdown, Laos fully opened its border on May 2022¹⁸, allowing Hmong Americans to visit the country where some continued to practice (abusive) international marriages. Zon Moua, the Queer Justice Director of Freedom Inc., Madison, Wisconsin, expressed concern over the "huge rush" of Hmong Americans travelling to Laos. Moua posited that the excitement to travel was partly shaped by the psychological impact of the pandemic, which left people feeling lonely and needing socialization. She went on to say that the urge to travel was not only occurring among Hmong but also experienced by many other Americans.¹⁹

¹⁵ U. S. Mission Laos, "Government Announces Lockdown of Vientiane Capital Province & Additional COVID-19," U.S. Embassy in Laos, April 22, 2021, <https://la.usembassy.gov/government-announces-lockdown-of-vientiane-capital-province-additional-covid-19/>.

¹⁶ United Nations World Tourism Organization, "145 Key Tourism Statistics," <https://www.unwto.org/>, December 22, 2022, <https://www.unwto.org/tourism-statistics/key-tourism-statistics>.

¹⁷ Tammie Xiong, interview by author; MayTong Chang, interview by author.

¹⁸ World Health Organization Western Pacific Region, "Lao PDR Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Report #60," July 5, 2022, https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/wpro---documents/countries/lao-people's-democratic-republic/covid-19/covid_19_wco_moh_sitrep_60.pdf?sfvrsn=310b795f_1&download=true.

¹⁹ NPR reported in June 2022 that travel had seen a significant surge in popularity among American citizens based on data from a travel insurance company and research analyst, Steve Trent, who focused on airline

Moua had witnessed the continued trend of international relationships in her community and through social media platforms.²⁰ “I say that because you know, our community is very small. Soon then you see things online... You see things on Facebook on TikTok... You have family members who are saying all these things...and then soon you’re witnessing these things...” said Moua. She also highlighted that she knew there were perpetrators who had caused harm to other and continued to go overseas and duplicate similar behaviors.²¹

Advocates recognized that creating cultural change to end violence would necessitate long-term efforts, especially in a world where patriarchal culture still dominates many aspects of life. In Hmong American context, to exemplify the community resistance as one of the biggest challenges of the movement, MayTong Chang pointed to a segment of the Hmong community that still viewed domestic violence (including cases involving abusive international marriages) as an issue to be resolved only within families. Some members of the Hmong American community believed that victims of domestic violence should not seek help from outside organizations. Unfortunately, when certain families and clan leaderships subscribed to fixed sexist gender roles and expectations, women were at risk of being silenced as men typically led the negotiation and mediation between disputing husbands and wives.²² The advocates also experienced silencing from some community members who pushed back against their work. Advocates attempted to manage this dynamic by spreading awareness about men’s role in challenging the patriarchal system. They concurred that one of the positive impacts of the movement was the increasing number of Hmong men who dared to speak up against gender-based violence and challenge

travel. Manuela López Restrepo, “‘Revenge Travel’ Is Surging. Here’s What You Need to Know,” NPR, June 16, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/16/1105323610/flight-tickets-inflation-pandemic-revenge-travel-vacation-europe-recession>.

²⁰ Hmong American community leader Kevin Xiong also highlighted the significant role of social media in spreading information regarding AIM cases. Kevin Xiong, interview by author, Zoom meeting, November 16, 2022.

²¹ Zon Moua, interview by author, Teams meeting.

²² MayTong Chang, interview by author; Tammie Xiong, interview by author.

sexist oppression.²³

Another challenge pointed out by the advocates was the issue of the movement's sustainability. Thao suggested the importance of ensuring the organizations involved could work continuously while simultaneously "building a pipeline of leaders" to prepare more young people with all skills and resources needed to foster a more significant impact in the community and sustain the movement.²⁴ In this vein, Xiong suggested that increased funding would be valuable in supporting prevention efforts. Although Wisconsin's organizations focused on domestic violence received significant funding from the Department of Children and Families and Office of Crime Victim Services, Xiong noted that such funding was primarily allocated towards direct services.²⁵ Accordingly, funding specifically earmarked for community education could prove advantageous in maintaining the movement's momentum.

Transnational Solidarity: An Alternative Form of Belonging

This section will elucidate how years of the community-led movement against abusive international marriages have had a powerful impact on spreading transnational awareness, where a political commitment became the bond of this relationship. The preceding chapter has explored how the commitment has permeated the four-year meetings and *Building Our Future* (BOF) community campaign and fostered a shared purpose as the foundation for the movement's sustainability. The political commitment is infused with a gender justice effort that aims to end sexist oppression of all genders and classes while simultaneously combating racism. This final part of Chapter 2 will reflect on the transnational solidarity among the global network of Hmong

²³ Tammie Xiong; Pheng Thao, interview by author.

²⁴ Pheng Thao.

²⁵ Xiong Xiong, interview by author.

gender justice activists as an impact of the movement against abusive international marriages, which has cultivated a new alternative form of belonging. Additionally, this reflection will touch on how the movement's political commitment has intersected with class issue.

First off, it is essential to note that the gender justice effort within the movement against abusive international marriages did not emerge in a vacuum. While some ideas in the 2012 report were newly constructed, the movement's attempt to combat sexist discrimination was preceded by long-time work of Hmong American women activists in Wisconsin and beyond. One of the founders of the 2007-2010 gatherings was MayTong Chang, who also pioneered Hmong American Women's Association (HAWA) with twelve other women in 1993 in Milwaukee. HAWA was Wisconsin's first Hmong American women's organization focused on gender justice efforts. Its significance was acknowledged in the premier and subsequent issues of the *Hmong Community Journal*, published for the first time on December 15, 2002, in Wisconsin. The journal provided a space for HAWA to announce its missions and programs. It was written that HAWA began from a small group of women who gathered to create *paj ntaub* (Hmong embroidery arts) while functioning as a support system for the women. The group was developed into a formal organization in 1996 to "advocate, organize, and identify the needs of Hmong women" and "empower Hmong women and girls to reach their full potential."²⁶ In the early 2000s, its works were already fueled with gender justice programs, such as direct services for those impacted by domestic violence and leadership training for women and girls.²⁷ HAWA is

²⁶ "Hmong American Women's Association," *Hmong Community Journal*, December 15, 2002, 9, Wisconsin Historical Society Library (hereafter: WHSL).

²⁷ "Hmong American Women's Association," 9; "HAWA Teen Parenting & Leadership (TPL) Project," *Hmong Community Journal*, March 30, 2003, 7, WHSL.

among other organizations supported by Refugee Family Strengthening Program (RFS),²⁸ whose chapter in Wisconsin used to be led by Bo Thao-Urabe in the 1990s. The State of Wisconsin hired her as one of the first RFS program staff concerned with domestic violence.²⁹ After two years, Thao-Urabe moved to St. Paul to work for Minnesota's first Hmong women's organization, the Women's Association of Hmong and Lao (WAHL),³⁰ founded in 1979.³¹ She acted as WAHL's Program Director in January 1998 and later became its Executive Director in June 1998, replacing KaYing Yang³², who was appointed to be the Executive Director of the Southeast Asia Resources Action Center.³³ Thao-Urabe executed the Hmong Women's Peace program as part of her gender justice work at WAHL.³⁴ The program supported Hmong women and girls who experienced sexual assault and raised awareness about such violence in the Hmong community.³⁵ Chang, Thao-Urabe, and other Wisconsin advocates maintained their network despite staying in different states. In 2007, they worked together to design the first forum focused on a new form of gender-based violence: abusive international marriages. Thao-Urabe

²⁸ The RFS program was developed by U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), aiming to "strengthen low-income refugee and immigrant marriages and relationships with education, mentoring, and comprehensive case management to support long-term relationship success and economic self-sufficiency." In Wisconsin, the RFS program funds "education, prevention and intervention services targeted to the Southeast Asian and other refugee population.) Read: Jennifer Salerno et al., "U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants' (USCRI) Refugee Family Strengthening (RFS) Program in 11 Different Program Sites in the U.S. Final Impact Evaluation Report for: U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants," September 28, 2020, https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ofa/USCRI_Impact_Report.pdf ;

²⁹ Bo Thao-Urabe, interview by author.

³⁰ Bo Thao-Urabe. Bo Thao's name also appeared as the representative of Refugee Family Strengthening project in a Public Hearing in Wisconsin, April 17, 1997, see: "Wisconsin Legislature: Senate Bill 77," docs.legis.wisconsin.gov, April 17, 1997, <https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/1997/related/records/1031/2/1/1079>.

³¹ "Organizational Information" by Women's Association of Hmong and Lao, (n.d.), box 157, folder WAHL Board 1996, Hmong Archive, St. Paul, Minnesota.

³² "Executive Director's 1998 Performance Narrative Submitted by Bo Thao-Urabe to the Board of Directors" by Bo Thao-Urabe, (March 12, 1999), box 157, folder WAHL Board Minutes 1999, Hmong Archive, St. Paul, Minnesota.

³³ "Hmong Women in Minnesota Timeline," Minnesota Historical Society, accessed April 9, 2023, <https://www.mnhs.org/hmong/hmong-women-timeline>.

³⁴ "Hmong Women in Minnesota Timeline."

³⁵ Women's Association of Hmong and Lao, Inc., "Hmong Women's Peace Manual Part 1-5" (Saint Paul, Minnesota, n.d.), box 164, folder WAHL Book: Hmong Women's Peace Manual, Part 1-5, Hmong Archive, St. Paul, Minnesota.

and Chang's stories exemplify the continuation of Hmong Americans' gender justice activism that has shaped the four-year meetings and BOF campaign in the subsequent years.

One of the discourses that emerged in the 2007-2010 meetings, which may make this movement different from preceding Hmong American gender justice activism, was the transnational perspective and solidarity fueled with a political commitment. It can be reflected explicitly in the action steps in the 2012 report that connected Hmong American women with Hmong "Girls and Families in Laos, Thailand, and China." The document suggested seven acts Hmong American women could do as follows:

- Collaborate with and encourage the development of women's programs in all three countries.
- Educate young women, teens, and their family members about what awaits them here and alert them to the issues they may face in the U.S.
- Expose the lies these men use (e.g., that they are widowed or have no children) both here in the U.S. within their own community in Laos, Thailand or China.
- Create a hotline for girls in all three countries where they can get more information and possibly run background checks on prospective husbands.
- Organize a women's trip from the U.S. to Laos to share stories and educate.
- Start educational funds to help Hmong girls in all three countries; and establish schools for them to show that marriage isn't the only road to economic opportunity.
- Engage parents, especially mothers, to see how the practice of marrying their young daughters to old men is abusive.³⁶

Although the word "transnational" and "feminism" did not appear here, these action steps suggested efforts to (re)connect, help, and foster an understanding among Hmong women in the diaspora. Such attempts, in some ways, were feminist because they aimed to create solidarity among women of different classes to confront inequality and to nurture trust between women to eschew women-hating as a result of sexism. These action steps were partly formulated from the

³⁶ Chic Dabby-Chinoy, Asian & Pasific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence In partnership with Wisconsin Refugee Family Strengthening Project, "Abusive International Marriages: Hmong Advocates Organizing in Wisconsin" (San Francisco: Asian and Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence, 2012), 28, <https://www.api-gbv.org/resources/abusive-international-marriages-hmong-advocates-organizing-wisconsin/>. (hereafter: Chic Dabby-Chinoy: "Abusive International Marriages.")

community advocates' knowledge and experiences when they travelled and observed the situation in Asian countries.

Following the opening of the Laos border, many Hmong Americans visited the country, including Hmong American community advocates and organizers. They made some recurring trips to better understand the situation of Hmong women and girls in the country. Thao-Urabe's first trip to Laos and Thailand was in 2003, where she witnessed the Hmong young women's desire to pursue formal education. "The young women were very much like wanting the opportunities for education...and they talked about how hard it is to be an ethnic minority," said Thao-Urabe. The young women showed her their curiosity about life in America, and they treated her like their older sister. Nonetheless, according to Thao-Urabe, things changed a couple of years later when she returned to Laos:

And then I would return over the years...maybe 2007, 2008... I had seen the shift in the young women there because now when I went, they were putting on makeup. They didn't talk to you like your relatives, then they were saying, oh they were there to greet Hmong American men, right. So just the mentality of feeling like, oh if I could find a Hmong American husband then I'm going to marry him because I might have a better life.

Thao-Urabe then asked some of the young women why they would marry the Hmong American men, especially the men "who were so old," sometime "30 or 40 years older" than the women. Some women told her that they had no better choices. In Thao-Urabe's memory, the young women told her, "If I can sacrifice myself, then I could get to America, and at least, I could send \$50 a month home. That's better than not." Some young women showed desperation toward Thao-Urabe as she confessed that it was hard for them to get a job and make money to survive.

Despite the adversity endured by some Hmong women in Laos, the country's national census in 2005 and interviews indicated that the education for Hmong women was developing. As discussed by Professor in the School of Environment and Human Sciences at the University

of Hyogo, Japan, Miki Inui, the Lao PDR government provided more education to their ethnic minorities following their policy to open their country to foreign assistance. The international aid offered numerous educational programs for women and minorities in Laos, resulting in the reported development of education among Hmong women. The 2005 census displayed that the literacy rate among Hmong women was vastly ameliorated in a decade from 1995 to 2005. In 2005, 67.9% of the Hmong women were reported to be “economically active.” Through an interview with a Hmong specialist, Inui conveyed that more Hmong women worked in Laos’ capital city, Vientiane.³⁷ Although Inui did not explain the potential bias or inaccuracy of the government census data, some of the author’s interviewees mentioned another fact: a segment of Hmong parents still prioritized their sons pursuing formal education and expected their daughters to work, which reflected a more nuanced reality. The young women who spoke with Thao-Urabe during her visits might have been those whose parents requested them to labor to assist the family’s financial situation.

Later in 2012, at the time Wisconsin advocate Kabzuag Vaj travelled to Laos to observe the trend of transnational marriages between Hmong American men and Hmong women. Vaj emphasized that “Hmong women and girls in almost all villages are affected.... and a way out of poverty have become intertwined in a complicated game where even married women are now involved.” Vaj’s observation explained that a segment of Hmong women and girls still faced adversity that made them engage with Hmong Americans (men and women) to gain money.³⁸ Vaj further mentioned that besides patriarchy, globalization has become the root causes of the

³⁷ Miki Inui, “Hmong Women and Education: Challenges for Empowerment in the Lao PDR,” *Hmong Studies Journal* 16 (January 1, 2015), 9, 12-19.
<https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&issn=15533972&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA451311505&sid=googleScholar&linkaccess=abs>.

³⁸ Chic Dabby-Chinoy, “Abusive International Marriages,” 8-9.

oppression that allows abusive international marriages to happen.³⁹ Globalization has not only increased cross-border interactions but has also facilitated a global political economy that generates economic inequality between so-called less developed countries and wealthier countries. Class differences between certain Hmong women and girls in Asia, who lived in poverty, and Hmong American men, who enjoyed economic privilege with their American dollar currency, have enabled a pattern of gendered marriage-migration process. This process involves a segment of Hmong brides from the poorer country moving to a wealthier country in search of upward economic mobility for themselves and their families.⁴⁰

In 2014, BOF released a video featuring a Hmong Lao woman Noimaniphone (Nou), the Director of *VivNcaus* (Sisterhood) *Laos*, who shared about the situation of the Hmong community in Laos. This video was likely based on the organization's event during BOF's first campaign in 2013, where *VivNcaus* held a workshop about preventing abusive international marriage and domestic violence on October 25. Some of Nou's points aligned with the workshop result as published on the BOF Facebook page.⁴¹ Her testimony was crucial as it revealed the nuanced realities of Hmong people in the country. She mentioned that some Hmong were living in the cities, and some parents were employed or running businesses, which enabled them to

³⁹ Chic Dabby-Chinoy, 10.

⁴⁰ Chic Dabby-Chinoy, 9. This phenomenon is common in other communities as well. Nicole Constable utilizes the term "less developed global South to more industrialized North" to describe the countries of origin for brides and the countries of destination in their marriage migration process. Nicole Constable, "Introduction: Cross-Border Marriages, Gendered Mobility, and Global Hypergamy," in *Cross-Border Marriages: Gender and Mobility in Transnational Asia*, ed. Constable, Nicole (Philadelphia, United States: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 4. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uwm/detail.action?docID=3441421>.

⁴¹ The meeting highlighted poverty as the core reason that led families and young women to engage in AIM with Hmong American men. The indigence was worsened by a lack of educational opportunities, support for the potential victims and victims, and information about the actual realities surrounding the marriage phenomenon. The participants suggested four solutions: providing opportunities that would lead to financial scholarships, access to education for young women, making visible role models, mentoring programs for young women and men, and education for young people about the consequences of AIM, among others. Building Our Future: A Community Campaign, "Domestic Violence Awareness Month is Over," Facebook, November 12, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/buildourfuture/posts/pfbid02ZfeUivaaHSxwifj7XLzZBWS3GrEZE9ZC9LCYdJ8yK1m98EadXY5WMhdk5cajxB1>.

support their children's education and helped them to reach prosperous lives. However, some girls who lived up in the mountains were still surrounded by poverty and lack of education and decided to engage with Hmong American men for money. Nou asserted that education would help these young women to be able to support themselves and help their families. She invited the audience to join hands to support Hmong girls in Laos.⁴² The video caption stated that "we" could support young women to gain education and skills to run for business and get a job. These transnational initiatives were similar to the spirit of the movement against abusive international marriages, as mentioned in the action steps in the Wisconsin meetings report.

In the same year, founders of BOF Vaj, Thao-Urabe, and Yang launched *RedGreen Rivers*, a social enterprise that aimed to promote and distribute Hmong women's handicrafts to the global market. *RedGreen Rivers* attempted to create more job opportunities for Hmong women and girls in Laos, with the founders hoping it could give more choices for women and girls to earn money and preserve Hmong arts and culture.⁴³ Many Hmong women were well-known for their crafts, and *RedGreen Rivers* provided the platform to market their works, such as accessories, jewelry, and home decor. Furthermore, the initiative also aimed to end gender-based violence, where some Hmong women engaged in inappropriate relationships with American men in exchange for financial support to survive.⁴⁴ "Some of the artisans that we work with, I mean, it's really amazing because they make money and they spend it on their brothers' schooling, they make money, and they pay for their parents' medical," said Thao-Urabe, which

⁴² Building Our Future: A Community Campaign, "Nou, a Hmong Lao Sister, Shares Her Thoughts," Facebook, October 28, 2014 (translated by Choua Vang), <https://fb.watch/jFCTKf1wZr/>.

⁴³ *Self-Starters: RedGreen Rivers* / NBC Asian America, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tpvJ9BoW-M>.

⁴⁴ Diana Fraser, "Meet Your Maker," TPT Originals (Twin Cities PBS), November 24, 2018, <https://www.tptoriginals.org/meet-your-maker/>.

explicated the life of some Hmong women⁴⁵ as mentioned by Inui earlier. This transnational work between Hmong women across the ocean became more apparent as the Hmong transnational network conducted international gatherings to discuss gender-based violence issues.

To continue the initial initiative to confront the root cause of abusive international marriages, from March 23 to 24, 2015, BOF held a two-day meeting in Thailand that brought together community builders from Laos, China, Thailand, and Vietnam. The gathering was a space to listen and learn about gender oppression and gender justice issues involving Hmong women in each country and establish transnational relationships among the leaders. “It’s not just about naming a problem. It’s like how we build a network of people who can share their expertise and knowledge with each other and get to know each other,” said Thao-Urabe. In the convening, they also discussed the condition under which Hmong women lived in Laos, China, Thailand, Vietnam, and the U.S. and how it had affected the women's lives. They conversed about Hmong women's oppression and shared the solution they thought might be best to confront the problems.⁴⁶ The initial meeting in 2015 became the foundation for a bigger convening next year to develop a more extensive transnational network among Hmong gender justice advocates and organizers.

From December 19 to 24, 2016, BOF and their partners held the first Global Women’s Summit in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The meeting was arranged primarily by Yang, who also did

⁴⁵ Louisa Schein’s ethnographic research revealed that there were many Hmong/Miao women in China who married Hmong American men, possessed high levels of education and decent jobs in their country before moving out to the United States. According to Schein, some of these women worked as “performers, journalists, or traditional medical doctors.” Some also had received education up to high school and college levels. Nevertheless, Schein did not examine the possibility of abusive practices within these transnational marriages. See: Louisa Schein, “Marrying out of Place: Hmong/Miao Women Across and Beyond China,” in *Cross-Border Marriages: Gender and Mobility in Transnational Asia*, 74.

⁴⁶ Bo Thao-Urabe, interview by author.

community organizing work in Laos and Thailand.⁴⁷ Unlike the previous gathering, the 2016 summit involved more than 100 Hmong community advocates from Thailand, Laos, France, the United States, and Vietnam.⁴⁸ The gathering was primarily discussing about abusive international marriages in panels and breakout sessions. One of the main objectives of the sessions was to create a common understanding about the phenomenon occurred in each country of participants and why such issue happened. According to Zon Moua, the meeting also encouraged its attendees to dismantle the root causes of the problem, which is not only patriarchy, but also global capitalism.⁴⁹

Besides discussing abusive international marriages, the gathering also touched on the issue of discrimination of sexual and gender minorities, which involved the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer (LGBTQ)'s experiences.⁵⁰ Chai Moua, a Wisconsin advocate who was working at CAP Services at the time, expounded one of the significances of the summit, which resulted in a collective understanding that LGBTQ advocacy should be an integral component of gender justice efforts. Social justice leaders in Thailand have made such an effort, which inspired Hmong American advocates to follow their steps. Zon Moua further underscored how Hmong Thai participants introduced their new vocabulary to describe LGBTQ identity, such as *tou zoo nkauj* and *ntxhais zoo nraug*. For her, these terms were meaningful because the people self-defined themselves in their own language.

Chai Moua also noted another important takeaway from the event, which was the Global Summit's roots in the organizing efforts of advocates in Wisconsin back in 2007. She underlined

⁴⁷ Bo Thao-Urabe.

⁴⁸ "Hmong: First Global Hmong Women's Summit A Success," February 16, 2017, <https://unpo.org/article/19862>.

⁴⁹ Zon Moua, interview by author, Teams meeting.

⁵⁰ "Hmong: First Global Hmong Women's Summit A Success,"; Zon Moua, interview by author.

how the Wisconsin gathering had evolved into a vision of creating a sisterhood among Hmong advocates and organizers from the diaspora. “A sisterhood to end violence...where we there to support each other and learn from each other. To ask, how do we help those are affected here (in the U.S.) and how do we affect those from other countries?” said Chai Moua.⁵¹ “We started building relationships that Hmong men and Hmong communities probably thought we never would,” she asserted. The notion of sisterhood also held a powerful meaning for Zon Moua. She noted that in Hmong culture, sisterhood was often defined through patrilineality, which connected a woman with other women who shared her husband’s name. “It was such a huge impact because we got to choose who we build sisterhood with. And I think that's so beautiful, and that's why we have these relationships still to this day,”⁵² she said.

All the efforts as elucidated above had played a significant role in further solidifying solidarity among advocates and organizers in the Hmong transnational community, which was imbued by a political commitment that bonded their relationship. The Hmong transnational solidarity discussed in this chapter resembles hooks’ point that suggested a political commitment as the foundation of a feminist movement. This kind of commitment is deemed more potent by hooks compared with a movement that is solely based on shared victimization. The connection among the predominantly Hmong women advocates and organizers was built beyond the shared idea that women, queer, and trans folks were the victims of men or patriarchy. The Hmong transnational solidarity, reflecting the movement against abusive international marriages in general, goes beyond demanding equal treatment with men; instead, it envisaged a gender justice vision that was inclusive and intersected with class issues. *RedGreen Rivers* and BOF campaign

⁵¹ The interview was conducted by the *Portage County Gazette* as republished in “Hmong: First Global Hmong Women’s Summit A Success.”

⁵² Zon Moua, interview by author.

with the participation of Nou could be interpreted as the ways in which Hmong American activists consciously address the class problem in a global political system and how they tackled the issue of poverty together with Hmong women from Laos. Therefore, it also aligned with hooks' point on a political commitment that promoted collectivity instead of a focus on individual identity. This collaborative transnational network has nurtured an alternative form of belonging among the Hmong diaspora: a strong bond that (re)united them not necessarily through their identity as Hmong individuals, but rather, through a political commitment to foster gender justice.

Conclusion

Overall, the data presented in the first reflection suggest that the Hmong American community-led movement against AIM has not had a significant impact on the trend of AIM in Wisconsin. Despite the efforts of the movement as describe in preceding chapter, AIM practices continue to persist in the community. The ultimate factor that may have disrupted the trend of AIM was probably the global COVID-19 pandemic, which to some extent halting traveling across countries. Nevertheless, the pandemic did not necessarily stop transnational connection through social media platform, which may have enabled the continuation of AIM practices.

Meanwhile, the second reflection suggests a lasting impact of the movement and exemplifies another persistent element of the activism. The political commitment rooted in the four-year gatherings in Wisconsin remain consistent, as evidenced by the continued statements and actions of the Hmong American activists. The data presented in this section reveal the movement's attempt to address class issues, in addition to its persistent focus on challenging sexist oppression and anti-Hmong sentiment. Moreover, the reflection also underscores the

continuity of the transnational character of the movement, which has sustained since its inception. The Global Hmong Women's Summit and *Redgreen Rivers* project are two examples of programs that embody this spirit. These two initiatives can be regarded as positive outcomes of the movement along with the sense of connection among the activists that may have formed an alternative form of belonging.

In summary, while the Hmong American community-led movement against AIM may not have had a significant impact on reducing the prevalence of AIM practices in Wisconsin, it has had powerful effects on community advocates and organizers, leading to the development of programs that promote social justice and cross-border collaboration. Such impacts are crucial for the movement's long-term goal of effecting cultural change that prioritizes gender justice.

The persistence of the movement's political commitment and transnational character over the years, which resulted in a creation of an alternative form of belonging among the activists, underscores its resilience and enduring impact.

Conclusion

This thesis has analyzed the emergence and growth of the Hmong American community-led movement against abusive international marriages from 2007 to 2022 and how it has sustained grassroots feminist activism to confront gendered issues of marriage-migration in the community. Historical analysis has revealed that the movement arose due to a confluence of factors. These include the trend of forced divorce and the discourse around this issue in the early 2000s, which shed light on the gender dynamics within the Hmong American community, and the community's resistance against racism from the mainstream society and structure, which was an instance of persisting marginalization towards Hmong people. By investigating the development of the movement, this thesis illuminates some consistency and changes within the activism. First, the movement consistently employs a gender-based lens as part of its strategy. Second, the activism persistently resists patriarchal power within a segment of the Hmong American community that perpetuates sexist oppression. Third, it consistently counters racialized and sexualized stigmatization from the dominant American culture and structure. Fourth, the activism maintains an awareness of a class problem stemming from the global political economy that has created economic inequality. Lastly, the movement has persistently adopted a transnational approach since its inception. One aspect of the activism that has evolved is the public acknowledgment of the leadership role of Hmong people of sex and gender minority. This grassroots feminist movement reflects a political commitment to gender justice that intersects with race and class issues. Hmong American advocates and organizers have performed acts of resistance towards sexist oppression of all genders and classes while also resisting racism from mainstream power.

This project has argued that the foundation of the Hmong Americans' grassroots feminist movement against AIM is beyond shared victimization. Rather, it is based on a political commitment to a liberation struggle against sexism, racism, and classism. The dynamic within this movement has cultivated an alternative form of belonging among the Hmong community advocates and organizers. It is true that the connection among the Hmong American gender justice activists had already been established before the four-year gatherings in Wisconsin. It is important to note that Hmong American women have nurtured a network to navigate domestic violence issues in the community since the late 1970s.¹ Nevertheless, the movement against AIM may have transformed this cooperation into a stronger bond that aims not only to find the solution for domestic violence case-based problems but also to build a cultural change for a long-term purpose. This effort has brought people together to share their knowledge, reflections, memories, and vulnerabilities, utilizing these as tools to heal the community. Furthermore, the movement against AIM has extended these grassroots efforts beyond the national border, creating a transnational connection and solidarity bonded by a collective political commitment.

Transnationality is an inevitable aspect of research about activism in the marriage-migration process. The deepening of the globalized economy, especially with Laos opening its border, allowed Hmong American people with their currency to travel to Asian countries and have a nostalgic journey (re)visiting their homeland.² This cross-border interaction was also fueled with expressions of a transnational desire,³ which not only opened an opportunity for the

¹ Kristine Lizdas and Bo Thao-Urabe, "A Guide for Advocates to Understand the Legal Implications of Abusive International Marriages" (Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence and Battered Women's Justice Project, 2016), <https://www.api-gbv.org/resources/abusive-international-marriages-legal-guide/>, 4.

² Louisa Schein, "Marrying out of Place: Hmong/Miao Women Across and Beyond China," in *Cross-Border Marriages: Gender and Mobility in Transnational Asia*, ed. Nicole Constable (Philadelphia, United States: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 54, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uwm/detail.action?docID=3441421>.

³ Nicole Constable, "Introduction: Cross-Border Marriages, Gendered Mobility, and Global Hypergamy," in *Cross-Border Marriages*, 3.

former refugees to return to their roots or reunite with family but also allowed some to fulfill their fantasy of meeting their “homeland women.”⁴ This desire has incited romantic or sexual intimacies and marriages within the Hmong transnational community. Apart from successful relationships, the exploitation of women and girls has been proven to occur within this dynamic. The sexist oppression of a segment of Hmong women and girls is facilitated by global capitalism and patriarchal norms that reproduce global economic inequality combined with the hypersexualization of Hmong women and girls that may have been rooted in the long history of hypersexualization of Asian women⁵ by the white supremacist culture and structure.⁶ It is worth examining the extent to which Hmong American men may have internalized or perpetuated similar attitudes from mainstream American society towards Asian women in their transnational community. However, it is important not to reduce the experiences of victims/survivors to mere victims of globalization and patriarchy, as they may also possess and express agency. Moreover, it is possible that the victims/survivors of AIM also participate in transnational efforts to foster gender justice. While my project acknowledges the importance of the transnational element in the movement against AIM, it does not extensively explore this aspect due to its limited scope. This thesis focuses mainly on the case of Wisconsin and does not employ a transnational methodology. Nevertheless, this research can call for future scholars to continue this work using a transnational approach to better understand the power dynamic among Hmong transnational activists and between Hmong organizers and the dominant powers in Asian countries. Interviews with Hmong activists in Asia are essential for future researchers to generate more nuanced

⁴ Louisa Schein, “Marrying out of Place: Hmong/Miao Women Across and Beyond China,” in *Cross-Border Marriages*, 54.

⁵ Celine Parreñas Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁶ This dynamic is not novel, as it exhibits patterns that have persisted throughout the history of U.S. imperialism and military intervention in different Asian countries.

standpoints, knowledge, and experiences about the phenomenon of (abusive) international marriages and the Hmong transnational feminist movement. This transnational approach would enrich the perspective of my thesis, which relies mostly on sources available in the United States.

The second limitation of this research is the absence of the voices of Hmong individuals from Asian countries who were involved in (abusive) international marriages with Hmong Americans. Amplifying their stories is important to better understand their agency. It is worth noting that transnational relationships also occurred between Hmong LGBTQ individuals besides Hmong women and men, as my interviewees pointed out.⁷ Oral history interviews with these actors may reveal their experiences in Asian countries and the United States. This project can potentially challenge the mainstream stereotype of foreign brides as perpetual victims. Regarding the experiences of victims/survivors of AIM, my interviewee mentioned that some Hmong women who are victims/survivors living in Wisconsin have created a network to support each other.⁸ Reflecting on historian Ji-Yeon Yuh's research on social groups of Korean military brides, an opportunity to respectfully connect and learn from the Hmong victims/survivors' stories may result in narratives about their struggle, agency, and (everyday) resistance. Including the knowledge and standpoints of these actors may enhance our perspective and understanding of the dynamic within (abusive) international marriages and the feminist movement against AIM.

In addition, my research also excludes the discussion on the legal implications of AIM. In 2016, Hmong community gender justice activists collaborated with their allies to publish a guide to support advocates in addressing various issues and providing resources to help victims/survivors of abusive international marriages. The Guide was authored by Bo Thao-Urabe

⁷ Zon Moua, interview by author, Teams meeting, April 10, 2023; Kevin Xiong, interview by author, Zoom meeting, November 16, 2022.

⁸ Xong Xiong, interview by author, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, March 14, 2023.

from the Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence and Kristine Lizdas from the Battered Women’s Justice Project. Long-time Hmong American community advocates and activists worked with non-Hmong allies to serve as advisors for this publication. They were Pheng Thao, MayTong Chang, KaYing Yang, Hli Xiong, Sy Vang Mouacheupao, Judge Gail Chang Bohr, and Lani Suarez. The Guide explains the core principles for working with victims/survivors and provides an introduction to understanding the American legal system as it relates to abusive international marriages. The publication of this Guide may have been a direct result of naming the issue as abusive international marriages rather than simply categorizing cases as sex trafficking. The Guide also explores Family Laws and jurisdictions that govern marriage, divorce, child custody, and civil protection orders in addition to Criminal Law.⁹ Although studying the legal implications of AIM would be valuable, it was beyond the scope of this thesis. Conducting such a study would require observation of the ways in which the Guide has influenced the direct services provided by Hmong American advocates to victims/survivors of AIM. Access to their organizations’ documents may be necessary for a successful research study. However, such documents may be highly confidential. Future researchers may be able to access these documents if they are deposited in the archives.

Despite its limitations, this thesis sheds light on the grassroots feminist activism of the Hmong American community in their fight against abusive international marriages and multiple forms of oppression. By incorporating the knowledge and experiences of Hmong American community advocates and organizers, this paper adds to the U.S. historical discourse on activism or resistance related to marriage-migration that has not adequately explored phenomena in the 21st century and Hmong American experiences. This thesis also makes a unique contribution to

⁹ For more: Kristine Lizdas and Bo Thao-Urabe, “A Guide for Advocates to Understand the Legal Implications of Abusive International Marriages.”

the discourse on the movement against AIM by accentuating that the community advocates and organizers not only resist multiple oppressions within and beyond the Hmong American community but also foster solidarity and create an alternative form of belonging based on a political commitment that transcends shared victimization. To continue the spirit of this political commitment, I hope that my thesis can serve as documentation of the Hmong American grassroots feminist movement against AIM, which may be helpful for the involved and future activists, as well as individuals and non-Hmong communities in general who are curious about how grassroots feminist activism is developed and sustained.

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