

# COMMUNITY EQUITY RESEARCH CENTER

## Community Learning ~ PAR ~ Grassroots Action

### **Intimate Partner Violence and Traditional Leaders Prevention in the Hmong Community: A Community Based Participatory Action Research Project**

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#### **Introduction**

Cultural norms such as patriarchal ideology, traditional gender roles, and group-orientation, where the need of the group comes before the needs of the self, are core tenets of the ecological system in which many Asian immigrant women live. These cultural norms are also factors that contribute to high rates of intimate partner violence (IPV) in Asian immigrant communities. Research has shown that cultures steep in patriarchy are associated with high prevalence of IPV. Among Southeast Asian immigrant groups, the Hmong has a strong patriarchal culture where traditional leaders, who are male members of a family or clan unit, are called upon to make major decisions for family members and often, to mediate conflicts between family members and different clan members. Frequently, mediations are between married couples. Despite having this influential body of decision makers and council, IPV in the Hmong community continues to increase with fatalities. A report by the Asian API-GBV on intimate partner and domestic violence related homicides as a critical issue affecting Asian Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander battered women since 2001 indicated that the Hmong to have the fourth highest cases.

There are 18 traditional Hmong clans delineated by the 18 traditional Hmong surnames. A Hmong person's surname indicates which clan the person belongs to. A Hmong marriage is a rite of passage for a Hmong woman because she is relinquished from her birth family, and therefore clan, to join her husband's family and therefore, his clan although she retains her maiden name. Hmong clans are considered a family unit with no delineation between the horizontal relations of cousins. Families are headed by male members of the family who often become designated traditional leaders or clan leaders. When there is conflict between married couples, they must appeal to clan leaders for guidance, counsel, mediation, and intervention in cases of abuse and safety. Clan leaders play an important and sometimes, a decisive role in intimate partner violence prevention and intervention. The purpose of this study seeks to explore how traditional leaders' intervention impacts IPV survivor's safety in the Hmong community.

#### **Research Method**

This study utilizes a Community Based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR) framework focusing on involving key stakeholders throughout the research process. It is a research framework that aims to address the following components: the practical concerns of people in a community based on their needs, issues, and concerns; participatory through directly engaging the community; and its outcomes and action based and oriented through a community lead strategies and actions for transformative and social change.

The first stage to this process focused on identifying key stakeholders, which included IPV advocates and traditional leaders or clan leaders. These two groups work directly with IPV victims and survivors, and their understanding and perceptions of key safety concerns are central to developing culturally responsive prevention and intervention strategies. The second and third stage of this process focused on sharing the needs and concerns of IPV victims through previously collected data and conducting a focus group with traditional clan leaders. An open-ended questionnaire was used to prompt responses from clan leaders participating in the focus group.

Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants for the focus group. Known male community leaders through the clan network were approached for the study. Those leaders solicited more participants from their clan leader networks. The focus group data was analyzed through a two-stage coding process. The first coding process involved identifying key phrases with similar meaning. The second coding stage organized the similar phrases from the first stage into a major theme. A brief demographic questionnaire was also administered.

#### **Results**

The focus group participants were all Hmong male ages 41 through 64, born in Laos and Thailand. All participants were married and still practice Animism, consisting of many traditional Hmong rituals and ceremonies. One participant had no formal education and three had some college education. Their English fluency ranged from some English, to fluent in English.

There were five themes resulting from the focus group, indicating a fundamental shift in the role of clan leaders and their influences, including transformative changes through an egalitarian approach to problem solving and further education and knowledge of Hmong cultural practices and resources for victims.

### **Theme 1: Perception of Safety for IPV Victims**

These traditional leaders' perception of safety were those that include having a "peaceful family," the "need for protection so that you can eat well and be well so that you don't have any problems," and when a situation involves weapons, "go to the police."

### **Theme 2: Mediatory Process**

Most traditional clan intervention/mediation include a mediatory process which includes the Hmong phrase, "ua siab ntev" translated to mean "be patient." With the exception of identifiable and eminent threat, such as the use of weapons, the phrase "be patient" is the start of an investigative process typically constituting at least three occurrences, "how many times they've already been here. If it's the first time they've come to me, I will say, 'you both go' [back]," "I have to listen to both side of the story." These two sides of the story take time to investigate and because of inter-clan harmony protocol, it is imperative to conduct the investigation appropriately. An over-arching thread through this theme is an inter-clan harmony with respect to traditional Hmong marriage processes.

### **Theme 3: Influences & Authority of Traditional Clan Leaders**

Participants expressed how there were transformative changes in their influences, "when we were in our old country, we executed a monetary fine after we've addressed the issue...that's the consequences. This stops the behavior. In this country, we cannot force [any fines on] anyone during mediation." Traditional mediation is still influential and widely utilized, "as a Hmong person, we have to constantly guide others to be good people." The focus is not so stringent to the degree that no one can leave a marriage, "we also have the right to let her go without any blame. The husband will have no say in the matter. We gladly open the door for her to leave."

### **Theme 4: Education**

There are two subcategories for education: knowledge of Hmong cultural practices, child rearing practices and family harmony; and knowledge of norms and values in the U.S, including legal issues (law enforcement, custody battles) and resources for social support.

Participants differentiated between what constitute serious offenses that could result in a lawsuit/legal issues or in Hmong, "plaub tug" with severe consequences including monetary fines (i.e. extra-marital affairs, violent physical abuses) and mediation which needs counseling but does not necessarily result in a fine being issued. To be an effective clan leader, one must have a good grasp of Hmong cultural practices including traditional clan mediation rules and procedures. Many of these rules and procedures are not written down. Knowledge is gain through experience. Participants expressed that "a lot of the elders..don't understand the laws in this country," as well as being aware of what resources are available to support IVP victims.

### **Theme 5: Recommendations**

The leaders recommend that any effective outreach or education program should go through the clan leaders, "we have clan leaders in every city, every town. These are the ones who will support you so the community will not criticize you." Shelters were seen as safe havens for victims.

### **Findings and Implications**

The themes germinated from the clan leader focus group indicates a fundamental shift in the role of clan leaders and their influences. Clan leaders' effectiveness depends on many factors, including competent grasp of Hmong cultural knowledge, the need to preserve Hmong family unity, and the ability to enforce some traditional penalties or fines for egregious acts such as extra-marital affairs and physical abuses. Conversely, traditional clan intervention practice to render monetary penalties and fines are limited and restricted by contradiction to U.S legal precedence and therefore, are not as consequential and effective. There is an over-arching mediatory process that is fundamentally based on traditional inter-clan harmony and respect. This constrains any proactive and immediate prevention and intervention that can be crucial when the safety of a victim is involved. However, law enforcement involvement is considered when there are direct verbal threats or threats with weapons to victims. Although there is an indication of transformative changes through an egalitarian approach to problem solving with women, especially those in position of providing social support to victims, any efforts and outreach should still go through traditional clan leaders. Finally, there is a need for clan leaders and those who will become leaders to have further education and knowledge of Hmong cultural mediation practices and current community resources available for IPV victims.to be effective.