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Recommended Citation

Thompson, Perrin, "Hmong Women in Leadership: Creating a Multicultural Identity While Preserving Traditions in the Modern Age" (2020). *Celebrating Scholarship and Creativity Day*. 132.

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**Hmong Women in Leadership:
Creating a Multicultural Identity While Preserving Traditions in the Modern Age**

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April 16, 2020

Abstract

The life of a Hmong woman in America is dedicated to trying to find the perfect balance between professional achievements and cultural and familial expectations. This proves extremely challenging as there are occasions when professional and personal demands are in absolute contrast. This situation is even more prevalent in the life of a Hmong woman who endeavors to become a leader in society. The purpose of this phenomenological culture case study, whose data will be based upon a nine-month research project, is to examine how recognized Hmong women leaders have overcome the differences in value systems and have balanced the demands of Hmong culture while maintaining a successful career.

Keywords: Hmong women, Hmong culture, differences in Hmong and United states cultures, leadership, women's role in Hmong culture.

Hmong Women in Leadership: Creating a Multicultural Identity While Preserving Traditions in the Modern Age

It is fair to say that some people take simple liberties for granted. In American culture, these liberties include but are not limited to running water, grocery stores stocked with food, and having a roof that does not leak. It is easy to get caught up in everyday life and forget that people do not have access to the same comforts around the world. This truth became radically apparent to Kia Lor, a Hmong girl who was born in a refugee camp in Thailand and is now the Associate Director at the Greenfield Intercultural Center at the University of Pennsylvania. Although Kia remembers little from this time in her life, she will never forget why she was there. During this time, a Hmong diaspora had broken out and the Hmong people were being persecuted for their role against the communists in the Vietnam War. Eventually, Kia's mother had had enough of living in the midst of this violence. When Kia was three years old, her mother decided to take her along with her three siblings and immigrate to America. "My grandparents came to Minnesota so my mom knew this place somewhere in the world called Minnesota and that we needed to go there" (K. Lor, personal communication, March, 5, 2020). After a long journey, they landed in Minnesota where Kia and her family were faced with many unfamiliar challenges. As the oldest daughter of six children in a single-parent household, Kia learned quickly how to navigate her new life as an aspiring Hmong woman in America in addition to becoming a second mother to her siblings, balancing the family checkbook, and going to school. Kia's story is one that many Hmong women share and it shows that the life of a Hmong woman in America is devoted to finding a balance between professional and personal expectations. This has proven to be extremely challenging as there are occasions when these expectations are in absolute contrast.

While discussing Hmong women in leadership positions, an issue that is brought up is whether or not they have a more difficult time breaking into these positions than other ethnicities or genders. While some say that they are equally as equipped as other ethnicities and genders to enter these positions, others contend that there are many unique obstacles that Hmong women face in the process of attaining a leadership position. Research leads to the conclusion that Hmong women have a more difficult time succeeding in securing these leadership positions because of the various social, familial, and cultural obstacles they face.

Literature Review

Before one can truly understand these obstacles, one must have an understanding of who the Hmong were in the past and who they are today. The Hmong culture is steeped in rich traditions that its people place high value in. This is because, according to Hmong anthropologist Gary Yia Lee, in ancient times, Hmong people were thought of as mountain dwellers and hill people by other cultures. They did not have a solid place to call home because of their frequent migrations and their choice to live in the mountains. Additionally, when a tribe would get too big, the decision would be made to split it up into numerous tribes and then go separate ways (1996). Due to these conditions, the Hmong people held on to their traditions with a tight grip. Mary Romero, a sociologist at Arizona State University, and Abigail J. Stewart, a psychologist at the University of Michigan, further explain that “As nomads, their traditions and cultural values have been the primary source of their identity” (230). These traditions of valuing family and maintaining their culture have helped Hmong people honor and remember their ancestors. These cultural practices have also aided them in never forgetting that they were born Hmong. Although some traditions have faded, the Hmong culture has preserved most of them into the modern-day.

Despite these deep-rooted traditions, Hmong origins are relatively unknown. Lee states that some Hmong people link the syllable “mong” with Mongolia and claim they originated from there; whereas, some scholars believe that Hmong people originated from Southern China or even that they were the lost tribe after the fall of the Tower of Babel in the Old Testament (1996). Due to the Hmong language being purely a spoken language, the history of the Hmong people has been passed down orally rather than by written stories or accounts. This uncertainty of origin can be confusing and saddening, especially when living in the melting pot that is the United States of America--a country where knowing the cultural and ethnic background of one’s ancestors is the topic of frequent discussion. Being uncertain of where their Hmong ancestors originated has fueled feelings of insecurity and lack of identity in modern-day Hmong people.

Another historical source of strain comes from the Hmong people’s role in the Vietnam and Secret Wars. Jennifer Yau, a previous research assistant at the Migration Policy Institute, explains that during these wars, the American soldiers recruited the Hmong people because of their excellent fighting skills. This started when the United States was concerned about a communistic takeover and ran CIA ground operations in Vietnam from 1960-1975. The Hmong people were a great source of knowledge of the terrain and even prevented the Vietnamese from extending the Ho Chi Minh Trail (2005). However, the loyalty and dedication that the Hmong people showed towards the Americans were not rewarded. When the Vietnam War ended in 1975, America flew its troops out of the country and left the brave Hmong warriors defenseless against the now angered communists. This led to a Hmong genocide in Laos in 1975 when communist leader Pathet Lao gained control of the government (Romero and Stewart 231). Some Hmong people were able to immigrate to the United States at that time, while others were forced into refugee camps.

This persecution triggered the largest migration of Hmong people in history. In an article written by Yang Lor, a sociologist at the University of California, Berkeley, he explains that throughout the war, American soldiers had told the Hmong of the wonder and freedom that the United States possessed. While being persecuted, America was thought of as a place of escape and safety that the Hmong people desperately longed for. These thoughts prompted the Hmong to immigrate to America. However, they did not immigrate to just anywhere, they chose to immigrate to states that were welcoming and had numerous opportunities and programs for them to become established. Given these specifications, Hmong people immigrated to St. Paul, Minnesota between 1976 and 1982 and then to Fresno, California in the late 1980s because of the programs those states offered to help them become settled (2).

Before coming to the United States, traditional Hmong culture viewed women as tools in helping men lead the clan and the family. Dr. Pa Der Vang, an Associate Professor of social work at St. Catherine University and a Hmong refugee, states “Men are at the center of Hmong society where they are in charge of making major decisions, leading the family, and representing the family within the community” (2015). She goes on to explain that “The roles of both genders are focused on helping men to fulfill these roles” (P. Vang 2015). The inequality between genders that is shown by treating women as only helpers to male success can further instill feelings of inadequacy in the women of the culture. Dr. Vang continues on to say that Hmong women have always been taught to be compliant and obedient. She explains that girls are told from a young age, “[. . .] never cross over men” (2015). Women are also prevented from interjecting when a man is speaking in order to “[. . .] maintain the appearance of lower intelligence and less power than men” (P. Vang 2015).

These factors influence the way Hmong women think about themselves and how they perceive their abilities. Cultural views of Hmong women also influence their ability to break into leadership positions. According to Dia Cha, a Hmong-American author, although women made up 50% of the refugee population in Thailand and Laos, there was not one woman who held a leadership position in a Hmong refugee camp before 1992 (2013). The lack of women in leadership positions even when they make up a good majority of the population further highlights the traditional values of emphasizing women to aspire to be helpers to the men in Hmong culture.

Theoretical Framework

Research Location and Participants

Results and Analysis

Hmong women encounter an entirely new set of obstacles when they try to assimilate into leadership positions. The first set of obstacles they face come when they enter the education system which include but are not limited to: stereotypes, social isolation, and experiences of the imposter syndrome. Sometimes Hmong women are not able to even start to develop the skills needed to become a leader because of the educational and social obstacles they face. According to Dr. MayKao Hang, the founding Dean of the Morrison Family College of Health at the University of St. Thomas, “As the ‘successful’ immigrants, Asians are often overlooked in educational research” and “Educational and social policy justifies the exclusion of Southeast Asians [. . .]” (1997). Asian students are often categorized as the “model minority” meaning that this demographic group often outperforms the nation’s average in school systems. This

stereotype is incredibly prominent across the United States and has allowed teachers to disregard this group and allocate their time and attention to other students who may or may not need assistance.

In addition, Dr. Christopher Vang, an Assistant Professor of Education at California State University, Stanislaus, gathers, “In most cases, teachers would assume that they understand and are working hard. The truth is that they do not receive the necessary assistance they need to survive academically” (2004-05). He goes on to discuss how the lack of Hmong bilingual teachers also impacts the success rate of Hmong people. If there are fewer Hmong teachers, the Hmong students often get placed into English as a Second Language (ESL) courses. This results in them being segregated from the rest of the students and deprives them of improving their connections with people outside of their culture. Additionally, having fewer Hmong teachers also leave fewer role models for aspiring Hmong students. Being unable to have someone who can impact lives, such as a teacher, understand a student’s cultural background can lead to those students becoming less social because they feel like they don’t have a figure they can relate with and look up to.

These educational barriers, as well as their traditional cultural background, can also lead to Hmong women experiencing a phenomenon called “imposter syndrome.” Kia Lor explains that the imposter syndrome, a feeling of inadequacy and doubt, is something she has faced head-on while living on the East Coast, “[. . .] I'm really challenged to find my Hmong identity and I find myself having to navigate through the imposter syndrome [. . .] I find myself saying, ‘I'm not white enough to be here, I'm not rich enough to be here, I'm not smart enough to be here’” (K. Lor, personal communication, March, 5, 2020). This phenomenon is one that many Hmong women experience because of the lack of representation the Hmong community has throughout

the United States. This lack of representation has deterred many women from reaching their goals because it is frustrating when one has to explain themselves over and over and can make them question who they really are--directly resulting in the imposter syndrome.

The low representation of Hmong people locally and nationwide has also added to the social and educational barriers Hmong women encounter. Due to the lack of Hmong in government and the small Hmong population in the United States, fewer resources have been devoted to specifically aid Hmong women or the Hmong culture in general (Hang 1997). There are few resources available for Hmong women who are looking to enter leadership positions and that along with the lack of Hmong role models and the language barrier that is often present drastically inhibit a Hmong woman's ability to gain skills needed to be a leader and, therefore, break into various leadership positions.

In addition to educational and social obstacles, Hmong women also encounter barriers in their households. These obstacles often appear because of the language barriers that are present between the younger and older generations. This separation arises when Hmong students are expected to speak Hmong when they are in their home and English when they are at school. Concha Delgado-Gaitan, an ethnographic researcher and professor, gathers that "The discontinuity between home and school [has] hindered students from sharing ideas and/or developing new language skills" (as cited in C. Vang, 2004-05). This hindrance is caused by not being able to develop crucial communication skills and is detrimental to a Hmong woman's ability to enter a leadership position. This is due to the fact that a leader needs to be able to effectively communicate ideas with others and if one cannot practice that skill, they will have a very difficult time developing it on their own. Additionally, as Dr. Hang notes, although both genders have been affected by the discontinuity, Hmong boys are often more outgoing and social

than Hmong girls and are able to practice their communication skills. On the other hand, Hmong girls are taught to be docile and submissive (1997), therefore, the discontinuity of language between home and school affects them to a greater extent.

Another barrier Hmong women face inside their household is the structure of their family. Tracy Pilar Johnson-Messenger, a professor at Columbia University, states that “The household forms the most important social and economic unit in Hmong society, representing a bond between members of the same clan” (2003). The Hmong household is an important aspect of the Hmong family and each member has their own specific jobs. Most often, the bulk of the jobs fall onto the eldest daughter. These duties include taking care of the younger siblings, making meals, and other domestic duties along with being a cultural broker for the family. Kia Lor explains that she was expected to carry a great amount of responsibility as the oldest daughter:

When I entered school, I found out that my mom [. . .] actually knew very little about American culture. I had to learn to navigate these new systems like the education system, the financial system, the English language, and the ability to commute because my mom didn't know how to drive. I had to translate everything for her, I had to go to the grocery store and buy everything. For a lot of my life, I had to be this cultural broker for my mom and the rest of my family. (K. Lor, personal communication, March, 5, 2020).

She continues to discuss how this responsibility made it very difficult for her to leave for college because everything she carried was now put on her younger brothers and sisters. “When I left, I felt so guilty. I felt like I abandoned my family when they needed me. I felt like I was being selfish” (K. Lor, personal communication, March, 5, 2020).

Hmong women often feel guilty about leaving home because of the heavy responsibilities that are placed on them. They are also oftentimes made to feel guilty by their family members. “My mom said to me that I shouldn't go far for college because I'm a girl and because they like to regulate our bodies” (K. Lor, personal communication, March, 5, 2020). Hmong parents might not support their daughters in pursuing higher education because they are afraid that when they return, they will be too old to be married. Dr. P. Vang explains that marriage is important in the Hmong culture because they believe in collectivism, or not having personhood unless they are connected to a clan. Women do not carry on the clan name of and because of this, they are viewed as the property of other lineages (2015). This low view of women has not only lead to the parents not supporting their daughters but also women’s low view of themselves. Not having someone believe in or support them in reaching their goals can lead to feelings of self-doubt and even to a woman experiencing the imposter syndrome.

This gender inequity is caused by not only familial traditions but by cultural pressures as well. Dr. Hang explains that these pressures arise due to the vast differences that separate Hmong and American culture (1997). In the United States, although women have not always been treated as equal to men, the culture has progressed in the last couple of decades. Women still have to work considerably harder than men to get to the same position; however, the scales are beginning to even out and women’s efforts are being recognized and appreciated.

This is not to say that Hmong culture does not appreciate its women, they just have a different place in the culture. Shuling Peng and Catherine Solheim, both professors at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, explain that “The Hmong exhibit unique cultural norms that have been influenced by their historic, geographic, economic, and political contexts” (2015). These norms are unique to Hmong women and are seen by some as barriers but to others they are

motivation. However, the traditional gender roles that the Hmong culture implements have added to the obstacles that Hmong women must overcome in order to break into leadership positions.

“[. . .] daughters are often expected to carry more domestic responsibilities than sons [. . .],” writes Peng and Solheim (2015). This means that while sons are encouraged to go to school and participate in extracurricular activities, daughters are encouraged to stay home and learn how to take care of the household. This can be incredibly damaging to a Hmong woman’s confidence in her abilities and to her opportunity to learn leadership skills. If she is not going to high school and is not involved in extracurricular activities, she is missing many opportunities to develop the skills that a good leader so desperately requires.

These strict gender roles in the Hmong community can lead to Hmong women not having the skills that they need to go out into the world on their own or have the confidence to do so. Romero and Stewart report, “[. . .] the issues Hmong women have faced are completely due to cultural differences,” and that “[. . .] girls who dropped out for domestic reasons won community approval by moving into valued gender roles” (1999). Due to the fact that Hmong culture is collectivist, having the community’s support is oftentimes crucial for decision making. If the community does not support a Hmong woman in her endeavors, such as higher education or becoming a dominant leader, she is more likely to give up these goals to please her community. Additionally, Hmong women are not often thought of as being able to be leaders because Hmong men are pushed towards those aspirations instead. Dr. Pa Der Vang discusses how women’s role in the clan is to make sure men can maintain their leadership roles in society and that men are more valued in the culture because they are able to pass down the family lineage (2015). This too can hurt a Hmong woman’s confidence in her skills. If the men are valued more than women in the culture and are constantly getting communal support to reach their goals while the women

are seen as dispensable and get no communal support, they may begin to question their skills or their place in both the Hmong and American culture.

Discussion

These women are unable to break into leadership positions because of the social, familial, and cultural obstacles they encounter. They are often encouraged to not go to school which cuts off almost any chance they would get to develop crucial leadership skills. If they do stay in school, they are usually faced with language barriers as well as a lack of cultural understanding from their teachers and peers. Hmong women who graduate from high school are often not given the mentorship or communal support needed to proceed on to higher education and stride into leadership positions.

When discussing Hmong women in leadership positions, a controversial issue is whether or not they have a more difficult time breaking into these positions than other ethnicities or genders. There are some who argue that they are equally as equipped as other ethnicities and genders to enter these positions and that programs such as College Possible and The Hmong Women's Circle are aiding them in their endeavors. Zong Xiong, a sophomore at the College of Saint Benedict, states, "College Possible helped me realize that college is serious" (Z. Xiong, personal communication, February 14, 2020) and Nina Vue, a junior at the College of Saint Benedict, confirms, "College Possible helped me with applying to college. Being a first-generation student, my parents don't know how to do that or even speak English" (N. Vue, personal communication, February 11, 2020). This program and others are proving to be helpful for Hmong women whose goal is to gain a higher education; however, not all Hmong women have access or even know about these programs. With widespread communication about these

programs along with more locations and times, these programs would be able to help many more Hmong women than they already are.

Additionally, the Hmong culture is slowly becoming more progressive and more Hmong women are pushing back on the strict gender roles the culture imposes. Vue, Xiong, and K. Lor noted how their parents have supported them through their journey of higher education and named their mothers as being the most supportive. This support from their mothers shows that the Hmong culture is in the process of a big switch. Romero and Stewart comment that many Hmong parents are seeing that education provides security for their daughters and because of this, they are starting to also stress later marriages and smaller families (1999).

Final Conclusion and Recommendation

Although research has shown that there are unique social, cultural, and familial obstacles that make it increasingly difficult for Hmong women to reach their goals of becoming leaders, the gradual change in the Hmong culture is producing hope in the young Hmong women. This slow but steady move towards less strict gender roles and encouraging women will be of greater help to Hmong women seeking to enter leadership positions than any program that could put in place. Hmong culture is collectivist and for a Hmong woman to finally have the support of her community when seeking these positions will be the greatest motivation of all. The reason why this has not happened sooner is because the Hmong culture is extremely worried about these young women preserving their Hmong identity. Kia Lor concludes, “As Hmong women, we’re taught really young to never forget where we came from. I’ve learned that the fact that I’m different is my strength. I’ve learned to understand why I’m even in this country is because of so many sacrifices people have made to get me here” (K. Lor, personal communication, March, 5, 2020). By challenging the social, familial, and cultural obstacles they are faced with, Hmong

women are recognizing and making sure that the sacrifices others have made for them are not going to waste.

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