

Hmong Traditional Marital Roles and the Pursuit of Higher Education
for Married Hmong American Women

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Abstract

The patriarchal traditional Hmong culture has defined expectations for both Hmong men and women. In Laos, education and employment opportunities were restricted to sons who were more valued than daughters. Since the immigration of the Hmong to the United States, education and employment have become accessible to Hmong women. However, traditional Hmong gender roles and values continue to be strong practices impacting Hmong women negatively in regard to their educational pursuits. Young married Hmong women who are expected to fulfill their obligations as new wives and daughters-in-law often delay or discontinue their educational plans.

This researcher found reoccurring themes in literatures regarding the relationship between Hmong women's traditional gender roles and their abilities to obtain higher education. This researcher also interviewed nine married Hmong women informants who were pursuing their education. Reoccurring themes expressed by the informants were compared to the existing literature on Hmong women's gender roles and challenges. These themes focused on marital

challenges, educational impacts, Hmong women in higher education, and changes needed to support and advocate for Hmong women. This researcher concluded that the importance of maintaining Hmong traditional gender roles overshadowed the importance of obtaining an education for Hmong American women.

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Chapter I: Introduction

All societies socialize their children into gender roles which reflect their societal values. Traditionally, the Hmong, an ethnic minority culture from Southeast Asia, have had separate and distinct gender roles for men and women. However, now the strong traditional patriarchal Hmong culture is being transformed in profound ways such as in the changing dynamics of traditional Hmong gender roles (Culhane-Pera, Vawter, Xiong, Babbitt, & Solberg, 2003; Vang 2008). With the assimilation of the Hmong culture into U.S. mainstream culture, Hmong women have begun to transform and redefine their traditional gender roles (Foo, 2002).

Traditional Hmong gender roles have been challenged and redefined especially by Hmong women and the Hmong community in terms of opportunities and resources in education and employment. However, the dynamics of Hmong gender roles in the U.S. have gained little attention and discussion in research studies. In traditional patriarchal Hmong society, women are regarded as a subordinate group (Lee, Jung, Su, Tran, & Bahrassa, 2009; Yang, 2004). For example, in Laos, opportunities seen as leading to a more prosperous life such as being able to attend school daily and getting a job in the city were often restricted or off limits to women. However, as the Hmong began immigrating to the United States in the late 1970s, Hmong women were introduced to unlimited resources and opportunities (Park & Chi, 1999; Foo, 2002).

In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, Hmong refugees from Laos resettled in France, Australia, Canada, Argentina, French Guyana, and the U.S., with the largest influx of over 165,000 Hmong refugees making U.S. their home (Park & Chi, 1999; Greaves, 2002). In 2000, approximately 250,000 Hmong were reported living in the U.S. Currently, the states with the largest Hmong populations are California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, with about 50,000 Hmong in Wisconsin alone (Greaves, 2002).

Statement of the Problem

Hmong traditional cultural practices have collided with United States mainstream culture, leading to misunderstandings and intergenerational gaps (Timm, 1994). Intergenerational gaps have created a constant struggle between the younger generation and older generation in gender role clashes (J. Lee et. al., 2009; S. Lee, 1997). For instance, the younger generation advocates for change and independence while the older generation wishes to preserve traditional ways of Hmong patrilineal clanship, patriarchal household structure, and traditional gender roles (Su, Lee, & Vang, 2005; Park & Chi, 1999; Hendricks, 1986). The Hmong, as an ethnic minority culture, are confronted with gender role changes as they try to maintain a vibrant Hmong culture and identity within the U.S. dominant culture. However, the inevitable social adjustment and cultural adaptation to U.S mainstream culture has revolutionized the ways the Hmong community thinks about gender role and the ways Hmong women view and carry out their gender roles (Vang, 2008).

The patriarchal structure of Hmong households plays a significant role in how gender roles are specified for both men and women (Park & Chi, 1999). As a patrilineal culture, family lineages are traced through the male's ancestry and clan; and, sons will remain a part of the family's clan, expected to carry on the family's name (Lo, 2001; "Hmong Families," 1997). Thus, sons are more valued than daughters as daughters will remain in their father's clan only until they are married; then they become a part of their husband's clan (Park & Chi, 1999; Cerhan, 1990; Culhane-Pera et al., 2003). Traditionally, young women who married moved into their husband's father's family household and these married women were no longer considered their parent's daughters but were now seen as a part of their husband's family (Culhane-Pera et

al., 2003; Long, 2008; Timm, 1994). The son and his wife were expected to live with the family until they had some children of their own and were able to support themselves (Foo, 2002).

Traditional values of Hmong gender practices are often in opposition to modern mainstream U.S. gender values. In traditional households, Hmong men are more authoritative than women as men have more power (Vang, 2008). Hmong men make most of the decisions for the family, resolve family conflicts, perform rituals and ceremonies for the family, and provide economic stability. Within the traditional household, Hmong women are valued for their work in performing domestic chores and caring for children and grandparents (Park & Chi, 1999; Culhane-Pera et al., 2003; Yang, 2004). In addition, needlework and embroidery of traditional clothing are performed by women. However, the traditional work in the field of caring for and harvesting crops is usually performed by both women and men (“Hmong Families,” 1997). Women are also expected to be “good” or “dutiful” *nyabs* by respecting and performing their mother-in-law’s requests (Yang, 2004). This relationship and what it means to be a good or dutiful wife and *nyab* will be discussed in further detail in the literature review.

Unfortunately, with the value and status placed on the male gender role, schooling (a successful and powerful accomplishment) has often been restricted to men (Vang, 2008). Women in Laos were often discouraged or lacked a supportive environment for their educational pursuits (Lee, 1997; DuongTran, Lee, & Khoi, 1996; Timm, 1994). The different perspective of gender roles in the U.S. has paved a road for Hmong women to seek out more opportunities to become more independent and empowered (Park & Chi, 1999; Foo, 2002). This has created some controversy among the older and more traditional Hmong as they see the younger women stepping outside of their gender boundaries.

Many Hmong parents were not able to attend school in Laos as transportation and financial resources were not easily accessible (Vang, 2008; Duffy, Harmon, Ranard, Thao, & Yang, 2004). Thao (1999) reported that about 72% of the older Hmong population has lower than a high school education and more than half have no formal education. Thus, being able to obtain an education was highly valued and seen as a prestigious achievement. Today, many parents do encourage education and are often very strict in regards to their children's academic performance in the U.S. Sons and daughters have both been reported to be equally supported by their parents in their educational pursuits (Lee, 2007). Yet, as many young Hmong Americans strive to meet the demands of schoolwork excellence, they must also fulfill the strongly rooted cultural practices of gender expectations (Culhane-Pera et al., 2003).

A common cultural practice that has gained much attention and conflict in the U.S. is early marriage, usually occurring between the ages of fourteen and eighteen ("Hmong Families," 1997; Timm, 1994; Park & Chi, 1999). Traditional martial roles demand a quick change from adolescent to adult roles with new expectations and obligations. Early marriage increases the chance of early parenthood; and, thus, has become the strongest predictor of Hmong women withdrawing from high school (Lee, 2007). Though early marriage still takes place, it is often discouraged by parents until after high school completion. In addition, Hmong youth have shown a stronger commitment to complete their education as they become more aware of the relationship between education and successful career opportunities (Park & Chi, 1999).

Most Hmong parents in the United States have reported that they value education and place academic achievement high for both their sons and daughters. Though educational opportunities are valued for both genders, higher educational expectations are held for Hmong men. Fulfilling cultural practices and obligations are emphasized more for Hmong women as

gender expectations are stricter for daughters (Lee, 1997; Vang, 2008). Therefore, to be honored and respected, women must fulfill traditional gender roles first before pursuing educational opportunities (Lee et al., 2009; Timm, 1994). Daughters are not allowed as much freedom and leisure time as their brothers (Cerhan, 1990). Hmong girls are expected to perform well in school and, at the same time, fulfill the demanding responsibilities at home.

Young Hmong teens have reported feeling torn between the two worlds of the American culture and Hmong culture because of conflicting expectations (Park & Chi, 1999; Duffy et al., 2004). Consequently, the multiple roles expected of Hmong women are often burdensome and sometimes overwhelming as they search to find equilibrium between their gender and educational expectations, especially if they marry young (“Hmong Families,” 1997). Therefore, the persistent value and practice for Hmong women to maintain their traditional gender roles seems to overpower the value and opportunity in obtaining an education beyond high school.

There needs to be more research regarding the impact of Hmong traditional marital gender roles on Hmong American women and on their educational pursuits. The researcher believes that her research investigations will contribute to a fuller understanding of the struggles and realities faced by Hmong American women in traditional martial roles, especially those who are trying to balance their family values and expectations as well as their individual educational goals. This research is intended to contribute to the existing research on Hmong women, focusing on the challenges of married Hmong women as they combine individual educational goals with family responsibilities.

Purpose of the Study

The overwhelming pressures and expectations regarding gender roles and family expectations, which are performed by Hmong women, have been associated with psychological

and emotional distress (DuongTran et al., 1996; Lee et al., 2009; Su et al., 2005). In addition, early marriage among adolescents or simply performing a role earlier than usual will more likely lead to stress and conflicts surrounding “marital instability, poverty, and the attainment of lower levels of education” (Waite & Moore, 1978, p. 846). Marital obligations as a daughter-in-law (*nyab*) and success in academic achievement as a student compete with one another as both roles are expected to be sought out with commitment and excellence by young married Hmong women.

As previously discussed, being a Hmong woman involves learning to balance multiple demanding roles from family members and extended family relatives with one’s own individual aspirations. Priorities expected for Hmong women are focused on maintaining their traditional gender roles; thus, obtaining an education beyond high school is often not valued for Hmong women, especially if they are married (Timm, 1994). For this reason, married Hmong women often find themselves delaying or completely discontinuing their educational pursuits to fulfill their gender role expectations (Lee, 1997).

In her study, this researcher examined how traditional Hmong gender roles impacted married Hmong women who wished to pursue higher education beyond high school. This research consisted of a literature review of the common experiences and expectations impacting married Hmong American women in traditional Hmong marital gender roles while pursuing higher educations. In addition, the researcher interviewed Hmong married women and then integrated these findings with the literature review. In this integration process, similarities and differences were examined in regards to traditional Hmong women’s roles and educational expectations as cited in the literature and as reported by the Hmong women.

The study addressed the following questions:

1. What are the challenges that Hmong American women face in performing traditional marital roles?
2. In what ways do traditional marital expectations adversely affect educational pursuit among Hmong American women?
3. What are Hmong American women's perceptions and the perceptions they believe the Hmong community has of Hmong American women in higher education (beyond high school)?
4. What changes do Hmong women feel are needed to advocate support for Hmong women in their educational pursuits?

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined for clarity in their use throughout this research to provide a better understanding of their context.

Acculturation: “the process of extensive borrowing of culture when two or more cultures are in contact” (Ember, Ember, & Skoggard, 2005, p. xxv).

Assimilation: “the process of absorbing or taking on the cultural values, attitudes, and behaviors or another cultural group” (Ember et al., 2005, p. xxv).

Clan: “a set of kin whose members believe themselves to be descended from a common ancestor or ancestress” (Ember et al., 2005, p. xxvi).

Culture: “the set of learned behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, values, and ideals that are characteristics of a particular society or population” (Ember et al., 2005, p. xxvi).

Extended family: “consists of two or more generations of male or female kin and their spouses and offspring, occupying a single household under the authority of a household head” (Nanda & Warms, 2009, p. 156).

Gender roles: “expectations regarding the proper behavior, attitudes, and activities of males and females” (Schaefer, 2010, p. 347)

Hmong: “a closely-knit ethnic hill tribe from Laos, [who] originally migrated from China in the eighteenth century and settled in Southeast Asia” (Thao, 1999, p.2).

Hmong Americans: U.S citizens of Hmong ancestry

Nyab: Hmong word for daughter-in-law

Patriarchal: “men have more status and power than women” (Culhane-Pera et al., 2003, p.15).

Methodology

Through reading and analyzing the existing literature, the researcher selected common themes and issues on how Hmong women are redefining their roles in the United States. The researcher believed that similar experiences and struggles would emerge from personally interviewing Hmong women. Likewise, the researcher felt that the obstacles and struggles experienced by Hmong American women might be better understood by allowing the voices of Hmong women speak of their experiences as they discussed their own realities. The researcher interviewed nine Hmong American women ranging from twenty-one to thirty-two years old. Informants were met the following criteria: 1) currently living or have lived with the husband’s family; and 2) currently enrolled in or have completed their post secondary education in a two year community college/technical school or a four year college/university.

Depending on the requests of the informants, the interviews were conducted by one of three means: by phone, email, or in person. Pre-determined questions were asked to help facilitate and provide direction regarding the individual experiences of these Hmong American women. Then, the researcher used experiences shared by informants as references to support the

existing literature or provide different perspectives not yet discussed in the literature regarding the relationship between these women's marital roles and their educational pursuits. In her discussion and analysis, the researcher focused on the following themes surrounding the challenges and lives of Hmong women: Hmong martial challenges and expectations, the impact of gender roles on Hmong women's pursuit of their education, and the perception of Hmong women obtaining higher education.

Additionally, the researcher provided suggestions given by informants for changes needed in order to advocate for and support Hmong women in their endeavors. The researcher anticipates that her findings will help guide educators towards a more comprehensive understanding and awareness of the multiple roles impacting Hmong American women, making educators better prepared to work effectively with Hmong American students that may be facing gender expectations different from their non-Hmong peers.

Chapter II: Literature Review

The cultural practices of Hmong American families, an ethnic minority group who immigrated to the United States in the late 1970s, have often been misunderstood. One of the most apparent differences between Hmong cultural values and present day mainstream U.S. cultural values is the practice and socialization of gender roles and expectations (Culhane-Pera et al., 2003; Lee et al., 2009). Hmong traditional gender roles have been challenged and reexamined by both Hmong men and women as educational opportunities have brought about a better understanding of gender roles and a striving for gender equality (Foo, 2002; Yang, 2004).

Gender roles and expectations for Hmong men and women are beginning to be transformed. Opportunities that were limited for women such as in education and employment are now being especially sought out by Hmong women (Duffy et al., 2004). Thus, Hmong women are stepping out of their gender boundaries into roles that were once only seen as men roles. This new relationship of accepting more non-traditional gender roles and expectations for women have conflicted with traditional cultural values and practices (Long, 2008; Lee, 2007; Foo, 2002).

To give the reader a better understanding of the effects of Hmong gender practices on women obtaining higher education, this researcher will discuss the framework of gender relations within the organization of traditional Hmong family households. The importance and meaning of a "good" daughter-in-law and wife will also be clarified, and the connection will be made between the relationships of education to gender values. Lastly, the stigmas associated with Hmong women pursuing higher education will also be explored.

The Hmong Household

The patriarchal Hmong household has been traditionally structured through extended family members: parents, grandparents, unmarried sons and daughters, married sons and their wives, and the grandchildren living together (Greaves, 2002; “Hmong Families,” 1997; Park & Chi, 1999; Culhane-Pera et al., 2003). Family is most important and is valued as a collective unit, emphasized through working closely with one another and focusing less on the individual self (Hendricks, 1986; Tatman, 2004; Duffy et al., 2004). Men are looked upon for guidance and wisdom as men are more highly respected and valued than women. Therefore, fathers are seen as the heads of the households with authority to make the major decisions for the family (Vang, 2008; Timm, 1994).

Nevertheless, mothers are also highly respected and have great influence. By sharing their perspectives, wives have power to influence the decisions of their husbands. Positive relationships between mother-in-laws and their daughter-in-laws are highly valued and respected. The daughter-in-law’s relationship with her husband's family is seen primarily as one to help the mother-in-law with domestic household chores. In the *nyab*'s unique relationship to her husband’s family, the mother-in-law is valued as the head of the household (Long, 2008; Timm, 1994).

The household is where Hmong cultural values are rooted and where traditional expectations and responsibilities for both genders are learned and practiced. Thus, the cultural roles and responsibilities of Hmong men and women are taught and exemplified early in the home (Lo, 2001). The symbolism and practice of Hmong gender roles begins with a traditional practice at birth known as “The Burial of the Placenta.” In villages, the placenta of a boy is buried by the house’s central post to symbolize support for the family lineage once he has matured

and married. However, the placenta of a girl is buried underneath her parents' bed to symbolize reproduction and domestic chores as she learns to become a daughter, daughter-in-law, and wife ("Hmong Families," 1997). The early symbolic meaning of where the male or female placenta is buried depicts the roles expected of Hmong men and Hmong women.

Clan leaders and elders continue to have a strong influence on Hmong social values and practices. Many parents and elders maintain strict men's and women's roles to preserve the continuation and practice of Hmong cultural values (Culhane-Pera et al., 2003; Thao, 1999). The older generations now fear that the Hmong culture will be forgotten and lost as the younger generations become acculturated into mainstream U.S. culture, changing their ideas of gender roles and values (Long, 2008; Timm, 1994). As such, older Hmong believe that the traditional extended patriarchal family household will become less valued by the younger generation, changing the composition of Hmong family households and gender expectations. As women's roles become less visible in the home, families must renegotiate gender roles. Thus, the younger generations see themselves at a crossroads, receiving conflicting messages and values from both mainstream U.S. culture and their parents' traditional cultural viewpoints (Park & Chi, 1999).

The Good *Nyab* and Wife

As mentioned earlier, a woman's role is defined mainly in terms of the domestic household chores of cooking, cleaning, and washing the dishes. The woman is also responsible for taking care of all the children and other family members. Additionally, in Laotian Hmong villages, the woman's role included the chores of feeding the animals, farming in the garden, and sewing traditional clothing ("Hmong Families," 1997; Culhane-Pera et al., 2003; Long, 2008). A good *nyab* or wife was expected to fulfill all expectations and perform any other routine duties as needed without being asked (Lo, 2001; Yang, 2004).

Even today, *nyabs* have no power and are open to being judged and criticized by their husband's family and elders (Culhane-Pera et al., 2003; Long, 2008). A *nyab* proves her loyalty and respect for the family by being visible and helpful around the house and during family ceremonies. A good *nyab* will bring honor to the family by being diligent in her work and doing more than is expected of her (Yang, 2004). A good *nyab* or wife does not question her role or what is being asked of her but instead she quietly does what is asked even though she may be overburdened to the point of exhaustion (Lo, 2001).

The *nyab*'s first responsibility is to fulfill her mother-in-law's requests. In traditional martial roles, it is expected that the new *nyab* will have a respectful relationship with her mother-in-law (Timm, 1994). The *nyab* is expected to wake up before the mother-in-law, prepare each meal for the family, clean and wash the dishes, take care of any children in the home, attend ceremonial gatherings, and perform any other chores around the house. The *nyab* brings honor to the family by being a hard worker and being loyal to the family ("Hmong Families," 1997; Long, 2008).

The wife's second responsibility is to her husband. A traditional wife is submissive to her husband and is expected to take care of her husband's needs before her own. By fulfilling his needs before her own, she will be perceived as a committed and hard working wife. Therefore, a good wife remains obedient and quiet by obeying and following her husband's requests without questioning or objectifying his authority. A good wife stays home and does not go out to socialize without her husband present as she may be perceived and judged as having an affair. A wife's place is now with her husband and she has little say in decision-making (Foo, 2002; Yang, 2004).

Gender Roles and Educational Values

Intergenerational family conflict arises and is perpetuated by the many misunderstandings concerning the different expectations that young Hmong Americans have for their parents and that the immigrant parents have for their children (Timm, 1994; Lee et al., 2009). The Hmong culture teaches children to be obedient, to always do what one is asked, to be submissive (which means never questioning or talking back to parents), and to be respectful to all elders (Lee, 1997; Thao, 1999; Yang, 2004). In contrast, people in mainstream U.S. culture teach their children to be assertive, to speak up and share their perspectives and thoughts, and to stand up for what they believe in.

Thus, Hmong youth growing up in traditional Hmong households while being exposed to mainstream cultural values often find themselves at odds with their parents' values (DuongTran et al., 1996). This intergenerational gap creates a divide between the generations based on different values and beliefs concerning their personal interests, marriage values, and perceptions of their own gender roles (Timm, 1994; Thao, 1999). Likewise, the gender values and expectations in Hmong culture conflict with mainstream values and ideas about gender equality and the full participation and involvement of women in all aspects of U.S. culture (Yang, 2004).

The strong focus on prescribed gender roles in Hmong culture connects directly with the early practice of marriage. Sometimes women marry as early as fourteen years old ("Hmong Families," 1997; Timm, 1994; Park & Chi, 1999). Consequently, marriage is one of the most common reasons why many Hmong American women adolescents drop out of school. Studies have reported that early marriage, often also resulting in early parenthood, is the highest contributor to educational delay for women (Waite & Moore, 1978; Lee, 1997). Early marriage, with its expectations of meeting the new responsibilities and obligations as a daughter-in-law,

does not allow time or energy for Hmong American adolescent women to pursue educational opportunities.

Fortunately, more and more Hmong families are encouraging and supporting high school completion before marriage (Long, 2008). In addition, parents often lecture their children about the importance of education. Nonetheless, many Hmong adolescents are still marrying at early ages (Yang, 2004). This marriage practice suggests then that early marriage and motherhood in the Hmong culture is still highly valued (Lee, 1997). Building family relationships and continuing the family clan takes priority over fulfilling personal and professional aspirations. Education is encouraged as long as it does not interfere with family responsibilities (Cerhan, 1990).

Maintaining traditional gender roles remains a higher priority for women than men, resulting in educational and personal aspirations often being delayed while women fulfill their gender roles within the family household (Lee et al., 2009). It becomes a two world reality struggle for Hmong American women because they must learn to balance their traditional martial roles with educational commitment. Family expectations and responsibilities compete with educational commitment as both may be equally valued but each requires much time and effort (Waite & Moore, 1978; Lee, 1997).

Historically, education was not readily accessible to the Hmong. If opportunities for education did arise, they were only extended to boys in the family. Such opportunities were often not valued or encouraged for girls as their roles were focused on duties and responsibilities in the home (Timm, 1994; Vang, 2008). However, today many Hmong parents in the U.S. value the importance of education for both their sons and daughters even though educational obtainment is

still often postponed at a higher rate for women than men due to women's obligations expected in the home (Lee, 1997; DuongTran et al., 1996).

Nevertheless, Hmong adolescent women who have dropped out of high school are also returning, completing high school and continuing their post secondary education (Lee, 1997; Long, 2008). However, even as educational opportunities become more widely accepted for Hmong women in the U.S., strict traditional Hmong gender roles are still emphasized by Hmong parents and continue to play a key role in Hmong women's educational attainment (Lee et al., 2009).

Hmong Women and Education

Education is a way to free the mind to explore many opportunities and possibilities. Education becomes a resource that opens doors and introduce possibilities that perhaps would be otherwise closed and soon forgotten because of family responsibilities. However, in Laos, those that were privileged (either from a wealthy family or simply being a son) were more likely to receive an education; and the less unfortunate were defined by the responsibilities of their traditional gender roles (Foo, 2002; Yang, 2004).

As Hmong women commit to and strive for education, they must still learn to carry themselves dutifully as good Hmong women. Traditional gender practices and expectations for Hmong women (early marriage, domestic household chores, and family commitment) are still highly valued by the older generations (Lee et al., 2009). However, with more and more young Hmong women pursuing educations, traditional Hmong gender roles are now being questioned and challenged by women who have gained a greater sense of personal self-worth and independence through their education (Yang, 2004; Lee et al., 2009).

Thus, education has become a powerful resource for women in gaining respect and honor. Education has provided an outlet for many Hmong American women to challenge and step outside of their defined gender roles and, in so doing, gaining a stronger sense of their independence and self-identity (Culhane-Pera et al., 2003; Lee, 1997). Higher education has empowered many Hmong American women to understand their rights and work towards fulfilling their full potential as women in the Hmong community. Many Hmong American women perceive education attainment as a way to bring equality to gender roles within Hmong families. Consequently, many Hmong American women pursuing higher education find themselves challenging and breaking away from male patriarchal rules and traditional Hmong gender roles (Lee, 1997; Yang, 2004).

Even though Hmong men appear to value education less for Hmong women than for themselves, many Hmong women, young and old, highly support and encourage education for Hmong women. Researchers suggest that Hmong American men feel threatened by educated Hmong women because these women tend to be more assertive and sometimes defiant of traditional women's roles. Both assertiveness and defiance are qualities not valued for women in the patriarchal Hmong culture as these qualities are perceived to be rude and unmannered. Furthermore, it is suspected that Hmong men prefer younger wives for their passivity and their tendency to be more submissive (Lee, 1997). With Hmong women redefining their roles, conflict and stress also arise between men and women having to renegotiate and reexamine their responsibilities, roles, and new relationships in the home (Culhane-Pera et al., 2003; Long, 2008).

Chapter III: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of Hmong traditional marital roles on Hmong American women in the United States who wish to pursue higher education.

Traditional Hmong gender roles have been challenged by assimilation of the Hmong in America (Yang, 2004). These challenges hold especially true for Hmong women who are trying to combine their traditional role expectations within the household with opportunities in education and employment. For these women, the demands from both traditional marital roles and the pursuit of educational careers is often burdensome and maybe overwhelming as both sets of responsibilities are expected to be met with excellence (Lee, 2007).

Further research is needed in the area of how traditional marital gender roles impact the educational pursuits of Hmong American women. Understanding the changing dynamics of Hmong gender roles in America may help bridge intergenerational conflicts between the younger and older generations. By gaining a comprehensive and empathetic understanding of Hmong gender roles, the Hmong community will be able to create opportunities for building supportive and conducive environments for Hmong women who choose to complete their educational careers while maintaining their Hmong traditional gender roles.

Research Design

The researcher addressed the following questions which focused on building a stronger awareness of the realities experienced by Hmong American women in Hmong traditional marital roles while obtaining higher education: 1) What are the challenges that Hmong American women face in performing traditional martial roles? 2) In what ways do traditional marital expectations adversely affect educational pursuit among Hmong American women? and 3) What are Hmong American women's perceptions and the perceptions they believe the Hmong community has of

Hmong American women in higher education (beyond high school)? As part of her analysis, this researcher also recommended changes needed to support Hmong American women and their dreams by addressing the fourth question in the study: What changes do Hmong American women feel are needed to advocate support for Hmong women in their educational pursuits?

First, the researcher surveyed the literature on Hmong family life and women's roles in traditional Hmong households. Then, the researcher contacted Hmong women acquaintances describing the purpose of the research and requesting their participation. She also asked them for referrals of Hmong women who might wish to be interviewed. The researcher chose to conduct open-ended interviews to allow Hmong women to share their experiences and voice their realities as *nyabs* in traditional Hmong marital roles while pursuing higher education.

The researcher believed that interviews would encourage a more personal relationship between the informant and the researcher, allowing the informants to express themselves in ways they believed were important in understanding their life experiences as Hmong women. To capture and appreciate the full essence of the informant's life experiences, the researcher's task required the ability to actively listen and be empathic, to genuinely be present and aware, and to effectively expand and clarify the informant's responses. The researcher especially paid attention to the tone of voice, non-verbal cues, and congruence in responses throughout the interview, and areas of resistance or hesitation from informants. Such observations were able to add to a fuller understanding of the informants.

Participants

There were a total of nine Hmong American women informants who agreed to take part in this study, ranging from twenty-one to thirty-two years old. The number of years that the informants had been married ranged from about a year to about fifteen years. Five of the

informants were known acquaintances of the researcher. The remaining four informants were referred to the researcher through friends and family. Informants met the following criteria: 1) currently living or had lived with the husband's family; and 2) currently enrolled in or had completed their post secondary education in a two year community college/technical school or a four year college/university.

Instrumentation

The interviews were conducted through three different approaches: phone interviews (4 informants), emails (3 informants), and in person (2 informants). There were four main questions asked of all informants: 1) Describe your experiences and challenges in living or having lived with your husband's family and fulfilling traditional Hmong women's roles; 2) Describe how you see Hmong traditional marital roles impacting your educational goals; 3) What are your personal perceptions and the perceptions you believe the Hmong community has in regards to Hmong women wanting to attain higher education? and 4) What changes, if any, do you believe need to be addressed to support Hmong American women in traditional Hmong marital roles? (see Appendix 1).

These four questions were asked of each of the informants to gain a fuller understanding of their perspectives and experiences in regards to the four research questions. The researcher also asked some follow up questions for clarification and to allow informants to expand on their experiences. Follow up questions varied depending on the experiences of each woman.

Data Collection

Before the interviews were conducted, informed consent was obtained from all informants (see Appendix 2). The researcher explained the nature of confidentiality and how the data would be kept anonymous, the risks and benefits involved, and informants' rights to

withdraw any time during the interview. The researcher shared the purpose of the study, expressed that it would be the informant's decision to share any information she chose, and invited her to fully express her life and experiences as a married Hmong American woman in pursuing her educational goals. To each informant, the researcher indicated her willingness to answer any questions about the interview process and research.

In addition, to accurately represent the voices of the women, permission was asked to take brief notes during the "in person interviews" and the "over the phone interviews." After a given interview session had ended, the researcher, by herself, then reflected back on the session to highlight and note the many detailed experiences expressed by the informant. The interviews conducted through email allowed the researcher to reflect on the exact words of the experiences expressed by the informants. After these email interviews, the researcher then corresponded again with the informants with follow up questions for further clarification.

Interviews focused on the four open-ended questions discussed above. Additional questions were asked of each individual, depending on personal situations and struggles. The researcher asked these questions to gain a deeper perspective and clarification of what the informants viewed as issues they faced in their educational careers while balancing their family obligations. These additional questions also provided the opportunity for the women to expand and self-reflect on their individual experiences and challenges with Hmong traditional family values and their individual education goals.

Data Analysis

The personal experiences expressed by each informant were analyzed to examine commonalities and reoccurring themes. The commonalities and reoccurring themes of experiences, challenges, and perspectives were then compared and contrasted with the data

gathered from the literature review. The researcher used direct quotes from informants to represent their experiences. To protect the informants' privacy and to respect and honor the women's personal stories, pseudonyms were given to all informants.

Throughout this research project, the researcher was aware of her bias as a Hmong woman. She realized that her own perspectives and experiences with Hmong gender roles might influence certain conclusions and summarizations. To maintain accuracy and congruency with the informants' experiences, it is important for the researcher, in order to gain insights and awareness, to be aware that her values may be in conflict with informants' personal experiences. The researcher also acknowledged that misinterpretations might have possibly occurred despite the researcher's effort to best understand each informant's personal experiences. The researcher concluded this study by formulating the major factors faced by these young women in balancing marital gender roles and educational pursuits. As a researcher, she also advocated strategies for building supportive networks within the Hmong community to proactively support Hmong women in their personal and professional endeavors.

Limitations and Weakness

The limitations and weaknesses of this study included 1) the lack of research available on traditional Hmong marital roles and how these roles have impacted Hmong American women in higher education; 2) the small number of Hmong women interviewed; 3) the level of relationship between the informants and the researcher; 4) the inconsistency of the three different methods used to conduct the interview; and 4) the limited interview sessions held with each woman.

Since only a total of nine Hmong American women were interviewed, it would be unethical to generalize these women's individual gender experiences and expectations as a whole to the lives of U.S. Hmong women in traditional Hmong family households. As within any

family and culture, family values and practices differ from one household to the next. Thus, some Hmong households may practice traditional values more strictly than other households. How traditional a given Hmong household is structured affects how strict marital gender roles are in regards to Hmong women.

In addition, five of the informants already had an existing relationship with the researcher. Because of these pre-existing relationships, the researcher felt that this familiarity would result in a higher level of ease, comfort, and trust, allowing informants to more openly share their experiences. The researcher met the remaining four informants in the initial interview process which left little opportunity for building rapport and a sense of connection. This lack of rapport between the informant and researcher could have affected the informants' level of trust (either positively or negatively) in being able to openly share their experiences and challenges.

Nevertheless, the researcher also considered that being a Hmong American woman herself, informants would have already felt a sense of connection and relationship of comfortability and formality. The sensitivity of the relationship between the researcher and the informant was an important consideration in how and what experiences were shared. Feeling vulnerable may have led informants to not disclose certain information because informants may have perceived a sense of judgment or criticism about their roles as *nyabs* and wives from the researcher.

Another weakness that may have also affected the informants' responses was that the interview process was conducted through one of three different approaches: phone interviews, emails, and in person. Depending on the informant's level of comfort with the given style of communication, a certain approach may have been more conducive than the others and a better match in allowing the informant to express herself. For instance, it may have been easier for

informants to more fully communicate and express themselves in person or over the phone than by email. The three different types of communication may have also created inconsistency in how the experiences might have otherwise been expressed and shared. Therefore, the informant's responses may have been influenced by the type of communication used to conduct the interview.

Lastly, the researcher conducted each interview in one session lasting from one hour to an hour and a half. Interviews over email were followed up by one or two email responses for clarification and expansion of experiences. The researcher recommends more than one interview session with informants over a period of time to authentically understand their experiences and realities. To strengthen the relationship and trust between the informant and researcher, the researcher recommends interviews to be conducted in person to respect and honor the nature of informants' personal and sensitive experiences. Additional follow up sessions might have also provided the researcher with a deeper understanding of the women's experiences, challenges, and perspectives as Hmong American women in traditional marital gender roles pursuing their educational careers.

Chapter IV: Findings

Hmong traditional gender roles impact the lives of Hmong women in setting boundaries and defining limits of opportunities. For a Hmong woman to gain respect and honor in the family, she must prove herself to be a good daughter, wife, and *nyab* by committing herself to traditional gender roles in the home (Yang, 2004). The value placed on family obligations and responsibilities were more important than obtaining an education. The researcher was interested in understanding the realities and experiences of Hmong American women in traditional marital gender roles while pursuing higher education. To understand the experiences and realities of Hmong women, the researcher interviewed nine Hmong women (Table 1) focusing on expectations of marital gender roles for Hmong women, the relationship between marital gender roles and educational attainment, Hmong women in higher education, and changes needed to support Hmong women in traditional marital roles while obtaining their education.

Marital Expectations of Hmong American Women

The Hmong culture follows a patrilineal model in which men are highly valued and hold positions of power; whereas, women are belittled and expected to remain submissive (Lee, 1997). In the patrilineal family structure, the bride and her husband will traditionally live with his family. The *nyab* is married into the family and is expected to carry herself respectfully and modestly to bring honor and pride to the family. The *nyab* fulfills these expectations by performing traditional marital gender roles such as cooking and cleaning for the family, attending family (in-laws) ceremonies and gatherings, and caring for any children in the home (Park & Chi, 1999; Culhane-Pera et al., 2003; Yang, 2004). In a conversation the researcher had with Yeng Xiong (25 years old), Yeng described her challenges in performing traditional marital roles:

I think one of the biggest challenges was trying to live up the “traditional *nyab*” expectations: waking up early at 8 a.m. to cook and serve food for the family, then cleaning and washing the dishes afterwards, keeping the house clean, serving drinks and making food for guests who visited, and always being on top of things when there were family gathering such as Thanksgiving, New Years, birthday parties (personal interview, February 16, 2010).

Table 1

*Background Information of Informants**

Informant	Age	Education	Years of Marriage	Years Living with in-laws	Current Living Arrangement	Method of Interview
Nou Lee	21	Community College	4	2	Moved out	Person
May Her	21	University	1	1	Living with in-laws	Email
Lu Kong	23	University	6	6	Living with in-laws	Phone
See Chang	23	University	5	1	Moved out	Phone
Houa Lor	24	University	6	6	Living with in-laws	Email
Pang Moua	25	University	Not Applicable	Not Applicable	Moved out	Email
Yeng Xiong	25	University	7	7	Living with in-laws	Phone
Yer Vang	29	State University	8	6	Moved out	Person
Sheng Yang	32	Technical School	15	7	Moved out	Phone

**The names given here and used throughout the text are all pseudonyms given to these women to protect their privacy and identity.*

The responsibilities and roles defined for a dutiful woman are learned at a young age from her natal mother (Lo, 2001; Yang, 2004). Girls are taught and told to practice women’s roles by observing their mothers and aunts’ roles during family ceremonies and celebrations. Mothers will usually request the assistance of their daughters as she prepares meals for the family and cleans the house. Through this, young girls learn their gender expectations for the

future when they become *nyabs* and wives. May Her (21 years old) discussed how her roles in her parents' home continued to play out in her husband's home:

I, as a Hmong woman, still know my role and manners. I tie this back to when I was still living with my parents. I had a ton of responsibilities. I had to prepare everything from cleaning and cooking to serving and washing. I did it all. I still do the same roles [now] as when I lived with my parents (personal interview, February 25, 2010).

However, the demands of fulfilling women's roles are perceived as being more lenient in her own natal home than in her husband's home. Mothers and fathers-in-law dislike telling their *nyabs* the chores and tasks that need to be completed. It is expected that *nyabs* should have learned and will understand their responsibilities as taught to them by their natal mothers (Lo, 2001). Nou Lee (21 years old) shared the difference between her own mother and mother-in-law's households in what was expected of her:

I was freer in my mother's home and was not expected to cook for my entire family. In my mother-in-law's home, I had to do things the way she liked and wanted things done which was always a learning process. She does not tell me how she wants things done; I have to learn it on my own (personal interview, June 22, 2009).

Though Hmong women's roles, compared to men's roles, are stricter in their natal homes, women's personal freedom seems to be even more suppressed when they marry and go to live in the households of their mothers-in-law. In an interview with Sheng Yang (32 years old), she also commented that she was freer in her natal mother's home as she had the choice to perform chores without being as harshly judged or negatively perceived (personal interview, June 25, 2009). Thus, the *nyab* must learn how to adjust and accept a new life style.

The idea of being "good" *nyabs* and wives were also occurring themes. The status of a good *nyab* and wife were often associated with the roles expected of a traditional *nyab* and wife. The *nyab* must show devotion, selflessness, and commitment to the family if she wants to be viewed favorably and honorably ("Hmong Families," 1997; Yang, 2004). Yer Vang (29 years

old) explained the expectations taught to her by her mother that were emphasized again by her in-laws of what she needed to be and do in order to be respected:

My mother always told me how I should be and what I needed to do as a good *nyab* so that my husband's family will like me. My mother always said it was important to do things so others [the husband and his family] will be able to honor and respect you. Living with my in-laws, I was supposed to be the smart *nyab* in doing anything they wanted me to do. I was not supposed to question or be lazy in chores. They expected me to take care of everything. But no matter how hard I worked in the home, I was never appreciated or praised. I felt that no matter how much I give and do, it was never enough (personal interview, February 17, 2010).

In Yer Vang's discussion, there appears to be a lack of appreciation for her work and contributions to the family household even though there continue to be endless expectations for *nyabs*. The pressures and multiple expectations for young married Hmong women are burdensome and overwhelming, often leading to psychological and emotional distress (DuongTran et al., 1996; Lee et al., 2009; Su et al., 2005). If the *nyab* does not perform chores the way her mother-in-law prefers them, she may be perceived as inadequate as she does not understand or know how to perform her duties as a *nyab* (Yang, 2004). *Nyabs* must continuously learn and meet the demands of the in-laws, especially in satisfying the mother-in-law while maintaining her identity as a wife, mother, and student ("Hmong Families," 1997). Houa Lor (24 years old) illustrated by giving an account of a particular day when she felt worn out and exhausted by the end of the night:

I woke up this one day and started to clean and cook before the family woke up. After they all ate, I cleaned up, and then took some siblings to school, picked them up and dropped each one at their activities. Then towards the evening, I cooked again, didn't get to eat and went to pick up the siblings from activities, and then dropped the other siblings off at work, and then at night picked them up from work. I went straight to my bed, skipped dinner, and sat on the ground with the fan in my face. I felt as if my heart was beating so fast, I could hardly breathe and I swear I was going to die (personal interview, February 20, 2010).

Aside from cooking and cleaning, additional chores are also expected of the *nyab* such as running errands or paying house bills for the family. Houa Lor explained that additional chores were not only expected of her with her husband's family, but also with her husband's extended family.

[I] helped outside cousins of theirs [husband's extended family members] and friends of theirs by filling out paper work and sorting out each one's mail. My days got longer as they solicited me around. I barely slept. There are numerous traditional parties I have to attend on weekends and that got worst year by year. More and more is expected, and there is so little I can bear with any longer (personal interview, February 20, 2010).

Houa Lor's experiences illustrate the numerous chores and multiple roles expected of her as a *nyab* in the family. She added that as a full-time *nyab*, wife, mother, and student, help was never offered in the home. *Nyabs* must learn to adjust to multiple demanding and overwhelming roles while completing each task competently and respectfully. *Nyabs* have few rights as they were married into the family; and their relationships are expected first to their mother-in-law, and, then to their husbands' requests (Yang, 2004). All informants generally reported similar experiences in feeling the need and pressure to fulfill the high expectations of a traditional *nyab*. The value and respect for a *nyab* seems to be measured in her commitment, work, and contribution to the home and family.

Marital Expectations and Educational Pursuit

Balancing gender roles and education goals are two demanding responsibilities that require both time and excellence. Daughters have been traditionally taught to remain obedient and submissive in the home. However, sons are often given more freedom and are encouraged to become strong, intelligent, and independent people. Therefore, the traditional value placed on men has led families to invest and provide more for sons in attaining educational and employment opportunities. Educational pursuit for women has traditionally been viewed as

unimportant, especially for married Hmong women as their roles were expected to be centered on household responsibilities (Lee, 1997; Yang, 2004).

Hmong women's roles are strongly connected to family values as childbearing ensures that the family clan will continue. These expectations are bounded for women (Yang, 2004). For example, Houa Lor explained the disapproval from her mother-in-law in wanting to pursue her education and the strong role her mother-in-law defined and confronted her with:

My mother-in-law did not approve of me going back to school. These are her exact words, "You cannot go to school because you are a married woman with children and more children to come. You have to be a daughter-in-law and take care of us all as you are supposed to." I really didn't understand the "As you are supposed to" meant. Is there really a rule that I was supposed to know ahead of time? It hurts even remembering these words (personal interview, February 20, 2010).

The value of maintaining gender roles surpasses the importance of obtaining an education. If educational aspirations are to be pursued, gender roles must also still continue to be a priority and important for Hmong women. May Her shared the gender expectations continuously held for her as she continued with her studies:

I, as a wife/nyab, feel like being married has a whole lot of impact because I have to study on my own with no help from the family. Even if I am dead tired from school and work or studying, I still have to take care of the house and meals. Even if I'm tired, I always find the strength to do it. It's not fair because none of the guys do anything in the house and I feel like as a family we should all pitch in and do a little. The whole day spent at home can be more tiring than a day studying at school (personal interview, February 25, 2010).

As Hmong women choose to obtain an education, families need to shift and balance roles but such role flexibility is often uncomfortable and difficult to achieve. Although educational attainment is valued for Hmong men and women, as indicated in the above interviews, educational commitment must not interrupt family obligations and expectations (Cerhan, 1990). Domestic household chores and family commitments remain women's primary responsibilities

as such work illustrates that these *nyabs* honor and respect the family (Yang, 2004). See Chang (23 years old) explained her in-laws' position regarding her educational career:

My in-laws would often criticize me and talk about me quitting school as the best option since I now had my first baby. They saw that if I quit school, I will have more time to perform my duties as a wife and mother and fulfill those expectations adequately and obediently. It was hard, because my husband's family would talk negatively about me and judge me a lot about not being a good wife (personal interview, June 20, 2009).

Adhering to these traditional values while attempting to continue and complete educational goals creates constant conflict and tension between household members and the young married women. Hmong women are expected to fulfill the needs of the family. Women who do not meet the expectations of a *nyab* and wife are stigmatized and negatively viewed as not loyal ("Hmong Families," 1997). As previously mentioned, education for men has been more supported as education provided wisdom and power. Sheng Yang who was attending school with her husband, described the different expectations for her and her husband:

There was a lot of pressure and comments from my mother-in-law for me to quit school. She urged that it was better if I just found a job to support my family and take care of things at home. My husband was always supported and encouraged to finish his schooling. With such high pressure, it is hard to really believe in my education. I also began to see that I could possibly put it [education] on hold because I can always go to school later on (personal interview, June 25, 2009).

As Sheng Yang's narrative illustrates, being a good *nyab* who is taking care of the family surpasses the importance of obtaining an education. Unfortunately, educational opportunities are more limited and restricted for daughter-in-laws than for sons or natal daughters. Though the *nyab* is married and is now seen as a member of her husband's clan, she is still not fully considered as one of the family's children (Long, 2008; Timm, 1994). Parents are much more likely to support education for the young man and his siblings than his wife (the *nyab*). Lu Kong (23 years old) stated that "though my husband supported my educational goals, my husband's

relatives saw little importance and need of it for me. I was not their child” (personal interview, June 23, 2009).

As Hmong women become *nyabs* and wives, they are more pressured to fulfill their primary traditional gender roles in the home, especially making sure the families’ needs are met.

As a *nyab*, Houa Lor explained her perception of families’ values in obtaining an education:

From my experience, I see that the Hmong culture [family] who still practice the old tradition only have high hopes for their own daughters to gain knowledge and attain a higher education. As for the daughter-in-laws, attaining a higher education is not an option because daughter-in-laws have a different role to take upon when they get married. (personal interview, February 20, 2010).

Additionally, despite the multiple roles expected of Hmong women, they, themselves, must also contribute financially to the family. For them, working and having an income are more valued than pursuing an education. What most families fail to recognize is that education is often associated with obtaining a better well paying career and providing a comfortable lifestyle. Yer Vang described the conflict she perceived with her in-laws and other older generation adults when trying to obtain an education:

I believe my in-laws do value education and so do a lot of parents, but the problem is that the older generation, who did not go to school, does not fully understand the time commitment and work expected in obtaining a degree. They [in-laws] want you to go to school and think that’s all you need to do and do not need to spend time at home studying (personal interview, February 17, 2010).

It seems that parents do value education but are not fully aware of the time commitment or effort required. Though parents agree and believe that education is able to provide more opportunities, parents do not fully recognize or understand the process and work in schooling as many of the older generation lacked an opportunity to receive an education themselves (Vang, 2008; Thao, 1999). Yer Vang continued by explaining the conflicting relationships and messages received from her in-laws about her education:

At first, my in-laws were very supportive of me going back to school. When I came home from school, they would tell me I didn't need to cook or wash the dishes and for me to concentrate on my homework. I was very glad but later found out that they thought of me to be lazy and that I never did anything around the house. It hurt me a lot to hear my in-laws say this about me (personal interview, February 17, 2010).

Lu Kong also shared her experience of feeling conflicted with her in-laws in regards to her house chores and school work:

Sometimes they would say that I did not need to wash the dishes or cook because they knew I had homework. Even though they said it was "okay," I still felt bad and knew that if I did not do it, I would be a "bad" daughter-in-law (personal interview, June 23, 2009).

Lu Kong and Yer Vang's experiences illustrate that in-laws (and parents) for the most part do support and believe it is great to obtain an education. However, the messages are conflicting as parents may verbalize their support but are frustrated with their *nyab*'s wish to continue with school. For their approval, the *nyab* must still prove herself a hard worker and loyal by performing domestic household chores (Lo, 2009).

However, not all traditional Hmong households expect *nyabs* to perform demanding multiple roles and responsibilities while pursuing their educations. Yeng Xiong reported that in her husband's household, she did not feel either the high pressure or the burden, as experienced by the other informants, in meeting gender expectations while pursuing her education. Yeng Xiong described the support from her mother-in-law:

My mother-in-law was very supportive of me. She cooked for us [the family] and helped watch my daughter when I wasn't at home until I graduated. My in-laws and husband didn't really expect me to cook or clean. I loved it. My mother-in-law understood well because she witnessed her cousin going to school and having a lot of homework. When I had a lot of homework or an exam to study for, I wouldn't even help clean the table or do the dishes and they understood I had homework and studies to do. They were really supportive of me throughout my entire education (personal interview, February 16, 2010).

All informants stated that their husbands supported them in their educational pursuits. However, the challenges and conflicts in trying to balance marital roles with obtaining an education largely influence the *nyab*'s relationship with her in-laws. The in-laws are perceived to hold more traditional gender values and practices that are projected onto their children to teach and maintain the practices and cultures of the Hmong. However, as the younger generation acculturates into mainstream U.S., traditional gender values become less important.

Hmong Women in Education

Higher education is seen as a prestigious and honorable accomplishment in the Hmong community. Educational opportunities in the U.S. have brought a sense of self-determination, independence, and achievement for women but such opportunities have also challenged the Hmong patriarchal culture (S. Lee, 1997; J. Lee et al., 2009; Yang, 2004). Hmong women pursuing higher education have also received more respect and honor in the Hmong community. Sheng Yang shared her perspectives of Hmong women obtaining higher education. She sees educated Hmong women as being more independent and stronger people. She stated that as a Hmong woman, it was important to obtain an education, to live a successful life, and excel in America:

I see so much young Hmong women my age married and struggling against the marriage roles and confinements. I believe that education is able to provide a different path and possibility for our young Hmong women. Having an education as a woman, you will be more respected and valued. I think it is able to change lives (personal interview, June 25, 2009).

Yer Vang also discussed the value and importance of education for herself as a woman:

I value and understand the importance of an education so much more now. Women have more respect and credibility. We need to understand that we live in America now with educational opportunities and to take advantage of it. Education is important to me because it is able to increase my career opportunities and income (personal interview, February 17, 2010).

Sheng Yang described the perception she believes the Hmong community has regarding Hmong women in education:

I believe that the Hmong community appreciates the Hmong women going out and taking the opportunities to be like Americans. Hmong people like to take pride in success; therefore, they will encourage this. The Hmong community sees how the population of the Hmong women has succeeded over the Hmong males and supports their success for guidance in the future. Thanks to our positive Hmong women who have gone to college and opened up the Hmong community's eye to see that we too can succeed as much as Hmong men (personal interview, June 25, 2009).

Education provides knowledge about the ways of the world and leads to Hmong women being able to challenge their present situations. Hmong women obtaining higher education are seen as achieving independence and breaking away from the norm and from the traditional role of being submissive to one's husband (Lee et al., 2009). Hmong women achieving their educational aspirations become role models to young and old Hmong women in providing a sense of hope and determination to seek their own dreams and to be able to define their own roles and identity.

However, with Hmong women becoming more independent, it is also feared that Hmong women will become disobedient and challenge their husbands' authority once they attain an education. The common perception held by older Hmong is that educated Hmong women will defy their husbands, be too aggressive or assertive (not valued characteristics of Hmong women), and/or possibly leave their husbands (Lee, 1997). Houa Lor explained the fear she perceived parents had regarding Hmong women in education:

What traditional Hmong parents are most scared of, if the woman has access to gain knowledge, is that the woman will leave the family by divorcing or overcoming the family by gaining knowledge to defend oneself against the family. I hear by the mouth of others [older generation] that because so and so allowed their daughter-in-law to go to school, she learned that she have rights and so she left the family because she was sick and tired of doing things for the husband's side. And not just that, my mother-in-law warned me that if I go to college, I better not cheat or leave her son. They [in-laws] do not want the daughter-in-law to overcome the fear of them. They want for the daughter-

in-law to fear them and be scared forever. So, they are scared that if she goes and obtains knowledge, she will know what rights she has in the United States and will soon not fear them and will leave (personal interview, February 20, 2010).

Nou Lee also expressed the idea that her mother-in-law did not trust her in obtaining her education for fear that she would leave her son. Nou Lee shared an account of a conversation she overheard between her mother-in-law and her husband:

My mother-in-law was telling my husband to be careful because since I was going to school now, I might go cheat. She [mother-in-law] was telling my husband that education was not good for me and that I should just go work so that I can support the family. She told my husband that one day he will see and that I will leave. It really hurt me to hear her say this (personal interview, June 22, 2009).

In conclusion, women pursuing higher education have challenged the traditional patriarchal Hmong culture by requiring a renegotiation of gender roles and responsibilities in the home (Lee et al., 2009). Education has provided a strong foundation for women to establish their identity and independence in setting personal goals and professional careers. Pang Moua (25 years old) explained how she perceived gender roles of Hmong women changing:

Women were expected to stay home and take care of the house. Now, it's different. I feel like we as women are growing out of our bubbles and are looking for a better life. We don't believe in staying home and being a well raised daughter, we don't want to waste our lives like our mothers so we [women], as the younger generation, have to make a change so we are going for a higher education to not suffer like our parents (personal interview, February 22, 2010).

For these reasons, the cultural identities of the younger generation are pushed and pulled, being transformed, as these young people try to find a balance between their two worlds: the traditional Hmong culture and mainstream U.S. culture. The traditional roles of Hmong women are being revolutionized by acculturation. Hmong families and women find themselves redefining gender expectations, family values, and priorities in the home (Yang, 2004). But, such redefinitions may come slowly; thus, this researcher believes changes in Hmong women's gender roles are a lifelong process as the patriarchal lineage is deeply rooted in Hmong cultural

practices. Nevertheless, this researcher believes that burdens and battles faced by Hmong women may be lessened through advocating and supporting women in their aspirations.

Advocating Support for Hmong Women

As discussed throughout this paper, understanding the dynamics of Hmong households and how traditional gender roles are structured in a patriarchal society is vital. Awareness of this strongly rooted patriarchal tradition in the Hmong culture builds a foundation to better understand and appreciate different cultural values and practices in the Hmong culture that may conflict with mainstream U.S. values. Traditional cultural values are highly regarded and respected by Hmong elders as these values are tied to family cohesiveness, create a sense of community, build pride in Hmong history, and continues Hmong culture.

However, today young Hmong men and women are transitioning into new roles as the younger generation acculturates into mainstream U.S. society. In other words, the traditional gender roles, with their respective assigned values, are being redefined (see Table 2, p. 44). In table 2, the researcher has summarized the main components of this gender role transition: 1) Traditional Household and Roles; 2) Transitional Households and Roles; 3) Conflicts; and 4) Social Adjustments. As the researcher illustrates, conflicts arise and social adjustments are being made to transition between the traditional roles and emerging new roles, not yet defined. The “Social Adjustments” listed in the table may well prove to be the pathways by which Hmong men and women renegotiate and come to understand their gender roles.

This researcher believes that these new gender roles will include self-empowerment and self-discovery for both men and women. But, during the present transition period, advocating and speaking for change will be necessary, especially on behalf of women pursuing higher education. Sheng Yang described the changes she believes need to take place to support women in their educational pursuits:

Table 2: *Hmong Roles in Transition*

Traditional Households and Roles	Transitional Households and Roles	Conflicts	Social Adjustments
<p>Patriarchal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Family is emphasized - Family clan and lineage is traced through men's ancestry - Men are more valued 	<p>Patriarchal values continue to be practiced by the older generation.</p> <p>Younger generations value individual and personal identity.</p>	<p>Acculturation: Patriarchal values and practices are challenged by U.S. mainstream values.</p> <p>Intergenerational gap between the older and younger generations creates misunderstandings of cultural values.</p>	<p>Both the older and the younger generations try to understand and accept the social values of the other.</p>
<p>Men are head of the household:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Decision makers - Conflict mediators - Perform ceremonial rituals <p>The <i>nyab</i>'s relationship is first to her mother-in-law, then her husband, as mothers-in-law are valued as heads of the households.</p>	<p>Men continue to be the household decision-makers, conflict mediators, and perform ceremonial rituals.</p> <p>The <i>nyab</i>'s relationship to her mother-in-law is still primary.</p>	<p>Young married men and women try to maintain their traditional roles in the household while pursuing higher education (taking them away from household chores and roles). The balancing of these roles is often very difficult and demanding.</p>	<p>Young married men and women are re-evaluating their roles in their marital relationships and in the extended family household.</p>
<p>Education and work outside of the home are valued for men.</p> <p>Household duties are valued for women.</p>	<p>With more opportunities and resources in the U.S., education and work become more accessible and supported for both men and women.</p>	<p>Focus on traditional roles in the household is now waning.</p>	<p>A realization by both the older and younger generations that changes in gender roles are necessary to actively support both men and women in their higher educational aspirations.</p>
<p>Women (<i>nyabs</i>) are valued for their work in the household, and for taking care of children and family members.</p>	<p>Women (<i>nyabs</i>) continue to work in the household.</p> <p>More women are obtaining higher education.</p>	<p>Women gain more independence and freedom as they enter higher education or work outside of the home.</p>	<p>A greater understanding of the need to create more gender role equality as more equal gender responsibilities emerge.</p>
<p>Extended family household:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Grandparents, parents, children, sons and their wives, grandchildren 	<p>Practice of extended family households is decreasing.</p>	<p>Younger generations value their independence more and value the collective extended family household less.</p>	<p>Young married couples are leaving the extended family household to become more independent</p>

I have seen other relationships where the men think that their wives should do everything for them and I think that is one of the biggest things that needs to change in a Hmong marriage. The typical role of the Hmong woman is to cook, clean, do the chores, take care of the children, and go to work to bring in extra income. Men are not expected to do much besides work and some outside/mechanical chores. I personally think that there needs to be balance between the two sexes to have a more efficient and balanced marriage. Balance means that both the wife and husband are willing to help one another out with the household chores, the children, and bring in income. A couple can create a balance by communicating with one another and making agreement on things that should be done between the two of them (personal interview, June 25, 2009).

In the above observation, Sheng Yang illustrates the importance of husbands and wives communicating and understanding one another in their needs and responsibilities. The husband is able to change the dynamic and decrease the burden on his wife through his support and encouragement when such support is lacking overall in the household. The husband's ability to demonstrate his support physically, emotionally, and socially impacts the beliefs his parents may have regarding the *nyab*'s pursuit of her education. Pang Moua also shared the importance of the husband and wife supporting one another:

Before she [the woman] puts herself into a marriage, she needs to communicate and understand with her future husband on what their roles are as a couple and individually. As an individual you want to be independent. You want to be able to provide for yourself and take on your own responsibilities. As a couple you want to make sure that both of you understand each other's goals and support each other, instead of holding each other back. For example, before I married my husband, we expressed to each other what our goals were; mine was to finish my Bachelor Degree. Plus we made sure both of our parents were going to support our decisions. We both agree to support each others' education and work with our work schedule and childcare to make it all possible for us both to succeed. If there is not that understanding then it will take a while for change to come (personal interview, February 22, 2010).

This researcher believes husbands, brothers, and fathers must also advocate and support women in their educational aspirations even though they may be mothers, *nyabs*, and wives.

Having conversations and discussions with the family about personal goals and ambitions does

not often occur and is usually avoided. However, Yer Vang explained the importance of having an open communication with the mother and father-in-law no matter how difficult it may be:

In my family with my in-laws, it is hard to really communicate and explain how we are feeling. It is hard to be open and express ourselves to one another because it is always seen as rude and impolite. I believe this is true for most Hmong families. We aren't supposed to do anything but what our parents tell us. But, you [*nyabs*] have to be straight forward and tell them [mother and father-in-law] what you want. Communicate and be honest. If there is an issue, sit and talk about it with the in-laws (personal interview, February 17, 2010).

As important as it is to have the support and encouragement from husbands and the in-laws, women must also continue to support and believe in their own will and determination. However, it is difficult and shameful to disobey parents, especially the husband's parents. It is very discouraging and disheartening to not receive the approval and support from the mother and father-in-law in educational pursuits. May Her discussed the challenges women face in wanting an education but also needing to meet the families' needs and demands:

Our parents needs to give us more support and more motivation. We [Hmong women] should and need to go into something we enjoy so we'll have a more successful life. We should believe in ourselves more and build up our confidence instead of worrying about our reputation in our family. We women worry about our families and worry about our parents getting upset about us. I know I have a fear of letting my parents down and I'm sure other women are afraid, too (personal interview, February 25, 2010).

Hmong women must also use their own strength to surpass barriers and discouragements from family and in-laws who are unsupportive and see women's roles as restricted to the home. Houa Lor shared her words of encouragement to Hmong women in the following statement:

I believe that Hmong are given the opportunity to explore what America greatly has to offer; and they [Hmong women] should take that advantage as it is free. My words and advice for Hmong women are: focus on your abilities, your new family to come, and never give up. Even if you see that the other family [your in-laws] doesn't see a good thing about you, even if you have done as much as you can, others do see and you will survive and be the best (personal interview, February 20, 2010).

Advocating and supporting Hmong women in their educational pursuits requires the understanding and patience of the family, most importantly of the mother and father-in-law along with the husband. By accepting and encouraging their *nyab*'s pursuit of higher education, the mother and father-in-law are able to positively change the dynamics of the women's relationship with the family and with her husband. If supportive fathers, brothers, and husbands actively speak out on behalf of women's educational pursuits, cultural norms begin to change (Foo, 2002).

In addition, educators need to become more aware and knowledgeable about cultural values and practices for Hmong families. In proactively engaging in conversations and learning about Hmong gender roles and cultural changes, counselors and educators are able to more competently understand their students. For instance, it is important to understand that the Hmong place a higher importance on the family than on the individual's self achievement and appraisal (Tatman, 2004). Additionally, it is essential that educators are able to not only understand the cultural conflicts impacting Hmong students but also empathize with these students. By doing so, these counselors can better provide efficient and supportive services and resources for the Hmong students' ambitions and academic achievements.

Chapter V: Summary

The younger Hmong generation finds itself bounded by two different worlds: the one of their parents and the one of the larger society. U.S. mainstream culture supports and encourages Hmong adolescents to seek out their individualism and self-identity (Lo, 2001; Vang, 2008). On the other hand, Hmong culture continuously connects the individual to the family, in a collective unit, which focuses on family responsibility and commitment (Lo, 2001; Duffy et al., 2004). Young Hmong men and women must learn to understand their roles and their place in these two conflicting worlds and realities.

Hmong women have been more limited in their gender roles than Hmong men because they have been confined to the household and to domestic chores. Traditionally, women were valued in the home for being obedient and hardworking daughters, wives, daughter-in-laws, mothers, and mothers-in-law. However, the transformation of Hmong gender roles in the U.S. has empowered Hmong women to seek opportunities and positions traditionally reserved for men. In the patriarchal organization of Hmong culture, men are given more opportunities outside of the home and are more supported their aspirations to obtain higher education. But today, more Hmong women are working outside of the home to bring in a second income and/or pursuing an education.

With new opportunities in the United States, many Hmong women are redefining their positions and roles. Women are challenging the ideals and traditional cultural practices of Hmong gender roles that have limited them in their personal and professional development. Through education and work outside of the household, Hmong women are discovering their potentials and strengths and becoming more independent. This sense of independence allows for a stronger recognition of self-empowerment and self-worth.

Nevertheless, the cultural practice of early marriages continues to be a strong value that has led many Hmong girls to drop out or delay their educational pursuits to fulfill traditional marital expectations and responsibilities in the household (Yang, 2004). The high and strict expectations of traditional Hmong marital gender roles are often overwhelming for Hmong women as these expectations create pressures to be flawless. Balancing Hmong marital gender roles with obtaining higher education result in struggling realities for Hmong women as both demand time and commitment (Waite & Moore, 1978; Lee, 1997).

The researcher was interested in the relationship and impact of traditional Hmong marital roles and values on the educational pursuits of Hmong American women. Therefore, the researcher focused on the following themes: marital gender role expectations, the relationship between gender roles and Hmong women pursuing higher education, and the perspectives of Hmong women in higher education. The researcher conducted one-on-one interview sessions with nine Hmong women to allow a richer and stronger understanding of the impact Hmong women's gender expectations have on their educational obtainment.

Discussion

The researcher found consistent themes between the literature review and reports from the Hmong women informants. According to research, the strong patriarchal nature of Hmong household puts tremendous pressure on Hmong women to prove their loyalty by conforming to the expectations of traditional gender roles within the household ("Hmong Families," 1997). Mothers-in-law are in charge of the households; *nyabs* are expected to be quiet and submissive, to cook, clean, to attend and help at family gatherings/ceremonies, and to care for members of the family, especially the children (Park & Chi, 1999; Culhane-Pera et al., 2003). If women perform these traditional roles, families and friends will be able to proudly comment that the

nyab is a loyal and a hard worker for her husbands' family. Thus, Hmong women must obediently perform traditional gender roles to protect their reputations as *nyabs*.

The interviews with Hmong women confirmed the continuing expectations placed on Hmong women to fulfill traditional gender roles within the household as a first priority. Informants reported that the strain and stress of their marital roles and expectations placed barriers on their educational pursuit and achievement. The researcher found that the women had high aspirations for themselves before and during their marriage. However, the expected roles for a married Hmong woman to her husband's family often conflicted with the time and commitment needed for academic achievement, usually leading to educational postponement.

Eight out of the nine informants reported feeling expected and/or were directed to continue their traditional gender roles in the household while pursuing their school work. Though support was verbalized, about half of the women reported a lack of emotional and social support from their husband's family for their educational attainment. Only one informant reported that her mother-in-law supported her by doing domestic household chores so that she could focus on her school work. The continuous support from their husbands became the ultimate motivation for them to pursue their educational goals.

Thus, traditional gender roles and family household obligations supersede the value of continuing an education. Women are more strictly held to their traditional roles than men (Lee et al., 2009). Many times, the husband's family will expect the wife to discontinue her education in order to work in the home or to obtain a full time job to take care of the family. Though family members may verbalize their support for the *nyab*'s continuing her education, they seem to lack a full understanding of the time and commitment required for academic achievement as traditional roles are still highly expected. Both Lu Kong and Yer Vang said that they continued

to feel a sense of pressure and burden to fulfill their traditional roles since their in-laws would speak badly of them when they did not perform their roles as a *nyab*.

Traditionally in Laos, opportunities for education were often unaffordable. If families were able to send their children to school, opportunities were reserved for boys as they were traditionally more valued (Lo, 2001). Women were not encouraged to obtain an education as their primary roles were in the household and parents feared education would lead women to ignore their traditional roles (Thao, 1999). Likewise, the Hmong women informants interviewed by this researcher reported that the perception of educated Hmong American women is that they will become too smart and defiant, thereby challenging their husband's authority. Nevertheless, the informants reported that they valued obtaining a higher education, first to achieve a future different from their parents and second, to be able to provide their children with a better future.

In addition, the literature suggested that through education, Hmong women were able to gain a sense of independence and to develop self-empowerment (Culhane-Pera et al., 2003; Lee, 1997). The researcher found that her informants also reported that today in the U.S., Hmong women pursuing higher education are able to gain a greater sense of independence and empowerment. The Hmong women informants also confirmed that with an education they are able to gain a higher degree of respect in the Hmong community as they are seen as determined and hardworking.

Parents are reported as encouraging and supporting educational achievement for their sons and daughters (Lee, 1997; Long, 2008). However, parents still want Hmong women to be committed to their traditional household roles because these roles are culturally valued. However, if Hmong women are unable to complete high school or pursue higher education because of early marriage or motherhood, their chances of living in poverty are increased as they

will only be able to obtain low paying jobs. If Hmong women are to acculturate into mainstream U.S. culture and to achieve in mainstream society, their gender roles at home must be redefined. Otherwise, Hmong women will continue to find themselves overwhelmed because they are simultaneously working in the home, pursuing their education, and/or bringing in a second income to help the family. For this reason, the dynamics of the *nyab*'s relationship in the home must be renegotiated to adequately support her educational aspirations.

The results of this study illustrate the importance of providing resources and services to Hmong women to support their pursuit in higher education and, thus, enrich their lives. Also, the findings can be utilized by counselors and educators to guide them in understanding and being empathetic towards Hmong women as they struggle to overcome obstacles to their educational achievement. The researcher believes that there also need to be dialogues within the Hmong community, addressing the values and priorities of both the younger and older Hmong generations. These dialogues need to include both women and men of different generations. Such intergeneration dialogue may be what is necessary to overcome the fears of change and to renegotiate Hmong gender roles.

Conclusions

The researcher believes that the findings from this study will allow for a stronger empathetic understanding of the challenges and realities impacting Hmong American women who find themselves in traditional Hmong marital roles while pursuing their higher education. The researcher concludes that the identity of Hmong women lies within their multiple interconnected gender roles. The multiple expectations and roles defined for Hmong women are often overbearing and burdensome. In their marital situations, the demand for perfection increases lower self-esteem and self-worth, which, in turn, affects their future educational

aspirations. In addition, the pressure of early marriage (voluntarily or involuntarily) creates stress and increases barriers in their pursuit of educational achievement (Yang, 2004).

The findings also suggest that the intergenerational gap in values and priorities causes conflicts between the younger and older generations. Because parents prioritize taking care of family and maintaining the family clan, they may also be unaware or fail to acknowledge how the demands of marital roles affect the emotional and psychological well being of Hmong women. As long as traditional cultural practices continue to influence and determine decisions and choices made within the households, education will remain a secondary priority for Hmong women. Therefore, for transitions in gender roles to take place, both older and younger generations must come to an understanding of gender equity and begin the equalization process of gender roles responsibilities. Such an understanding may lead to older Hmong adults becoming more tolerable and even supportive of renegotiating gender roles (refer back to Table 2, p. 44).

Recommendations

The researcher believes that there is a need for more research on Hmong women's marital roles and their pursuit of higher education. Specifically, the researcher urges more extensive study of both the experiences and challenges faced by Hmong women as they try to combine and meet the expectations of marital roles and excellence in higher education. Factors which need to be taken into consideration to more fully understand the circumstances of marital roles impacting Hmong women education pursuits include 1) The age of the Hmong women when they were married; 2) Whether the marriage was forced or volunteered; 3) Whether the women lived with their in-laws versus never having lived with their in-laws; and 4) Whether households with more

than one *nyab* impact traditional marital responsibilities of Hmong women and their abilities to pursue higher education.

Though there is limited research on Hmong women's transitional gender roles, there is even less research on Hmong men's transitional gender roles. Thus, the researcher recommends a more thorough examination of the impact of Hmong men's gender roles in mainstream U.S. culture in comparison to Hmong women's roles. The pressure and demand for Hmong women to dutifully fulfill their cultural gender expectations may just be as prevalent for Hmong men expected to meet cultural gender responsibilities such as carrying on the families' name, understanding their roles in cultural ceremonies, and/or being able to financially provide for their families.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire/Survey Instrument

Title: Hmong Traditional Marital Roles and the Pursuit of Higher Education for Married Hmong American Women

Introductory Comments:

Objectives and significance of the research will be shared with participants. Any questions from the participants regarding the research process will be invited. The informed consent will be explained to each participant to establish a well understanding of their voluntary participation.

Interview Questions:

- 1) Describe your experiences and challenges in living or having lived with your husband's family and fulfilling traditional Hmong women's roles.
- 2) Describe how you see Hmong traditional marital roles impacting your educational goals.
- 3) What are your personal perceptions and the perceptions you believe the Hmong community has in regards to Hmong women wanting to attain higher education?
- 4) What changes, if any, do you believe needs to be addressed to support Hmong American women in traditional Hmong martial gender roles?

Follow up questions dependent on the experiences shared by each woman will be asked for elaboration and clarification.

Appendix B: Consent to Participate In UW-Stout Approved Research

Title: Hmong Traditional Marital Roles and the Pursuit of Higher Education for Married Hmong American Women.

Investigator:

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Description:

This study is to contribute to the existing literature on the Hmong traditional gender and marital roles impact Hmong American women pursuing higher education in the United States. The research is designed to gain a better understanding of the challenges faced by Hmong American women.

Risks and Benefits:

The intimacy and sensitivity of sharing personal experiences as Hmong American women in traditional Hmong gender and marital roles may be emotionally upsetting or raise new emotions for you as a participant sharing your own experiences. In sharing personal life experiences, you may have feelings of discomfort or vulnerability may be experienced.

Also, your participation may be rewarding as you may develop and gain a stronger awareness and insights into yourself. The common themes expressed will be used to expand, support, or refute existing literature and knowledge about the challenges faced by Hmong American women in traditional Hmong gender and marital roles while pursuing higher education.

Special Populations:

For the purpose of the study, the special population consists of Hmong American women who have lived or are currently living with the husband's family, practicing traditional Hmong gender and material roles, and have completed or are currently pursuing their post secondary education.

Time Commitment:

Your time commitment is estimated to be approximately one hour to two hours long. You may also be asked to meet for a second session if there is a need for clarification of your answers.

Confidentiality:

Your name or any identifying information will not be included on any documents and will be kept private by the researcher. Interviews will be audio taped if participants consent and personal notes will be taken by the researcher then destroyed after the information has been transcribed. All names and any identifying information will be changed. You will not be able to be identified from any of the information you choose to share. This informed consent will not be kept with any of the other documents completed with this research.

Right to Withdraw:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to no longer participate in the research either during the interview or later, you may discontinue your participation with no adverse consequences for you. You may choose to leave any questions unanswered if you wish.

IRB Approval:

This study has been reviewed and approved by The University of Wisconsin-Stout's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has determined that this study meets the ethical obligations required by federal law and University policies. If you have questions or concerns regarding this study please contact the Investigator or Advisor. If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact the IRB Administrator.

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Statement of Consent:

By signing this consent form you agree to participate in the project entitled, *Hmong Traditional Marital Roles and the Pursuit of Higher Education for Married Hmong American Women*.

 Signature

 Date