INTRODUCTION

Minnesota is home to one of the largest Hmong communities in the United States. More Hmong live in the Twin Cities than in any other urban area in the United States. Originally from Laos, the Hmong supported American troops during the Vietnam War. Beginning in 1976 and continuing in four waves until 1996, many came to the United States as political refugees. The Hmong have strong kinship and clan ties. Many who originally were resettled in other areas, chose to move to Minnesota to be close to family members and other relatives.

The elder women’s experiences included maintaining home and family while their husbands fought alongside American soldiers in the Vietnam War. They fled their farms and villages and crossed the Mekong River into Thailand where they lived in refugee camps before resettling in the United States.

The experiences of the oldest members of the community are vastly different from those who came here as children and those who were born in this country. Today, Hmong women work as teachers, lawyers, and decision makers in their respective positions—opportunities not available to them in their homeland. The youngest never experienced war or resettlement and are unfamiliar with the privations of their elders.

This oral history project chronicles the contributions and experiences of Hmong women with ties to Minnesota. Members of the Hmong Women’s Action Team, a group of Hmong women community leaders and activists, interviewed each other and their mothers and grandmothers, and in one case her daughter. They share their stories of life in the Minnesota, Thailand, and Laos. Three generations from six different families are represented in this series of eighteen interviews.

The interviews help provide a greater understanding of Hmong women’s roles in the home and community, challenges and successes in public and private realms, and across time and space.
An Interview with

Maykao Hang
Narrator

May Hang
Interviewer

On
January 17, 2000

For the
Hmong Women’s Action Team Oral History Project
Hmoob Thaj Yeeb Oral History Project

The transcript is presented in both English and Hmong.
MayKao Yangblongsua Hang

May Hang: This interview is of MayKao Yang Hang at MayKao’s house, January 17, 2000.

Okay, before we start, I am going to ask couple questions about yourself. You can speak Hmong, speak English, whatever you are comfortable with, but I am going to ask you in Hmong. Whatever language you prefer, you use. What is your maiden clan name?

MayKao Hang: I am from the Yang clan.

May: What clan did you marry into?

MayKao: I married into the Hang clan.

May: How old are you?

MayKao: I am 27 years old.

May: So, how many children do you have?

MayKao: Right now I have one child…he is a boy.

May: What is the highest level of education you have achieved?

MayKao: I earned my Master’s in Public Affairs from the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, and in addition to that I have an undergraduate degree in Psychology from Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island.

May: What type of job do you have right now?

MayKao: Right now, I’m the Director of Resident Services for St Paul Public Housing. We serve 12,000 residents who live in our public housing sites in addition to others who have Section Eight vouchers. We don’t own the housing, but we give you a subsidy for your rent. So, I’m the director of the department that handles all the public housing issues and all the management side and everything in St Paul.

May: Okay, next, approximately how much do you make per year. There are a couple of choices. First, under $20,000; second, between $20,000 and $50,000; third, $50,000 to $75,000; and fourth, above $75,000. What category do you think you fall into?

MayKao: $50,000 to $75,000 per year.

May: Do you live by yourself or with your husband and others?
MayKao: My husband and I have bought a house…but we have a cousin living with us too. So, our son, me and my husband, and that cousin lives with us.

May: You just mentioned that you are married. So your marital status is married, right?

MayKao: We have been married for almost four years.

May: Okay. How long have you been into this country?

MayKao: Oh! I came here in 1976, and now is the year 2000, so it will be twenty-four years in August. I have been in this country for twenty-four years.

May: You have been here for twenty-four years, so what country were you born in?

MayKao: I was born in Laos, in Sayaboury, …NangHia.

May: Okay, you lived in that part of the country…yourself, what type of Hmong are you?

MayKao: I am White Hmong, but when I got married…In Hmong culture, when you get married, you are considered to become their type of Hmong…my husband is from the Hang clan, Blue Hmong, so maybe…I am White Hmong married into Blue Hmong, or I, technically, I am Blue Hmong.

May: So, you and your husband, just both of you…do you still practice the traditional Hmong religion or have you adopted Christianity?

MayKao: Before I got married, my family, we practiced the traditional religion, but when we arrived in America, we were sponsored by Lutheran Churches…they encouraged us…when we arrived…at that time…I was four years old. My dad, he used to listen to people preaching back in Laos and Thailand, so he kind of …believed in the new religion already, so when we arrived and the sponsors, they were also Lutheran…we were baptized to become Lutheran. But when I was twelve years old, my dad married a second wife, and it seemed like he was ashamed or something, but after that we stopped going to church. My dad said that it was because my grandpa had come, and because my grandpa did not approve of us practicing the new religion, and he wanted us to go back and practice our traditional religion. So, since I was twelve years old up until I got married, we practiced shamanism and…fiv yeem and did everything…so, you can say I do both…I know both, but now that I am married to my husband, and he is a Lutheran, so I’ve changed, I have to practice Christianity, but…I believe in the traditional religion as well as the new religion.

May: Okay. So now, what is your plan in terms of which one to choose because now that you have children?

MayKao: Yes.
**May:** Okay, we talked a little about yourself, let’s go back to when you were still small. I want to ask you a couple of questions about you when you were growing up. When you were little, did you go to school at all?

**MayKao:** When I was little and lived in Laos, my father was a teacher, so…at that time I was like just three and a half years old, I did not go to school, but I remember that I really wanted to go to school. My older sister went to school, she spoke Laotian most of the time because, in Laos, you go to their school like in this country, when you go, whatever language they use, you use that language, so…I also had my own uniform for school…I don’t know why I did not go to school. Arriving in America, I still had to wait one more year before I became five years old, then they let me go to school. I started in kindergarten. I always wanted to follow MaySong, who is my older sister to school, but they did not let me. So I kind of grew up in this country started from kindergarten all the way to a Master’s degree in this country.

**May:** When you were little, were there any jobs or duties that your parents assigned entirely to you?

**MayKao:** I remember because I was a girl, …we, in my family, there were four girls and only one boy, so my mom always taught us on how to dress…clean up the house, how to cook. When I was able to reach the stove, my mother taught me how to use a chair to stand and so I could do the dishes. Duties in the house…cleaning the house, those were all my responsibilities. About cooking, when I was able to reach the stove, I cooked all the time. So, besides that, all the women’s jobs such as sewing, taking care of guests, I had to learn these since when I was a little girl. I don’t even remember how small I was, and I had to work up until now.

**May:** Okay. The jobs you are talking about are just jobs inside the home. How about outside of the home? Outside, have you done anything that you could remember…that you have done to help the community?

**MayKao:** I remember I was my dad’s, as they say, “favorite,” he did not have a boy. My mom gave birth to many of us, and finally, the last one was a boy, so I was my dad’s surrogate son for many years until my brother grew up. My dad took me to meetings with relatives, when he went to organization meetings, he also took me wherever he went, he took me because there were so many of us, and my mom had to babysit us, or sometimes my mom was tired, so my dad took the girls with him too. But I was the one that my dad took with him the most, so it seemed like I was the one who had the most chances to see things when I was little.

Also when we arrived in America, we lived in Milwaukee, and my dad came to St. Paul to see if we would move up here. My dad took me with him. I think my sisters were kind of jealous, you know, but I think I was just my dad’s sidekick for so long and he’s a very community oriented person, so I’ve always been involved in the community, as long as I can remember.

And then, there were other activities, you know, in terms of serving the community, because we were a group of girls about the same size, so my dad hired a (natasin) dance teacher to teach us. We learned how to dance. So we walked back and forth like those little girls at the New Year [celebration] that we used to see dance. That was us, too. Now, when I think about it, it’s very
embarrassing, you know. I don’t think any of us were real extroverts. We were all scared, you know, but my parents always forced us to do that. Oh, you should go and do it, you should go and do it and then you just learn how to deal with it and cope with it.

May: Okay. You’ve talked about it already, but talents or other things, as a girl your parents have taught you, so, you have talked a little bit about it already, but can you tell more about, as a girl, what kind of skills or things did your parents teach you because you were a girl?

MayKao: I think that there was a centerpiece that linked everything together. The centerpiece was, you have to learn these things because when you get married you need to know how to do them. It just seemed like everything centered around being a wife, you know. It is not because you learn so you know, but my mom always talked about the fact that you have to learn so that you don’t have to ask someone else for help.

So whatever you want to do, you know how to do it yourself. Because my mom’s mom, our grandma, she passed away when my mom had not yet married my dad. So when she married my dad, there was no one to teach her. Also because her mom had passed away early, she became the mom for her brothers and sisters. She talks about how she got married and she—or when her mom has passed away, that she did not know how to sew Hmong clothes and she had to ask others for help. It was so sad because she was talking about how she did not have a mother, and there was nobody to teach her on how to do it. So she had to ask other people, and they yelled at her. And just other things…

May: So, she probably prepared you so you could become self-sufficient.

MayKao: Yes. I think self sufficient according to her because it was a different time…a different life and so…but I think the lesson was that as a woman, you really need to depend on yourself and…you know, there’s no one in the world who’s like your mother who’s going to teach you every single thing you need to know in order to be self sufficient when you’re an adult. And I think that for Hmong people, what that means is…when you’re married. So even though she always centered it around thaub koj mus ua nyab, for Hmong people, thaum koj mus ua nyab is when you become an adult and that’s how they explain it to children now. I think a lot of girls, they probably misunderstand, you know, that that means that it’s just that you’re preparing for marriage. But I think that for me, I understood because of my mother’s experience of being an orphan, that’s really not what it was about...

May: And do you feel that, that philosophy in which your mom, your mom sees that is the way to behave, that is the way to do things. Do you feel that that’s appropriate for you to continue that with your own daughter?

MayKao: I think that, you know, the lesson about being self-sufficient and being able to do everything yourself is a really important one. I don’t think that the messages would be the same. I mean, I think that to be self sufficient in America is very different from being self sufficient in Laos. I don’t have to sew Hmong clothes now. I can just go and buy it. I wouldn’t say to my daughters. Now you need to do this, but I think it’s an important lesson because I do think that even though we live in America, Hmong women have a long way to go in order to be at the same
level with Hmong men. And, I think that what my mother taught me was, the more you know, the more protection you have against those who would harm you or things that you wouldn’t know how to necessarily deal with, you know, because she was harmed so much in her marriage and her life, and she didn’t want the same for her daughters, and I think I would want the same for my daughters, you know. It was the real lesson of independence, it wasn’t so much dependancy, or, you know, anything like that.

**May:** With that, it ties directly with what I am going to ask next. It asks a little bit about when you were little. When you were young, were there anything you thought you would do for yourself such as “I have to do this so that when I grow up, I can do it, or I get it, or create it?” When you were little, did you think about that? Or did you have anything that you wanted to accomplish or aspired to be?

**MayKao:** Oh! You know, Hmong people have a saying that you have to have heart and soul (be motivated), so you can accomplish something important. Since I was little, I always wanted to learn and accomplish something important for myself or for my family. So I always knew I wanted to be somebody or something. I think early on, you know, when you’re little, you have all these strange dreams of being ballarinas or, you know, being a teacher or some other profession that’s sort of girly and that way.

But I think that as I grew older, you know, and I realized, how the world really was, I saw other opportunities. I know that my father would have liked me to have been a doctor or something like that but, you know, that just wasn’t for me. Because for me, you know, making other people’s lives better is who I am and not necessarily physically, you know. I think there are a lot of social issues and I’m definitely a socially oriented person. So I knew that when I was in high school that I could probably be in a profession where I was helping people and making systems better. As you grow up and you go to college, you know, you figure out what you want to do, but I don’t think that as a child I had any clear ideas.

**May:** Talking a little bit about women, and women’s jobs or what we consider as women’s jobs. Between you and your husband, are there some jobs considered mainly to be a woman’s job, and you are the only one who does them or mainly a man’s job that only your husband does. Or can you talk a little bit about how both you and your husband balance it?

**MayKao:** Well, my husband and I, for us, we don’t know how other couples do it, but for us, we don’t specify that this is a man’s job, this job is woman’s job. Whoever has the time that person just does it, things such as doing dishes, cooking dinner, doing laundry. I just don’t talk about my life to others, but I grew up in this country, and many things here are different, and I force my husband to change also. [Laughter] Sometimes when I am tired, I tell my husband that these jobs are not just women’s jobs but everybody’s jobs, so whoever has time, that person needs to do it. And he is willing to help out.

But there are some jobs that, when you have guests coming, or relatives coming to your house, I need to do the best I can to demonstrate that I am doing the “women’s jobs.” For example bringing drinks to the guests, or preparing food. You need to protect your husband’s reputation because it’s not that you don’t want to do it and it is not that he forces me to do it, but our
society, our culture, we have not really changed that yet. And so I make every effort that I can to appear like a normal wife when I can.

I don’t mind doing it, because I know that he does things that balance out what I have to do too. It’s just a negotiation, and I think it’s a good balance. But I hope that one day, when guests arrive, either the wife can bring them the drinks or the husband can bring them the drinks and they won’t think that you don’t love him because he is doing it. I think, right now, if you are a wife and guests arrive at your home, for example, my in-laws come and visit and you don’t bring them the drinks, they would be very upset. [Laughter] If you want your husband to do it—so I just don’t think that people are ready for that. So there are definite rules and structures culturally I think that we have to follow, and even as modern Hmong women, but I don’t think that, you know—I think later on that will change.

May: If that is the case, about decision-making, how do you make decisions and what is your process?

MayKao: For us it is like when we have something big that is just within the clan and they want to talk to us about it, my husband goes most of the time. I usually don’t go. Even when you go, you just go and support him, but if you have talked about the issue at home about what needs to be done, I already told him what I think, so when he goes he just talks about it.

But sometimes when it only involves his immediate family members or just my side of family members only, then I go and say whatever I want to say. And my husband has never interrupted me or told me that I should not say this or that. So, maybe he knows me well because before when we dated, I told him straight out that I am the kind of person who would treat my parents and his parents the same.

Unless the situation were, you know, where many relatives are there and didn’t want to invite the women along. I don’t know that I’m comfortable with, going to sit with all the men, when they are making decisions. I would not want to, even though I recognize that it’s tremendously sexist. But I think, I can recognize that it is sexist, but I still get my input in because I am not yet ready to rock the boat, you know, and, and make everything, throw everything off. I trust him, so it’s fine.

May: About decision making, do you think if you gave a speech or did any process decision-making as MayKao representing Public Housing, do you see that your public outside role, that you can make decisions, and is it easier doing your speech than going to a group of relatives and talking with them.

MayKao: Yes, it is easier. I think that Hmong women have very separate roles, you know, in the work life, in the home life. And, if I was in my capacity as Public Housing Director of Resident Service, and I was talking to all of Lou’s relatives, I wouldn’t have a problem telling them what I think because that’s my arena. And I don’t have a problem, usually even telling cov kwv tīj what I think but I am not willing to just go and give my opinion because...

May: As Lou’s wife....
**MayKao:** Right, because, me as Lou’s wife, and me as MayKao Hang, who is Director of Resident Services, are two very separate people and so I feel comfortable in that role of talking. If the relatives invite me to go and talk, I would talk. I would not say anything to offend them about education and about that if you have the authority, or the decision-making power, I think, you and I both know that we are a lot smarter than most of those guys—and we are a lot more educated too.

But you know, you just protect them and you don’t want to say something bad about them, so you just, it is not that you put yourself down, but you show deference to them and let them think a certain way. If they don’t come and ask you, don’t go and tell them what to do. I think that’s a very Hmong value. I think that, whether you are a man or a woman, if they don’t invite you and ask you, you would never offer to go anyway, so I don’t have a problem with speaking out publicly as long as it’s in my public role. And if they want you know, to invite me as Lou’s wife, that’s fine, but most of the time they are not interested in that part of my life unless it affects them.

**May:** Earlier when we started, you mentioned that now you have a son... about family planning, it is the responsibility of both of you, or how do you do it?

**MayKao:** Well, in our own family, it is up to both my husband and I to make the decision about how many children we would have. How many boys and how many girls, but, whatever God gives you that is what you get. And me, I know that the elders, either the parents or the in-laws, they want us to have more children. But, in this country, everything is money, so if you want to raise children successfully and give them an education like other children, then you need to have a lot of money. The elders believe that each child has his/her own destiny and luck, so you can have many children, but because I am a practical person I know that’s not always the case.

I think when you are a Hmong woman, you are not just bearing children for you and your husband. That’s the problem, you are bearing children for the whole clan system. I think the clan really does see children as theirs. You know, they really have ownership over all children, and so to a certain extent the family planning piece is not just a couple’s decision. I think that is why so many Hmong women, even though, *tuaj, tuaj teb chaws no los*. They still end up having a lot kids because they are bearing children to insure the survival of the clan. And usually boys, I mean that they want boys. So, you know, you have people like my sister and your sister who keeps giving birth until they can find their…

**May:** Number six, you know.

**MayKao:** Yes… that’s right, my sister has to do number six. She only has one son and again you know I recognize that’s tremendously sexist. At the same time, I recognize that if you don’t have a brother, it’s a real sadness in our community. If you don’t have any brothers, then when it come to having weddings, performing rituals, you can’t do some of them if you don’t have a brother. You can have your cousins substitute, the sons of your father’s brother, but it’s not the same kind. You know there are a lot of considerations. I think each couple just has to lay down the law and figure out what they want to do.
May: According to what you are saying, you do work inside and outside the home. By having a close look at all these situations, do you remember if there was a time when people in your close family, extended family, or people in the community respected you the most. When was it?

MayKao: Oh, well it's really tough, because I think that Hmong women are so much more disrespected than they are respected in a lot of ways. I think a time when people respect you the most is when you graduate or when you do something very important. For instance, when the refugee camp in Napho was about to close down, this was the last refugee camp where Hmong and Lao people lived, I went and closed the refugee camp. I went because I cared about the women and children in the camp, and I did what no other Hmong people could do before. That was to form the relationships politically to get into the camp.

I went to work with the families there. I like to joke that maybe I'm one of the first Hmong woman that General Vang Pao really hated. I think it's kind of true because I did what they couldn’t do, which was get access to the camp. I was there for over two months.

I think I accomplished a lot of good, in terms of teaching them about America, getting them shoes, getting them the right kind of bags to put their belongings in. These were the people left behind from over twenty years ago. So these were the last holdouts who had not wanted to come to America at all. But they were so starved for information and news from the United States.

That created a lot of controversies, but I think I also felt very respected because it was because of who I was, that I was able to go. Who I was in terms of lobbying and my personality. And the fact that I was willing to take some risks that very few Hmong people are willing to take. And so I felt really respected then, that was a very public role for me.

I felt tremendously disrespected at the same time because, after I had done it, they made videotapes to criticize me. They gave me a bad name. But I think the most important thing for me though was getting those six thousand people out and that was very important. I think that if I never do anything again my life with my public policy degree, I think it was worth it. Because I don’t know anybody else who could have done it. I don’t think it was a sole effort on my part. There were a lot of other people who were involved, but I was the first one to get in there, and that was very important for me.

May: So, you talked a little bit about the backlash that you experience as a result of that. Were there any other times when you felt that you were disrespected solely based on your gender?

MayKao: Oh yes, I mean you know the whole thing about going to Napho refugee camp. The thing that people talked about, of course, was see, she is just a woman, a young girl, and she is capable of going there. You know, they were all mad…Jane Hamilton Merrit, the women who wrote Tragic Mountains was mad at us.

But I think I feel disrespected every time I hear something happening to Hmong women that affects every Hmong women. For example, I have an uncle. He gets divorced after fifteen years of marriage, then he marries another wife. He is now on is his third wife. So, when he married
his second wife, we kept telling me “my girl, don’t marry a white person.” He told me everyday, whenever he saw me he told me. If he saw me at a soccer tournament, he would tell me. If he saw me at the Hmong New Year, he would tell me. Last year, he divorced his wife, then married yet another wife, a little 16 year old, and I was so mad at him. The thing is, I think I take that personally.

I see that as disrespectful to all women, but I also have been in meetings where you finished talking and nothing would be done at all, even though you know that you’re right and they just ignored you. At the same meeting, it’s the same thing happening all over again. Everybody figures, oh she’s woman she must not know what she’s talking about. Yet it’s the same conclusion every meeting. Oh, gosh, one year I helped plan the New Year and that was how all the meetings went, and I just got so fed up and talked about disrespect. It’s disrespect through discounting. Also women, they don’t have a voice. I get really bothered when I’m sitting at the table, where I was actually invited to speak, and it doesn’t matter how much I talk, it seems like they are deaf. They won’t hear you.

May: So, it kind of gets back to a lot of our culture where like even at our wedding the bride is not at the negotiation table.

MayKao: Well, yes, exactly and they only need the men there, so I think I feel disrespected every time something like that happens. That’s why I feel so strongly that, yes, there are situations when, for example, when a group of relatives gather together, even though it is not my duty to talk… but me, I talk to everybody. People get sick of me cause I’m always out there.

May: Okay, we were just talking about women’s roles and what your thoughts on that were. I just want take you back a little bit to the war and the refugee experience now, you were saying….

MayKao: I do not remember much, but I only remembered that I needed to be quiet that I should not say a word or cry at all. I don’t remember much, but I do remember the country. And when we left our village, I remember being very scared. One time the Vietnamese came to our village, and at that time our Uncle Yia, my father’s brother was still alive and there, but my father was not. My father was teaching someone else, so it was mom and grandma and us, just the girls, and the Vietnamese came. They came and we fled, so then, I thought it was only a dream, but I—a couple years ago I asked my mom, and she said it was real. Then I thought it was only a dream, but it was real.

We fled and I was very hungry, I was crying and I kept scratching my head. My uncle, he looked and there were ants crawling all over my head. So, I was crying. I kept crying, so he cut some fruit apart and gave it to me to eat. I remember that and—when you smell something smoke or when you go somewhere and you can smell a smell like that in Laos. I can’t describe it to you, but when I smell things like that again I am reminded of it in Laos.

The thing that scared us the most during that time was when we walked all day long and ended up at the same place because we did not know the path. So we landed in the same place, and it was very scary because we came back to almost the exact same spot as we were before because
we had gotten lost and so that’s what I remember. I don’t remember much the refugee camp experience at all…

May: Do you, recall, how long have you been living in the refugee camp before you came to this country?

MayKao: We stayed there for almost a year.

We left in 1975, when the country fell to communism. We stayed in the refugee camp called Nam Yao, but at that time, there was no real refugee camp set up because the international agencies had not yet come and so we built a lean-to on the side of a hill. My dad went to look after cows, and me, I just played, so I couldn’t remember the difference…

May: When you arrived here, what were the things you thought were different, and what did you see that were the most difficult thing for you?

MayKao: Well, I was pretty young. I think the hard part for me was understanding why the people looked so different. I mean my first memory of coming to the United States is getting off the plane, you know, the hallway into the airport. There was a Thai woman there who look like us and then there were all these white people there with really big noses who were really tall and I got a Barbie, and MaySong got a Barbie, my sister Naly got Raggedy Ann and she kept crying. I just remember things like that and I remember playing with the kids next door and they were Mexican, you know, they were not fluent in English, you know, and you, then we did not know. But we played Wonder Woman, and then I did have to wait almost a year to go to school. But I do remember learning English, you know. I remember when I was little I was playing with the kids next door, they put me on the monkey bars, and I didn’t know the word for “let go.” And I was terrified because one of the older kids just put me up there. So this girl, you know, this Mexican girl next door kept saying, “Let go!” I’m thinking, “What does ‘let go’ mean?” I finally got tired and I let go, but I never forgot what ‘let go’ meant after that. Then I think just adjusting to speaking two languages, one at school and one at home, because our neighbors were White.

When we first arrived, they thought we were so cute because we Hmong children …they hadn’t seen any Asians before in Milwaukee at that time. And we were the first Hmong family in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Everybody just thought we were darling, but it was hard to balance. I remember when I first went to Kindergarten, and they make you take a nap in the afternoon. I got home and told my mom that I needed a mat to sleep on, and she did not know, you know. She didn’t know, because she didn’t know what school was like, she didn’t understand that for Kindergarten there was an hour nap after lunch. Well, I cried because I was one of those little kids that had to put my head down on the table and sleep instead of laying down. I just wanted to be like all the other kids. And so kuv quaj nav ib yam kuv tsi paub piav rau kuv niam hais tias yuav daim uas i zoo li cas, thaum ntawd yus me me aiv thiab ces yus tsi…

May: Oh because you needed a blanket to lay down...

MayKao: Yes…
May: You didn’t have a blanket so you lay your head on the table…

MayKao: Yes, that’s right because you know there were these mats and your parents were supposed to buy them and provide them for the kids. I realized that my mom and dad could not understand what I was going through at school and I was five and I just kept crying *kuv yuav li*, *kuv yuav li cov me niaam meskas muaj*. They just seemed like they didn’t care… I’m sure that they didn’t understand what I was talking about either.

May: Speaking of like changes and adjustments overall, do you think coming to this country was better for women, or do you still think it is the same?

MayKao: Well, I think in a lot of ways it’s a lot better for Hmong women. And in some ways we also made it harder for Hmong women because, you know. Back then your world is just your own village, you didn’t see much, so you did want so much. But coming here, the world is so big, and you see everything. You see the struggles of people, and I think education, your mind is broadened, it constrains you in some ways because you have to learn to identify the boundaries. Just like what I said before about do you serve water to this person or you don’t, can let your husband do it.

In Laos, *poj niam hmoob*, they knew their role you know this is it, this is what you do and why would you question that? I think now there are a lot of possibilities and I think especially for *cov poj niam* or a lot older, it’s a lot harder for them because they don’t understand the reality. They understood one reality of the world and they’re here and now they have to understand a completely new reality.

For women like my mother who are in their fifties, it’s very difficult for them to understand. For women who are like me in my twenties, it’s great, because there are tremendous opportunities and possibilities. It’s also very frustrating to see the inequalities, and you want to rectify them and you know there are no easy answers. And I see the negotiation between older women and younger women to be very difficult. What if the right solution for one family is not the right solution for another family?

I still see a lot of younger Hmong girls, who are restricted by their parents’ narrow views. I mean, I think, yes, my parents are progressive in certain ways, especially because my dad has always been a person who had a strong education background. Boys and girls were encouraged to go to school. It does not matter how far they go in school, it’s fine. Some girls they don’t have that advantage, but they still, complain and cry about the fact that they don’t have a boy. So he is worried about who is going to handle his funeral ceremony when he passes away, it’s still his one issue. So I think that yes, it is better overall that I think that there is so much to be worked out. I wouldn’t say that it’s worth, I don’t say that is better for all women, but in terms of opportunities, it is a lot better.

May: Different struggles because it’s different being in the United States. Have you become a citizen?
MayKao: Yes.

May: And do you take part in voting for individuals who seek public offices? And if you do, what are your thoughts or impressions of the Hmong people who compete against other people for public office or governmental office whether statewide, county-wise, or maybe a senator?

MayKao: Well, I do vote regularly, and I see it as an opportunity for me to make a difference for Hmong people. And those people running for political office, I really admire them whether or not they represent my views because I recognize the tremendous accomplishment in trying to build consensus. It’s been a really valuable experience for our Hmong people. And I think that maybe even now, for example a candidate, such as Choua Yang when she ran for school board. Some men criticized her saying, “Where did this woman come from, where did this women come from and become”…they didn’t like her. For me, I was so grateful even though this person was not as educated as what we expected, or she is not a man as they wanted her to be, it doesn’t matter. She had the courage to do something for our Hmong—that’s to have a voice in the American society. I think that’s really important.

May: Do you think that leadership overall has changed for you now being in this country compare to other Hmong women, and are they changed for Hmong women overall or still the same?

MayKao: Yes, I don’t know if I could say how it was in Laos, but I do know that when the war broke out that there were already women who starting to go to school and have jobs and, yes granted they were people such as the daughters of the leaders and wealthy. They were the first and I think that they were already starting to change some of the leadership structure there and now women like us who are now in the United States have even just changed it some more. I think that what’s changed about it, it’s not only…that the leadership is becoming more women, but it’s also becoming younger, because our value system assumes that you know more when you get older. But we go to school, I think that gives a edge and the elders sometimes look for answers from us on what to do if there is a problem.

I think that young people, especially young women who are done with college, they have a tremendous responsibility now in terms of taking leadership maybe not inside the clan system but certainly with their families. I don’t know that everything has to come back to the clan anymore either, because if there is any problem, the relatives call and ask me also. It is not that they come to my house and pour a glass of alcohol for me and ask me to help them, but if they have something, they call me and ask if this is the kind of problem, what is your opinion? We have asked a couple of people, but they don’t know. Even if they have problem with paperwork, or with any problems that they may have, they also call me. So I think that is a change in leadership.

May: So, there is maybe a change or shifting of how the clan actually works through a more, it’s more individualized now versus the strict clan decision conflict?

MayKao: Yes, I think that if you talked to older Hmong men they would still like to believe that oh yes, the traditional system is at work, but my clan doesn’t even work like that anymore.
my dad is the leader of our clan and if something happens and I’m there and he knows that I
know more than most people, and he doesn’t think anything of it now when he calls me to
meetings or meetings with youth or meeting about other problems. He also asks me to go. And if
my dad is not available, there are times when the relatives couldn’t get help, they have also come
to talk tome. It is never so formal like a clan discussion, but I think that women are being more
and more utilized internally. I think it’s just that men have refused to acknowledge that’s
happening. I really do because I see so many educated Hmong women and their families depend
on them so much if they didn’t exist…

May: There would be dealings here and there…

MayKao: Yes, exactly, dealings with all the crisis whether it’s with their siblings or in the past if
there were problems like that, they would not have invited you as a girl, especially when you
married to the Hang clan already. They would not ask you, they would not consider you as part
of the Yang clan anymore and ask you to be there. But the time has changed, and I think that
they are asking more and more for women, daughters to play role in their families, and I think
the other thing that is sort of balancing out too is the distinction between the relatives and the in-
laws. It is blending a little bit… I know that for people in my dad’s generation, the in-laws, they
always take on the lesser role. The husband’s relatives, they always take on a greater role but I
don’t know if that’s so true anymore. I see in a lot of families where it’s balancing out, I mean
it’s a lot more equal, and I think that when that balance happens what we see is increased value
in daughters, because they are still your daughter. What make my dad angry the most is that
when you got married, you become part of their clan and family, so when he has something he
cannot depend much on you, but nowadays, he still call me, so I think that’s a good thing.

May: With all the discussion we had, in your opinion, personally, if you can give a message to
everyone that Hmong women have contributed for our Hmong people, what are the things you
see? What public contribution or that women have done to the community, solely from women,
what are they? In addition, about yourself, what do you want other people see you, as Lou’s
wife, or Fuchi’s Chee’s—you contribution to the Hmong community…what is the contribution
or either way, broadly or yourself?

MayKao: Well, I think there are a lot of things you can say broadly but, I think for myself and
maybe because I’m the only one that can talk about that. I think that in each job that I have had, I
tried to make a mark, with each thing that I’ve done I tried to make a mark and whether it is—I
was the first Hmong girl nationally to study overseas. I mean for whole year in Germany. I was
sixteen then, and I think that I made it possible for so many Hmong girls who dreamed about
that, to go and see other countries, go even for a summer or a week, with a scholarship, so
parents they can see it work. They just don’t want to allow their girls to go anywhere, and I think
that when I went, and I came back safely, I carved a path for Hmong girls who are related to me,
or who knew of me, oh yeah, MayKao has gone, you know. It just made it so much more
accessible for Hmong girls.

Then I think that because I was actually—I think in the Twin Cities area, the first Hmong girl to
go study so far away for college and even today, Hmong parents still don’t like the idea of
having their girls go and study far away from home, but when I went there, people were
convinced that I would come back pregnant. In fact, when I went to study in Germany, there was a man in the Yang clan who came from nowhere, and he yelled at me, and my parents as well as the whole Yang clan. He was from the Yang clan and he said, “Where were all the Yang boys? How come I was just a girl and was able to do these things? How come no boy could do anything like that? How come a girl is even more capable than all the boys?” He just said “I’m just so ashamed of all you guys,” and it was terrible, because he was a guy who is older.

But it didn’t matter because I went to Germany. I came back and I was fine. And I went to college, I came back, I was fine. And I think that each time something like that happens, it opens up the path for other girls, and I have so many Hmong girls come up to me...

I was coordinating Hmoob Thaj Yeeb and even just conferences and staff, and they come up and say, “Oh god, thank god, there are woman like you out there because you’re my only hope because my parents don’t understand me when I try to do things.” It’s so difficult and there’s so much opposition and Hmong parents yelled at me, because I’m doing this kind of job.

I just say you have to do what you think is best, because every step that you take is a real gain for not just women but for you as an individual. Being hired at St. Paul public housing, it’s such a high level position. Yet it is kind of like a slap in the face because in some ways for Hmong men they feel that, I am just a Hmong girl, I am just a Hmong woman, how come I get such a high position? If I was a man I’m sure that, I’d be getting invitations to speak to all over the place, because it’s such a high level position. But because I’m a woman, I think that people are more like, “Oh how did that happen?” because—[Laughs] Because, look at people like Lee Pao, just being on the council and being at Concordia. Those aren’t even positions where you have so much influence, and I think if people were really to think about it, they would say, “God…that’s quite an accomplishment!” But because you’re a woman, they just go, “Oh geez! How did that happen?” And that happens a lot with women, even internally within the structure of the Hmong people I work with. They still think that because all of them are men, men think that it should be men, but they never say it straight to you, that’s not going to happen, but I mean…

I guess my point is that, whenever a women like me or like you, makes a decision to make a career move, and it is up, it proves something to Hmong men, to the world, and to other Hmong women that it can be done. I think that is a public contribution that we make as individuals and that is what I think we can hope for. I know Choua Yang, when she went on the school board, it was because she had the courage—It was not because, yes she may not have had all the skills necessary or whatever, but she opened up the path—and you know, and the fact that woman went before a man, oh my gosh [Laughs] that’s just ridiculous, for Neal to have to follow the footstep of a woman, and I think that each time a man has to follow a footstep of a woman who is in leadership, that is a real public contribution because it has shown people that women are smart, and they can do things that maybe people never thought were possible for women and that to me is very impressive.

So, I think because we have increasing numbers of women who are doing that, whether or not they are doing it in a big way. I mean people may not think so much of women who become teachers aides or become like just teachers or nurses, but the thing is, every time a little girl
meets a Hmong woman who is a nurse she gonna get excited to that “Wow!! She’s a nurse and maybe, I can be too…."

**May:** Something like that…

**MayKao:** Oh yes, and that’s very important and I think that’s what we contribute to our daughters and to the world and to the Hmong community.

**May:** We’ll probably have female senator before we have a male senator….

**MayKao:** Maybe.. yes..maybe..

**May:** Just wrapping a little bit here. Was there anything else los yog koj puas muaj lwm yam ab tsi koj xav ntxiv kaw khaws cia?

**MayKao:** Well I think the only thing that I would add is that I think people underestimate Hmong women all the time and, and one of my goals and in really trying to get this project going is to really document poj niam and their stories, and the fact that they are so smart and have accomplished so much and, and I hope that at least from, from the older Hmong women we get a picture of how they were because, yus xav hais tias yus niam thiab yus txiv lawv nav, es leej twg yog tus es uh muaj peev xwm tshaj plaws nav. I think I have to say that my mom, because when you think about it, how hard it is for us to raise children now, and than to take that leap into raising children in a completely foreign country and still makes everything seem okay for their kids and I think that’s great and yog koj nrog cov laus tham nav lawv yeej hais tias you know kuv yeej hais tias kuv lub neeg ces tag lawv thiab tab sis mas kuv xav kom kuv cov me nyuam txawj ntse kom lawv ua neej zoo kom lawv muaj li luag tej kom lawm nto npe, that is all the hopes that parents have for their kids but to me it, it’s mothers that make it a reality because we are the ones that spend the majority of our time doing all the childcare and…

**May:** All the behind the scenes stuff…

**MayKao:** Oh yes, all the behind the scenes stuff and what happened when the men went off to war, well the women were left to take care of everything else, and I think they did a really good job. I think women like us are testaments to their strength and I hope that through this project, people will really remember that the most important thing that we do is not all the material things, but who we really leave behind the kinds of legacy we have as a people, and to me the people legacy is the women and the kids and how they grow up, and what they become. That’s a general contribution I think that women really make that I think it’s really underestimated. The fact that you have to have smart women to raise smart kids, and that it’s not a good argument to not educate girls too because they’re going to go out and marry out of the clan and you won’t be any better off if you educate a girl or whatever.

**May:** Okay, thank you.
MayKao Yangblongsua Hang

Interviewer(I) : This interview is on MayKao Yang Hang at May Kao’s house, January 17 year 2000. Ua ntej wb pib no kuv yuav nug koj ob lo lus me ntsis txog koj tus kheej. You can speak Hmong, speak English, whatever you’re comfortable with, but kuv mam li…cov lus kuv yuav nug koj ces yog hais lus Hmoob. Koj nyiam hais li cas los koj mam hais. Koj yog nkauj Hmoob dab tsi?

May Kao Hang (M) : Kuv yog nkauj Hmoob Yaj.

I : Koj ho los yuav tsev Hmoob xeem dab tsi?

M : Kuv yuav xeem Hmoob Ham.

I : Tam sim no koj muaj pes tsawg xyoo lawm?

M : Kuv muaj 27 xyoo.

I : Ua li, koj muaj pes tsawg tus me nyuam lawm?

M : Tam sim no kuv muaj ib tug me nyuam...yog ib tug tub.

I : Uas hais txog kev kawm ntaub kawm ntawv xwb, qib siab tshaj plaws uas koj kawm ntawv tas los yog dab tsi?

M : Kuv kawm tiav Masters in Public Affairs tom Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota thiab tsis tas li ntawd kuv tau ib daim undergraduate degree in psychology from Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island.

I : Tam sim no txoj hauj lwm koj ua yog dab tsi xwb?

M : Right now, I’m the Director of Resident Services for St Paul Public Housing. We serve 12,000 residents who live in our public housing sites in addition to others who have section eight vouchers which is basically where you go…and you …we don't own the housing but we give you a subsidy for your rent. So, I’m the director of the department that handles all the public housing issues and all the management side and everything in St Paul.

I : Qhov tom ntej no yog hais txog kev ib xyoo no seb ua tau nyiam ntau npaum li cas, nws muaj ob peb qhov choices: qhov ib yog $20,000 rov hauv, qhov thib ob yog $20,000 mus txog $50,000, qhov thib peb yog $50,000 mus txog $75,000,
qhov thib plaub yog $75,000 mus txog $100,000. Ntawm koj tus kheej xwb, koj ho xav hais tias ntawm plaub qib no, koj ho dho rau qhov twg?

M : $50,000 rau $75,000, tauj ib xyoo.

I : Tam sim no, koj kev um…nyob vaj nyob tsev ntawd, koj nyob li cas xwb? Koj nyob koj tus kheej los yog neb ob niam txiv neb nyob neb li cas?

M : Tam sim no kuv thiaj kuv tus txiv wb yuav ib lub tsev kheej yog wb nyob xwb...tab sis wb muaj ib tug kwv, kwv tij los nrog wb nyob thiaj ces...wb tus tub thiaj, kuv thiaj, kuv tus txiv thiaj, tus kwv ntawd nrog wb nyob.

I : Yog li ces koj twb nyuam qhuav, yav tas pem nov koj twb tias koj yuav txiv no ces, hais txog qhov tias saib tam sim no koj married status, ces yeej yog…yuav txiv, muaj txiv lawm puas yog?

M : Sib yuav tau yuav laug 4 xyoos noj.

I : Koj twb tuaj tau teb chaws no tau pes tsawg xyoo lawm?

M : Oh ! Tuaj thaum 1976 ces, tam sim no twb yog xyoo 2000 lawm ces, rov qab txog lub 8 hli ntuj no thiaj ces, 24 xyoos…tauj txog teb chaws Meskas no 24 xyoos.

I : Koj tuaj tau 24 xyoos no es, koj ho yug teb chaws twg?

M : Kuv yuav, yog nyob tebchaws Nplog, nyob Xasnyabnpuslis (Sayaboury)...Naj Hiab.

I : Nej ho nyob thaj tsam ntawd es, ntawm koj tus kheej xwb, koj xav tias koj yuav muab faib rau hom, hom neeg ntawd, es koj yog hom hmoob dab tsi?

M : Kuv yog nkauj Hmoob Dawb, tab sis…kuv los yuav txiv ces…Hmoob li ces laww yeej thwm hais tias yog yus los yuav txiv laww ces yus mus ua laww haiv Hmoob laww no ces…kuv tus txiv ho yog Hmoob Ham, Hmoob Ntsuab ces tej zauam…yog yuav hais los ces, yog nkauj Hmoob Dawb yuav Hmoob Ntsuab, los yog Hmoob Ntsuab los yog laww thiaj mas.

I : Ces ntawm koj thiaj koj tus txiv xwb, neb xwb…neb tseem coj kev cai qub los yog neb ho coj kev cai tshiab laww los ua li cas lawm?

M : Thaum ua ntej kuv yuav kuv tus txiv ntawd mas, peb tsev tib neeg yeej coj kev cai qub tab sis mas thaum peb tuaj txog teb chaws Meskas no ces, yog ib co es church es yog Lutheran na,…laww ua ntaub ntawv txais peb tuaj um…sponsor peb tuaj teb chaws no ces um…thaum peb tuaj txog ntawd, lub sij hawm ntawd ces, kuv muaj 4 xyoos. Hos kuv txiv mas kuv txiv yeej…mloog mloog laww tiajxabnam nyob teb chaws Nplog thiaj teb chaws Thaib. Nws yeej muaj ntsis uas…ntseeg
Okay. Ces tam sim no ntawm neb ces ho yuav tsum npaj tias seb yuav mus taug txoj kev twg rau qhov muaj me tub me nyuam lawm thiab puas yog?

Yeah.

Okay, piav me ntsis txog koj tus kheej tam sim no lawm, rov qab mus hais txog thauam yav thauam koj tseej me. Kuv xav noog koj ob peb los me ntsis txog koj, thauam koj nyuam qhuav loj hlob tuaj. Thauam yam yau ntawd koj puas tau mus kawm ntawv li?

Thauam yau es nyob teb chaws Nplog ces kuv txiv yeej ua nais khu nav, ces...thauam lub sij hawm ntawd kuv nyuam qhuav muaj peb xyooos ntau xwb ces kuv tsis kawm thiab tab sis mas kuv, kuv nco ntsoov hais tias kuv xav xav mus kawm no na. Kuv tus niam laus nws mus kawm, nws mus kawm ces nws yeej hais lus npllog ntau lawm xwb nav rau qhov nyob teb chaws Nplog ces yus mus kawm lawv cov tsev kawm ntawv xwb ces zoo li teb chaws no xwb ces, yus mus kawm ces lawv hais yam tus tsev ces yus siv yam tus ntawd xwb ces kuv yeej muaj ib ce ris tshe es hnav mus kawm ntawv thiaj na...Tab sis um...kuv um, zoo li xyov, kuv yeej tsis kawm li thiab...tauj txog teb chaws no um, tuaj txog teb chaws Meskas no ces kuv mam li...kuv tseem tau tos ib xyooos thiab kuv mam li muaj 5 xyooos lawv mam li pub kuv mus...pib kindergarten. Niaj hnb xav raws Maiv Ntxhoo es, yog kuv tus niam laus, mus kawm ntawd thiab tab sis mas lawv tsis tau pub kuv pais ces kuv yeej...tauj loj hlob nyob teb chaws no es kawm kindergarten txog ntua li tiav Masters nyob teb chaws Meskas no.

Thauam koj yau ntawd puas muaj tej yam hauj lwm, los tej yam dej num dab tsi es koj nco hais tias koj niam lawv yeej muab tso hlo koj thiab?

Oh ! Kuv nco los mav rau qhov yus yog me nyuam ntxhais ces...peb, kuv tsev tib neeg muaj 4 tug ntxhais, ib tug tub xwb nav, ces um...yus niam yeej niaj hnb nco ntsoov qhia yus hais tias yuav tsum tu tsev li no, cheb tsev li no, ua zaub ua mov li no. Thauam yus twb ncaj tsis tau txog qhov cub...los yus niam twb qhia
I: Okay. Hos tej num koj piav ko yog hauv tsev xwb. Hos sab nraum ne? Sab nraud, koj puas ua tej yam ab tsi es koj nco, es koj tseem nco koj tau mus ua pub pab rau zej zog, thiab los yog tej kwv tij neej tsa?

M: Kuv nco thiab rau qhov kuv yog kuv txiv tus ua, li lawv hais, tus “favorite” ces, tsi muaj tub li. Kuv niam twb yug yug yug tus kawg thiaj yog me nyuam tub xwb ces, kuv yog txiv tus surrogate son rau, tau ntau xyoo, until my brother grew up, kuv txiv mus sab laj tom kwv tij los kuv txiv coj kuv mus hos, kuv txiv mus um…sab laj tom es koom haum los kuv txiv coj kuv mus, ho yog tias muas ua noj ua haus tom tej xwb los nws yeej coj yus mus tas li na. Rau qhov yus coob coob thiab ces…kuv niam zov peb thiab xwb ces, tej zaum kuv niam Laj zov peb thiab. Kuv txiv coj peb cov ntxhais mus thiab, tab sis kuv yog tus es kuv txiv coj heev tshaj plaws na, ces zoo li, hais tias, yus yog tus es pom ntau tshaj plaws no los mas…thaum yus me me aiv ntawd na. Thiab …zoo li thaum i.. peb tuaj txog teb chaws Meskas no es, peb nyob Milwaukee, es kuv txiv tuaj saib St. Paul na, saib seb peb puas tsiv los nyob ntawm nov nav. Kuv txiv coj kuv tuaj na. Kuv txiv coj kuv ua luag tuaj…I think my sisters were kind of jealous. I think I was just my dad's sidekick for so long and he's a very community orient person, so…I've always been involved in the community, as long as I can remember. And then there were other activities, um…you know, in terms of serving the community, rau qhov peb yog ib pab ntxhais sib luag zog, ces um…kuv txiv ntiav kom ib tug nais khu es qhia «foob nab tab xeev » nav, tuaj qhia peb es peb um…peb xyaum laas voos, ces peb sij um…mus tom ub tom no li cov me nyuam ntxhais tom tsiab peb caug es yus mus pom, es lawv niaj caug fuab na…that was us so…tam sim no kuv xav txog mas, it’s very embarassing you know, ’cause um…I don’t think any of us were real extroverts, we were all scared, you know but my parents always forced us to do that. “Oh, av tsij mus ua, av tsij mus ua”…and then you just learn how to deal with it and cope with it.

I: Koj piav txog, me ntsis lawm, tab sis hais txog hais tias tej txuj ci, los yog tej ub no es ua ib tug ntxhais, es koj niam koi jtxiv tau qhia koi na, ces koi piav me ntsis txog lawm tab sis koi piav ntxhais me ntsis hais tias, ua ib tug ntxhais xwb, yam dab tsi yog yam, hauj lwm dab tsi yog yam txuj ci es lawv qhia koi vim tias koy jog ib tug ntxhais no na, puas muaj tej yam ab tsi li ntawd ?

M: I think that there was a centerpiece that linked everything together and the centerpiece was, koy Yuav tsum xyaum tej no rau qhov lwm hnub koy mus ua nyab
So she probably npaj koj kom koj ua tau self sufficiency pab tau koj tus kheej.

Yes. I think self sufficient according to her because it was a different time...a different life and so...But I think the lesson was that as a woman, you really need to depend on yourself and...you know, there's no one in the world who's like your mother who's going to teach you every single thing you need to know in order to be self sufficient when you're an adult. And I think that for Hmong people, what that means is...when you're married. So even though she always centered it around thaub koj mus ua nyab, for Hmong people, thauem koj mus ua nyab is when you become an adult and that's how they explain it to children now. I think a lot of girls, they probably misunderstand, you know that that means that it's just that you're preparing for marriage. But I think that for me, I understood because of my mother's experience of being an orphan, that's really not what it was about...

And do you feel that, that philosophy in which your mom, koj niam, pom tau hais tias...yuav tsum coj li ntawd, ua li ntawd...Do you feel that that's appropriate for you to continue that with your own daughter?

I think that, you know, qhov lesson, about being self sufficient and being able to do everything yourself is a really important one. I don't think that the messages would be the same. I mean, I think that to be self sufficient in America is very different from being self sufficient in Nplog teb. I don't have to txiav khaub ncaws hmoob now, I can just go and buy it. I wouldn't say to my daughters now you need to do this but I think it's an important lesson because I do think that even though peb nyob teb chaw Meskas no los, pom niam Hmoob have a long way to go...in order to be at the same level nrog txiv neej Hmoob na. And I think that what my mother taught me was, the more you know, the more protection you have against those who would harm you or things that, things that you wouldn't know how to necessarily deal with, you know, because she was harmed so much in her marriage and her life and, she didn't want the same for her daughters, and I
think, I would want the same for my daughters. It was the real lesson of independence, it wasn't so much dependancy or you know, anything like that.

I: With that, it ties directly with qhov lus kuv yuav nug koy tom ntej no. Nws nug me ntsis txog thaum koy tseem yau, yog thaum koy tseem hluas nav, puas muaj tej yam dab tsi, los yug puas muaj ib qho ab tsi, koy xav rau koy tus kheej hais tias kuv yuav ua kom thaum kuv tiav niam kuv ua tau, los yug muaj tau, los yug tsi m tau na. Thaum koy yau koy puas muaj tej qho xav txog li ntawd, los koy puas muaj ib qho es koy tuav cias hais tias koy yuav ua kom tau qhov ntawd, los yug accomplish kom tau los yug aspire to be?

M: Oh! You know, …rau kuv tus kheej xwb mas, zoo li as…Hmoob si muaj ib lo lus es lawv hais tias yus muaj siab muaj ntsws yus yeej ua kom tau ib yam ab tsi kom tseem ceeb xwb na, ces um…txij thaum kuv me aiv los los, kuv yeej kub kub siab, hais tias kuv yuav xyaum kom tau ib yam ab tsi, los ua kom tau ib yam ab tsi tseem ceeb rau kuv tus kheej los puas yug rau kuv tsev neeg…so I always knew I wanted to be somebody or something. I think early on, you know, when you're little, you have all these strange dreams of being ballerinas or, you know, being a teacher or some other profession that's sort of girly and that way. But I think that as I grew older, you know, and I realized, how the world really was, I saw other opportunities and I know that my father would have liked me to have been a doctor or something like that but, you know, that, that just wasn't for me because um…I think that um…for me, you know, making other people's lives better is who I am and not necessarily physically, you know. I think there are a lot of social issues and I'm definitately a socially oriented person and so…I knew that when I was in high school that I could, I could probably be in a profession where I was helping people and making systems better and…as you grow up and you go to college, you know, you figure out what you want to do, but I don't think that as a child I had any clear ideas.

I: Um ntawm, tham me ntsis txog poj niam, thiab poj niam ua dej num los yug poj niam tej peb suav tias poj niam hauj lwm naj, ntawm koy thiaj koy tus txiv xwb, hauv nev vaj tsev xwb puas muaj tej yam lawv los yug puas muaj neb, nev kev um ua niam txiv nav, puas muaj tej yam hais tias tseem tseem hais tias poj hauj lwm es koy ua xwb, tseem tseem li txiv neej hauj lwm koy tus txiv ua xwb, los koy piav me ntsis ntawm neb ob leeg seb ho muab cov no los balance los muab los sib txuas li cas?

M: Well, kuv tus txiv wb mas, wb, xyov luag tej niam txiv zoo li cas thiab tab sis mas wb tsi txiav hais tias txoj hauj lwm no yog txiv neej li, txoj hauj lwm no yog poj niam li,ws yug tias leej twg muaj sij haew no ces leej twg yeej uas xwb nav, yug zoo hais tias ntxuav tais diav, los ua hmo, los ntxhau khaub ncaws tej ntawd. Tab sis mas ntawm, yus tsi tham txog yus lub neej xwb nav rau qhov yus tuaj hlob teb chaws no ces yus yeej pom ntau ntiau yam txawv es yus yeej yuam kom yus tus txiv hloov thiab nav (laugh)…rau qhov tej thaum kuv nkees nkees los kuv yeej hais rau nws hais tias tej hauj lwm ntawm no yeej tsi yog poj niam hauj lwm xwb
yeej yog sawv daws li hauj lwm es yog leej twg khoom no ces leej twg ua no ces nws yeej kam ua li ntawd thiah. Tab sis mas yeej muaj ib co hauij lwm es hais tias thauam muaj qhua tuaj txog, los hais tias kqw tij neej tsa tuaj txog yus yeej ua kom tau thoob thib li yus ua tau hais tias poj niam cov hauij lwm, zoo li hais tias yus nqa dej los rau hau los puas yog yus ua noj ua hauij yus txuag yus tus txiv lub ntsej muag thiah, rau qhov tsi yog hais tias yus tsi xav ua….thiab tsi yog hais tias nws yuam kom yus ua tab sis mas peb lub societey peb qhov culture nav, we are not really that change yet you know, and so I make it every effort that I can appear like a normal wife when I can, but I don’t mind doing it, you know, because I know that he does things that balances out what I have to do to. And it’s just a negotiation, and, um, I think it’s a good balance, but I hope that one day, you know, thauam qhua tuaj txog yog tias yus tus poj niam, yus hlv dej mus rau lawv haus los yog tias yus tus txiv hlv dej mus rau lawv haus teh no they don’t think that you don’t love him because he is doing it. I mean I think right now yog tias yus yog ib tug nyab es lawv tuaj txog nav es zoo li tias niam pog txiv yawg tau txhais yus, yus tsis laub dej los mus rau lawv haus nav they would be very up set you know (laugh)...if you want your husband to do it, so I just don’t think that people are ready for that, so there are definite rules and structures culturally I think that we have follow, and even as modern hmong women, but I don’t think, that’s right, you know, I think later one that will change.

I: Zoo li ntawm ko ne hais txog neb kev txiav txim no yog kev hais tias neb ob niam txiv xwb neb yuav yuav li cas xwb ntawm neb. Koj piav me ntsis seb neb kev txiav txim ntawm neb qhov process neb make neb qhov decision yoi li cas ?

M : Wb li mas zoo li hais tias thaum yus muaj teh yam loj es yog ntawm kwv tij es lawv hu xwb no ces yeej yog kuv tus txiv mus ntau no xwb tsi yog kuv mus thiab yus mus los mus pab txhawb nws xwb, tab sis yog tias yus yeej tham yus ua, ua tom tsev ua ntej lawv naw hais tias yuav yuav ua li cas. Yus yeej qhia rau nws tag laww, ces nws mus ces nws mam li hais xwb, tab sis mas teh lub sij lawm es zoo li hais tias yog nws tsev neeg kiaq thiab yus cov nyob ntawm xwb ces yus hais li cas los yus hais yus yeej tau thiab, thiab kuv, kuv tus txiv yeej tsi tau txiav kuv lus hais tias kom koi txhob hais li no li no nav, ces tej zaum nws yeej paub yus zoo laww thiab rau qhov tham ntej es yus sib tham laww yus yeej qhia ncaj rau nws hais tias yus yeej yog hom tib neeg es hais tias txog niam tais yawm txiv txog niam pog txiv yawg los you just treat them the same, you know, so unless the situation were, you know, ib tog kwv tij tuaj ntawd coob coob es lawv tsis, lawv tsi caw kom poj niam mus no ces you know yus mus tsi muaj neeg hais yus thiab tab sis I don’t know that I’m comfortable with, going to sit with all the men, when they are making decisions I would not want to, um even though I recognize that it’s tremendous sexist. But I think I can recognize that it is sexist, but I still get my input in because I am not yet ready to rock the boat, you know, and make everything, throw everything off and I trust him, so it’s fine.

I: Hais txog txiav txim thiab decision making no xwb koj puas xav tias ntawm koj tus kheej xwb yog koj mus sab nraad es koj mus sab nraad koj ua, koj mus hais
lus los koj mus ua qhov process decision making es Maiv Kaus representing public housing no koj puas pom tau tias koj qhov role nraud naj, koj tseem txiav txim siab tau txiav txim los yog hais lus tsee m ib nyuas nyaib zog li koj mus rau ib pab kwv tij, mus nrog ib pab kwv tij tham lus?

M : Yeah!...It is easier, I think that Hmong women have very separate roles, you know in, in the work life, in the home life, and if I was in my capacity as you know public housing director of resident services, and I was talking to all of Lou's relatives, I wouldn't have a problem telling them what I think because that's my arena. And I don’t have a problem, usually even telling cov kwv tij what I think but I am not willing to just go and give my opinion because....

I: As Niam Lwm....

M : Right, you know because me as Niam Lwm, and me as May Kao Hang who is director of resident services are two very separate people and, and so I feel comfortable in that role of talking, you know yog cov kwv tij caw kuv mus hais los kuv yeej hais yus yeej tsi hais siab sawy daws thiab, tab sis mas, hais txog kawm ntaub kawm ntawv thib hais txog hais tias if you have the authority, you know, or the decision making power. I think you and I both know that we are a lot smarter than most of those guys and we are a lot more educated too, but you know, yus txuag lawv xwb nav. Es yus hlub lawv es yus txuag lawv thib yus tsis xav es mus hais lus siab lawv, ces yus txhob txwm muab yus tus kheej, tsi yog tsuj tab sis mas yus hawm lawv es yus tso hwj chim me ntsis hais tias lawv xav li no lawm ces cia lawv xav lawv no, cia lawv ua lawv yog tias lawv tsi tuaj thov yus ces yus tsi txhob mus hais thib no xwb nav, I think that’s very hmong value you know, I think that whether you are a man or a woman, you know, lawv tsis, lawv tsi tuaj caw yus lawv tsi tuaj thov yus, you would never go any way so, so I don’t have a problem with speaking out publicly as long as it’s in my public role, you know, and if they want you know caw kuv mus ask niam Lwm hais los that’s fine, but most of the time they are not interested in that part of my life, unless it affects them so....

I: Puag ta thaum pib koj hais tias koj, tam sim no koj muaj ib tug tub lawm, ws hais txog kev npaj tsev neeg los npaj tias me tub me nyuam los ntawd yeej yog neb ob leeg hauj lwm, lawv yog neb kev txiav txim siab muaj tub kiv los, los li cas xwb?

M : Well, hais txog ntawm yus tsev neeg kiaj xwb mas yeej yog yus thiab yus tus txiv txiav txim siab hais tias seb yuav yug pes tsawg leej thiab yuav pes tsawg tus tub tus ntxhais, tab sis, ntuj pub li cas ces yus txawm yuav tau li ntawd thiab xwb nav, thiab kuv, kuv yeej paub hais tias lawv, cov laus mas txawm, txawm yog niam tais yawm txiv, txawm yog niam pog txiv yawg los lawv yeej tsis xav kom yus yug coob zog nav, tab sis mas nyob teb chaws no ces ab tsi los nyiaj xwb es yoga tias yog yus xav tu es hais tias kom yus cov me nyuam muaj li luag tej thiab kom nws mus kawn ntaub kawm ntawv tau li luag tej no ces yus yeej yuav ts tau npaj
I: Number six, you know.

M: Yes...that’s right, my sister has to do number 6, she only has one son and, and again you know I recognize that's tremendously sexist. At the same time, I recognize that you yus tsi muaj kwv tij naj, it’s a real sadness in our community, you yus tsi muaj kwv tij no yus ua tshoob ua kos, yus ua neeb, you yus ua ab tsi los yus tsi muaj kwv tij ces, yus txawm hais kom cov kwv, kwv tij co tij laug cov, cov tub tuaj los it’s not the same as having two of the same kind. You know there are a lot of considerations. I think each couple just has to lay down the law and figure out what they want to do.

I: Raws li koj piav tas ntawd, koj yeej ua hauj lwm hauv tsev neeg los ua, nraum los ua, ntawm koj tus kheej xwb koj xav hais tias koj muab tej no los xyuas tas nrho tib si, lub caij twg lawm koj puas nco ib lub caij los ib lub caij nyoog es koj pom tau hais tias luag sab nrudu los yog, koj tsev neeg los yog, cov zej zog lawv hawm koj tshaj, los yog respect koj tshaj yog lub sij hawm twg?

M: Oh, well, it’s really tough, because I think that hmong women are so much more disrespected than they are respected...a lot ways. I think, ib lub sij hawm es zoo li hais tias tib neeg saib yus muaj nuj nqi yog thauv yus kawm ntaub kawm ntawv tiav nav, los yog tias yus ua ib yam ab tsi tseem ceeb xws li thauv Nas Phaus yuav kaw es thawj, lub xoom es xuv thaib es hmoob thiab nplog nyob hauv es kuv mus, kuv mus kaw xoom.

I went because I cared about the women and children in the camp, and I did what no other hmong people could do before, which was, form the relationships politically to get into the camp, and to work with the families there, and I like to joke that maybe I'm one of the first hmong woman that general Vang Pao really hated...I think it’s kind of true because I did what they couldn’t do. I get access to the camp, and I was there for over two months. I think I accomplished a lot of good, just in term of qhiba lawv txog teb chaws meskas thiab tsi tas li ntawd getting them shoes, getting them the right kind bags to bring their belongings in;
and these were the people left behind from over 20 years ago es cov tsi kam tuaj teb chaws Meskas li and they were so starved for information and news from the United States. I think created a lot of contraversies, but I think I also felt very respected because it was because of who I was, that I was able to go, you know, and who I was in terms of lobbying and my personality. And the fact that I was willing to take some risks that, very few Hmong people are willing to take. And so I felt really respected then, that was a very public role for me and, I felt tremendously disrespected at the same time because, yus mus ua tag los, you know, lawv tseem ua video cem yus, ho…lawv tseem muab yus lub npe hai tsis zoo rau tom, rau sawv daws you know. But I think the most important thing for me though was getting those, 6 thousand people out and, and that was very important, I think that if I never do anything again my life with my public policy degree, I think it was worth it, because I don’t know anybody could have done it and I don’t think it was a sole effort on my part. It had a lot of other people who involved, but I was the first one to get in there and that was very important for me.

I: So you talked a little bit about the backlash that you experience as a result of that were there any other times when you felt that you were disrespected solely based on your gender?

M: Oh yeah, I mean the whole thing about mus xoom Nas Phaus nav, the thing that, people talked about, of course, was, koj saib nws yog ib tug poj niam, me nyuam ntxhais xwb es nws tseem mus tau thiab. They were all mad…Jane Hamilton Merrit, the women who wrote tragic mountain was mad at us, but what I think… I feel disrespected every time I hear something happening to Hmong women that affects every hmong women, like kuv muaj ib tus txiv ntxawm nav, nws yuav poj niam li 15 xyoo tej ntawd sij muab nrauj, ces nws yuav ib tus tshiab los, ces tam sim no ces nws txog tus niam thib peb lawm nav ces thaum nws, yuav nws tus niam thib ob nws sij hais rau kuv hais tias me ntxhais nawb koj tsi txhob yuav meskas nawb. Hais niaj hnub hais li, pom kuv qhov twg los hais, ntsib kuv tom tshav npaas los hais, ntsib kuv tom tshiab peb caug los hais. Xyoo tag los lawm, tseb no nav, ces nws nrauj nws tus poj niam, ces nws rov qab yuav tus poj niam tshiab thiab nav, a little 16 years old, and I was so mad at him. The thing is, I think I take that personally.

I see that as disrespect to all women, but I also have been in meetings where you nyob es yus hais kieg tas los lawm txawm, tsaawm tsis ua li yus hais tias, even though you know that you’re right, you know, and they just ignored you, and at the same meeting it’s the same thing happening all over again and everybody figures you know oh she’s women she must not know what she’s talking about, and yet it’s the same conclusion every meeting and … oh gosh… one year I helped plan the New Year that was how all the meetings went and I just got so fed up and talk about disrespect. It’s disrespect through discounting and also that poj niam nav, they don’t have a voice and I get really bothered when, when I’m
sitting at the table es lawv yeej txhob txwm caw yus mus nav, tab sis yus hais npa li cas los zoo li lawv lag ntseg lawm. They won’t hear you.

I: So it kinda gets back to a lot of our culture where like even at our weddings the bride is not at the negotiation table.

M: Well yeah, exactly and they only need the men there, so I think I feel disrespected every time something like that happens, which is why I feel so strongly that yes, there are situations when, zoo li hais tias thau m ib pawg kvw tij tuaj nyob ntawd es tsi yog yus nab thib hais nav tab sis mas kuv mas kuv yeej hais hais rau leej twg los hais tag nrho li people get sick of me cause I’m always out there.

I: Okay, we were just talking about women’s role and your thought on that were, I just want take you back a little bit to the war and the refugee experience now koj hais tias….

M: Ces yus yeej tsi nco qab ntau thiab tab sis mas yus tsua nco qhov hais tias kom yus nyob ntsiag to es kom yus tsi txhob hais ib los lus los quaj. Kuv nco kuv tsi nco ntau thiab tab sis kuv nco hais lub teb chaws zoo li cas, thiab thau m peb khiav ntawd yus, yus nco qhov ntshai ntshai qhov hais tias muaj ib zaug es Nyab Laj tuaj poob peb lub zos. Thau m ntawd peb Hlob Yias, kuv txiv tus tij laug tseem nyob, thiab tab sis kuv txiv tsi nyob lawm. Kuv txiv mus ua nais khu lawm, ces kuv niam thiab peb pog thiab peb xwb nav, cov me nyuam ntxhais nyob xwb ces, Nyab Laj tuaj ces peb khiav nav, ces thau m i kuv, kuv mas kuv xav hais tias yog npau suav xwb no tab sis kuv, tau ob peb xyoo rauh los lawm kuv noog kuv niam na, kuv niam hais tias yeej muaj tiag no. Then yus xav hais tias yus npau suav xwb no, tab sis yeej muaj tiag.

Peb khiav khiav ces kuv tshaib tshaib plab, kuv sij quaj nav puas yog, thiab kuv sij mos taub hau nav, es peb tus Hlob ntawd nws, nws saib na has muaj ib co ntshauv nkag cuag cas ntawm kuv lub taub haus nav, ces kuv sij muab zuaj, ces kuv sij quaj ces nws muab cov niag txiv hlais rau kuv noj. Kuv nco qab qhov ntawd thiab kuv nco qab qhov es hais tias, ws zoo li yus hnov tsw kub nyhiab los puas yog yus mus tom tej es yus tsw, tsw li Nplog teb. Kuv qhia tsi tau rau koj thiab, tab sis mas yog hais tias yus rov qab hnov qhov tsw no ces yeej paub hais tias yog ab tsi, tab sis qhov es ntshai ntshai peb khiav ntawd yog peb khiav ib hnu hib hmo es rov tig los txog tib qho chaw qub nav rau qhov peb tsi paub xyov peb khiav rau qhov twg, so we landed in same place, and it was very scary because we came to the almost exact same spot to that we were before because we had gotten lost and that’s what I remember. I don’t remember much the refugee camp experience at all …

I: Do you, recall, nej nyob hauv xoom tau hov ntev xwb nej mam tuaj teb chaws no?

M: Ws, peb nyob yuav luag tau ib xyooos.
Peb khiav thaum xyoo 75, thaum teb chaws tawg kiaj ces peb nyob Xoom Naab Nyaus, tab sis thaum lub sjaw hawm ntawd ws, ws zoo li uas Hmoob khiav ces uh tsi tau muaj xoom nav rau qhov cov international agency lawv tsi tau mus hauv mus ua tsev tej ntawd nav ces mus nyob ntawm ib sab roob xwb nav, ces kuv txiv mus saib nyuj, hos yus si nav ces yus tsi nco qab hais tias txawv li cas nav, yeah.

I: Uas thaum koj txog koj, koj pom ho txawv li cas thiab koj pom hais tias qhov twg yog qhov nyuab rau koj?

M : Well, I was pretty young, I think the hard part for me was understanding why the people look so different. I mean my first memory of coming to the United States is getting off the plane, you know the hallway into the airport and there was a Thai woman there who looked like us and then there were all these white people there with really big noses who were really tall and I got a Barbie, and MaySong got a Barbie, my sister Naly got Raggety Ann and she kept crying. I just remember things like that and I remember playing with the kids next door es lawv yog mev nav, you know, lawv hais lus meskas tsi tshua meej thiab nav, thiab yus, thaum ntawv ces yus tsi paub, but we played Wonder Woman, and then I did have wait almost a year to go to school, but do remember learning English, you know, I remember when I was little I was playing with the kids next door. Lawv muab kuv tso ntawm monkey bars nav, you know and I didn’t know the word for “let go”, and I was terrified cause one of the older kids tsaws kuv rau sau xwb nav, es this girl, this mexican girl next door kept saying, let go, I’m, “what does let go mean”and I finally I got so tired and I let go but I never forgot what let go meant after that, and then, I think just adjusting to speaking two languages, one at school and one at home rau qhov wb cov neighbor yog Meskas thiab..

Yus nyuam qhuav tuaj txog, they thought you were so cute because yus me nyuam Hmoob and they haven’t seen any Asian before in Milwaukee at that time, and we were the first Hmong family in Milwaukee, Wisconsin so, everybody just thought we were darling but it was hard to balance…I remember when I first went to Kindergarten, es, they make you take a nap in the afternoon, kuv los txog tsev es kuv qhia kuv niam hais tias kuv yuav daim ntau puas, es pw no nav, es nws tsi paub nav…she didn’t know, cause she didn’t know what school was like, she didn’t understand that for Kindergarten there was an hour nap after lunch. Well, I cried because I was one of those little kids that had to put my head down on the table and sleep instead of laying down, and I just wanted to be like all the other kids, and so kuv quaj nav ib yam kuv tsi paub piav rau kuv niam hais tias yuav daim uas i zoo li cas, thaum ntawd yus me me aiv thiab ces yus tsi…

I: Oh cause you needed a blanket to lay down…

M : Yeah…

I: You didn’t have a blanket so you lay on the table….
M: Yeah, that’s right cause you know there were these mats you’re parents were supposed to buy them and provide for the kids. I realized that my mom and dad could not understand what I was going through at school and I was 5 and I just kept crying kuv yuav li, kuv yuav li cov me nyuam meskas muaj. They just seemed like they didn’t care…I’m sure that they didn’t understand what I was talking about either..

I: Speaking of like changes and adjustments overall koj puas xav hais tias peb tuaj txog teb chaws no nws zoo dua rau poj niam hmoob los yog tseem li qub xwb los li cas?

M: Well I think in a lot of ways it’s a lot better for Hmong women and in some ways we also made it harder for Hmong women, because thaum yus lub ntuj es tsuas kawg ntawm yus lub zos xwb nav, yus tsi pom lwm yam ces yus tsi paub ntshaw nav hais tias ntshe kuv yuav ua li nov, li nov tab sis tuaj txog lawm ces lub ntuj loj heev li lawm ces yus pom hais tias all over the world you see the struggle of people, and I think education…your mind broadens, it also constricts you in some ways cause…you have to learn to identify the boundaries just like what said before about do you serve water to this person or you don’t can let your husband do it. In Laos, poj niam hmoob, they knew their role you know this it, this what you do and why would you question that I think now there are a lot possibilities and I think especially for cov poj niam or a lot older it’s a lot harder for them because they don’t understand the reality. They understood one reality of the world and their here and now they have to understand completely new reality. For woman like my mother who are, who are in there 50’s it’s very difficult for them to understand for woman who are like me in my 20’s it’s great because there, there are tremendous opportunities and possibilities it’s also very frustrating to see, to see that the inequalities, and you want to rectify it and you know there are no easy answers and I see the negotiation between older women and younger women to be very difficult you know because, you know what if the right solution for one family it may not be the right solution for another family and I still see a lot of me nyuam ntxhais hmoob who are restricted by their parents narrow you know maybe I’m one of them I mean think, yes, my parents are progressive in certain ways especially because kuv txiv ib txwm yog ib tus tib neeg es kawm ntaub kawm ntawv, nws pom hais tias txawm yog tub txawm yog ntxhais los yus mus, yus tso mus kawm ntaub kawm ntawv deb npaum li cas los it’s fine. Some girls they don’t have that advantage, but they still, complain and cry about the fact that nws tsi muaj tub nav es txog thaum kawg es nws yuav tuag yog ab tsi es leej twg yuav mus tha nws nav, it’s still his one issue. So I think that, that yes, it is better overall that I think that there is so much to be worked out I don’t say that is better for all women but in terms of opportunities it is a lot better.

I: Different struggles different being in the United States, are you, have you become a citizen?

M: Yes.
I: And do you, take part in voting for individuals who seek public offices and if you do what are thoughts or impression of the, peb cov hmoob es hos tau muaj qhov cuab yeej los muaj qhov hais tias lawv xav pov npe sib xeebm nrog lawv cov, lwv haiv neeg tuav public offices los yog tuav tsoom fvwv offices nrog cov states county mus los tib si txog rau senator tej ntawd thiab?

M: Well I do vote regularly and I see it as a opportunity for me to make a difference. Hmong people and hais txog cov tib neeg es nws, nws mus ua nyob political office I think I really admire them whether or not,you know they represent my views because I recognize the tremendous accomplishment in trying to build consenses. It’s been a really valuable experience for peb cov hmoob nav, and I think that maybe even now, zoo li hais tias koj candidate, zoo li Cua Yaj nws mus school board, cov txiv uas muab nws cem cem cem cem, es lawm hais tias "Niag poj niam no es nws, niag poj niam no es nws, nws los qhov twg los es nws cia li uh tau mus ua nom tswv lawm nav?" They don’t totally didn’t like her and, for me, I was so greatful so because it was like txawm hais tias tus tib neej no nws tsi muaj quha hub npa li yus siab nyiam los puas yog hais tias nws tsi yog txiv neeg li yus siab nyiam, it doesn’t matter nws muaj peev xwm ua ib yam ab tsi tshiab rau peb cov hmoob nav. Txawm yog li cas los nws yog ib lub suab es txawv rau ntawm cov meskas dawb nav, I think that’s really important.

I: Do you think that leadership overall has change for you now being nyob teb chaws no compared to other Hmong women and are they changed for Hmong women overall or still the same?

M: Yeah, I don’t know if I could say how it was in Laos but I do know that when the war broke out that there were already women who were starting to go to school and have jobs. Yes granted los yog cov tib neeg, poj niam es cov ntxhais es yog tias nom tswv lawv cov ntxhais xwb tam sis mas, txawm yog ib los they, they were the first and I think that they were already starting to change some of the leadership structure there and now women like us who are now in the United States have even just changed it some more and, and I think that what’s change about it, it’s not only that the leadership is becoming more women but it’s also becoming younger, you know rau qhov peb qhov value system mas hais tias yog yus laus ces yus thiaj li paub xwb no nav, tab sis mas uh peb mus kwaw ntaub kawm ntawv, I think that gives an edge lawv cov laus los noog yus cov hluas thiab nav tias yuav ua li cas, yog hais tias muaj qhov teeb meem zoo li no es yuav ua li cas no nav ces I think that young people, especially young women who, who are done with college they have a tremendous responsibility now interms of taking leadership maybe not inside the clan system but certainly with their families. I don’t know that everything has to come back to the clan anymore either, because you know yog tias muaj teeb meem li cas no los cov kww tij lawv yeej hu tuaj noog kuv thiab nav, tsi yog hais tias lawv yuav hu es you know tsi yog laww yuav tuaj thov yus es hais tias hlív ib khob cawv yus haus los cas es yus mam pab pab laww tab sis mas yog muaj ab tsi lawv yeej hu tuaj laww hais
tias Maiv Kaus yog muaj teeb meem li no es køj yuav xav li cas tiab rau qhov noog noog ob peb tus lawv lawv tsi paub lawm thiab es txawm yog tsis paub ntaub ntwv, txawm yog tsi paub ab tsi los lawv yeej hu yu thiab nav. So I think that is a change in leadership.

I: So, there is maybe a change or shifting of how the clan actually work through a more, you think it, it’s more individualized now verses the strict clan decision conflict?

M : Yeah, I think that if you talked to older Hmong men they would still like to believe that oh yes the traditional system is at work but you know, my clan doesn’t even work like that anymore. My dad is the leader of our clan and hack if something happens I’m there and he knows that I know more than most people and he doesn’t think anything of it now when he calls me to meetings los yog yus mus sab laj txog cov yau los puas yog tias yus sab laj txog teeb meem tom tej los you know nws yeej hu yus mus thiab yog kuv txiv. tsi nyob ntwd lawm los yeej muaj tej lub sib haaw hais tias cov kwv tij es uh lawv tsi paub mus nhriaab leej twg ces lawv yeej tuaj nrog yus than, it is never that formal like ib pawg kwv tij kind of discussion but I think that women are being more and more utilized internally. I think it’s just that men ah refused to acknowledge that’s happening, I really do because I see so many educated hmong women and their families just depend on them so much if they didn’t exist…

I: There would be dealings here and there…

M : Yeah, exactly, dealings with all the crisis whether it’s with their siblings in the past yog tias mauj teeb meem li ntwd nav, lawv yeej tsi hu yus ua ib tus ntxhais li nav, especially yog tias yus mus ua Hmoob Ham lawm, lawv yeej tsis xam hais tias yus yog hmoob Yaj li lawv yeej tsi hu yus tuaj nyob ntwd li nav tab sis lub sj hawm hloov thiab ces I think that they are asking more and more for women, daughters to play role in, in their families, and I think the other things that is sort of balancing out too is, you know the distinction between kwv tij thiab neej tsa nav it is blending a little bit. I know that for people in my dad’s generation neej tsa mas they always take on the lesser role of kwv tij mas they always took on a greater role but, I don’t know if that’s so true anymore. I see in a lot families where it’s balancing out. I mean it’s a lot more equal and I think that when that balance happens what, what we see is increase value in daughters because they are still you’re daughter vim qhov es kuv txiv chim tsaj plaws es yus mus yuav txiv ces yog hais tias yus mus ua lawv haiv Hmoob es yus mus ua lawv xeem Hmoob es nws muaj ab tsi los nws hu tsi tau yus nav tab sis mas niaj hnub no nws yeej tseem hu yus thiab, ces I think that’s a good thing.

I: With all the discussions we had in your opinion, ntwm køj tus kheej xwb, køj xav hais tias, yog køj yuav qhia tau los yog yuav piav tau kom, ib qhov ab tsi kom sawv daws pom tau hais tias, thiab tias poj niam hmoob no contributed rau peb haiv hmoob no, tej yam ab tsi xwb køj pom tau hais tias what public contribution
M: Well, I think there are a lot of things you can say broadly but, I think for myself and maybe because I’m the only one that can talk about that I think that in each job that I have had, I tried to make a mark with each thing that I’ve done I tried to make a mark and whether… I was the first Hmong girl nationally to study overseas I mean for whole year in Germany I was 16. I think that I made it possible for so many Hmong girls es lawv ntshaw qhov ntawd, es hais tias mus pom lub teb chaws txawv, mus even for a summer or week with a scholarship, so parents lawv awv pom nab they just, they just you know they just don’t want to allow their girls to go anywhere and I think that when I went and I came back safely, I carved a path for cov me nyuam ntxhais hmoob who are related to me or who knew of me, Maiv Kaus twb lawm mas, it just made it so much more accessible for, for Hmong girls and, and than. I think that because I was actually I think in the Twin Cities area the first Hmong girl go study so far away for college and even today cov niam thiab txiv Hmoob los lawv yeej tsis nyiam kom lawv cov ntxhais mus kawm ntawv deb li nav but when I went there people were convinced that I was come back pregnant in fact thuam kuv mus kawm ntawv nyob Germany, muaj ib niag yawg Hmoob Yaj es xyov nws tuaj qhov twg tuaj es nws muab kuv cem nav, thiab nws cem kuv cem nkawv, thiab nws cem cov Hmoob Yaj tag nrho nav, nws yog hmoob Yaj, thiab nws hais tias uh cov tub Hmoob Yaj dua qhov twg tas lawm tu li cas es kuv ua ib tug khaub ntxhais xwb es kuv tseem ua tej yam es zoo li nov es tsu muaj cov tub es ntse nyob qhov twg li lawm nav, es peb cov ntxhais thiab li tus niag khaub ntxhais xwb es tseem, tseem keej tshaj nej lawm thiab es nej mas…he just said I’m just so ashamed of all you guys, and it was terrible, because he was a guy who, who is older…but it didn’t matter because I went to Germany. I came back. I was fine, and I went to college I came back I was fine, and I think that each time something like that happens it opens up the path for other girls and I have so many hmong girls come up to me…

I was coordinating Hmoob Thaj Yeeb and even just conferences and staff and they come up and say oh god, thank god there are women like you out there because you’re my only hope because my parents don’t understand me when I tried to do things. It’s so difficult and there’s so much opposition and cov niam txiv hmoob muab kuv cem, because I’m doing this kind of job, and I just say, what you do what you think is best because every step that you take is a real gain for not just poj niam but you as a individual and, and I think being hired at St. Pual public housing it’s such a high level position you know it is a kind of like a slap in the face because in some ways rau cov txiv neej hmoob because they feel that yus yog ib tus ntxhais Hmong xwb es yus yog ib tus poj niam xwb es ua cas es uh yuav mus tau tej txoj hauj lwm es siab ua luaj ntawd nav, and if I was a man
I’m sure that, I’d be getting invitations to speak to all over the place because it’s such a high level position but because I’m a woman I think that people are more like oh how did that happen, because ...(laugh)... look at people like Lee Pao na, just being on the council and being at Concordia, those aren’t even positions where, where you have so much influence and I think if people were really to think about it, they would say god…that’s quiet an accomplishment because you’re a woman they just go oh gees how did that happen and that happens a lot with women, even internally within the structure cov Hmoob es nrog yus ua hauj Iwm nav they, they still think that because all of them are men, men think that it should be men but lawv yeej tsis hais ncaj nraim rau yus that’s not gonna happen but I mean I guess my point is that, whenever a women like me or like you, makes a decision to make a career move and it is up, it proves something to txiv neej Hmoob, to the world, and to other Hmong women that it can be done. I think that, that is a public contribution that we make as individual and that, that is what I think we can hope for it and I know Cua Yaj nav, when she went she on the school board it’s because nws muaj peev xwm nav, tsi yog hais tias, yeah she may not have all the skills necessary or whatever, but nws tho tau txoj hauv kev for new help and you know and the fact that woman went before a man, oh my gosh, (laugh)... that’s just ridiculious, for Neal to have to follow the footstep of a woman, and I think that each time a man has to follow a footstep of a woman who is in leadership that is a real public contribution because it has shown people that, that women are smart and they can do things that, that maybe people never thought were possible for women and that to me it’s very impressive. So, I think because we have increasing numbers of women who are doing that whether or not they’re doing in a big way, I mean people may not think so much of women who become teachers aides or becomes like just teachers or nurses the things is, every time a little girl meets a Hmong woman who is a nurse she going get excited to that wow!!, she’s a nurse and maybe, I can be too…

I: Something like that.

M : Oh yeah, and that’s very important and I think that’s what we contribute to our daughters and to the world and to the hmong community.

I: We’ll probably have female senator before we have a male senator….

M : Maybe.. yeah..maybe..

I: Just wrapping a little bit here. Was there anything else los yog koj puas muaj Iwm yam ab tsi koj xav ntxiv kaw khaws cia?

M : Well I think the only thing that I would add is that I think people under estimate Hmong women all the time and, and one of my goals and in really try to get this project going is to really document poj niam and their stories, and the fact that they are so smart and have accomplished so much and, and I hope that at least from, from the older hmong women we get a picture of how they were because,
yus xav hais tias yus niam thiab yus txiv lawv nav, es leej twg yog tus es uh muaj peev xwm tshaj plaws nav I think I have to say that my mom, because when you think about it, how hard it is for us to raise children now, and than to take that leap into raising children in a completely foreign country and still makes everything seem okay for their kids and I think that’s great and yog koj nrog cov laus tham nav lawv yeej hais tias you know kuv yeej hais tias kuv lub neeg ces tag lawm thiab tab sis mas kuv xav kom kuv cov me n’yuam txawj ntse kom lawv ua neej zoo kom lawv muaj li luag tej kom lawm n’to npe, that is all the hopes that parents have for their kids but to me it, it’s mothers that make it reality because we are the ones that spends majority of our time doing all the childcare and…

I: All the behind the scenes stuff…

M: Oh yeah, all the behind the scenes stuff and what happened when the men went off to war, well the women were left to take care of everything else, and I think they did a really good job. I think women like us are testaments to their strength and I hope that through with this project, people will really remember that the most important thing that we do is not all the material things but who we really leave behind the kinds of legacy we have as a people, and to me the people legacy is the women and the kids and how they grow up, and what they become so I that, that’s a general contribution I think that women really make that I think it’s really underestimated and the fact that you have to have smart women to raise smart kids, and that it's not a good argument to not educate girls too because their going go out and marry out of the clan and you won’t be any better to educate a girl or whatever.

I: Okay, thank you.