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.
MAO THAO YANG

BO THAO

MAI VANG THAO

Photo by Dawn Villella
BO THAO                                  MAYKAO HANG

Photo by Petronella Yisma
An Interview with

Bo Thao
Narrator

MayKao 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.
Bo Thao

MH: January 17th the year 2000. This is an oral interview with Bo Thao conducted by MayKao Hang. I’m going to ask you questions about your background.

BT: Okay.

MH: What is your married name, what is your clan name?

BT: I am from the Thao clan.

MH: You are not married, are you?

BT: No, I am not.

MH: How old are you now?

BT: I am 26.

MH: Do you have any children?

BT: No.

MH: What is the highest level of education you have completed?

BT: I have an undergraduate, a bachelor’s degree in Family Social Science, and I am working on my master’s.

MH: Okay. What kind of job do you have right now?

BT: Oh, you are asking me? I was talking.

MH: Yes, what kind of job do you have?

BT: I am working for the Department of Labor and Industry. My job is to look at how the department is serving people of color, such as, African Americans and Asian Americans. The Department of Labor and Industry enforces and regulates workplace safety and labor issues, such as, about people’s rights in the workplace. My job is to see that their services are also accessible to communities of color.

MH: What is your income range? $20,000 or below, $20 to $50,000, $50 to $75,000 or $75 to $100,000?

BT: 20 to 50.
MH: What is your current living situation? Are you living by yourself or with a spouse, other family members, or with non-relatives?

BT: I am living with my parents.

MH: I asked you before if you were married, and you’re single?

BT: Yes, I have never been married.

MH: How many years have you been in the United States?

BT: Let’s see. I’ve been here for twenty years. We came in December 1979, so twenty years.

MH: Where were you born?

BT: In Luang Phrabang, in Laos.

MH: Okay.

BT: In Laos.

MH: What category of Hmong do you belong to?

BT: We are Stripe Hmong.

MH: Stripe Hmong, right?

BT: Yes.

MH: What is your religious affiliation?

BT: When we first came, we were sponsored by the churches, so when we arrived here, my parents went to church. My parents were even baptized. However, I think, as time passed they attended church less and eventually stopped going to church.

When I was little my parents went to church, so I just went with them. But when my siblings and I got older my parents told us that it was our choice. They said they took us when we were little, but when we grow up we could decide whether or not we wanted to attend church.

So, when I was in college I stopped going. Now I don’t practice either traditional or Christianity. For younger Hmong persons, such as myself, practicing the old ways is difficult, because we don’t know enough. Of course when my parents held ceremonies with shamans or had soul calling ceremonies (hu plig) I helped, but I was only there as an
observer. If I were to fully practice animism today I don’t think I could do it. I don’t know enough.

As for going to church, I don’t go either. I don’t know what I should be practicing, so I don’t do either.

**MH:** Now I am going to ask you about your childhood.

**BT:** Okay.

**MH:** Did you go to school when you were little?

**BT:** Let’s see. In Laos, I was about three years old when we fled to Thailand. I was too young, so I don’t remember much. I do remember going to school for like one week only.

We had a younger sister, who was very sick, so the elders were taking care of her. When she got so sick, everyone became depressed and worried, and did not pay much attention to see if we were going to school or not. Soon we just didn’t go to school anymore. That is my first memory of school. We arrived in this country when I was six years old, and I started in first grade.

**MH:** So since then, you’ve attended school in the United States?

**BT:** Yes.

**MH:** When you were a child, what were your duties at home?

**BT:** I think, because I am a daughter, I was taught what most Hmong girls were taught. For example, cleaning the house, and getting up to cook breakfast. When I was too little to know better, they would tell me to do whatever my mother did. Like learning how to do the handiworks (paj ntaub). My mother and older women would thread the needle, and give it to me to play with, and eventually I learned. So, that is what I remember—doing things like that.

**MH:** Did you perform any community services?

**BT:** When I was strong enough to help out, my parents would take me along when relatives had gatherings or other ceremonies like that. If I didn’t know what to do, my parents would tell me to just ask the elders what they needed help with. When we were still going to church, we were part of the youth choir, so we would go to sing at people’s homes during funerals.

**MH:** As a girl, what are some skills that you were taught?

**BT:** As I’ve said, as a daughter, they taught me to keep the home clean and in order—how to cook and sew. These are things that my parents were taught are roles for girls.
They were taught this way, so in their minds they did not think girls could go far or achieve much. They believed that if you were a girl you had to be skilled in these things in order for someone to marry you.

When I returned home from school they would say, “Oh, come and cook first.” You know—they never told me to do my homework first. In second or third grade, they wanted us to go and learn how to dance, because that was pretty and it was what all girls did. [Laughs]

MH: What are some social activities that you remember from when you were a child?

BT: See, I was already six years old when we arrived in this country. The things that I did for fun were jump rope with rubber bands and playing rocks. You know, things like that. Those were Hmong games.

When I went to school Caucasian children were different. They played differently, so I tried to learn their games too. I went roller-skating and things like that. When I was with my Hmong friends, I played Hmong games, but when I was with my American friends, they didn’t play those games.

In school, it’s different because American children didn’t do that. They jumped rope, or you know, they played hopscotch—things like that. So, I participated in two kinds of activities. Those were the differences.

We first arrived in Chicago when many Hmong families were also arriving there, so we had many relatives, and I played with their children.

MH: What were your aspirations as a child? What did you think you wanted to do or be when you grew up?

BT: When I was little, my parents could not have seen the future, so they only taught me what they knew. I was too young to have a vision of the future, and didn’t think beyond my present. I had a very Hmong childhood, because my parents have never gone to school. They taught me things like how to cook and clean, because that’s what they were taught men wanted in a wife. For a Hmong girl, the ultimate goal is to be married. That’s what I thought my future would be, and I really didn’t think beyond that.

The first memories I have of actually thinking about what I wanted to become was in second grade when our teacher asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” She wanted us to draw pictures, so I drew a nurse or a teacher—because those were professions for women, you know.

Those were the things I first thought about. However, when I came and talked to my parents about it, and told them what our teacher asked us, my parents would say, “Don’t be silly, women cannot do those things!” It was very confusing. When I got into high
school, that’s when I became more serious about what I wanted to be. I began realizing that I had many opportunities, and could be a lot more than what I saw.

Our family has never had a girl who received a higher education degree. Not only that, the sons who have tried also failed to graduate, so our close relatives were not hopeful that any sons or daughters could accomplish this task. They didn’t even talk about it at all. I never heard any talk of college except in school. My friends and I would talk about it, and I would think, “Oh yes, I could do that.”

I was fortunate; because when I was in high school I had a really good group of Hmong girl friends. It seemed as though every one was very ambitious, and we would always talk about this and that about the future. That was odd, [laughs] because there had never been a group of Hmong girls who talked about these dreams for the future.

MH: That’s actually a good lead into our next section, which is talking about Hmong women’s roles. What kinds of work do you consider as Hmong women’s work?

BT: I think my mother’s generation was different than our present generation. In my mother’s generation, their roles were very specific. For example, when I am with them and I do something, they would tell me, “No, this is or is not women’s work.”

When we were growing up, my mom would never let my brother do chores that were supposedly women’s work. She said my sisters and I are daughters, so we must do the household chores. For example, when we all got home from school, everyone had homework, but she would tell my brother to go finish his homework, and tell my sisters and I that we had to cook first—things like that. If the house was messy, my dad would say, “The house is so messy, clean up!” He sat right there, but he wouldn’t clean it up, because he saw that as women’s work.

The Hmong people have had this belief for so long that the elders see that as a way of life. That is what they know. They believed that women’s roles are as homemakers and caretakers of the children. They see it is as something to be proud of that when people come to your home, they can’t say anything bad about how you keep your home.

Women try to cover up the messiness of the home (material and emotional messiness), while men are the ones that go outside of the home, and are the only ones who can say anything outside of the home. That was something that I saw all my life growing up.

Often I observed that my parents would talk about things at home first, but when outside, it was only my father (and the men) who could speak on decisions. I know my mother contributes in many aspects, but when outside of the home, my father is the only one who can say anything. Men are the only ones who are supposed to think outside of the home.

When it comes to making any decisions, my mother accepts this role. If someone asks for her opinion she would respond, “Oh, I don’t know. I have to talk with my husband to see what he says. He will let you know.” She never gives the answer herself. [Laughs] She is
like that, but I think we, the generation who grew up in this country, are different. Especially me, because according to Hmong customs I am an old maid, or whatever the term is, because I am an adult, and still not married. If we talk about what my role is, it’s very different because I can and do think for myself. If people ask me things, I can answer for myself and say, “This is what I think...” or, “This is best for me.” However, for the elders, it’s different.

**MH:** So, would you say that when women make decisions with their families they do it internally, but when they go out into the public, then they leave that to the men. In your father’s extended family (kwv tij), is it the same?

**BT:** Yes, I think…

**MH:** Or your mother’s family (neej tsa)?

**BT:** Yes, within our family and extended family when there is a meeting my dad has to attend. He then comes back and shares information about the meeting with my mom. She is a very strong person, and often stands up for her views.

So, I get that from her. She tells my dad if she sees something is not right. She will say, “What you are doing is not right.” She often tells my dad what she thinks. Of course, only the men are invited, so my father is the one who talks, but if he does something wrong, and she hears about it she will say, “You should not say such a thing like that to them!”

So those are things I’ve observed and heard, I remember a time when my uncle was attending a family meeting and he said, “You are young and have good ideas, why don’t you go with us to the meeting to see what we need to do for the Thao clan?” I agreed to go, but when I arrived at the meeting my uncles just said, “Welcome daughter, we are glad you are here, please help serve us drinks.” [Laughs] Obviously, they saw what role was fitting for me. They did not expect that I would go sit at their same table and talk with them, and they conducted the meeting without me.

I try to be respectful, because I know that the Hmong people have not had these roles in the past. Unmarried daughters have not participated in these processes before. We are a new group in America. They don’t know what to do with us. They don’t know if they should be happy that we’ve attained our education, or sad that we’re not married yet. [Laughs]

**MH:** So, who are some women in leadership roles and how are they seen in the community?

**BT:** I think women in leadership are people like you and I. People who work in other capacities, not just for the Hmong people, but work in the mainstream community as well, and can make decisions. We don’t involve ourselves just with our own families, but work for the community at large as well.
This is something new for our Hmong people. If we talk about problems within the Hmong community, then many elders still do not believe that we (women) are smart enough to be part of the solution yet. The elders don’t see us as leaders who can make decisions. Maybe they see us as unqualified to be leaders, but in the mainstream community, we are able to take jobs that may require us to make decisions for the public.

In our outside jobs, we may be asked to decide on what is good for the Hmong; however, when we return to our families we still don’t have decision-making power. So, many Hmong women have dual decision-making roles—one within the family and one outside.

MH: This is relevant to Laos and here. What did women do to support the families? I guess you can answer that for now too.

BT: I think back in Laos, the community lived an agrarian culture, so everybody had to help each other out. Families had to work hard in the fields, and women played an important necessary role in doing household chores. The men—it’s like hunting and gathering—where men and women had very specific roles. Even in this country, I think women work outside the home, because everything is money. If you depend on just one person’s income, it’s often not possible. I think the thing that is different is that women now work hard to help make money.

Hmong women have accomplished a lot since first arriving in this country. After being in the U.S. for about two or three months, my parents started working, but during the summer my mother still gardened. She did not get any money for doing that, but it was a way to bring extra food, like vegetables, to help the family. She planted vegetables, so that she did not have to buy them. My father worked, and he didn’t help her out much with the gardening. They both worked, but on the weekends, my mother still farmed to support our family.

MH: How were families planned, and what kind of things do women do to have fewer children?

BT: As I’ve said, things are changing, and it’s different now too. Back then, medical facilities were not accessible, so having a child did not mean the baby would survive. Women gave birth to as many children as they could. In addition, they were farmers and needed the help.

In this country it’s harder, because many Hmong women don’t know that having too many children too often can damage their health. I’ve worked for health clinics before, and when the doctor would ask me to translate to Hmong women, who had nine or ten children already, about the option of birth control, often the women refused. They said they wanted as many children as their body would allow. They did not think about their health. They grew up thinking that as women, they had to have children, so they did not consider birth control.
As for myself, I think unfortunately, that everything here involves money, and even I have to plan to see how many children I can afford to raise. The elders have told me that I need to get married soon, so I can have children, but I can barely take care of myself, how can I take care of a baby?

**MH:** When do you feel that you are most respected as a woman?

**BT:** Hmm…most respected huh? [Laughs]

**MH:** Most respected as a woman?

**BT:** I think a lot of that probably has to do with a person’s self-esteem, and how they feel about themselves. From the American perspective, if others see that I have certain skills or qualities, they respect that about me. From the Hmong perspective, it’s very hard as a Hmong woman, because I am often not heard. I’ve been in situations when I’ve brought an idea up over and over, and no one acknowledged it, and then when a white woman finally reiterates my idea, everyone says, “Yes, that’s a good idea.” It makes me sad and frustrated to know that what I’ve been saying is not heard, but when a white person says it just one time, everyone hears it and says it’s right. This is hard.

Once I attended a luncheon for William Yang, the director of HAP [Hmong American Partnership]. At the luncheon there were other Hmong directors. My dad accompanied me, and it was the first time that the people there did not recognize me as my dad’s daughter, but recognized me in my capacity as director of an organization. I felt respected, because my father was introduced as, “Bo’s father” not, “This is Neng Chua’s daughter.” It is customary that only the men are known, so women are always introduced as this person’s daughter, or this person’s wife. I think when my father saw that people recognized me in that capacity he felt a new respect for me.

However, I think it’s the other way most of the time. It’s important to remember that if I respect myself, and do things that I feel are fair and right, then I will not have a problem when people disagree with me, or don’t respect my views.

**MH:** So, I think you answered the most disrespected question.

**BT:** [Laughs].

**MH:** Now we’re going to talk a little bit about the war and living in the refugee camps. I know that you came when you were six, so just tell me whatever you can remember, I guess, of the refugee experience. Do you remember how you decided to leave Laos during the war, and how was that decision made?

**BT:** Yes.

**MH:** What do you remember of that time?
**BT:** Actually, I don’t remember a lot about Laos, because when the country was at war and fell to communism, I was only three years old. I’ve only heard my mother talking about it. She says we were one of the last families to leave the village, because at that time my grandfather and grandmother were very old, and they did not want to leave. So, my parents stayed behind as long as they could.

They stayed as long as they could. All their children were still very little—ages four, three, two and one. I think my brother was not even one yet. My father joined the guerrilla fighters (cob fab), and often left my mother home alone with the children.

That made it hard for my mother, because she could not just leave Laos. She’s told me a little bit about why they decided to leave Laos, but I don’t really remember much. She says that when our family fled Laos, someone was paid to carry my younger sister. My older sister and I walked, while she carried my brother. It was rainy most of the time. God, the rain and cold! I just remember little things.

When I was in 7th grade, my teacher wanted us to keep a journal. I kept writing this journal piece about soldiers and things like that, so she asked me, “Is that piece from the war?” I said, “Oh, no,” but I kept dreaming about it, so I wrote about it. My teacher said, “You should ask your mother about it.” So, I asked my mother, and she said, “Yes, that happened.”

I don’t remember the event, but I kept dreaming about it. I had these reoccurring dreams that there was a baby who kept crying in the jungle. When I asked my mother about it, she said, “That was real. There was a baby who cried constantly when we were running in the jungles to Thailand. Soon, fearing for the safety of the group, people told the mother that she must either leave her child behind or stay with the child behind, because the crying could cause the group’s location to be discovered by the communist soldiers. The mother decided that she would leave the child behind, and left him by a tree with nothing more than a cloth to wrap him. The baby was crying.” It finally made sense why I was having that dream.

**MH:** What do you remember about the refugee camps?

**BT:** The refugee camps? I don’t remember much either. My mother probably has more stories to tell about that topic. I just remember the very poor living conditions. Everybody lived in tight quarters. It was always very hot. When the food rations came, I remember being so excited, and always tagging along with my parents to get the food. That’s pretty much it...very basic stuff.

**MH:** Was there anything positive about the refugee experience, or were there any other negative things about the refugee experience, or were you too little to—?

**BT:** Yes, I don’t remember much.

**MH:** Do you remember what you did in the refugee camps?
BT: Like I said, I remember very little. I remember going to school for only one week. Then my younger sister got really sick, the elders were occupied with being worried about her failing health, so they did not pay attention to whether or not we were going to school. So, we stopped going. My sister got very sick, and eventually she passed away. That’s it.

MH: Did you perceive any treatment differences between men and women in the camps?

BT: As I said, I was very little to see any differences.

MH: Now, we are going to talk about coming to America. Can you tell me about how you came to America and what was it like? How did your family decide to come to United States? It sounds like you were in the camps for a while?

BT: Yes, we were in the camps for two and a half years.

MH: Yes, that’s longer than most of those early families.

BT: At that time my dad’s younger brother, my uncle was already in the U.S. He came in 1976, and lived in Chicago. Then in 1978, my dad’s old brother also came to the U.S., so they kept telling my dad to apply to come here. A younger uncle and my dad were the two brothers remaining in Thailand. My uncles who were already in America kept writing, asking my dad to come. Finally, my uncle and my dad decided to come. Two American families sponsored us.

My memory of coming to the U.S. is limited. All I remember is getting on the bus—the big bus. I remember seeing my grandma. The whole memory is similar to all the videos that you see of Hmong people coming to America. That’s exactly what it was like, because we got on the bus, and had no idea where we were going. I see my grandparents crying, and I questioned myself, “Why are they crying?” Our family gets on the bus. We were so happy, because we’ve never been on a bus before, but my parents and grandparents are crying. The whole trip I just remember throwing up on the airplane. [Laughs] That’s pretty much what’s in my memory.

MH: Not a good memory.

BT: Yep…

MH: You said you were six when your family came?

BT: Yes, yes.

MH: Since coming to the United States, what has been the easiest to adjust to for you?
**BT:** Nothing has been difficult, but a lot of things have been really hard. For example, my first day at school, my sister was in kindergarten, and I was in first grade. My class was next door to hers.

When I entered my class for the first time all the students were learning how to write cursive and their ABCs. When I got there the teacher just put the alphabets in front of me, and I thought to myself, “What am I supposed to do with this?” So, I didn’t do anything with it, but let it sit in front of me. Then, my sister, who was in kindergarten, in the next class was crying, so they brought her to me. They expected me to be able to help them, but I didn’t speak English either. [Laughs] She was crying, and she said, “Oh, I have to go to the bathroom.” I said, “I don’t know how to tell them that either.” [Laughs] So, she peed in her pants, right there.

Now when I think about it it’s like really funny, but then, it was so traumatic. At that time there were not many Hmong people in the school either, so there were no Hmong staff in the school. I guess the teachers didn’t know what to do either, but think about it. Those teachers were really ignorant. How can they think that if they brought this little kid to me in the next classroom I could help her out. I couldn’t help her out either. [Laughs]

**MH:** What immediate skills do you need in your adjustment process? Were you learning English?

**BT:** Yes, definitely.

**MH:** It sounds like that was a critical step. How did you acquire the necessary skills to survive in America?

**BT:** As I’ve said, I was very fortunate to come at that age, and just went to school…

**MH:** Were some of the skills that you learned in Laos and Thailand adaptable or usable in the United States?

**BT:** Well, I guess if you talk about things like household chores, and being able to help my parents, who were also learning at the same time. Everything in America looked so different, but just helping clean the home, and doing what I could around the house was helpful. My mom sewed a lot, so we helped her do cross-stitching. Then, she sewed embroideries and sold them to American people, so…

**MH:** Yes, over all, do you think that life in the United States is better for Hmong women?

**BT:** Yes, I think it’s a given, not just Hmong women, but Hmong people in general, a lot of opportunities. More so for Hmong women, because it’s been a place where if you really want something you can achieve it. If you ask the elders it might be a bit different, but…
MH: Do you feel that the United States is home?

BT: Oh yes.

MH: And are you a U.S. citizen, do you vote regularly, do you vote at all?

BT: Yes, I’m a U.S. citizen. That was the first thing I did when I turned 18, because my parents tried twice before I turned 18, and they couldn’t pass. They did not have enough English skills, so we (the children) couldn’t pass under that law. So, when I turned 18, I went to get my citizenship, and yes I vote.

MH: What do you think of the Hmong individuals who have sought out public office?

BT: I think it’s good, because the only way to improve life in America for Hmong people is to be involved in the political process. In this country your right to vote is really important, and if you are not involved and don’t vote, then it is almost impossible that they’ll pay attention to you, because they’ll make decisions and we won’t even know about it, or they will make all the decisions for you.

MH: Yes. Let’s talk about women’s roles outside of the home, in particular about public life during the war. Did you know what was going on? Did women know what was going on and what was happening?

BT: Well, for myself, I obviously didn’t know. I was too little, but from my conversations with my mom, women only knew as much as told by their husbands. In terms of understanding what was happening in the war and why the war happened, they just knew what they were told by the men, or their husbands. So, no I’d say, in general, they didn’t know.

MH: Yes. Well, were there any public figures from that time period that you admired, or are there any public figures now that you admire?

BT: From that period, I don’t know, because I was still little. However, now that I have heard people talking about it, yes, there were women who were able to go to school. That is really good, because unlike my mom and her peers, who never went to school, there were women who had the chance to attend school. I’m happy for them.

Now, about political figures. Yes, there are a few Hmong who have competed for public offices, like Neal and Choua Lee. When I see Hmong people like that, even though I don’t agree with them, I am still happy that they are Hmong, and they compete for public offices. However, when talking about whether to support them or not, if I share the same vision, then it is okay. If I don’t, then I don’t have to.

MH: In America, how do you think that leadership has changed for you and other Hmong women?
**BT:** I think, in this country, what has changed is that women can go outside the home. If they become educated, they can acquire jobs that involve decision-making, whether it affects just their family or the public. Women’s decision making is no longer just limited to the family, or we don’t always have to wait for people to ask. It depends on the capacity in which we work. For example, if my expertise is in housing, that’s something that my family may not need, but the public needs it, so I make decisions, because it’s my work role.

It doesn’t concern my family, but these new roles can put me in a decision-making position. In Laos or Thailand I probably wouldn’t have that opportunity. So, it has meant that Hmong women have gained additional roles.

In addition, I think the opportunity to go to school has helped, not just women, but men as well. If everyone shares the same vision about education, then they would understand that if mothers, wives, and women got their educations, we would be even more helpful to our families. It doesn’t inhibit men’s ability to do better, rather it will help, because unfortunately, in this country everything is about money. If we are more educated, or have the skills needed by people, we can make money.

**MH:** You mentioned a few of them already, but what types of things are women doing here publicly that they would never be able to do in Laos and in Thailand? For example, you mentioned running for political office, and making decisions outside of the family?

**BT:** In my case, deciding not to be married and pursuing my career—this is different. If I were in Laos, I probably would’ve been pressured into marriage. My parents now know they cannot force me. These are things that women can do now that they couldn’t then.

In terms of the decision-making, I think that even though my parents are already older, they have changed a little too as well. Even simple things like talking about retirement funds. Wives can now decide where they want their money to go. That’s something that’s new for my parents, because they grew up with a different knowledge about money. These are things that women have now that they didn’t have then.

**MH:** What public contributions do you want people to remember about Hmong women?

**BT:** I think just very simply that they were the ones that brought all of us into this world. A lot of mothers just want the best for their children, and women have always been the quiet ones behind a lot of decisions.

In my discussions with my mom, she often did not give credit to herself. Whatever I asked her, she would say, “Oh, we did it because your dad said so, or because your grandfather told us to do it.” This is how women respond, because they knew it was the best thing for their families. Often times, they don’t get credit. In current situations, I think a lot of women are the ones that make things move, and stir things up, because if we just let things be like it’s been in the past perhaps men will be happy; but letting
things be the way they’ve always been, and letting the usual people make decisions is not right. Although, I think people would be okay with that if we let that be.

For many women and some men, we’ve seen the benefit of having women involved and push for that. I think women realize that they, their education and decision-making abilities can contribute and help the community just as much. It is not just to support any particular individual, but it’s better for everyone.

MH: Okay, was anything else that would you like to add?

For proud women and yourself?

BT: I think just the little bit that we’ve discussed here will not capture anyone’s entire story about the differences between men and women. There are many times when I see things happen that make me sad that I was born a girl. That’s happened to me many times.

For example, after I graduated from college I was living by myself in Green Bay. I had been living there for two years, and none of my relatives visited me. I think if I had been a son, a man, they would have come and at least said, “We are happy you are here.”

Then when I started to become very active in that local community, doing more work in the public, my relatives called my parents and said, “How can you let your daughter live by herself like this?” Things like that. They were essentially saying, “You need to supervise her, because many men will come date her, and that will not be good. We will lose face.” All they cared about was that I might do something to make them lose face. That was hard, because in my heart I felt my work was important and good for the community, and I couldn’t understand why they didn’t see beyond that.

I guess that’s also what drives me to do the things I do. I realize that even though I’ve avoided being Hmong when I was younger, I am still very much impacted by my relatives and my community. I can’t ever run away from it, so I try to make the best of the situation.

After college when I was thinking about graduate school, I told my parents that I was going to continue school in California. I applied to a graduate school there, and went to visit it. When I returned from my visit, I noticed many of our relatives were over at our house. I figured they were there to talk about some cousin’s problems as usual, and thought nothing of it. In the past they came to talk about my younger sister, because she was the black sheep in the family. When I got home they said, “We’ve come here to talk to you.” I couldn’t figure it out. [Laughs]“Why?”

They said, “We heard that you are planning to go to school far away. Is that true?” I answered, “Yes.” I just came back from my visit to the school. They told me, “You cannot go,” and I was stunned.
What do you mean I can’t go? My uncle just said, “Well, because you are a girl. We are worried that if you go far away you may get sick, and there will be no one to take care of you.” They just said that, but their reasoning was that I am a single woman, and if I go there everybody will say bad things about our family.

I was 21. I couldn’t believe that they couldn’t be happy and supportive of my decision to continue my education. Rather they were concerned that I was going to have a bad reputation for being far away from home. [Laughs] These are times that make me think that, in general, people don’t realize that because I was born a Hmong daughter, I have to live with all those conditions. Only if I really push myself, can I overcome those barriers.

That’s a credit to a lot Hmong women who’ve made it. Maybe people don’t realize that—what’s behind the picture of all the women who’ve made it successfully, but I think you know all those things. That’s it.

MH: Great, thank you Bo.

BT: Thank you.
Bo Thao

Interviewer (I) : January 17th, the year 2000. This is an oral interview with Bo Thao conducted by May Kao Hang. I'm going to ask you questions about your background.

Bo Thao (B) : Okay.

I : What is your married name, koj yog nkauj hmoob ab tsi?

B : Ws, kuv yog nkauj hmoob Thoj.

I : Koj, koj tsi tau muaj txiv puas yog?

B : No, tsi tau yuav txiv.

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

B : Ws…muaj 26.

I : Koj, koj tsis muaj me nyuam poj?

B : No.

I : Tsis muaj. Qib siab tshaj plaws uas koj kawm ntawv tiav yob dab tsi?

B : Hm, I have an undergraduate, a Bachelor’s Degree in Family Social Science and I am working on my Master’s.

I : Okay, hm…what kind of job do you have right now?

B : Oh, you are asking me? I was talking.

I : Yes, what kind job do you have?

B : I, kuv ua hauj lwm rau the Department of Labor and Industry, and txoj hauj lwm ces yog pa bawv saib xyuas seb lub koom haum nws ua hauj lwm zoo li cas nrog rau cov neeg es um…tawv daib thiab tawv dub nav. Labor and industry is the department that enforces and regulates workplace place safety and labor issues. So, hais txog neeg ua hauj lwm saib uas lawv muaj cai li cas thiab tej ntawd. Ces saib xyuas seb ua lub koom haum ntawd nws ua hauj lwm nws puas pab tau cov neeg tawv daib thiab tawv dub.

I : What is your income range; $20,000 or below, $20 to $50,000, $50 to $75,000 or $75 to $100,000?
B: Hm…20 to 50.

I: What is your current living situation? Are you living by yourself or with a spouse, another family member, or with non-relatives?

B: No, tam sim no kuv tseem nrog kuv niam thiab kuv txiv nyob.

I: And, I asked you before if you were married, and um…you're single?

B: Yeah, kuv tsis tau yuav txiv dua li.

I: Hm, how many years have you been in the United States?

B: Hm, let's see, tuaj tau 20 xyoo. Peb tuaj lub 12 hlis xyoo 1979, so 20 years.

I: Hm, where were you born?

B: Hm, yug Luang Phabang in Laos.

I: Okay.

B: Nplog teb.

I: Hm, what categories of Hmong do you belong to?

B: Um…peb yog Hmoob txaij.

I: Hmoob txaij lov?

B: Uh hm.

I: Koj kev ntseeg yog dab tsi? What is your religious affiliation?

B: Ws; let's see, thaum peb nyuam qhuav tuaj txog ces yog uas church tos peb tuaj nav, ces tuaj txog ces kuv niam nkawv pais pais church ces peb yeej coj kev cai tshiab. Nkawv yeej pais raus dej lawb dab tag, tab sis, I think um…nyob nyob ntev thfab ntev ces zoo nkaus li uas nkawv xav xav ces nkawv tsis mus thiab nav.

Thaum yus me me ces lawv pais ces lawv cia li coj yus pais, ces yus cia li pais church xwb nav, tab sis thaum peb loj hlob ces kuv niam nkawv hais tias ua peb tseem me me thiab peb tsis paub dab tsi nav, ces peb lam nrog nkawv pais xwb es thaum twg peb loj ces yog tias peb txiav txim li cas peb yuav pais los mam pais hos tsis pais no los kav liam.
I think thaum kuv pais pib kawm college ces kuv cia li tsis pais, ces nkawv nyob nyob ces tsis pais. Ces now, now kuv xav tias kuv, um, I don't know.

Kuv ho tsis coj kev cai tshiab tsis coj kev cai qub li. Kuv xav tias, rau qhov kuv coj kev cai qub zoo ngaus li peb cov hlua no yus tsis paub txaus txaus thiab nav, ces yog kuv niam kuv txiv ua neeb, los uas hu plig los tej ntawd, ces kuv tsuas nyob ntawd pom xwb, but yog yus ua yus ces yus kuj tsis ua thiab. Hos yog mus church los, I don 't know, kuv tsis pais thiab. So, tsis coj ib qho li.

I: Ws, tam sim no kuv yuav nug koj txog thaum koj tseeem me nyuam yaus nav.

B: Uh hm.

I: Koj sim piav saib thaum koj yog me nyuam yaus, koj puas kawm ntawv, koj puas mus kawm ntawv thiab?

B: Ws, let's see, peb nyob Nplog teb. Then, thaum kuv muaj 3 xyoo ces teb chaws tawg rotg ntawd ces peb tsiv los rau Thaib teb nav, ces tham peb los ces nyob rau Thaib teb, kuv tseeem yau yau thiab yus memory tsis tshua zoo. Kuv tsis tshua nco qab, tab sis kuv nco qab pais school for…. I think my sister, wb pais, ib as thiv xwb nav. Then peb muaj ib tug younger sister, tus niam hlua es yau wb nav, nws mob mob ces lawv coj nws mus hoog maum ces zoo ngaus sawv daws nyuaj nyuaj siab ces lawv cia li tsis saib tias kom peb mus kawm ntawv. Ces zoo ngaus peb cia li tsis pais kawm xwb. So, that was my first memory of school and tuaj txog teb chaws no ces kuv muaj 6 xyoo, ces kuv pais pib first grade.

I: Wj hwv, ces txij thaum txij thaum ntawd los ces koj yeej kawm ntawv nyob teb chaws America txog tav nov?

B: Uh hm, uh hm.

I: Um….thaum koj yog me nyuam yaus, ws koj cov dej num nyob tom tsev yog dab tsi xwb?

B: I think yus yog me nyuam ntxhais ces dej num hauv tsev ces koj niem koj txiv yeej qhia kom koj pab tu vaj tu tsev, sawv los ua mov. Hos yus tsis paub qhov twg los lawv yeej tias saib seb yus niem ua dab tsi ces, ib yam li kom pab nav. So, ua tej yam ntawd, hos lawv ua paj ntaub ces, yus tsis tau txawj ua ces lawv yeej paub tias tsis txawj ua tab sis lawv yeej chob thiab muab xov rau yus ua si nav. So, that is what I remember, ua tej yam me me li no nav.

I: Did you, did you perform any community service?

B: I think thaum yus loj hlob me ntsis es yus, ib yam li yus muaj zog txaus pab qhov twg lawm nav, ces yog tias muaj kwv tij neej tsa noj mov dab tsi los lawv yeej coj yus pais es yus tsis paub ces lawv tias yog tsis paub ces noog saib lawv kom pab
I: Um as a girl, what, what are some skills that you were taught?

B: Ua li hais, tej zaum yus yog tus ntxhais ces lawv yeej qhia kom yus paub tu vaj tu tsev, paub ua zaub mov noj, thiab paub xaws paj ntaub tej ntawd rau qhov, you know, thaum ntawd tej zaum yus niam yus txiv los lawv tsis tau kawm ntawv thiab ces lawv tsis, lawv tsis pom deb tshaj hais tias tus ntxhais ua tau dab tsi nav. Ces qhov lawv paub ces tsua yog hais tias, koj yog tus ntxhais ces koj yuav tsum txawj tej yam ntawd rau qhov yog, yog yus tsis, yus tsis txawj ces tsam tsis muaj neeg yuav yus no xwb nav. So, lawv yeej qhia kom yus, um…like koj mus kawm ntawv los txog, lawv yeej tias, “Oh! Los ua mov ua ntej tso.” You know lawv yeej tsis tias kom yus ua homework ua ntej, lawv yeej tias los ua mov ua ntej, things like that so I think just the household things um tej yam uas ho…Thiab thaum peb tseem me me, like second, third grade, lawv yeej, cov ntxhais ces lawv yeej kom pais xyaum fuab, you know, like, pais xyaum fuab las voos because that was pretty and all girls did that (laughs).

I: Um…what were some social activities that you remember from…from being a child?

B: Thaum peb tuaj teb chaws no ces kuv twb muaj 6 xyoo. Tej yam yus ua si xwb ces probably like, dhia yas, pov pob zeb. You know, rocks, and things like that. But I think tej yam ntawd yog hmoob xwb nav. Koj pais kawm ntawv ces koj pom Meskas nws ho ua si txawv thiab nav. So, yus yeej xyaum tej yam ntawd, and you go rollerskating and all those kind of things. Tab sis thaum twg koj nrog koj cov phooj ywg Hmoob nav, koj yeej paub nws txawv rau qhov yus dhia yas tej ntawd, but koj mus txog Meskas they don’t do that. So, those are the differences.

Thaum ntawd peb los peb tuaj poob rau Chicago nav, es thaum ntawd hmoob tuaj coob coob rau ntawd thiab nav, so peb cov kwv tij yeej muaj coob nyob nrad thiab ces koj nrog lawv cov me nyoam ua si. Ces yus ua li ntawd, tab sis koj mus txog tom tsev kawm ntawv, it is different rau qhov lawv tsis ua li ntawd. They jumped rope or played hopscotch, and things like that. So, you did two kinds of activities.

I: Um…what, what were your aspirations as a child, what did you think that when you grew up, you wanted to do or be?

B: I think thaum yus tseem me me nav, tej zaum ua li kuv hais, yus niam yus txiv tsis pom deb nav, ces lawv txawj li cas lawv tsuas qhia li ntawd rau yus xwb. Ces zoo
I think I probably had a very Hmong childhood because my parents never went to school, and so they taught you things like…oh…to know how to cook and clean, because that's what men looked for in a wife, and that is what, you thought about that, and you never really think beyond that.

The first memories I have of actually thinking about what I wanted to become was I think in second grade when our teacher asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Lawv kom yus draw pictures nav, so you draw like a nurse or teacher. But those are very women professions, you know.

So that was the first kind of things I thought about, tab sis mas like, yog koj los nrog koj niam koj txiv tham nav. Yus hais tias lawv noog yus saib yus xav, you're telling them that your teacher asked you and they're like, “Oh! Don’t be silly. Tej yam ko es poj niam ua tsis tau os.” You know, things like that. So, it was very confusing.

I think when I got into high school, that was when I became very serious about what I wanted to be, and that I could be a lot more. Rau qhov peb tsev neeg tsis tau muaj ib tug ntxhais mus kawm ntawv qib siab li nav. Not only that, cov txiv neej nws pais tab sis nws pheej paih poob los lawm xwb nav, so zoo nkaus li cov kwv tij kiaj, peb pawg kwv tij kiaj ntawd lawv haj yam tsis tso siab rau cov tub cov ntxhais es yuav mus kawm tag li nav.

So lawv yeej tsis tham txog li, so yus yeej tsis hnov txog li. Tab sis qhov koj hnov txog ces it is because koj kawm ntawv es koj nrog ib pab phooy ywg es lawv sawv daws pheej tham txog ces yus thiaj xav tias, “Oh yeah, oh yeah, I could do that!” But I think I was very fortunate rau qhov thaum kawm high school I had a really good group of Hmong girl friends es sawv daws noob nyooog ib yam, es lawv sawv daws zoo nkaus kuj ntsawv ntsawv thiab nav. So, peb kuj muaj ob peb tug phooy twg es sawv daws pheej tham tias lwm hnuh peb xav ua ub no. Zoo nkaus li that was odd rau qhov tsis tau muaj ib pab me nyuam ntxhais pheej yuav tham txog tej ntawd nav, you know.

I: It’s actually a good leading to our next section, which is talking about Hmong women’s roles. Um koj, koj pom hais tias poj niam tej hauj lwm yog dab tsi naj hauv peb haiv Hmoob?

B: Um… I think, yog hais tias kuv xav txog kuv niam lawv phaum nav, ces tej zaum nws txawv tshaj li peb phaum tam sim no. Tab sis, yog hais txog kuv niam lawv mas they are very specific, rau qhov, yog thaum twg koj nrog lawv nav, mas yus tsis paub tej yam twg los lawv yeej tias, "NO tej yam ko poj niam hauj lwm nav."
Yog tias um, you know, like when we were growing up, kuv niam yeej tsis pub kuv tus nus ntxuav twj taig li nav, because nws hais tias qhov ko koj yog tus ntxhais koj yuav tsum ua nav. Sawv daws los txog tsev, sawv daws twb muaj homework tib yam tab sis nws yeej hais kom, you know, tus tub pais ua xwb es cov ntxhais ces yuav tsum ua mov ua ntej nav. So tej yam ntawd nws hos ib yam li yog tias tsev sw los, you know, ua li hais, kuv txiv lawv yeej tias, “Oh tsev sw sw nej cheb nav.” Es it's like nws twb zaum ntawm los nws yeej tsis kov li nav, so koj yeej paub hais tias rau lawv ces laww pom hais tias tej yam ntawd yog poj niam nav, so I think that's what peb hmoob ntseeg li ntawd ces cov laus ces lawv tsuas paub li ntawd, ces laww tsuas hais tias poj niam qhov role ces yeg los tu vaj tu tsev, tu me nuuam, los um, ib yam li tu kom hauv yus lub tsev zoo nav, thiab ko du kom neeg tuaj los kom laww txhob hais tau tej yam phem txog yus nav.

Qhov nov ces yog poj niam, zoo nkaus li poj niam npog hos txiv neej mas txiv neej yog tus es tawm sab nraum es hais dab tsi los yog tu txiv neej hais xwb nav. So that's something that growing up, yus yeej pom tias yus niam yus txiv lawv coj li ntawd nav. Rau qhov yog muaj dab tsi los yog nkawv los sib hais hauv tsev tag tab sis thaua tawm nraum ces yeej yog tus txiv. You know, kuv pom li no tab sis, thaua los hauv tsev koj yeej pom hais tias yeej yog koj niam nrog nws hais hais thiab tab sis thaua nws tawm nraum mas yeej yeg ngs hais xwb nav.

Hos thaua twg yog muaj decision los kuv niam laww yeej tias ib yam li nws, koj yeej paub tias nws yeej make tau qhov decision, tab sis thaua nyob sab nraum nws yeej hais tias, “Oh! Kuv tsis paub es los nrog kuv tus txiv tham seb li cas tso nav, es nws mam tuaj hais rau nej xwb nav.” But she never, you know, nws yeej tsis hais kiaj rau laww hais tias, you know, wb xav li no nav. She is like that, but I think yus cov hluas yus tuaj loj hloeb teb chaws no tej zaum yus coj txawv laww.

I mean especially for me, maybe rau qhov tias yus um, yog hmoob hais ces tej zaum yus yeg nkauj laug os whatever, you know, rau qhov yus yeej muaj hnub nyooog txaus txaus thiab yus tsis tau yuav txiv na. So, yog tias hais txog tias yus, yus qhov role es yeg dab tsi, it’s very different because, you know, yus, yus kuj txawj xay rau yus, thiab yog tias neeg noog los yus kuj tias, “Oh! Kuv xav li no.” or, “Kuv txiav txim tias li no zoo rau kuv no.” But yog cov laus ces it’s different.

I: So, would you say that um that when women make decision with their families, they would do it internally, but when they got out into the public, then they leave that to the man to discuss things. Um hauv um hauv nej pab pawg…pab um pawg kwv tij kiag nev, ua li ntawd thiab lov?

B: Um hm…yeah. Kuv xav…

I: Or neej tsa, I guess?

B: Yeah, ntawm peb cov kwj tij neej tsa ntawd, thaua twg yog muaj sab laj yeej yog kuv txiv pais xwb los nav. But then ib yam li mus tham tag ces kuv txiv yeej los
I: Uh hm.

B: So, I get that from her, and so nws yeej hais rau kuv txiv yog nws pom tias tsis zoo los nws yeej cem hais tias, you know, nej ua li ko tsis yog. Nws yeej hais li ub li no rau kuv txiv, tab sis thaum mus txog los lawv yeej caw txog, you know, yeej caw txog cov txiv neej xwb, so thaum mus hais tom ces yog nws hais xwb. And then if my dad does something like, hais tsis yog es and she hears about it she would tell him ua cas koj mus hais li no rau lawv, you know so...

I: Uh hm.

B: So those are the things you, you hear. Hos hais txog, like, ntawm yus pawg kww tij, li ntawm kuv tus kheej nav, hais tias lawy puas tau noog yus, I think um hais txog cov txiv neej sab laj. Kuv neo qab ib zaug, kuv tus uncle nws, nws hais tias “Koj twb hlulas hlulas thiaj koj muaj tswv yim zoo es koj nrog peb pais sab laj saib seb yuav ua li cas.” You know, rau cov Hmoob Thoj. But kuv pais txog lawv tsuas tias, "Oh, me ntxhais zoo siab koj tuaj txog os paib pais nchuav dej peb haus.” You know roles are defined? Lawv tsis expect tias kom yus mus nrog lawv zaum tib lub rooj nrog lawv tham nav. So, that was how lawv coj li ntawd. You just try to be respectful.

Thiab zoo nkaus li hmoob tsis tau muaj cov ntxhais es muaj noob nyoog es tsis tau yuav txiv nav. So, zoo nkaus li tuaj txog teb chaws Meskas no thiaj li muaj cov ntawd coob mes ntsis xwb ces zoo nkaus li lawv tsis paub xyov yuav nrog yus zoo siab los xyov yuav hais tias ta cas tsis pais yuav txiv. So, muaj ib pab niag es lawv tsis paub ua li cas li thiaj nav. (Laughs)

I: So, um who, who are some women in leadership roles and how are they seen in the community?

B: Um, I think women in the leadership are people like you and I, you know. People who are, who work in other capacity, maybe tsis yog rau Hmoob xwb, tab sis ua hauj lwm tawm sab nraud. Where yus, yus muaj txoj cai txiav txim ub txiav txiam no nav. So nws tsis yog ntawm yus pawg kww tij xwb, tab sis los hais txog pej xeem zej zog nav. Ces qhov nov nws yog ib qho tshiab rau peb hmoob rau qhow tias, yog yuav tham txog hauv um, ab tsi hauv Hmoob nkaus nkaus xwb no mas tej zaum cov laus los lawy tsis tau saib tias yus txawj ntse txaus, thiab lawv tsis saib hais tias, lawv tsis thwm hais tias yus yog ib tug thawj coj es yuav txiav txim tau dab tsi nav.

So, I think yog tias li ntawd, tej zaum lawv yeej saib, saib yus zoo nkaus li yus tseem tsis tau yog ib tug leader los mus txog rau qhov ntawd nav. Tab sis yog hais tias tawm ntawm yus tsev neeg sab nraum, yus mus ua hauj lwm nav, ces koj
yeej, koj txoj hauj lwm yeej yog los txiav txim li ub txiam txim li no li ntawd es seb yuav zoo li cas rau pej xee "nav. Ces qhov no nws yog ib qho tshiab. Thiab nws txawv rau qhov tias nws tsis yog tej zaum yus twb nyob ntawd, yus twb txiav txim hais tias, you know, ib yam li um, yus ua hauj lwm nrog meskas los lwm hais neeg nav. Lawv twb tias nej puas pom hais tias qhov nov puas zoo rau Hmoob no. Yus twb teb tod los yus los txog hauv yus tsev neeg yus tseem tsis muaj xiv txiav txim dab tsi nav. So it’s like, nws muaj ob qho roles es ib qho yog hauv yus tsev neeg hos ib qho tawm sab nraum lawm nav, so it’s like two separate decision making roles for our Hmong women.

I: What, what did? This relates back to Laos back also here. What did women do to support the family, and I guess you can answer that for now too?

B: Yeah, well I think, nyob tim ub ces yog hais txog cov laus xwb ces lawv yeej ua liaj teb noj xwb ces sawv daws yeej yuav tau sib pab. Ces you know, yus yeej yog siv zog mus ua teb tej ntawd, hos poj niam ces yeej tu vaj tu tsev, hos txiv neej yeej mus, um I mean it’s kind of like hunting and gathering where women had very specific roles, tab sis tuaj txog teb chaws no los kuv xav tias um, poj niam nws, mus ua hauj lwm tawm sab nraud rau qhov teb chaws no qhov twg los nyiaj xwb nav, ces yog tias koj yuav npaj tos ib tug mus es nrhiav kom nyiaj txaus txaus los xwb ces yeej tsis tau nav. So, qhov uas txawv ces um yog poj niam siv zog mus ua hauj lwm los pab nrhiav nyiaj tej ntawd xwb rau qhov kuv xav and, and poj niam tuaj txog teb chaws no. They do a lot.

Kuv ntsia kuv niam xwb...kuv txiv nws tua tuaj txog teb chaws no lawv tuaj nyob ob peb month xwb lawv cia li pais ua hauj lwm rau company, so lawv yeej um ua li ntawd, tab sis like for kuv niam nav, like thau summer los nws yeej tseem xav ua teb nws yeej tsi, qhov ntawd tis tau nyiaj tab sis kom tau zaub, so that nws tsis tau pais yuav nav because tej yam ntawd yog tej yam nws nqhis. So nws yeej ua zaub los and, you know, like kuv txiv lawv yeej tsis ua tej ntawd, lawv yeej ua lawv tej hauj lwm xwb, but nws yog tus poj niam los, you know, nws tseem ua hauj lwm tab sis nws, on the weekend nws tseem pais ua nws ib daig teb thiab nav, so it’s like yog hais txog los txhawb tsev neeg.

I: Um, how were families planned, and what kind of things do women do to have fewer children?

B: Um I, I guess, you know, qhov kod ua li hais tej zaum nws txawv thiab. Tej zaum nyob tim ub mas lawv um ua li hais lawv ib yam tsis muaj hoos maum zoo tej ntawd ces, you know, yus yug tau me nyuam los los yus tsis paub tias yuav nyob ntev npaum cas ces tej zaum lawv yeej tsis npaj li cas nav. Ces lawv yeej yog kom coob xwb. Thiab tis tag li ntawd los yus ua hauj lwm um am, ab tsi, yus ua teb tej ntawd xwb ces muaj coob ces haj yam zoo xwb nav. Rau qhov ntxiv zog rau yus xwb, tab sis tuaj txog teb chaws no, I think nyuaj nyuaj rau qhov ntau ntau tug poj niam Hmoob nws tsis paub hais tias nws lub tsev, nws lub ab tsi tsev me nyuam yuav tsis zoo yog nws yug coob coob no nav. Ces ua li kuv ua hauj lwm
before in clinics es cov doctors huis kom kuv pab txhais rau cov poj niam Hmoob es muaj 9 tug 10 tug me nyuam in a roll es hais tias kom hais, huis saib lawv puas consider birth control, cov poj niam ntawd lawv yeej tsis kam li nav. Because lawv hais tias, you know, lawv, lawv lub body muaj ntaw dais ces ces lawv yuav yuav li ntawd nav, and lawv tsis xav txog lawv tus kheej hais tias lawv lub cev zoo li cas nav. It’s like, lawv loj hlob lawv tsuas xav hais tias lawv yog poj niam ces lawv yuav tsum yuav me nyuam xwb nav, so lawv tsis consider li ntawd, but for, you know, in this country there are a lot different, you know, birth control, things and, so, you know. For me, I think um, thiab everything los yog involve money xwb. Yog yug los tej zaum yus yuav tau npaj, npaj me ntsis tias saib yus yug tau tsawg tus thiab yus, yus khwv nyiaj txiax txaus los, you know, npaj lub neej rau tsawg tus me nyuam xwb nav. So for me, I think um… yus yeej xav li ntawd and um cov laus lawv yeej tias, koj yuav tsum pais yuav txiv tsuag tsuag rau qhov koj tsis yuav me nyuam, you know, then you’re gonna get too old and things like that. But ua li kuv huis yus ib leeg xwb zoo nkaus li yus twb tu tsis tau yus tus kheej es yus txhawj txhawj tsam ib pliaj muaj ib tug yus tu tsis tau thiab nav so.

I: When do you feel that you are most respected as a woman?

B: Hmm most respected? (Laughs)

I: Most respected as a woman?

B: Um hmm, I think a lot of that probably has to do with your own self esteem and how you feel about yourself. I think yog tias huis ntawm meskas xwb mas yog lawv ntsia yus es yog tias yus muaj certain skills, yog yus txawj tej yam nav, es lawv um, qhov ntawd ces zoo nkaus li lawv, lawv nav thwm yus ces tej yam ntawd yus tsis txawj tab sis hais txog yus cov Hmoob xwb nav, I think koj yog ib tug poj niam Hmoob yeej yog ib qho nyuaj tsaj rau qhov um tej zaum koj twb hais hais tej yam los cov txiv neej Hmoob lawv yeej tsis mloog nav. Then yog tias ib tug poj niam meskas hais kiaj lawv yeej tias, “Oh yeah”. So that makes you, ua rau yus npau taws thiab yus tu siab thiab rau qhov yus xav tias ua cas kuv twb hais li ntawd ib hnuv es lawv tsis hnuv kuv nav es tus neeg no nws, nws yus lawv dawb es nws tuaj hais ib nyuag lo xwb lawv txawm hais tias oh…yeah, koj hais thw. Yus tias wow...you know, kuv twb hais li ntawd thiab cas nej tsis mloog kuv nav. So, I think nws nyuaj me ntsis tab sis mostly respected um, kuv xav tias, there was one time where we went to um it was a luncheon, I think for William when he was first hired. William Yaj naj, tus Director tom HAP, and um…tag nrho cov executive directors tuaj ntawd and kuv coj kuv txiv nrog kuv pais nav. It was the first time that um not that I was most respected by the people there, but that my dad realized my capacity and the role that I was in. Rau qhov lawv introduce kuv and then they introduced my dad. They said, "Tus no yog Npauj txiv", I was like “Oh yes!” (Laughs) You know, it's my dad and not that I'm his daughter that not that you know. Usually lawv tsuas paub cov txiv neej xwb, ces qhov twg los lawv tsuas tias, yus know, tus no,
So, I think you answered the, the most disrespected questions.

I: Um now we're gonna talk a little bit about the war and living in the refugee camps, and um, I know that you came when you were six so, just tell me whatever you can remember, I guess, of the refugee experiences. Um do you remember how you decided to leave Laos during the war and how was that decision made?

B: Actually I don’t remember a lot about Laos, rau qhov thaum peb, teb chaws tawg ntawd peb khiav nav, I was three years old, tab sis kuv tsuas hnov kuv niam lawv piav piav txog xwb nav. So I think kuv niam lawv tias peb, we were one of the last families to leave the village rau qhov um, thaum ntawd pog thiaj yawg nkawv laus laus nav, so um nkawv, nkawv tsis xav khiav thiaj rau qhov nkawv laus laus lawm es xyov yeu ua li cas thiaj li mus txog Thaib teb nav, so kuv niam nkawv yeej nyob, nyob kom ntev li ntev tau nav because nkawv xav hais tias, you know, yuav khiav tam sin no los, you know, um pog thiaj yawg laus laus, so they tried to stay as long as they can, and thaum ntawd peb sawv daws tseem me me. Thiab kuv niam muaj plaub tug me nyuam (4, 3, 2, 1). No, my brother wasn't even 1 yet, and kuv txiv nws pheej pais ua cob fab tej ntawd nav, so pheej tseng kuv niam heev heev nrog cov me nyuam xwb ces zoo nkaus li tsis zoo khiav thiaj nav. So it was hard.

Kuv kuj nrog kuv niam tham tham nws kuj piav me ntsis tias ua cas lawv decide to khiav. Tab sis hais kiag yam kuv nco qab xwb, kuv tsis nco qab kuv tsuas nco qab like thaum peb khiav es kuv niam lawv ntiav neeg ev peb, but then most of the time you walk and, you know, tsuas nco qab los nag. Oh my god, los nag thiaj no no thiaj, you know, and then just remembering little things. I think I didn’t have very good memories of it, tab sis thauv when I was in 7th grade, we did journals and kuv tus nais khu nws kom peb write journals. I kept writing this journal piece about like soldiers and, you know, things like that, and she asked me. “Is that from the war?” And I said, “Oh no.” It’s like I just kept dreaming
about it, so I wrote about it, and she said “Well you know you should ask you mom.” So, I asked my mom and she said, “Yeah that happened.”

It’s like yus tsis nco qab tab sis yus pheej npau suav pom nav. I dreamed that muaj ib niag kid es muab tso ntawd es pheej quaj quaj nav es kuv pheej xav tias puas yog real nav, and I asked my mom, she said "Yeah thaum ntawd muaj ib tug me nyuam nws pheej quaj es lawv ib yam li sawv daws hais rau kuv niam tias, you know, yog tias nws tsis tso tus me nyuam ntawd tseg ces nws nrog tus me nyuam nyob xwb because quaj quaj es sawv daws khiav ib pab es ntshai ntshai thiab nav." So, so the mom left the kid there, you know, like cia li muab qhwv es tso tseg tom kev xwb nav, es sawv daws cia li pais lawm xwb nav. So that was what I was dreaming about, and it's like yeah...yeah.

I: What do you remember about the refugee camps?

B: Um the refugee camps? I don’t remember much either. I mean my mom has probably, you know, more stories to tell on that, tab sis kuv tsuas nco qab yus mus nyob es zoo nkaus nyob txom txom nyem, sawv daws nyob ti ti thiab, sov sov thiab, and then txog caij ces like kuv niam lawv um pais nqa, nqa thaum lawv faib zaub mov tej ntawd ces lawv pais nqa, ces yus nrog lawv pais um tej ntawd. So that’s pretty much it, very basic stuff.

I: Um what do you think was, was anything positive about the refugee experience, or were there any negative things about the refugee experience, or were you too little to um?

B: Yeah, yeah I don’t remember much you know.

I: Do you remember what you did in the refugee camps?

B: Like I said, I remember maybe going to school for one week, and then my sister got really sick and tshua nco qab lawy pheej sib tham txog tias yuav kho nws li cas, you know, like yus yog me nyuam yaus, so lawv yeej tsis tham rau yus, tab sis yus pom neeg sib hais sib hais and then that’s it. My sister, tus niam hluas ntawd, she passed away so that’s it, that’s pretty much it.

I: Did you, did you perceive any treatment differences between men and women in the camps?

B: Um… as I’ve said, I was very too little to see any difference.

I: Um now we are going to talk about coming to America, can you tell me about how you came to America and what, what was it like? Um how did your family decide to come to the United States? It sounds like you were in the camps for a while?
B: Yeah, we were in the camps for two and a half years.

I: Yeah, that’s, that’s, that’s longer than most in those early families so.

B: Let’s see, es thaum ntawd kuv txiv muaj ib tug peb muaj tug txiv ntxawm nav, my dad’s younger brother nws twb xub tuaj thaum ‘76 lawm nav, so nws tuaj ces nws, tuaj nyob rau Chicago ces and then thaum, I think ‘78 ces kuv txiv tus old brother, peb tug txiv hlob nws tuaj thiab nav. So, nkawv tuaj txog teb chaws no ces nkawv sij hais los tias kom kuv txiv lawv ua npe tuaj xwb, so kuv txiv lawv tshuav kuv txiv thiaj ib tug txiv, txiv ntxawm um ntawm lawv 4 tug brothers ntawd nyob rau Thaib teb, ces ua ntawv tuaj ces kom sawv daws tuaj xwb no ces kuv txiv thiab kuv txiv tus younger brother ntawd nkawv thiaj ua ntawv tuaj nav, so um yog, yog uas, thaum ntawd ces yog, you know, Meskas tos peb, I think then nkawv thiaj decide hais tias tuaj no. We all decided to come.

My memories of coming to the U.S was getting on the bus, the big bus, and I remember peb niam tais lawv quaj. I mean that's exactly what it was like, because we got on the bus and did not of understand where you are going, but yus tsuas pom like niam tais thiab yawm txiv quaj. Ua cas nkawv sij quaj nav? Because yus caij bus xwb, but we were so happy because yus tsis tau caij npav dua. You are going on a big bus but then your parents and your grand-parents were crying. Things like that. On the whole trip I just remembered throwing up the whole way on the airplane (laughs). That’s pretty much my memories (laughs).

I: Not a good memory.

B: Yep.

I: Um, and you said you were six when your family came?

B: Um hm, uh hm.

I: Um since, since coming to the United States, what has been the easiest to adjust to for you?

B: There wasn’t anything difficult or things like that, but a lot of other things were really hard. I mean, like my first day at school. My sister was in the kindergarten, and I was in class. I just remember they were learning how do write cursive and their ABCs. When I got there the teacher just put the alphabet in front of me. I’m like, “What am I supposed to do with that?” So, I didn’t know. Then my sister was in kindergarten. She was in a class next door, and they brought her cause she was crying. They expected me to be able to like help them, but I didn’t speak English either (laughs). She was crying, and she said “Oh! I have to go to the bathroom.” I’m like, “I don’t know how to tell them either.” (laughs). So, she just peed in her pants, right there. Now you think about it, and it’s like really funny, but then it was so traumatic, because you didn’t know.
I: Um… what were the immediate skills that you needed in your adjustment process, were you learning English?

B: Yes, definitely.

I: It sounds like that was a critical step. Um, how did you acquire the necessary skills to survive in America?

B: Oh, I think like I said, I was very fortunate to come at that age, and we just went to school.

I: Uh hm.

B: Uh hm.

I: What were some of the skills that you learned in Laos and Thailand adaptable or usable in the United States?

B: Um… well, I guess if you talk about, maybe how household chores are done, and like helping my parents. Everything looks so different and things like that, but just helping clean and doing what you could around the house. Yeah, and my mom sewed a lot, and we helped her do things like that, cross stitching because, thaum nws tuaj txog nws pheej saws paj ntaub muag rau meskas nav, so…

I: Uh hm, overall, do you think that life in the United States is better for Hmong women?

B: Um yeah, I mean, I think it’s given, not just Hmong women, Hmong people in general a lot of opportunities, but more so Hmong women because um it’s a place where, if you really want something, you can, you are able to achieve it, and things like that. I mean I think, you know, yog koj noog cov laus it might be a little bit different.

I: Do you feel that the United States is home?

B: Oh yeah.

I: And are you a US citizen? Do you vote regularly? Do you vote at all?
B: Yeah, um yeah I’m US citizen. That was the first thing I did when I turned 18 because my parents had tried like two times before, and they couldn't pass because they did not have enough English skills, so we couldn’t pass under that law, but when I turned 18, I went to get my citizenship, and yeah I vote.

I: Um what do you think of the Hmong individuals who have sought public office?

B: Hm, I think it’s good because the only way to improve life um in the America for Hmong people is to be involved in the political process. Rau qhov nyob teb chaws no, you know, your right to vote is really important, and yog tias kój tsis involve thiab yus tsis pais nrog lawv um, you know, pov ntawv ces it is almost impossible rau qhov lawv txiav txim yus tsis paub li nav, or they make all the decision for you about, you know, everything (laugh)

I: Um hm.

B: Um hm.

I: Um let's talk about women’s roles outside of the home. Um in particular about public life um during war. Did you know what was going on? Did women know what was going on, and um how, what was happening?

B: Um well, I mean for myself I obviously didn't know. I was too little, and you know, from my conversation with my mom it’s that, lawv tsuas paub yog hais tias lawv cov txiv los nrog lawv tham li čas ces lawv tsuas paub li ntawd xwb. But in terms of understanding what, what’s happening in the war, and you know, why the war happened? They just knew what they were told by men or their husbands. So, no. I'd say in general they didn’t know.

I: Uh hm, well were there any public figures from that time period that you admired or are there any public figures now that you admire?

B: Uh hm, um I mean, from that time. Yog tias hais txog thaum ntawd kuv yus tsis paub thiab oj because yus tseem me me nav, tab sis tam sim no yus hnow lawv tham tham txog. Yeah, there are some women who, thaum ntawd kuj muaj cov poj niam lawv kuj mus kawm ntaww tej ntawd thiab so that, that was really good, rau qhov um yog hais txog li kuv niam lawv xwb lawv yeej tsis muaj tus twg mus kawm ntaww li nav, so yog tias muaj ib tug poj niam tau mus los, it’s um...yus yeej nrog lawv zoo siab thiab. Hos hais txog tam sim no yog political figures um yeah, I mean, kuj muaj ob peb tug Hmoob, nws kuj tau mus nrog lawv sib tw ua nom ua tswv, like Neal and, you know, ab tsis. Cua and, you know, cov ntawd. So yog tias kój pom cov Hmoob mus ntawd, I think yus txawm tsis agree nrog lawv los yus yeej zoo siab tias lawv yog Hmoob es lawv tau mus nrog meskas sib tw ua nom ua tswv ntawd, but hais txog tias seb yus puas support lawv los yus puas txhawb lawv zog, yog tias yus tsis pom li lawv pom ces it’s okay, you know (laugh) yus tsis, you don’t have to.
I: Hm in the America, how do you think that leadership has changed for you and other Hmong women?

B: Hm I think, nyob rau teb chaws Meskas no qhov hloov ces yog hais tias qhov uas poj niam nws tawm tau mus sab nraum es nws, yog tias nws mus kawm txawj ib yam lawm nav es nws txoj hauj lwm yog mus ua ntawd, nws ho muaj txoj kev txiav txim siab uas tawm rau nws tsev neeg, tawm dhau ntawm tsev neeg ntawd nav. I mean, women's decision making it's not just limited to the family or you don’t always have to wait for people that ask um... and it depends on the capacity in which you work on. You know what we were talking about before that if your expertise is in housing, and if that's something that your family doesn’t need, but the public needs you, you can make decisions on those roles. Maybe it doesn’t concern your family, but that’s a new role that you have that I think in Laos or in Thailand you probably wouldn't have had that opportunity. So, it gives Hmong women those additional roles, but in addition I think the opportunity to go to school yeej pab, tsis yog pab tus poj niam xwb, tab sis yeej pab tus txiv neej, yog tias sawv daws pom, pom deb ib yam nav, rau qhov um, you know, yog tias yus tus poj niam txawj ntse los los txhawb yus tsev neeg xwb, it doesn’t inhibit your ability to do any better, but it helps cause this country it’s like um I mean, unfortunately everything ces hais yog nyiaj xwb, yog koj txawj ntse tshaj ces koj, you know, mus maybe tsis, it doesn’t necessarily mean schooling, but if you have the I guess the skills to do certain things that is needed by the people, you can make money uh hu...

I: What, what types of things, you mentioned a few of them, um what types of things are women doing here publicly that they would never have been able to do in Laos and in Thailand? I mean you mentioned running for political office, making decisions outside of the family?

B: Um hm outside of the family I think like in my case, deciding not to be married and, you know, just pursuing my career or something like that. If I was in Laos, I probably would have been pressured many times, and the date that I had would have to marry me (laugh). Those kind of things. But now it’s like yus niam yus txiv pom tias lawv yeej yuam tsi tau yus yuav thiab nav, yog tias yus tsi nyiam tiag thia, tej ntawd, so those are things that women can do now that they couldn’t then. Then, and in terms of the decision making. I think yus niam yus txiv laus laus los yus yeej pom tias lawv yeej change me ntsis thiab because they, even, just like simple things, I mean, like if they, if they’re talking about retirement funds, I mean, like your wife gets to decide where she wants her money to go if she dies, and that’s something that, you know, that’s new for your parents cause they, you know, lawv tsi paub hais tias well, that’s my money I could decide who to give it to and things like that. So those are the things that women have now that they didn’t have then, you know.
I: What um…public contributions do you want people to remember about Hmong women?

B: Um…well, I think just very simply that they are the ones that brought all of us to this world. And a lot of mothers just want the best for their children, and that women have always been the quiet ones behind a lot of decisions.

Ua li kuv nrog kuv niam tham a lot of times nws yeej tsis muab credit rau nws tus kheej nav. Koj noog nws dab tsi los nws yeej tias "Oh vim yog koj txiv lawv hais peb thiaj ua los vim yog koj yawg hais es peb thiaj ua.” But I think those are the things that they did just because they knew it was the best thing for their families. But a lot of times they don’t get credit for it so, but I think like tam sim no kiag in the current situations.

A lot of women are the one that makes things move, and stir things up, rau qhov peb lub community yog tias yus yuav tso zoo li thaum ub xwb nav, I think maybe txiv neej los yeej zoo siab and you know, just let it be that way. Let the usual people that make decisions and women would not saying anything. I think people would be okay with that if we let that be, but I think that you know, some men do see the benefit of having women involved and push that. I think women realize that lawv yeej, qhov lawv txawj ntse thiab qhov lawv pab txiav txim ub txiav txim no lawv yeej los yeej los pab tau pej xeem sawv daws nav. So qhov nov nws tsis yog los txhawb ib tug neeg xwb tab sis it’s better for everyone.

I: Okay, um was anything else that would you like to add?

B: Um let's see gosh…(laughs).

I: For proud women and yourself?

B: Well, I think that even, maybe peb pias me me no xwb yeej tsis capture ib tug neeg qhov story kiag hais tias txawv li cas rau cov ntxhais, cov tub, tab sis I think that there are a lot of times where koj nyob uas things happen es koj yeej tu siab hais tias koj yog ib tug ntxhais nav because many, many times that has happened to me. For example, when I was living by myself, thaum kuv kawm ntawv tag kuv pais nyob Green Bay, kuv nyob kuv ib leeg nav. Kuv twb mus nyob tau ob xyoos, peb cov kwv tij lawv yeej tsis tuaj xyuas kuv, I think yog, kuv yog ib tug txiv neej maybe lawv yeej, you know, tuaj yeej hais tias, "Oh, we are so happy that you're here." Things like that. Then when I starded to do a lot of work in the public, then they called my parents and lawv tias “Cas peb tsis paub tias nej tso nej tus ntxhais tuaj nyob nws ib leeg li no.” Things like that. And they were saying "Oh nej yuav tsum saib xyuas zoo rau qhov tias nws ua tsoj hauj lwm li no es tsam ib pliag muaj hluas nraug tuaj." So all they thought about is that tsam yus mus ua lawv poob ntsej muag tej ntawd, and that was really hard rau qhov yus xav tias ua cas yus twb pais ua qhov zoo xwb es lawv tsis pom li nav.
Then I think that just drives you because you realize hais tias txawm tsis xav yog hmoob nпаum li cas nav los koj yeej impacted by the things that you do and you can't ever run away from it, so you just try to make the best of the situation. Then, you know, even when I was thinking about graduate school, it is like, kuv hais rau kuv niam nkawv hais tias kuv yuav pais kawm ntawv in California, I applied to the school, went to visit the school, kuv rov qab los txog cas peb cov kwk vij tuaj hauv tsev. Usually they don’t come unless there is a problem. (laugh) You know, tuaj hais nav. I thought that lawv tuaj hais kuv tus niam hlus because she was like the blacksheep in the family, es nws pheej khib khib dwb nav, es kuv los txog ncua ces lawv tias "Oh peb tuaj nrog koj tham." Why? (laughs). Lawv hais tias, "Oh, peb hnov hais tias koj yuav pais kawm ntaw tim ub, is that true?". I said, “Yeah.” I had just came back from visiting and they're said, “Oh you know you can't go.” “What do you mean I can't go?” My uncle just said, “Well because koj yog ib tug ntxhais, and peb txhawj tias tsam koj mus deb deb es koj muaj mob tej ntawd ces tsis muaj tus twg sai." Lawv hais qhov ntawd first, but their real reason was that koj yog ib tug single girl es koj pais tid es, everybody yuav hais peb nav. (Laughs) So to me that was the time. I was twenty-one and I can't believe I just finished school. Aren't they happy? Aren't they like oh great, you're going on, and you're going to pursue a higher degree. So, those are the times that make you think in general people don't realize hais tias cov ntxhais nav, that because koj born ib tug ntxhais Hmoob nav, and you have to live with all those kind of conditions. Only if you really push yourself can you pass those plains. So that's credit to a lot Hmong women who have made it, and maybe people don’t realize that. What’s behind the picture of all the women who had made it successfully, but I think you know all those things. That’s it (laughs).

I: Great, thank you Bo.

B: Thank you.