



Building Our Future:

A Community Campaign

Day of Action Events Evaluation & Reflection Report

December 2013

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Building Movement to End Abusive International Marriages

Building Our Future (BOF) is a community campaign created by community change agents, movement builders, and advocates to end domestic violence and abusive international marriages/relationships in the Hmong community. We chose October 25th as the Day of Action for organizers across the country to host events that can bring awareness, spark conversations, and create strategies that help end abusive practices that hurt families. Activities ranged from vigils, teach-ins, kitchen table discussion, community forums, radio talk-shows, and viral organizing on social media networks.

As Hmong Americans, we have observed that the Hmong and American systems often fail Hmong victims of domestic violence (including those who experience abusive international marriages/relationships), yet we believe it is possible to achieve violence free families. Those most impacted, particularly victims and survivors, understand the problems and through their lived experiences we can develop better solutions. We are creating grassroots alternatives to end oppressive gender practices towards building healthy and thriving families from generation to generation.

Today, **75 organizers** are part of **Building Our Future** across the globe, and our efforts have reached at least **4,404 people (64% are women, 32% are men)** according to social network data on Facebook, twitter, and tumblr.

History

DEFINITION

Abusive international marriages/relationships results from the practice of older adults in the US (predominantly men) going overseas to marry or have relationships in abusive and exploitative ways. Any of these aspects make the relationship abusive: the very huge age difference (between 20-70 years), being deceitful about marital status or family status in the US, forcing their spouses in the US to grant them a legal divorce but remaining culturally married, making their sons legally marry the young wives so they can bring them, or sexual exploitation of young people overseas.

Throughout 2013, long time community builders and activists (Bo Thao-Urabe, Kabzuag Vaj, and Pa Vang) had opportunities, while traveling across the country for their various organization's work, to share the report, [Abusive International Marriages: Hmong Advocates Organizing in Wisconsin](#), published by the Asian Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence. In the report, long-time Hmong American domestic violence advocates defined abusive international marriages, and developed numerous strategies to tackle the issue. By sharing the report openly, Hmong Americans across the country voiced a common concern about the affects, normalization, and growing harm of abusive international marriages/relationships on families in both countries. This led to the creation of a virtual event on October 1, 2013 where the Building Our Future (BOF) Community Campaign was launched.

The BOF Campaign was launched with primary support from Bo Thao-Urabe, Kabzuag Vaj, and KaYing Yang, but moved by a group of local organizers across the United States, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. A Toolkit was developed, an organizer's webinar was conducted, and at least 12 community events were held as a part of the Day of Action in October 2013. Consequently, follow up meetings have taken place to keep the momentum going locally, nationally, and internationally.

The following is a summary of the evaluations collected from the Day of Action events.

Evaluation Report for Day of Action Events

Events & Participants

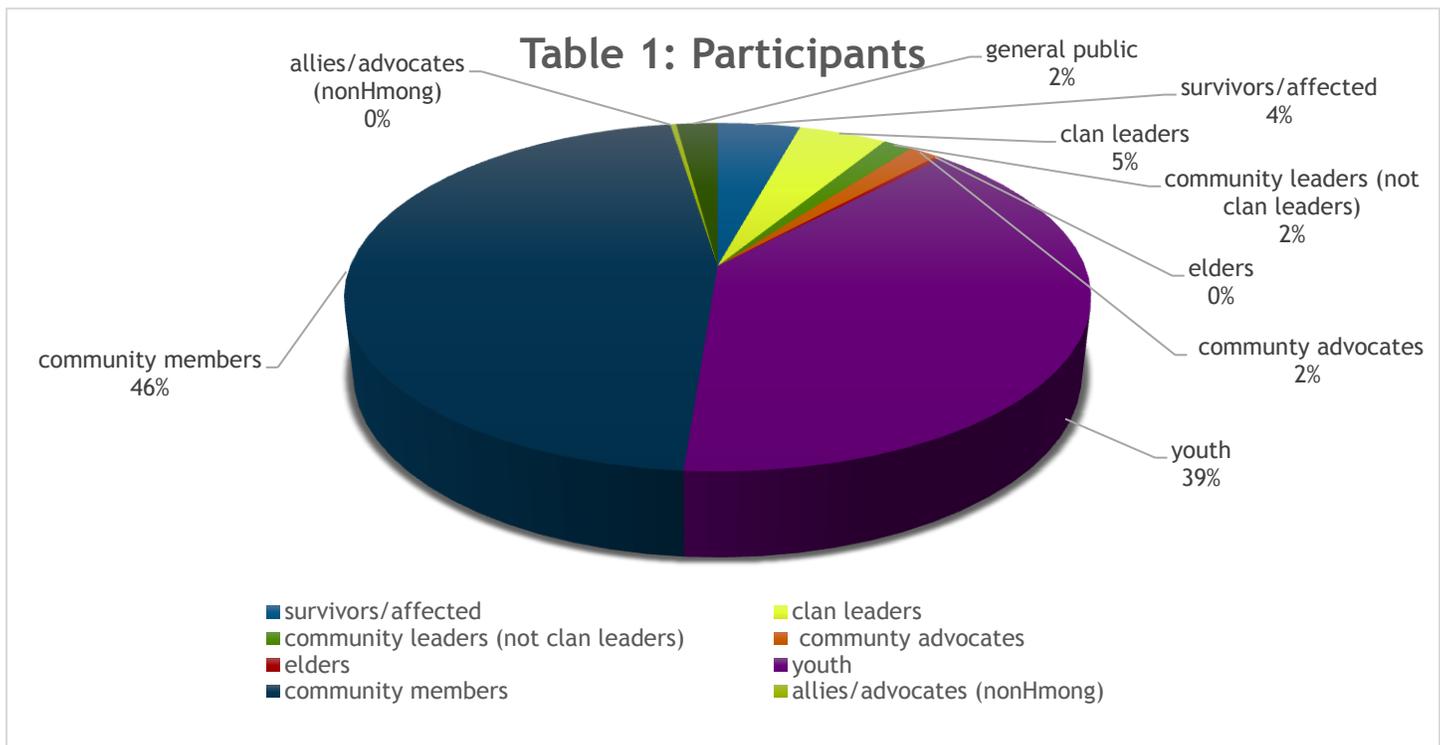
Twelve events took place in four states and in Laos during the Day of Action to end domestic violence and abusive international marriages/relationships in 2013:

- 1) California (Sacramento)
- 2) Minnesota (St. Cloud State University, College of St. Catherine, Community Vigil at Wilder Foundation, KFAI Hmong Radio, presentation at National Hmong 18 Clan Council Conference)
- 3) Hawaii
- 4) Washington, DC/Virginia area
- 5) Wisconsin (Green Bay Radio Talk-show, Madison and Milwaukee Suab Hmong Radio, Intergenerational Conversation at Freedom Inc., tabled at event in Steven's Point, and event in Eau Claire)
- 6) Laos (Conversation at VivNcaus: Sisterhood for Development)

Six evaluations were received from Building Our Future (BOF) organizers. While not all the organizers submitted evaluations, we were able to obtain the numbers of participants for Madison and Vientiane events to include in this summary. A large majority of participants were women (**279 women versus 51 men**). Event organizers did not indicate whether they limited the events to women only. For the radio talk show programs, it was not possible to gauge the number of listeners. The participants at the National Hmong 18 Clan Council Conference are also included here, because we were invited speakers to their event.

Table 1 Summary:

- More than **330 people** participated in these events, which ranged from workshop/discussions, radio shows to a community vigil. Community members (adults) made up 46% of the participants while youths made up 36%. Survivors of domestic violence or the affected community represented 4% of the participants. Clan leaders (5%) came to the St. Paul vigil. Another 2% of community leaders (no clan leaders), who happened to be all female, attended the St. Catherine event. Non-Hmong people and allies were present at some events but in very small numbers, mainly because they were not the target audience. Very few elders were also identified as being present at various events.
- The large numbers of youth were mostly participants at events that took place on university campuses or organized by young leaders.
- Most of the community members and clan members who participated joined the vigil.



Event Details

- **METHOD OF PUBLICITY** - The events were publicized using mainly using social networks, such as Facebook, emails, texts/SMS/IM, and to a lesser extent phone calls and posters/flyers.
- **LANGUAGE USED AT EVENT** - Most of the events were conducted in Hmong with only a few done in both Hmong and English. All radio programs were done in Hmong, except the Minnesota KFAI show, which was in English because of its targeted audience.
- **PARTICIPATION SCREENING** - Only one event limited the event to people who are sympathetic and open to learning more about the issue. The event was also kept small to hear ideas and concerns that could build the next phase of this work.

- **MATERIALS USED FROM BOF TOOLKIT** - Many of the materials were used for the event, including poster, press release/media advisory, FAQs/talking points, PowerPoint, abusive international marriage report. Other materials used were audio, video, and tumblr.

Participant Reactions of the Events

For many, the BOF events provided a first opportunity for them to hear about and to be involved in a conversation about “abusive international marriages.” Their reactions can be categorized into two areas:

Learning/Insights/More Questions	Interested/Possible Solutions/Want to Do More
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violent and self-degrading behaviors are results of historical trauma • Blames women overseas • Hopeful that DV can end but also concern that men have to change their behaviors • Military structure has misogynistic view of women, perpetuating violence against women • Shocked at the community member stories, were in disbelief • Why would the first wife go find her husband a wife? • Knows that the issue is bad, but unsure how it effects the community • Truth & powerful • Hurting so many families • Still learning at the beginning stages of the issue • Lack experience, relationships, and understanding of the daily struggles of women in Laos • Unsure about how to and needs tools and trainings to address directly within our own families • It also happens in the Somalia community • Everyone has experienced this and students are shocked and dismayed that it is so accepted in the community, they have questions about how to solve the problem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interested and engaged in the discussion • Wanted to learn more • Motivated • Lack of services for wives impacted here and from overseas • Want to help but just don’t know how • Have to do something different to address this issue • Want to be proactive and give back • Would like to connect and understand broader world context of this issue • Need to address the root cause which is unhealthy family relationships • Need to focus on families in America because the issues in Laos are too far from those of us in America while also supporting agencies in Laos to educate women and families in Laos • Community members are currently working hard with families (at nonprofit programs, in church) to help families develop stronger relationships

Ideas About Possible Solutions Discussed at the Events

Not all events were structured to have discussions on possible solutions, but for the events that were able to do so, the following is a list of their ideas.

What individuals can do	What organizations can do
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build communication with elders and men. • Educate each other, and have a voice when the topic is discussed. • Raise funds to support the needs of the girls overseas either in pursuing education or economic opportunities so that they have alternative choices. • Educate our peers through more dialogues. The next one could be focused on asking our partners and ally men to join a session. • Talk to your families; work to develop positive relationships in your family; speak up when it happens. • Each of us must stop participating in wedding ceremonies/ celebrations for 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer tools and training opportunities to address directly within our own families. • Create some kind of cultural exchange opportunity so that we can better understand the lives of women overseas and they can also better learn about the life we have here. We believe it will help foster relationships and a deeper understanding of what our experiences are like. • Create educational opportunities and economic development programs that support women and girls. • Work with families to build stronger relationships, work with youth who have negatively impacted by this practice. • Get Hmong social service agencies to be more involved and have their names listed as sponsors; all their staff must be trained on how to approach the subject and also pass out info. • Serve all victims (whether they are the first or overseas wife).

<p>under age marriage (local and international).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produce a campaign brochure/flyer that we can pass out to people stating that underage marriage is illegal and knowingly participating is considered a perpetrator.
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What the Hmong community can do	What allies can do	What governments can do
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a movement in educating the cause and effect of this problem. • Men need to take some leadership to speak against this issue. • Remove stigmas and derogatory terms that describe divorced women and widows to view them in a more positive way and be more inclusive of them. • Change our social values around this practice and start to challenge this practice. • Hmong 18 Clan Council should publicly support this campaign and denounce the practice. • Use ECHO (producers of MN TV PSAs in language) and other Hmong media to reach larger community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hear the voices of victims and survivors without judgment and consider what services/ support the community wants. • Support youth and families, speak to men who are doing this, challenge social values that promote this type of behavior. • Mainstream agencies can help by supporting our effort financially as well as passing out the info to their Hmong constituents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A few questions were raised about the immigration screening process and applying for visas coming from Laos to US. No particular solution was suggested. • Develop policies that will require Hmong birth to be documented in Laos and Thailand, work with the U.S. embassies to screen these types of marriages. • Follow Cambodia’s lead in making large age gap in marriages illegal between their citizens and spouses from other countries.

The evaluations indicated that after the event, the event organizers sensed that participants who had no opinion or were unaware of abusive international marriages felt that abusive international marriages generally harmed community. Participants who felt abusive international marriages harms community remained unchanged.

Other Comments

What other resources would have been helpful for the Day of Action event, or could be helpful for future events?

- Having more voices from women overseas or at least a better understanding of their lives would provide a balanced view about this subject. There is disconnect between what people know of in terms of the nuanced struggles of women overseas; more tools that can help with that would also be useful.
- A video or something more visual. Stories really impacted the students, because they could relate.
- More education is needed on culture, sexism and patriarchy connected to this issue, which is a foundational piece that would help frame the issue. To avoid some people from being turned-off right away it could be creatively integrated somehow.
- How to address questions about the differences between what is happening in our community versus other communities in the world and also what’s our comparison point for what makes a good marriage.
- The DV and abusive international marriages are two very big topics. It was not easy to discuss both at the same event. Next time, it would be better to separate the two or make be very clear about the link.

What other activities do you want to plan to raise awareness and generate solutions?

- It is very clear that many people blame women overseas for abusive international marriages because they see the women over there calling the men here and asking for money. Because they only see it from this angle, they believe men here are being abused or exploited. Deeper analysis need to be made about who initiates and perhaps historical perspectives on how all this began in the first place.
- Scenario stories were great for interactive activities but not enough time to create an action plan. It might be good for participants to make their own personal action plan for themselves.
- Most likely do a follow up gathering that includes men.
- Interested in raising funds to support programs that could help women overseas.

Special stories or quotes from the event

- Testimonies from survivors of domestic violence demonstrated that people do overcome victimization if they have strong family support to help them leave those relationships. Their stories also showed that traditional solutions, such as ‘going back to their abusive husbands’ don’t work. Yet, community leaders continue to use this solution for resolving conflicts.
- A woman who was taping the vigil said she has personally experienced abusive international marriage because her husband left her and married a young woman from overseas.
- A Hmong man who has been running for public office wanted to stay in touch and help because his sister is experiencing this now with her husband.
- Hmong male students publicly stated that they would build the future by lowering their ego, and acknowledging women around them. Hmong female students hoped to communicate more with their fathers. Many young students knew about international marriages but didn’t know about the negative consequences.

Other thoughts / Comments

- Abusive international marriages/relationships touches every family and even though many are against it, the burden is often put on the young woman or bride who comes to the US to end it. The young bride is criticized and told she is not a good wife, has bad intentions, etc. This raises several questions: Why are we not sympathetic to these young women? Why does our community so often quickly defend and protect men, even though deep down we know that it is men who have the power to engage in this kind of relationship? Has our society taught us to hate women so much that we don’t realize it in ourselves? Or has patriarchal practices brainwashed us to uphold men so much that we don’t value women, leading us to only question other women’s?

Closing Reflection

Building Our Future is a grassroots movement started by a handful of community builders with a shared desire to end a practice that is having dire consequences for Hmong families, especially children. We know the Day of Action events in October 2013 were just the starting point, not the end point. It successfully solidified relationships between the network of organizers across the country and overseas. Though not all the organizers are directly working on domestic violence or women-centered issues, we all share a sense of urgency to act to address this epidemic that is creating havoc for families.

For far too long, families have suffered silently. This silence has allowed the practice to thrive. We have witnessed that service organizations are totally unprepared to serve the impacted individuals and families; our traditional community leaders lack analysis, insights, and deep moral commitment to make meaningful change; our allies do not understand what is happening and at times unknowingly marginalize what is happening in our community; and, overwhelmingly this issue is seen as women’s issue when we know that it is not.

Overall the Day of Action was most effective in increasing awareness, and creating explicit spaces for the community to talk about what is happening. The Day of Action events occurred because of the leadership of younger people (ages 44 and under). Many of the organizers do not work directly on women-centered issues in their daily jobs, but many have first hand experience witnessing the impact of abusive international marriages/relationships. Women continue to lead the effort; though, many events brought more men than in the past. The organizers acknowledged that as we move forward, future efforts must consider how to engage all genders, ages, lived experiences, and the larger community of allies. Lastly, the organizers desired to continue building solidarity between Hmong Americans and Hmong populations overseas. While many participants are just beginning to understand the issue, there is a need to develop deeper understanding of systems of power and privilege. In particular the systems that contribute to this practice includes: patriarchy, globalization, economics, and culture.

This is a beginning and while more is needed to better serve, advocate, and change conditions locally and internationally, there’s an overwhelming sense that ***Building Our Future*** should focus on supporting organizers to plan and implement the Day of Action events each year. Organizers believe there is power in continuing a Day of Action to show unity, support local action across the globe, and to continue magnifying the state of the problem in order to leverage resources to meet the needs of victims and survivors and their families, and end the practice through advocacy, policy, and transformation. To do this, ***Building Our Future*** would need to sharpen the tools that we’ve created, collect more stories, provide trainings, and continue to be a connector for local organizers.

We believe this is achievable. Therefore, our next steps include planning a face-to-face organizer’s gathering in July 2014 in Minnesota; providing technical assistance to local organizers as they continue to carry out local efforts; collecting more stories; and, working with the Wisconsin advocates’ network to refine frequently asked questions.

Though the road is long and the climb is steep for all of us, we took the first steps together this year. We understand that we are building a movement, not a project, and change will not happen overnight. However, because we acted we have seen personal and community healing begin; we have widened the circle and know that our young people are intelligent and effective in getting the work done. Most importantly, because we took a public stand, we have helped to move this issue from the personal to the community space, and people can no longer claim this is a personal problem. We (men, women, children, young, old, Hmong Americans, Hmong overseas, our allies etc.) must all change if we want this practice to end. Systems must also be more responsive, and more effectively address the needs of those who suffer, but also reconstruct power to create new cultures of practice towards equity.

We are most grateful to each of the organizers who had a hand in making the local Day of Action events possible, and we are grateful for all the existing local organizations that supported them. As we look out a generation from now, we know change is coming because we acted together now.

Special Acknowledgement

We want to especially thank the Asian Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence for their unwavering support. Their technical support allowed our organizers to connect and helped us to measure our Day of Action impact. Additionally, they continue to demonstrate the essence of what it means to build a movement to end gender-based violence that puts impacted communities at the center of the issues and solutions.

New Resources Created As a Result of the Building Our Future Campaign

- **Building Our Future** Toolkit: <https://drive.google.com/folderview?id=0B6xVffOkcpMUOWhwN1VSODVvQ1E&usp=sharing>
- A list of **Building Our Future** Organizers from across the country
- SCSU student video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g0SVcWeCopE>
- Audio recording of message from a woman in Laos: <http://youtu.be/k6wWqwTyyQk>
- Video message from a VivNcaug, Laos member Maly Her: <http://youtu.be/Sp30qSCp48M>
- Senator Fong Hawj's personal message: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=580132455373715>
- Poster by Nancy Xiong: https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10102586586287227&set=gm.236370686525510&type=1&relevant_count=1&ref=nf
- At least three more radio program recordings: https://soundcloud.com/kinghi16/interview-with-kaying-yang?utm_source=soundcloud&utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=facebook...
- Hmong 18 Clan Council television footage: Part 1 with KaYing: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vHjSJMexFc>, Part 2 with Kabzuag Vaj: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zo_RPlD3F40.
- Individual stories - Destiny Xiong, youth in Wisconsin, song by Bao Vang (Maiv Yaj's sister)