

CHAN-BOF FOR PEACE

Challenging oppressive cultural norms in the Hmong community for domestic violence prevention

PRACTITIONERS AND ADVOCATES FEATURED

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CHAN-BOF for Peace is a California-based collaborative with a rich history of working within the field of domestic violence prevention and with expertise in culturally responsive approaches to end gender-based violence in the Hmong community. CHAN, which stands for California Hmong Advocates Network, is comprised of Hmong advocates, working to address and provide culturally-responsive direct services to survivors. The advocates are doing so through the domestic violence organizations they work for. BOF stands for Building our Future, a network that mobilizes the Hmong community to change cultural practices, attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs through the lens of gender equity. As part of Blue Shield of California Foundation's [Leveraging Collaboration to End Domestic Violence](#) grant program, CHAN-BOF for Peace is developing culture-change strategies for domestic violence prevention. By shedding light on and addressing oppressive cultural norms in the Hmong community that contribute to gender-based violence, CHAN-BOF for Peace hopes to make shifts in the community that better support women and girls.



BUILDING AN ADVOCATE NETWORK

CHAN-BOF for Peace currently works within the Hmong communities of Sacramento, Merced, and Fresno in California. The collaborative recognized very early that it is hard to focus on preventing gender-based violence without addressing its cultural context, and that if they wanted to see systemic change, they needed to involve the larger Hmong community in understanding and addressing the root causes of gender-based violence. They are currently working within the Hmong community alongside community organizers, survivors, community-based organizations, domestic violence organizations, and resident leaders with expertise from different professional backgrounds. Together they are trying to address this significant issue in their community, a community that has recently experienced three murder suicides and one murder of Hmong women by their Hmong male partners just in the short span of September to November 2019.

To better delve into conversations on how oppressive cultural practices contribute to a culture of violence, CHAN-BOF for Peace is broadening its collaborative. The process of forming the collaborative has been primarily informal. "It's about what feels right for our community," says Dee Lee, a Program Specialist for CHAN-BOF for Peace. The collaborative is responsive to the needs and ideas of the community and partners, ultimately evolving as the work progresses. For CHAN-BOF for Peace, building rapport and establishing trust within the Hmong community is an important first step because of the sensitive nature of domestic violence. The collaborative has already grown from 10 to 30 people and organizations in under one year, and together they are building a shared language and understanding around the issue of gender-based violence. They want to ensure that the whole collaborative agrees with the key elements of the work. These include values such as respecting the values of whole persons, remaining survivor-centered, assuming best intentions, and sharing decision-making responsibilities.



A picture of an embroidered cloth called a story cloth, representative of Hmong life in the mountains of Laos. Story cloths are a way for Hmong women to document Hmong folklore, lives, stories, and journey.

Photo provided by MaiBao Yang.

WORKING TO ADDRESS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN A CULTURALLY-SENSITIVE WAY

CHAN-BOF for Peace partners are working to find a balance in how they tailor the language of domestic violence to be more culturally appropriate depending on the setting and context. For example, a Hmong term used by domestic violence advocates and survivors for years is "kev tsim txom." Kev tsim txom has been coined to mean domestic violence, but the origin of the word is "torture." For some, this language is heavy and for others softer language doesn't necessarily convey the depth of what survivors may feel. Furthermore, there are lingering negative perceptions that domestic violence shelters are "tsev nkauj fa/ tsev poj nrauj" or houses of runaway brides/houses for divorced women. As CHAN-BOF for Peace navigates complex cultural dynamics, CHAN-BOF for Peace is committed to connecting with people within the community to address and get to the root causes of violence.

For example, they use oral storytelling traditions to help build an understanding of domestic violence as a community issue and openly discuss how cultural norms can be oppressive to Hmong women and girls and contribute to domestic violence.

NORMS CONTRIBUTING TO A CULTURE OF VIOLENCE

Culture is extremely positive, valuable, and salient in the Hmong community and of great importance to CHAN-BOF for Peace. Yet, in the Hmong community, as in most cultures, there are many cultural norms that are upheld due to long-standing patriarchal practices and beliefs. One cultural belief is that when a woman marries, her birth family lets go of all responsibility related to her physical and spiritual wellbeing and her spirituality becomes “housed” under her in-laws. If a divorced woman passes away, she becomes a “homeless wandering ghost.” Another example of patriarchal norms is the traditional practice of paying a “bride price” for a woman’s hand in marriage. The exchange of money at times enables families to hold abusive views that a wife is a commodity instead of a human being. “Ua siab ntev” is a practice where some domestic violence victims seek help from their elders and are told to return home and be patient. CHAN-BOF for Peace is working to shift these kinds of norms and practices by helping the community consider different perspectives and understand the connection between certain norms and domestic violence.

HOW CHAN-BOF IS ADDRESSING DEEPLY ROOTED CULTURAL NORMS

CHAN-BOF for Peace believes that to address deeply rooted cultural norms, the collaborative must change the narrative and educate community members on what gender-based violence looks like from a survivor’s perspective. MaiBao Yang, a Program Specialist for CHAN-BOF for Peace says, “We have to work with those in the community that have the power to help us make these changes.” The collaborative uplifts the voices of survivors and other members of the community such as shamans and cultural experts. Shamans and cultural experts play key

roles in many spiritual and cultural traditions such as soul-calling ceremonies and weddings.

MaiBao says, “In order to end gender-based violence, we are really digging deep to change the hearts and minds of our community so that we all can value the lives and well-being of Hmong women and girls. We know that when our women and girls thrive, then our community thrives.”



A group of advocates, activists, and movement builders working on gender-based violence prevention at the 2019 National Gathering of Hmong Movement Builders. Photo provided by CHAN-BOF for Peace Collaborative.

PRACTITIONER AND ADVOCATE BIOGRAPHIES

Dee works as a Program Specialist for CHAN-BOF for Peace Collaborative and has been organizing with Building Our Future since 2014. She is also the co-chair and co-founded Hmong Queer Suab and facilitates LGBTQ 101 and Allyship trainings. She has a background in data analysis, LGBTQIA+ organizing, and advocating for social justice.

MaiBao Yang started her career in the anti-gender-based violence movement 10 years ago as an advocate at Haven Women's Center of Stanislaus. Her love for Hmong women and girls and her community lead her to create California Hmong Advocates Network with other Hmong advocates in the Central Valley. She currently works as a program specialist for CHAN-BOF for Peace Collaborative, organizing to create systemic changes in the Hmong community.

RESOURCES

- [Web conference recording and slides](#)

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