



An Interview with The Hmong American Women's Association (HAWA)

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[The Hmong American Women's Association](#) (HAWA), Inc. is a non-profit organization that was founded in 1993 by a group of thirteen women who had a strong passion to advocate, organize and share concerns reflected by women in the larger Hmong community in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

The Hmong (pronounced mung) are an Asian ethnic group from the mountainous regions of China, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. The United States recruited a number of Hmong people to help fight against the communist Pathet Lao, known as the secret war, during the Laotian Civil War at the time of the Vietnam War. Hmong people were singled out for retribution when the Pathet Lao took over the Laotian government in 1975, and tens of thousands fled to Thailand seeking political asylum. Thousands of these refugees have resettled in the United States since the late 1970s. Their language is also called Hmong.

Last year, HAWA received a SASP grant to begin developing a sexual assault component of their community work. Executive Director MayTong Chang hired Joua Yang in September to coordinate the new sexual assault program called Ntuj Tshiab (translated as "New World").

Joua has been looking into the community's understanding of sexual assault including how victims are viewed. She has hosted five community focus groups with the goal of identifying recurring themes. Joua has also completed community surveys targeting specific age ranges and both males and females.

Currently in the phase of analyzing results, Joua sees a clear need for victim services and support as well as education and awareness. In June, HAWA will host a community meeting to discuss the results of their work and seek community feedback. Their goal is to launch a community sexual assault awareness campaign and develop direct services.

Even though the full results of their analysis haven't been released, one of the focus groups revealed such a strong need for a support group that HAWA started a psychoeducational group for Hmong survivors of sexual violence. Of the support group, Joua says, "It seems to be really helpful for someone to hear them and understand the weight of cultural influences and for them to have each other. It has been fabulous to see that Hmong survivors can come together. Many of their struggles are similar." She explained that it is rare for Hmong women to come together around this topic because sexual violence is such a taboo.

Joua and MayTong, Hmong themselves, believe there are a number of reasons why it is essential for Hmong survivors to be able to seek support in a culturally-relevant context. Joua explains, "First and

foremost for some survivors language is a huge barrier. A lot of Hmong translators and interpreters are not trained in terms of sexual assault and proper terminology. The Hmong language is so complex that one word can have multiple meanings." According to Joua, there is no simple way in Hmong to say "I was raped" or "I was molested." In order to talk about what happened to them, a survivor would have to explain exactly what occurred in detail without using any shortcut words like "rape" making the experience very traumatic.

The HAWA advocates believe these language issues can have a direct effect on how a case is perceived in court. As Joua explains, "Victims might beat around the bush and an interpreter would not be able to ask the kind of follow-up questions that would be needed to truly understand what happened." Most often, however, crimes of sexual violence against Hmong women are not reported. Lack of reporting, according to Joua, has an important cultural context as well: "The process of reporting would feel very intrusive, and we can understand the dilemmas these victims face. Support is very crucial because of the stigma and the possibility of becoming an outcast from the family and the community. Your life and reputation are built around the family and clan system. A victim would be going against this clan system to report and risk being branded as 'used.' If you are single, the possibility of getting a husband would be very hard."

Explaining that Asian societies discourage showing strong negative emotions, HAWA can focus on supporting the survivor in an emotionally appropriate way. Joua talked about a few survivors who have sought therapy in the wider community and found, while they learned some ways to cope, there was a lack of understanding of the multiple levels of pain they were experiencing and an inability to find true healing in this context. In addition to the event itself, survivors are negotiating potential community backlash, silence, and managing uncomfortable emotional and psychological turbulence.

MayTong explained another aspect of underreporting, "Hmong girls don't report because they are afraid they could be forced to marry their abuser." In the community surveys, HAWA found that many Hmong men stated there was no sexual assault in the Hmong community. Traditionally, the community has tried to find a way to make what happened okay by forcing a victim to marry the offender.

MayTong and Joua acknowledge that the work they are doing is painful and that sometimes they are labeled by their own community as trouble makers. As Joua notes, "It is so deep and raw to talk about how the Hmong community deals with sexual assault. There will be some against the program because they believe HAWA is painting the Hmong people as barbaric and breaking up families." But HAWA knows that sexual assault exists in all communities and remains hopeful that their work can help create a "new world" for survivors of sexual violence in Milwaukee's Hmong community. As Joua says, "We are at the forefront of what it means to be community. Givers of life, sustainers of hope, relievers of thirsty hearts, navigators of the lost, reflectors of colors and culture."