

BRIDGING THE SHORES
SEGMENT D-1: MARITAL CHALLENGES

Producer: Roisum
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Host:

The American lifestyle often requires married couples to share the responsibility of being breadwinners. This has caused tension, doubt, and worries among many traditional Hmong men, who fear their wives will become unfaithful outside of the home. Education efforts and counseling are trying to alleviate these fears, before they manifest into separations or domestic violence. Steve Roisum reports...

[OPEN WITH TODDLER AND MAI VANG PLAYING...FADE UNDER TRAK]

Mai Vang plays with her two-year old daughter, Jailie (jeye-lee-ah) on the toy-covered carpet of their la Crosse apartment. Jailie's language bridges two worlds... English and Hmong. And vang has crossed her own bridge...from being a submissive wife to a single parent with a job, who gave birth to her daughter (jeye-lee-ah) out of wedlock.

Vang wanted to be a good daughter for her parents when she gave the married life not just one chance, but three. Vang says it was her third marriage that convinced her she deserved better. Her last husband was violent and controlling, because he didn't like her working outside of the home.

MVang01: "He hit me, he kicked me, he was so jealous. I was working at first federal savings bank in Minnesota. I would be talking with my co-worker, he says why don't you come home, it's late. oh my gosh, I'm in a monthly meeting. pull me out, got too jealous, i quit that job."

Despite the jealousy and abuse, Vang stayed in the marriage. But then one day she asked her husband whatever happened to his ex-wife. He responded by pulling out his ex's drivers license, green card, and social security card and setting them ablaze on the kitchen floor in front of her. Vang fled to a shelter, and filed for divorce.

Vang's dilemma is a rare, extreme example of a problem in modern Hmong culture. Some men have trouble with their wives having a job of their own. They often fear she'll find someone else, maybe a boyfriend on the side, or someone she can run off with.

72-year-old Hmong elder Pao Xiong, speaking through an interpreter, says today's Hmong wives are confused. They want to go to school and start careers, while still being wives and mothers. Xiong says in America, Hmong women must remember to respect their husbands outside of the home.

PXiong01: "...woman when she goes to work has to remember she's married, she has a husband, and she has to come back to home. she cannot act like she is single.

Yeu Vu (zer vu) is the family strengthening coordinator for the Hmong mutual assistance association in La Crosse. It helps Hmong refugees adapt to life in America.

Whether its infidelity, past abuse, or other reasons, it's Vu's job to step in when Hmong marriages are on the line. Vu says sometimes the husband worries that the wife is enjoying too much freedom. It's vu's job to make sure the husband and wife understand each other.

YVeu01: "Myself, I try to stay neutral. I don't take woman or man side. When I talk to the woman she feel good about that too."

Vu says the police are called if it's a case of domestic abuse. But one husband told him that if he had talked with vu before, he wouldn't have wound up in jail twice for hitting his wife.

Hmong couples in vu's area are encouraged to attend what vu originally called domestic abuse training. When no one came, vu changed the name to leadership training. His 60- hour course helps couples learn to communicate with each other. And it also features guests who speak on topics such as how the local legal system works...for example, what does a district attorney do?

YVeu02: "DA say "I'm the district attorney, if you're good, I say on your side, if you hit your wife, I say on her side. If your wife hits you, I stay on your side. If both of you are good, i don't want to know you."

Thai Vue is the executive director for the Hmong Mutual Assistance Association in La Crosse. Vue says most traditional Hmong men are coming around to the idea that their wives should be treated as equals, and can seek an education, and land a good job without jeopardizing the marriage. Vue's own wife runs a custom tailoring business, and all three of his daughters are college graduates.

Mai Vang hopes her next husband -- if there is one -- is also open to her going to school. she says since escaping her third husband, she's happier living on her own with her daughter, Jailie. Vang has since joined a Christian church, and turned her life over to god.

[FADE UP FAST ON ROCK BAND, CLAPPING...AFTER A MOMENT, HOLD UNDER TRACKS]

Here at the packed Hmong Faith Alliance Church, Vang is among over a hundred other worshippers clapping along as a rock band kicks the service into high gear. She says everything has happened for a reason.

MVang03: "He did answer my prayer -- if there is a God, I will be pregnant one day and boom, one day I got pregnant....there is a God for me".

Vang says it took a while for her parents to accept her new life out on her own. But, Vang says they see she's happy. Vang hopes to marry again someday, this time for love. For Bridging the Shores, I'm Steve Roisum.

[FADE OUT MUSIC]