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## The Lived Experience of Hmong Women in Leadership Roles

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vang7202@mail.umassglobal.edu

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The Lived Experience of Hmong Women in Leadership Roles

A Dissertation by

Nou C. Vang

University of Massachusetts Global

Irvine, California

School of Education

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

April 2023

Committee in charge:

Philip O. Pendley, Ed.D. Committee in Chair

Laurie Goodman, Ed.D.

Jeffrey Lee, Ed.D.


University of Massachusetts Global  
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

The dissertation of Nou C. Vang is approved.

  
\_\_\_\_\_, Dissertation Chair  
Phil Pendley, Ed.D.

  
\_\_\_\_\_, Committee Member  
Laurie Goodman, Ed.D.

  
\_\_\_\_\_, Committee Member  
Jeffrey Lee, Ed.D.

  
\_\_\_\_\_, Associate Dean  
Patrick Ainsworth, Ed.D.

April 2023

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to dedicate this dissertation to my family. First and foremost, I dedicate this work to my parents, Cher Soua Vang and Sang Yang, who instilled in me the desire to seek higher education and whose love has encouraged me to set goals and strive to do my very best in life. My dad's words of wisdom ever since I could remember:

*Only you can determine which pencil you want to hold: the small pencil where you use your brain to work or the large pencil (referring to a garden hoe) where you use your whole body and physical strength. The choice is yours. Do not for one minute think that you are the only one with a master's degree. Do not stop here..... go get your doctoral degree.*

Dad, you would be so humbly proud to call me Dr. Vang!

To my husband, Khambee T. Xiong, who believes in me and pushes me daily to achieve the great things in life. Your love and support helped me persist and complete this profound journey of my life. There have been many dark moments when I wanted to give up, but you believed in me. All the times that I doubted myself, you never once doubted me and my ability, which motivated me to reach my goal.

To my father, Cher Soua Vang, my mother, Sang Yang, and my husband, Khambee Xiong, this degree is for YOU!

To my children Joy, Matthew, and Eric, you are the reasons why I live and continue to push myself to want to do better and accomplish goals in life. I want you to know that there will be times along your journey when you will be faced with extreme obstacles and setbacks. They will make you feel hopeless, powerless, and fearful. They will make you doubt your ability to accomplish your dreams. But I hope that the path that

I have the strength to break down those barriers, pick yourself back up, and continue your journey to accomplish your goals in life.

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It is an honor to dedicate my dissertation to those who are dear to my heart.

## ABSTRACT

### The Lived Experience of Hmong Women in Leadership Roles

by Nou C. Vang

**Purpose:** The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and understand the lived experiences of Hmong women who have achieved leadership positions.

**Methodology:** This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experience of 12 Hmong women who have ascent to leadership roles through personal, face-to-face, in-depth, open-ended questions. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for emergent themes. Related artifacts from the participants, along with the participant interviews, were collected to triangulate data. Research findings were a result of the correlating themes based on the qualitative data analysis and research question.

**Findings:** The findings of the study indicated that personal determination, life circumstances, and networking were key factors for participants to achieve top leadership positions.

**Conclusion:** The conclusions of the study indicated that all participants were impacted by self-efficacy, opportunities, and influence during their journey to top leadership positions.

**Recommendations for Action:** Recommendations for action are to conduct a long-term study exploring the generational differences and leadership styles to further illuminate the lived experience of Hmong women leaders and their journey to top-leadership positions.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

It happened again today... anxiety at its highest. Heart racing at the speed of light. Defeated and mortified. Sang remembers this feeling. Just two years ago, she was told she did not have the ability to represent the organization she was most passionate about. A couple of months prior, during a board meeting, Sang was notified that an executive position had opened, and she was determined to take on this position. Despite her male-dominated workplace, she knew she was qualified for this leadership role. She not only holds the highest degree on the staff and has been one of the longest-standing members of the organization, but she is also one of the most hardworking and creative individuals on the team. Confused and beaten, Sang decided to ask what factors held her back from obtaining this leadership position. "Sang, you're a hard worker, and you're qualified, but we were really looking for someone to *lead*, to *direct*, to *speak out*, to *point others out*." It seemed as if they only saw her as a submissive Hmong woman.

This typical scenario is played out too often throughout the nation. As a society, we have to learn to adjust to an information technology revolution, budget deficits worldwide, and how to manage a world of climate threats (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011). According to M. Moua (2010), these changes have forced us to work and live together in an unparalleled society unlike before. As our environment transforms, it is urgent that we learn to change and adjust to adapt to the challenges within our surrounding environment.

Change makes us aware of who we are, our differences, and how we relate to others (M. Moua, 2010). This has allowed us to utilize our best talents and skilled individuals to contribute to our nation's global economy. It is imperative that people

come together as a collective whole to use their talents, skills, and entrepreneurial drive to make their country a richer and more powerful place to live (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011). In collaboration, countries and nations around the world can thrive through this type of global adaptation - yet often, for an array of reasons, certain individuals, such as women, are not provided with the same opportunities to offer their skillsets and creativity that the nation needs.

M. Adams et al. (2013) argue that social groupings and class are used to inaugurate and endorse social order. As a result, this has threatened America. For far too long, many come to the land of dreams to pursue their education and continue to be dreamers, or they return to their country to live the dream. It is seen that Americans have become comfortable with the status quo of functioning globally as a nation. In order for America to rediscover itself, we need to accept that these social categories are what makes America great. Friedman and Mandelbaum (2011) concur that it is time to shift gears by acting differently, requiring us to loosen the control of division and interests in our policies.

Oppression of cultures, ethnicity, race, class, and sexual orientation has impacted the quality of talent and intelligence available to America (M. Adams et al., 2013). Consequently, this has suppressed many talented individuals from contributing globally. Not only has this suppressed people from offering necessary talents, but it also has pushed the nation behind in terms of ensuring that we have the most preeminent leaders to lead our nation. For that reason, we must break away from this.

## **Background**

To inquire further into the women's historical experience in the workforce and understand Hmong women's existence in America and the lack of representation in leadership positions, a background is provided. Multiple research projects strongly indicate that currently, there exists a discrepancy in educational attainment, workforce wage, and professional leadership positions in women when compared to their counterparts. Women represent about 50% of the United States population and have earned more degrees compared to men, specifically postgraduate degrees, in the last century (Perry, 2015a, 2015b; Pew Research Center, 2015; Sandberg, 2013).

For instance, women have received more than 44% of master's degrees in business and management, including 37% of MBAs (Warner, 2014). Despite the education attainment of women in the United States, the past 30 years illustrate how women have surpassed men; their presence in leadership roles remains significantly lower (Sandberg, 2013; Women and Leadership, 2015). Women hold about 52% of all professional-level jobs; however, women still lag significantly behind when it comes to leadership representation. Females are merely 14.6% of executive officers, 4.6% of Fortune 500 CEOs, and 17% of Fortune 500 board seats (Warner, 2014; Women in Leadership, 2015). Women of color represent 36.3% of the nation's professional-level jobs, and at most, 2.7% are Asian American (Warner, 2014).

Sheryl Sandberg (2013), CEO of Facebook, Harvard University Business School graduate, and founder of Lean in Circle, concurs that women are underrepresented in top leadership positions. Yet, the gap is larger for women of color, who hold just 4% of top corporate jobs, 3% of board seats, and 5% of congressional seats.



Studies of Asian American women reveal that although Asian American women are making great advances in achieving higher education and often doing as well as their male counterparts, there remains a wider gap among Asian American women in leadership positions (Guo, 2016; Smith, 2013). Smith (2013) notes that there are over 600,000 Asian American women who are entrepreneurs, and many own firms across the nation, estimating billions of dollars. Comparatively to other women of color, such as Latinas and African American women entrepreneurs, Asian American women entrepreneurs partake in overseeing more employees than other women. This goes to show that Asian American women have the ability and skill sets to take on leadership positions. However, studies concur that Asian American women remain underrepresented in positions of power, specifically in organizations, government positions, or Fortune 500 CEOs and board seats (Guo, 2016; Smith, 2013).

### **Gender and Cultural Expectations**

The Hmong culture does not have a government structure but is organized by clans. Hmong societal relationships are built where gender hierarchy is emphasized. The Hmong people have a social structure where they reside in clans, sub-clans, ceremonial households, extended families, and nuclear families (Owens, 2007). The Hmong people rely on clan leaders and elders to lead and resolve disputes among clan members and families. The Hmong people are communitarian in nature, surviving on relationships. The Hmong people do not describe themselves as individuals but identify themselves as a member of the family, clan, and/or community. Relationships by the individual are acknowledged by relatives and clan members, with respect for elders and men.

According to Owens (2007), clan membership is given from the father to the children through birth or adoption. Men have a higher status than women, are the head of the household, and hold decision-making rights. Daughters are seen as a guest in their family and are often referred to as "guests" since they are to be married at a young age and become a part of the husband's family. Once married, her sole responsibility is to perform domestic duties and be the primary caretaker, ensuring that the family's needs are met. Among women are seen as hard-working and hospitable individuals. It is frowned upon when a woman is not seen as warm, social, and welcoming. Power among women is to be attained as they age; mothers-in-law have power over the daughters-in-law, and the eldest daughter-in-law has power over the younger daughters-in-law. This creates high competition to gain respect and be known as the most reliable woman in the household (Fendya, 1995; Saechao-Elizalde, 2014; Vang, 2009).

### **Women in Leadership Roles**

Women in leadership continue to be a topic of discussion. Throughout history, we have seen women move from being home caretakers to working in the workforce in recent years and slowly but surely move into leadership roles. Evidence from many studies supports the conclusion that although there is an equal balance of men and women in professional jobs, few women find themselves climbing the corporate ladder to the top (Koneck, 2006; Sandberg, 2013). Many women who attain college degrees go out into the workforce and compete with their male counterparts. In many cases, women excel at what they do but are slow to receive raises or promotions. It is evident that even over time, women continue to enhance their skills, and yet they continue to encounter barriers (Koneck, 2006). Furthermore, Saechao-Elizalde (2014) states that women start their

careers with the same level of education, intelligence, determination, and commitment as men, yet relatively few reach the top business ranks. Considering research conducted by Koneck (2006), Saechao-Elizalde (2014), and Sandberg (2013), it can be concluded that women face far greater challenges than men in their attempts to climb the corporate ladder due to what is known as the glass ceiling.

Equally important to the idea that the glass ceiling is a contributing factor that oppresses women from achieving leadership roles, there lie the challenging aspects of class, gender, social, and family roles (Saechao-Elizalde, 2014). To elaborate, Koneck (2006) points out that barriers are usually "created by individual or organization prejudices" (p. 2). Not only is gender bias and stereotyping contributing to the barrier of the glass ceiling, but women choose to spend the bulk of their time attending to family responsibilities and take career breaks or leave their career to start a family (Koneck, 2006; Saechao-Elizalde, 2014).

### **Asian American Women in the Workplace**

Saechao-Elizalde (2014) confers that Asian American women are viewed as exemplary minorities based on education, income, and competence. On the other hand, too often, they are seen as less capable of attaining leadership positions. Asian American women are predominantly likely to be stereotyped as passive, held in reserve, and lacking desire. This, along with qualities attributed to typecast of women in general, provides a monumental challenge to being able to see leadership positions as an option for many.

On the other hand, in a study conducted by Kawhara, Esnil, and Hsu, Asian American women leaders were interviewed and shared that they attained leadership positions through the use of extending their leadership styles by exercising bicultural

values (as cited in Chin, 2011). For example, Asian American women are seen to use more indirect forms of communication in their leadership styles and take a more passive and humble approach to leading. According to Chin (2011), Asian women tend to communicate using moral messages, which suggests that they may hold different views about how they express their leadership style. For example, Asian women leaders rarely take credit for their success or toot their own horn. In a conversation with Dr. Ken Magdaleno (2017), founder of the CLEAR Institute and CALSA, his word to Asian American women is to stop thanking everyone for every little opportunity that is given to them. He reminded them that they have earned it, they deserve it, and they need to brag about it (personal communication, January 25, 2017).

### **Hmong Women in the Workplace**

Historically, the Hmong have resided in the United States in the last decade, and Hmong women have started entering the workforce in the last 30 years. According to the Hmong 2000 Census Publication, there are over 180,000 Hmong living in the United States, and of those, only 5% are Hmong women in management positions (as cited in S. Lee et al., 2004). According to L. Moua (2011) and M. Moua (2007), Hmong women have continued to redefine cultural norms. Many have attended college and entered the workforce, and a select few have managed to take on leadership roles. Over the years, Hmong women have excelled beyond Hmong men in various ways. L. Moua shares that Hmong women represent about three-fourths of all Hmong American lawyers, Hmong women represent about one-third of the 120 Hmong who have completed their doctoral studies, and Hmong women occupy about 24% of the same management or profession of Hmong men (L. Moua, 2011).

### ***Barriers Specific to the Success of Hmong Women in the Workplace***

As Hmong women assimilate into the American culture, many of them have created conflict in the household as they move beyond their traditional roles. While this is the case, the ideal role of Hmong women is not only to be primary caretakers of the home but also to use their skills to promote the welfare of the family. Hmong women have learned to involve themselves in the economy of providing for the family.

Research shows that Hmong women who enter the workforce encounter more than just cultural barriers. Discrimination in employment is still prevalent. Many are not even given the opportunity to enter the workplace. For example, Pacis (2005) points out that judgments are made about who is recruited and employed based on the social context in which females and minorities are viewed as unexceptional.

Hmong women are also faced with the reality that if they become successful in their jobs and seek opportunities to advance, they fear they will be alienated from their families and loved ones, especially since they have been taught at a young age to be docile. L. Moua (2011) highlights that women who are seen as ambitious individuals are viewed with negative stereotypes by their own community and the mainstream community. In addition, Hmong women are not just faced with adverse stereotypes from their community but with organizations within a society where they receive limited access to equitable experiences like other female colleagues (Hayer, 2015).

### **Behaviors of Women Leaders**

Each country, community, and culture instill in their young values that contribute to the society. Each woman's upbringing contributes to the types of behavior they display in the home, society, and workplace. Over time, women have learned to unpack their

fears and take on leadership roles head-on. Women leaders reject fears that have far too long hindered them from succeeding. Many have built the confidence to take risks in order to grow and advance in organizations (Aspire to Lead, 2015). Colvin (2015) points out that 15 women have made it to the top of World's Greatest Leaders and are seen as exemplary leaders based on specific leadership behaviors, such as: (a) empathy towards others, (b) displaying fairness towards all, (c) valuing reciprocal relationships, (d) inspiring, and motivating others on a personal level (Colvin, 2015; Silver, 2018).

To elaborate, women are optimistic and see opportunities in everything they encounter. Women are seen as strategists because they look at all perspectives and stretch themselves to see things from all angles in order to anticipate unforeseen events. Overall, women are known to be emotional, which is a benefit because they are passionate and will pursue all prospects to get the job done (Llopis, 2014).

### **Motivational Theory**

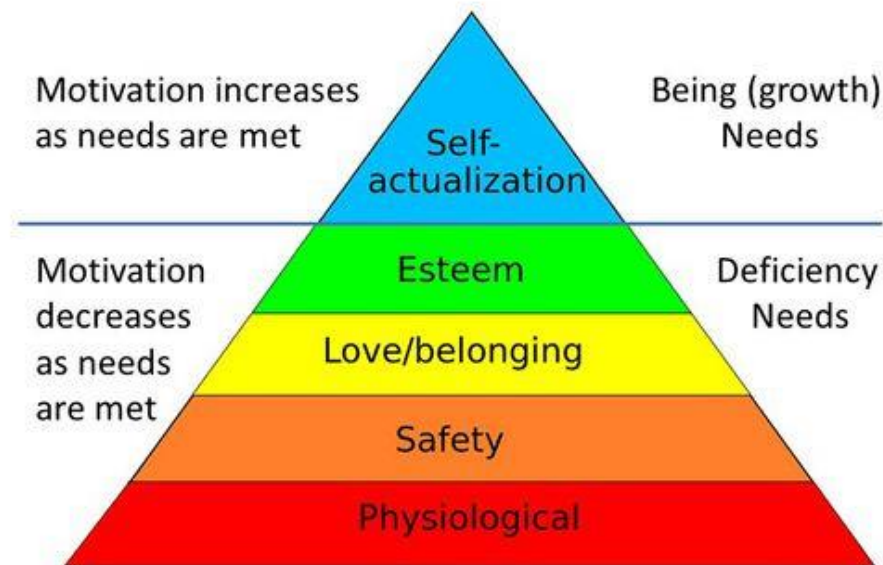
For a variety of reasons, depending on each individual and their experiences, leaders are motivated to lead for an array of purposes. Silver (2018) suggests that there are four types of motivational styles that lend to a person's personality. The first is egotistical motivation, which stems from the idea that these types of individuals are motivated to become leaders because they need to have power and control. The second is personal skills motivation. These types of individuals are motivated by comparing themselves to other leaders and feel that they could do a better job than those who are currently leading in the organization. The third is people skills motivation. These individuals are motivated by receiving satisfaction when others come to them for advice and guidance. They feel the need to motivate and inspire others and take pride in helping

others. The last motivational style is results orientation motivation. These individuals are result-driven. They feel and believe that things need to be done and feel the need to always jump into doing something that contributes to results. They have good ideas and are always willing to implement them.

Abraham Maslow's (1954) motivational theory argues that motivation helps to meet the hierarchy of human needs. Our behavior motivates us to meet each of the five levels, where some needs take precedence over others. Once each level of need is satisfied, the next level up is what motivates the individual, and so on (Maslow, 1954). Understanding Maslow's hierarchy of human needs allows leaders to understand how their basic needs are met to fine-tune the leadership skills needed to lead an organization successfully. Figure 1 illustrates Maslow's five levels of hierarchy of human needs.

**Figure 1**

*Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*



*Note.* From "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs," by S. McLeod, 2020. Simply Psychology. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>

## **Statement of the Research Problem**

Presently, in the United States, women are choosing to participate in the global workforce. Many are seeking higher educational degrees with the intent of pursuing career opportunities in a competitive workplace. As noted by Benko and Pelster (2013), there are now more women in middle management positions than men due to their higher educational accomplishments. This has resulted in a copious number of women who are ready to advance to top leadership positions in the United States. In spite of this, there remains a small number of women in executive leadership roles (Sandberg, 2013; Warner, 2014). Currently, women represent only 14.6% of executive officers, 4.6% of Fortune 500 CEOs, and 17% of Fortune 500 board seats (Warner, 2014; Women in Leadership, 2015).

For minorities, there exists a larger gap in attaining a leadership position. The glass ceiling, as well as additional barriers, prevent and/or delay marginalized women from attaining leadership roles (Hayer, 2015; L. Moua, 2011; Wesley, 2008). Research shows only 2.7% of the nation's professional-level jobs are occupied by Asian American women (Warner, 2014). This is a small number compared to the thousands of Asian American women who have attained a graduate degree in professional fields.

Concerns around discrimination in the workplace and the removal of barriers are addressed in many civil rights laws and statutes to protect women, including minority women. Such laws prevent organizations from engaging in discriminatory hiring practices in support of equal opportunities for all. Nonetheless, research indicates that Asian American women are rarely given the opportunity to attain leadership positions



despite having obtained a college degree and demonstrating the ability to take on leadership roles.

Other studies have been done with Asian American women, which have explored obstacles, as well as marginalization as they ascend to leadership roles, but not with Hmong women. To date, there has been limited research or studies about Hmong women and leadership. In addition, L. Moua (2011), who studies Hmong women in leadership-type roles in California and Minnesota, further recommends conducting larger ethnographic studies, which encompass additional states and countries. This would allow researchers to build awareness that can shape the practices needed to break down barriers for minority women to advance in the workplace. This would contribute to helping researchers fully understand the experiences of Hmong women who would ascend to leadership positions.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and understand the lived experiences of Hmong women who have achieved leadership positions. The study highlighted the actions, motivations, struggles, and cultural obstacles that Hmong women face in order to achieve leadership positions.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by one central research question and six sub questions.

#### **Central Research Question**

1. What are the lived experiences of Hmong women who have achieved leadership positions?

### **Sub Research Questions**

2. What actions, personal or professional, were taken by you, as a Hmong woman leader, to advance your progress to a leadership position?
3. What motivations or efficacies inspired you, as a Hmong woman leader, to pursue the journey of leadership to a leadership position?
4. What type of support was received, as a Hmong woman leader, from family members or professional mentors by Hmong women leaders, while ascending to a leadership position?
5. What obstacles were encountered by you, as a Hmong woman leader, as you worked toward a leadership position?
6. What cultural, racial, or ethnic stereotypes created support or barriers for you, as a Hmong woman leader, in your ascent to leadership?
7. What advice do you, a Hmong women leader, offer others who emerge from underrepresented groups to advance to executive-level leadership positions?

### **Significance of the Problem**

Studies have found that Asian American women are exemplary college graduates and employees in the workplace. They are seen as hard-working, ambitious individuals who have begun to redefine cultural norms as they seek higher education and career advancements (L. Moua, 2011; M. Moua, 2007; Saechao-Elizalde, 2014). Among Asian American women, Hmong women are contributors to the number of college graduates and exemplary employees who seek to advance in the workplace. However, little is known about why Hmong women are not contributors to top leadership positions.

Although some research has been conducted on women and leadership, it is not specific to this study. This study sought to strengthen and support current research and add to the literature regarding underrepresented minorities attaining leadership positions, specifically Hmong women. This study pursued to fill the gaps in the literature by understanding how Hmong women achieve leadership positions by focusing on their experiences, actions, motivations, and obstacles as they ascend to leadership positions. It was understood that this could lead to revealing significant information that organizations can utilize to contest the lack of talented Hmong women who can contribute as leaders throughout the nation.

Furthermore, schools, universities, organizations, and government entities can utilize findings from the study to address obstacles from underrepresented minorities to warrant equal opportunities for all. In addition, the findings of this study may lead to how these organizations conduct mentoring and coaching practices for women, as well as set up educational and informational workshops. Lastly, the study will enhance the knowledge of women aspiring to become leaders to recognize and prepare for the journey ahead of them.

### **Theoretical Definitions**

*Executive leaders.* An individual who manages or directs employees in an organization to influence and guide these individuals (Cole, 2015).

*The bamboo ceiling.* A combination of barriers such as individual, cultural, and organizational factors that impede Asian Americans' career progress in a profession or organization (Wikipedia, 2022).

*The glass ceiling.* This is an unofficially acknowledged barrier to advancement in a profession, especially affecting women and members of minorities (Lexico Dictionaries, 2022).

*The imposter syndrome.* A collection of an individual's feelings of inadequacy that persist despite their skills, talents, or evident success and has a fear of being exposed as a "fraud" (Wikipedia, 2022).

*Self-efficacy.* People's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave (Bandura, 1994; Lopez-Garrido, 2020).

*Motivational theory.* Motivational theory, according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, suggests that people are motivated by certain needs based on the five stages starting from the bottom of the hierarchy: physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs, and upwards to self-actualization (Lillbacka, 2010; S. McLeod, 2020).

*Social identity theory.* A person's sense of who they are based on their group membership(s). For example, social class, family, sports team, and organization (S. A. McLeod, 2019).

### **Operational Definitions**

*First generation.* An individual of immigrants who are designated as the firstborn in the country or of a generation to become a citizen in a new country (Merriam-Webster, 2022).

*Hmong*. An ethnic group living chiefly in China and Southeast Asia and speaks the Hmong language (Merriam-Webster, 2022).

*Hmong women leader*. A Hmong woman who attains a role in leadership.

### **Delimitations**

The delimitations of this study were Hmong women in leadership roles in California who volunteered to participate in the study. Specific criteria were outlined to frame the focus of the research study. The first criterion is that all participants were of Hmong descent. Second, participating Hmong women leaders were serving in leadership roles with their respective organizations.

### **Organization of Study**

The organization of the research study consists of five chapters. Chapter I includes the introduction of the study, which covers all aspects of the background of the study, including the statement of the research problem, purpose statement, research questions, significance of the study, both theoretical and operational definitions, delimitations of the study, and the organization of the remaining chapters. Chapter II is the analysis of the literature and research about women in leadership roles, specifically Hmong women. Chapter III summarizes and examines the research methodology and the design employed in the study. Chapter IV evaluates and summarizes the findings of the research study. Finally, Chapter V provides summative conclusions and recommendations for further research study and discusses the implications and significance of Hmong women in leadership roles.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### **Introduction**

To provide the background and underlying information necessary to conduct this study, the researcher developed this literature review, which is summarized in the Literature Review Synthesis Matrix (see Appendix A). This chapter explored the review of literature on women, culture, ethnicity, women of color, women in the workplace, and barriers that women face. The literature matrix outlined the following themes:

- Gender and cultural expectations in Laos
- Gender and cultural expectations in the United States
- Women in the workplace and in leadership roles
- Women of color in the workplace and in leadership roles
- Hmong women
- Barriers to success of women in the workplace and in leadership roles
- Theoretical foundation – self-efficacy theory, motivational theory, social identity theory, and leadership identity theory
- Leadership

The review of the literature on these topics provided the foundation for the development and execution of the study.

### **Gender and Cultural Expectations in Laos**

According to Vang (2009), "in the traditional Hmong culture, gender roles were established as the ideal by ancestors and upheld by the Hmong community, and descendants are expected to strive to reach this ideal state of behaving" (p. 82). Chow (1987) and Fong (1997) confirm that Asian American women have been socialized to be

subordinate and discouraged from having any worth of individuality, which is highly reinforced in the culture and family.

S. J. Lee (1997) shares that "The Hmong culture follows a patrilineal model in which men are highly valued and hold positions of power; whereas women are devalued and expected to remain submissive" (p. 31). In traditional Hmong households, Hmong men take the authoritarian role, where they make most of the decisions for the family, resolve family conflicts, perform rituals and ceremonies for the family, and provide economic stability. Within the traditional household, Hmong women are valued for their work in performing domestic chores and caring for children and elders (Park & Chi, 1999).

### **Role of Hmong Women in Laos**

Traditionally, a Hmong woman's primary responsibility is the household chores, and she is fully accountable for caring for the family's needs. Early on, she is taught the responsibility of caring for the family and conducting household chores to prepare herself to become a daughter-in-law. As young girls, Hmong women are expected to conform to specific roles and possess certain behavioral traits such as being obedient, soft-spoken, and submissive (Fendya, 1995; L. Moua, 2011; Saechao-Elizalde, 2014). Unmarried Hmong girls assume the lowest position in the hierarchies of age and gender within the family and marry young to gain adult status and more freedom within the context of the family (Saechao-Elizalde, 2014).

### **Role of Hmong Men in Laos**

In Laos, men traditionally are the authority of the household and take on leadership roles both in the home and community. Hmong men learn their expected roles

from their fathers and elders. Early on, young boys are taught to be the head of the household, which consists of being the decision-maker, breadwinner, protector, and overseeing the well-being of the family. Men are entrusted to perform rituals of worship such as marriages, new harvests, and family feasts (Owens, 2007; Xiong, 2015; K. Yang, 1997; K. L. Yang, 2011).

### **Gender and Cultural Expectations in the United States**

Over the years, intergenerational gaps have created a constant struggle between the present generation and the older generation in gender role clashes. For instance, as the present generation assimilates into American society, the present generation advocates for change and independence while the older generation wishes to preserve traditional ways of Hmong patrilineal clanship, patriarchal household structure, and traditional gender roles (S. J. Lee, 1997; Xiong, 2015). Moreover, Xiong (2015) agrees that the Hmong American communities experienced generational conflicts between the older and the current, in particular among those who were born and raised in this country. For instance,

[T]he elders believe in the need to maintain a strong Hmong community structure to promote cohesiveness, understanding, and maintain Hmong culture and traditions. However, young Hmong Americans have increasingly assimilated with mainstream American and adopted its values and standards which strays from the Hmong culture. (Xiong, 2015, p. 5)

While in America, Hmong parents and elders have encouraged both men and women to attend school and seek higher education, Hmong parents hold higher expectations for their sons compared to their daughters. There are double standards placed on Hmong



women. They are encouraged to seek higher education; still they are expected to hold onto and practice the Hmong culture.

### **Role of Hmong Women in America**

Influenced by the Western world, Hmong women are torn between the culture they were born into and the culture they are raised in American society, specifically, in retrospect to their self-identity (G. Y. Lee, 2005; Vang, 2009). For a woman to speak of herself, she only refers to herself in reference to others. Hmong women have no sense of identity until they married to their husband, which provides them with membership to the family lineage. Hmong women only identify themselves as the daughter of their father, wife of their husband, and mother of their oldest son. There is no language in the Hmong culture for women to express self-identity except through their kinship (G. Y. Lee, 2005; Xiong, 2015). For example, Nou identifies herself as Niam Khambee, Nyab Khambee, Pang niam, and Cher Soua Vang tus ntxhais. However, G. Y. Lee (2005) proposes that Hmong women identify a model according to the expected traditional role of Hmong women and the acculturation process of the Hmong in the United States. G. Y. Lee proposes that Hmong women will react in three ways as their identity develops:

Women who alienate the dominant culture, women, who alienate their traditional culture, and women who integrate traditional and [W]estern cultures. However, as Hmong women become more aware of their views and environment, they will rise to the highest stage of the Hmong Women Identify Model by defining their own identity based on their internal views. (p. 150)

Vang (2009) confers that Hmong women are pulled in two different directions, "one side promoting the ideas of independence, equality and self-indulgence, while the other side promoting restraint, tradition, and dependence" (p. 81).

As Hmong women assimilate into the Western world, the growing trend shows that Hmong women are becoming more independent. Hmong women view education as a catalyst for personal and cultural change, where Hmong women use the educational opportunity to challenge the cultural structure of their role in the United States (Fendya, 1995; Vang, 2009).

### **Role of Hmong Men in America**

As the Hmong assimilated to the cultural norms in the United States, education and employability gave the Hmong more access to positions of authority rather than in traditional Hmong culture, where the power is related to the man of the house or the male figures in the home. Fendya (1995) concurs that the concept of power and authority within the Hmong family structure is rapidly evolving, where men and women are both functioning in positions of authority and responsibility.

### **Women in the Workplace**

According to Adams et al. (2013),

From the 'first women's rights convention' in Seneca Falls, NY, in 1848 to the presidential, congressional and local elections of 2012, we have seen examples of women making history through their challenges to the limiting gender roles and power structures that marginalize them. (p. 321)

Several groups of women in recent years have devoted themselves to undertaking the mission of safeguarding rights for women and ethnic minorities to be inclusive in today's global workplace (Adams et al., 2013; Hayer, 2015; Sandberg, 2013).

Women's participation in the workforce has expanded since the end of WWII and has increased since the late 1990s. Furthermore, research has indicated an increase in women attaining higher education. Recent studies show that women have accounted for a little over 50% of all workers employed in management, professional, and related occupations (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Today, a majority of women are in the workforce and have made strides in positioning themselves into the leadership pipeline, taking jobs in managerial and professional positions (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017; Women and Leadership, 2015).

Affirmative actions have been addressed through laws and statutes such as the 1963 Equal Pay Act, which has prohibited an employer from paying its employees of the opposite sex less for equal work (California Department of Industrial Relations, n.d., p. 1). More importantly, the California Department of Industrial Relations (n.d.) pointed out that Governor Brown, in 2015, signed Senate Bill 358, which strengthened the Equal Pay Act. Additionally, SB 358 added protection to race and ethnicity, requiring equal pay for all employees who perform substantially comparable work, prohibiting employees from discussing or inquiring about their co-workers' wages, and anti-retaliation protections for employees who invoke the Equal Pay Act. Furthermore, under the recent Civil Rights Act of 1964, which banned employment discrimination because of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin (U.S. EEOC, 2014, p. 1). Additionally, the current Family, Medical, and Parental Leaves enacted in 1993 to help employees balance the demands of the

workplace with the needs of their families can be taken up to 12 weeks per year for any of the following:

- Pregnancy
- Adoption
- Foster care
- Baby bonding
- Caring for ill family members
- Self-health conditions
- Family military leave (Cal Chamber, 2018, p. 1; Wikipedia, 2018, p. 1).

The following existing groups that support Asian American Women such as the National Association of Asian Professionals (NAAAP), Asian American Professional Association, Asian Sisters Participating in Reaching Excellence (ASPIRE), National Council for Asian Pacific Americans (NCAPA), and Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA) have assembled to raise awareness, build political presence, support, and empower a community of women. These organizations have provided support for Asian women. What is absent in the research similar to these support groups for Asian women is that there is a lack of existing groups for Hmong women.

### **Women in Leadership Roles**

Despite the established actions to support social justice for women, women's educational attainment, and strides into leadership positions, disproportion still persists. Research has shown a regression for women in the workplace since 2013 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Progress for women has slowed down in recent years, and the gap for women attaining top management positions or leadership roles in the 21st century has

stalled while the gender wage gap continues to grow (Armani, 2013; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011; Women and Leadership, 2015). According to the Department for Professional Employees (2017) fact sheet, women still struggle for equality in numerous occupations. Women are earning post-secondary degrees at a quicker rate than men. Nonetheless, this segment of the population continues to be passed over for promotions and are paid lower salaries than their counterparts (Department of Professional Employees, 2017; Wesley, 2008). Over time, this inequity translated to large lifetime earning differences, which not only impacts women but also children and families where women are the sole provider (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014; Wesley, 2008). American women lag substantially behind men when it comes to their representation in leadership positions. According to Warner (2014), 16.9% of Fortune 500 CEOs board seats are women. Only 3.2% of these women are women of color, and Asian American women are an even smaller percentage.

### **Barriers to Success of Women in the Workplace**

Women face many challenges in the workplace, and some of these barriers are due to how women identify themselves as leaders. Based on the ideas of Ely et al. (2011), women are seen as ill-fitted for leadership roles because of cultural beliefs and the belief that men are favored in leadership roles. As a result, leadership roles are designed for men. This belief displays a bias that interferes with the woman's ability to see herself as a leader and take up leadership roles. For that reason, Ely et al. suggest another essential point that through this, women are self-sealing – which indicate that women's underrepresentation in leadership positions validates deep-rooted systems and beliefs that

support the viewpoints that prompt and support men's propositions for leadership, which in turn upholds the status quo.

Furthermore, women face the challenge of internalizing their leadership development through the process in which they see themselves and the feedback they receive from others. Through the lenses of women and the lenses of others, when women receive validation from others, they feel confident and motivated to lead, but when little or no feedback is given, self-confidence is diminished, and the motivation to lead or take on leadership roles is placed on hold.

To elaborate, Ely et al. (2011) and Sandberg (2013) state that successful women in male-dominated roles are less likely to be respected and supported because as they rise to leadership roles, this is seen as a violation of gender norms. Women are thought to be communal, friendly, unselfish, and caring.

### **The Glass Ceiling**

The infamous glass ceiling is described as a subtle barrier and prejudices that exclude women, especially minority women, from moving up the organizational ladder (Crampton & Mishra, 1999; Wesley, 2008). A point that the Glass Ceiling Commission created from the Glass Ceiling Act of 1991 revealed that in the top 1000 industrial firms and 500 largest U.S. corporations, 97% of senior managers were White, and 95% to 97% were male (as cited in Civil Rights Monitor, 1995). The Civil Rights Monitor (1995) report from the Glass Ceiling Commission further advocates that "proactive efforts are still needed to address the invisible but impermeable barrier that remains to deny women and minorities of admission to the highest levels of the leadership world regardless of their achievements" (p. 19).

Policies such as the Glass Ceiling Act and Affirmative Action have looked for ways to dismantle barriers that impede career growth. Yet, many organizations in the United States continue to embrace traditions that have unfairly excluded qualified women from their commencement into executive-level positions (Wesley, 2008, p. 6).

The glass ceiling can be viewed from two different lenses. One in which women cannot even get into leadership roles due to barriers. The other lens is the fact that women are often not selected to hold leadership roles, even though they may have the talent or degree to (Koneck, 2006; Li, 2014; Williams, 2008). According to the University of Chicago Booth School of Business (2018), women with college degrees often choose to work in fields that offer lower income and are vastly underrepresented in top-paying jobs. Another contributing factor, according to the University of Chicago Booth School of Business and Bertrand (2017), is that there are psychological differences between men and women that also account for a pay gap between women and men. Largely, the University of Chicago Booth School of Business argues that women often are held with the responsibility and demands for childcare, housework, and other life chores outside of work. Higher-paying professions are more inflexible and require more time commitment, which makes it harder for women to take top leadership roles.

Bertrand (2017) indicates that an additional factor that may contribute to this is that women typically do not ask for more. Women also do not negotiate well for themselves and don't ask for extra incentives, bonuses, or pay. Women also devalue their talents and do not own their power, oftentimes shying away from conflict in the workplace. In addition, women need more flexibility in their schedules and spend fewer hours at work than men do for childcare, housework, and other life commitments. The

glass ceiling is only one aspect of why women have a difficult time reaching top leadership roles.

### **The Bamboo Ceiling**

The bamboo ceiling is used to describe the artificial and invisible barriers preventing employees of Asian descent from attaining higher-level positions, similar to the glass ceiling that women face (Adams, 2019; Chu, 2020; Li, 2014). According to Chu (2020), an article by the Harvard Business Review found that

Asian American white-collar professionals are the least likely racial group to be promoted into Silicon Valley's senior leadership, even though they are the most likely to be hired into technical roles – a result more commonly known as the bamboo ceiling. (p. 1)

More importantly, Goyette (2015) and Kawahara (2022) further explain how Asian Americans make up almost 5% of the U.S. population but only hold approximately less than 2% of the corporate board of director seats in Fortune 500 companies. The evidence shows that Asian American women face even greater difficulties because they belong to two marginalized groups – they belong to the marginalized racial group Asian American and the marginalized group for gender being female (Kawahara, 2022). As indicated by extensive research, it can be concluded that based on bias and stereotypes, Asian American women face roadblocks that allow them to be a part of attaining leadership roles, hindering them from reaching their professional potential (Chu, 2020; Goyette, 2015; Kawahara; 2021; Lacoma; 2019; Tse, 2021).



## **The Glass Cliff**

Women who shatter the glass ceiling take on top leadership roles only to find out that they are not left with many options except to fall off the 'glass cliff.' Often, women come into leadership roles with challenges, crises, or downturns and are expected to fix these problems immediately. Researchers continue to examine this notion of the glass cliff, where women who reach top leadership positions often find themselves in a place where they are asked to take on the leadership role after periods of regression, crisis, conflict, or failure within the organization. Once these women break through the glass ceiling to get into top leadership roles, they are often there only to fall off what is called the glass cliff if the organization does not recover from the problems that the woman inherited (Bruckmüller et al., 2014; Murrell, 2018; M. Ryan & Stoker, 2012).

Mueller (2018) and Ward (2020) concur that there has been confirmed research that women of color are more likely to be promoted to top leadership positions in weak-performing or troubled organizations. This is one of the few ways that women of color can break through the glass ceiling to attain top leadership positions. As women attain the leadership role, they are faced with much more than their counterparts, often being set up for failure. Michelle Ryan (2020) tells Business Insider,

If women are appointed in times of crisis, it's not that those women are unable to lead, but leading in a time of crisis is more difficult and more precarious than leading when everything is great. We might find that these women don't last as long in these positions or that they may be highly criticized because there's a lot going on. And that potentially reinforces the stereotype that women [and people of color] aren't good at leadership. (as cited in Ward, 2020, pp. 8-9)

As we look at female CEOs in today's top 500 companies, there are now less than two dozen females in these roles. Women are not only faced with barriers such as pay gaps, inflexible positions, and the glass ceiling, but those who make it to the top are now facing the glass cliff, specifically women of color.

### **Minority Women in Leadership Roles**

Reports made by Huppke (2013) from the Alliance Board of Diversity states that top corporate positions have been predominantly held by White males, while data from Diversity Inc. (2019) disclosed that of all CEOs, the ethnic representation was determined to be 6 Black, 9 Asian, 10 Latino, and 24 women at this level of leadership. Based on the collective list, only 1.8% of all Fortune 500 company CEOs are from an Asian background.

The literature suggests that there are disproportionate representations of Asian American women in professional careers with higher educational levels compared to other minority women. The implications that each researcher suggests are key factors to this notion that Asian American women are docile, submissive, passive, and quiet. These stereotypes have an impact on how society perceives Asian-American women and their ability to lead (Boun, 2014; Fong, 1997; Salleh-Barone, 2004). Furthermore, Fong (1997) and Salleh-Barone (2004) concur that Asian American women who had advanced degrees worked in a variety of different low-paying jobs over the course of many years before working in leadership positions. This further affirms that Asian Americans are at the bottom of the economic and leadership hierarchy, working low-paying jobs with little to no opportunity to advance to leadership roles. Thatchenkery and Sugiyama (2008) claimed,

There is at once a pervasive invisibility that is shared experience among Asian Americans at all levels of organizations, and leadership invisibility at the senior level of organizations. Research shows that this invisibility, creating a glass ceiling effect for Asian Americans, exists across local and federal governments, private sector, and educational institutions. (p. 1)

Even when a position of leadership was achieved, the sustainability of that role presented greater obstacles for those of marginalized groups, such as Asian Americans.

### **Barriers to Success of Minority Women in the Workplace**

According to society's double standards, women are expected to live double lives, specifically minority women. Minority women are expected to behave according to mainstream characteristics and, at the same time, are expected to behave according to their gender and minority role characteristics (Wesley, 2008). Similarly, Asian American women's path to leadership is further complicated by the various variables such as culture, ethnicity, race, religion, and stereotypical attributions that compound the impact of social-stratification systems (Eagly & Szcesny, 2009; M. Moua, 2007; M. K. Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Tong, 2009).

A study conducted by Fong (1997) identified several external barriers, which included the lack of networking and a supportive system, stereotypes and biased attitudes toward women in leadership, the lack of women who served as role models, and inadequate efforts to identify women as potential future leaders. Furthermore, Salleh-Barone (2004) identified additional barriers that affect minority women, especially Asian American women, by their lack of women role models, the challenges of balancing

personal and professional lives, and struggles of getting on-the-job training and participating in networking.

Equally important research conducted by Eagly and Carli (2007) asserts that Asian American women face three stages in access to leadership. The first is the concrete wall – women face obstacles that block their path to leadership and full participation in organizations and society. These obstacles include denial of legal rights, educational opportunities, and career advancement. The second stage goes on to describe the glass ceiling, which describes a woman's ability to achieve executive-level positions while facing barriers that prevented them from attaining the position due to discriminatory practices and other factors such as bias and stereotypes.

Significantly, research illustrates that there are many barriers to the success of Asian American women in leadership roles. Thus far, this does not include research on the impact of the bamboo ceiling that Asian American women face (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Eagly & Szcesny, 2009; M. K. Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Salleh-Barone, 2004; Tong, 2009; Wesley, 2008).

### **Women of Color in the Workplace**

Even decades after the civil rights and women's revolutionary movements have taken shape and have provided a voice in the mainstream, women, particularly women of color, remain significantly underrepresented in leadership and high corporate-ranking roles (Adams et al., 2013; Alliance for Board Diversity, 2010; Evans, 2011; Hayer, 2015).

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017) states that women entered the workforce in considerable numbers during the late 1960s and early 1970s. This included

minorities, graduating from domestic or unskilled factory work to management and professional occupations. Furthermore, M. Moua (2007) concurs that "women's increasing labor participation has been influenced by improved education, entrepreneurial activity, and family-owned business, which has resulted in an increase in power for women" (p. 21). However, according to the *2013 Catalyst Census: Fortune 500 Women Board Directors* report, women of color only held 3.2% of board seats, illustrating that there is an immobile state of progress in gender equity and inclusion (Catalyst, 2013).

### **Women of Color in Leadership Roles**

As indicated by the Alliance for Board Diversity (2010), in Fortune 500 companies, 79.5% of board seats were held by White/Caucasians, followed by African Americans at 11.4%, Hispanics at 4.7 %, and Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders at 4.4%, respectively, signaling a slight upward shift toward diversity. However, when examining the lead chair roles on the board seats, less than 1% of minority women were represented.

Based on the findings of this literature review, it can be argued that there is a clear discrepancy between educational attainment and accomplishment levels of women, specifically women of color (Hayer, 2015; Sandberg, 2013; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). It is apparent that women of color continue to suffer from many barriers, including gender inequity (Adams et al., 2013; Hynes, 2011).

### **Barriers to Success of Women of Color in the Workplace**

Adams et al. (2013) and Hayer (2015) emphasizes this notion that although historical efforts have been made with women's movement with strides, women's right movements have achieved a greater voice for White, middle-class women, leaving women of color in a state of prolonged underrepresentation.

There are numerous views that explain why women are slowly making progress toward leadership attainment. Often, what women of color face in addition to gender, bias, stereotypes, and the glass ceiling is the lack of acceptance and having a seat at the table to be represented (Sandberg, 2013; U.S. Department of Labor, 1995). Another essential point based on the findings of Bell and Nkomo (2001), Hayer (2015), and M. Moua (2007) it is evident that women of color must know how to navigate multiple worlds. They must learn to navigate multiple cultures and each layer of the cultures, as well as what is socially acceptable within society and the organization they work for. Thus creating multiple effects of marginalization for women of color.

### **Hmong Women in the Workplace**

Historically, as early as the Vietnam War, Hmong people had access to education, but little access was provided to Hmong girls. However, as the Hmong arrived in America, Hmong women slowly assimilated into the American culture through the education they received at school. Hmong parents placed an emphasis on education, which provided opportunities for Hmong women to receive an education while their male counterparts may have been encouraged to attain higher education. Through this, Hmong women in the United States have begun to move beyond their traditional roles within the boundaries of the family (Fendya, 1995). According to Fendya (1995), the Hmong American Women Association, Inc., was founded in the early 1990s to "inform Southeast Asian women about educational, political, economic and health issues. Additionally, they raised money for college scholarships, find childcare so that parents can go to work or attend job training programs, teach parents skills, and provide interpreters" (p. 57).

Education became a stepping stone for Hmong women. Hmong women began to attain college degrees, which led them to the workforce. In a study conducted by S. J. Lee (1997)

The women in the study explain that Hmong college women are motivated to do well in college by their desire to break free of the traditional Hmong gender norms. They maintain that while Hmong men have power and get respect with or without education. Hmong women need to get educated to gain freedom. (p. 12)

### **Hmong Women in Leadership Roles**

With little research on Asian Americans, particularly Hmong women in leadership positions, this creates a larger challenge to comprehend the experiences and impacts that Hmong women have endured to attain a leadership role. Thus far, there is no specific data point to illustrate how many Hmong women are represented in leadership roles, concluding that there is a significant lack of Hmong women in leadership roles.

Since arriving in America in the late 1970s, a small handful of Hmong women to date are known to have achieved a leadership role through their organization, self-made, or society. The first known documented Hmong woman was Senator Mee Moua. Mee Moua is a well-known Asian American politician who was the first Hmong American woman elected to a state legislature, where she served as a member of the Minnesota Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party and served in office from 2002 to 2011. Senator Mee Moua was born in Laos and moved to the United States with her family at the age of nine after fleeing from the Vietnam War, where she relocated with her family to Saint Paul, Minnesota. Mee Moua is an accomplished attorney and received her Juris Doctor from

the University of Minnesota Law School. She is married to Yee Chang and has three children (L. Moua, 2011; Saechao-Elizalde, 2014; Wikipedia, 2012).

### **Barriers Specific to the Success of Hmong Women in the Workplace**

Thompson (2020) presents the idea that "while some say that Hmong women are equally equipped as other ethnicities and genders to enter these positions, others contended that there are many unique obstacles that Hmong women face in the process of attaining a leadership position" (p. 4). It is presumed that Hmong women will have more barriers and a difficult time succeeding in acquiring these leadership positions because of the various social, familial, and cultural obstacles they face (Lo, 2017; L. Moua, 2011; Thompson, 2020).

A theory that Thompson (2020) examines is the idea that Hmong women have this perception of themselves as not having the ability or skill to lead. Factors that lead to this mindset are how Hmong women are raised. Hmong women are taught to be submissive, compliant, and obedient. They are never to show more intelligence or power than Hmong men or elders in the household (Fendya, 1995; G. Y. Lee, 2005; Park & Chi, 1999; Thompson, 2020; Vang, 2009).

Lo (2017) concurs that as Hmong women receive college degrees and advance to the workforce and leadership roles, this has caused a disruption to many Hmong households. "Within these households where women were employed, the men felt a loss of prestige, self-esteem and authority" (Lo, 2017, p. 3). Saechao-Elizalde (2014) asserts that in her study, *A Narrative Study of the Transitioning from Traditional and Cultural Roles into Leadership Positions*, a participant shared,



Women in any type of leadership position were frowned upon by most of those in the Hmong community. Women who were outspoken were often seen as aggressive and would not be seen as desirable or good wife to her husband. (p. 56)

Furthermore, Floyer (2021), G. N. Moua (2015), and Thompson (2020) affirmed that these cultural barriers can lead to much more, resulting in women experiencing a phenomenon called "imposter syndrome," specifically in Hmong women.

Research has shown that there are unique challenges that Asian women face, specifically the additional layers that Hmong women face, such as cultural, social, and familial obstacles. These facts evidence the importance of addressing the gap in research and literature. As a result, this study focused on informing the lived experiences of Hmong women in leadership roles to fill the discernible scholarly research gap, with the purpose of increasing awareness and constructing opportunities to pave the path for other Hmong women who aspire to lead.

## **Theoretical Foundation**

### **Social Identity Theory**

The study of social identity theory is well-established in the literature. According to numerous studies, Henri Tajfel (1979) introduced this theory that a person's sense of who they are is based on their group's membership(s) (Chi, 2015; Dick & Kerschreiter, 2016; Hogg, 2001; S. A. McLeod, 2019; Vinney; 2019). Originally, Tajfel et al.'s (1979) social identity theory explains the importance of groups giving people a sense of belonging to the social world, adding to a person's pride and self-esteem.

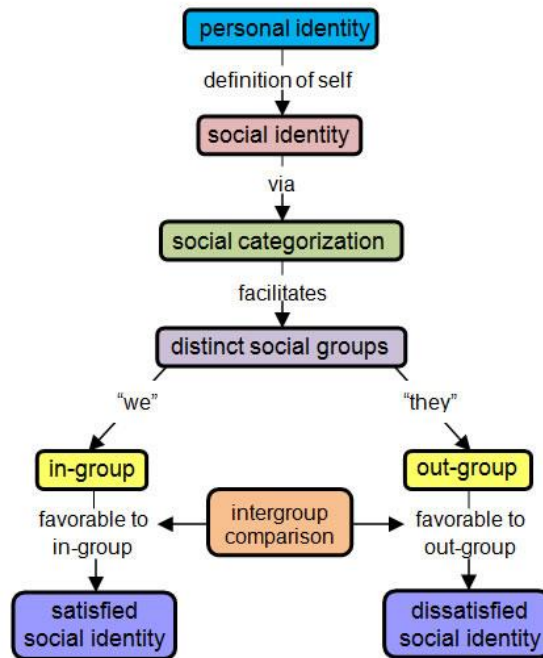
Furthermore, Chi (2015), S. A. McLeod (2019), and Vinney (2019) elaborate that the theory in ways can influence an individual's action or behavior. To further understand

this, social identity theory is built on three key cognitive components: (a) social categorization is the process by which we categorize objects to make meaning of the social environment. For example, in this process, individuals categorize people into groups; (b) social identification is the process where we adopt the identity of the group we have categorized ourselves as belonging to. A part of this process is also adopting the identity of the group, resulting in behaving in the way that the individual believes the group norms are; and (c) social comparison, which is the process we categorize ourselves as a part of a group and compare our group with other groups. During this process, individuals view their group as prestige, creating competition and rivals.

Researchers S. A. McLeod (2019) and Vinney (2019) explain the notion of us "in-group" and them "out-group" based on the social identity theory, where group members of the in-group will seek to find negative aspects of the out-groups, enhancing their superiority and self-image leading to prejudice views between cultures, discriminating against out-groups (see Figure 2). For example, Religion: Catholics and Protestants; Gender: Males and Females; Social Class: Middle and Working Class, etc. (S. A. McLeod, 2019).

**Figure 2**

*Social Identity Theory*



*Note.* From "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," by H. Tajfel and J. C. Turner (1979). *Organizational Identity: A Reader*, 56-65.

Complementary to this, an extension of social identity theory, the social identity theory of leadership, is a part of this phenomenon (Dick & Kerschreiter, 2016; Hayer, 2015; Hogg, 2001). Knippenberg and Hogg developed the social identity model of leadership (SIMOL), "which states that leadership does not operate within a vacuum but that leaders are also always members of the teams or organizations which they lead" (as cited in Dick & Kerschreiter, 2016, p. 7). The SIMOL theory claims that leaders can gain in effectiveness the more they are attuned to the respective group's identity. This concept presented through the study that prototypical leaders were strongly supported rather than less prototypical leaders who could only gain followers by granting them a voice (Dick & Kerschreiter, 2016; Hogg et al., 2012). Furthermore, Hayer (2015) highlights that "this

line of thinking presents alignment with the ability of particular individuals to rise through the ranks when they are attributed to qualities or characteristics consistent with a group's mindset about leaders or leadership In a given setting" (p. 45).

It is presumed that social identity may impact women's ability to attain or move up to leadership positions, specifically Hmong women. As Hmong women develop their identity among other groups, they encounter the social identity theory phenomenon in addition to the preceding compounded factors of culture, race, gender, ethnicity, class, and other such variables that affect their actions and behavior.

### **Motivational Theory**

Hayer (2015) argues that in the United States, while women's presence in the workplace and in leadership positions has improved to some degree, this ambition gap idea inspires inquiry. Hayer further explains that,

[M]otivational theory delves into the idea of motivation and self-efficacy, as opposed to oppression or discrimination from a social angle. Believing in and being capable of moving forward toward a desired leadership goal requires women to initially aspire for and then take relevant steps to achieve their career goals. (p. 61)

Therefore, motivational theory is an appropriate theoretical perspective to include in this study, in which Hmong women leaders challenge such barriers as cultural, ethnic, social identity, racial, and other coexisting barriers that hinder Hmong women from aspiring and reaching leadership positions.

According to Abraham Maslow's (1954) Hierarchy of Needs, it is suggested that people are motivated by certain needs based on the five stages that motivate their behavior. The Hierarchy of Needs five-stage model is:

- Physiological needs such as air, food, water, and shelter.
- Safety needs such as security and protection with predictability and control in their lives, such as family and society.
- Love and belongingness needs such as social needs for affection, acceptance, and friendship.
- Esteem needs such as self-worth, accomplishment, and respect, which are classified into two categories: (a) esteem for oneself, such as achievement, mastery, and independence, and (b) esteem to have a reputation or respect from others, such as status and recognition.
- Self-actualization is the highest level of needs, such as a person's potential, self-fulfillment, and personal growth (Lillbacka, 2010; S. McLeod, 2020).

### **Self-Efficacy Theory**

Psychologist Albert Bandura (1994) introduced into the world of psychology the theory of self-efficacy. The belief in one's abilities to organize and execute the courses of action to meet the challenges ahead of us to accomplish a task successfully (Ackerman, 2021; Bandura, 1994; Cherry, 2020). This theory indicates that we begin to form our sense of self-efficacy through various experiences and situations as early as our childhood years. Throughout life, our self-efficacy evolves based on the new experiences, situations, and skills we acquire (Cherry, 2020).

Bandura's (2018) self-efficacy theory identifies four major influences of efficacy beliefs (see Figure 3):

- **Mastery experiences:** The idea that performing tasks successfully strengthens our sense of self-efficacy.
- **Vicarious experiences:** Seeing people like ourselves succeed through sustained effort raises our beliefs that we, too, possess the capabilities to master comparable activities.
- **Social persuasion:** Being persuaded that we possess the skills and capabilities to master certain activities by verbal encouragement from others.
- **Emotional and psychological state:** The state in which your emotions influence your self-efficacy, such as a person's moods, emotional state, and stress levels (Akhtar, 2008; Cherry, 2020).

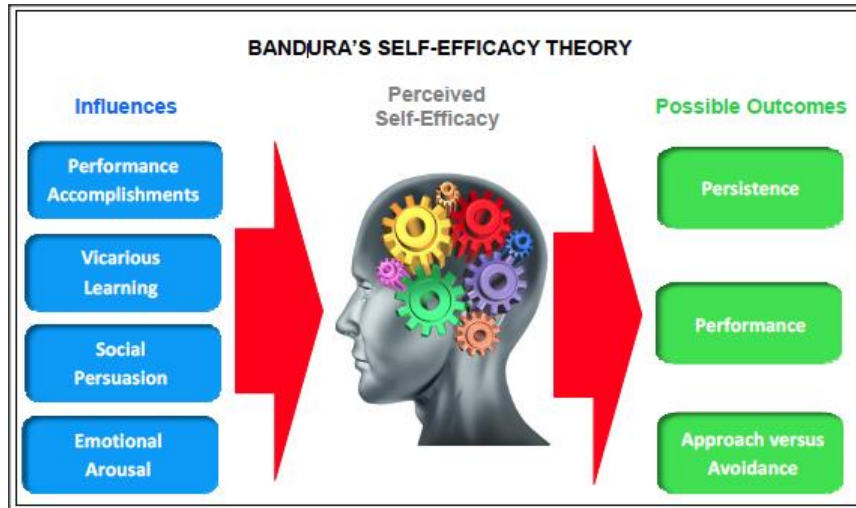
Even Mahatma Gandhi understood the fundamental role that self-belief has in our lives: "Your beliefs become your thoughts. Your thoughts become your words. Your words become your actions. Your actions become your habits. Your habits become your values. Your values become your destiny" (as cited in Goodreads, n.d., Quotable Quote section).

The body of literature on self-efficacy strongly indicates the following conclusions: "A person's belief in their own abilities is a strong predictor of motivation, effort expended, and success" (Ackerman, 2021, p. 2). People with a strong sense of self-efficacy develop a deeper interest in the activities in which they participate. They form a stronger sense of commitment to their interests and activities, recover quickly from

setbacks and disappointments, and view challenging problems as tasks to be mastered (Bandura, 1994; Cherry, 2020).

### Figure 3

#### *Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory*



*Note.* From "Self-Efficacy is Important for Teachers to Model for Students," by Management Consulting Group, 2018. <https://images.app.goo.gl/zRYYCuYAktXUAmgG7>

### Leadership Identity Development Theory

The term "leadership" was originally used in the early 1800s and 1900s in writings about the political influence and control of individuals that make them stand out as a leader. Leadership during this time period was based on inheritance, usurpation, or appointment. Males who lead displayed male-dominating characteristics traits, which is the idea that males during this time were born into these leadership roles (Bass, 1990; Uma et al., 2006).

To further explore this idea of leadership, it is important to understand the leadership identity development theory and how it relates to women in leadership. The leadership identity development theory outlines six stages and how leadership changes

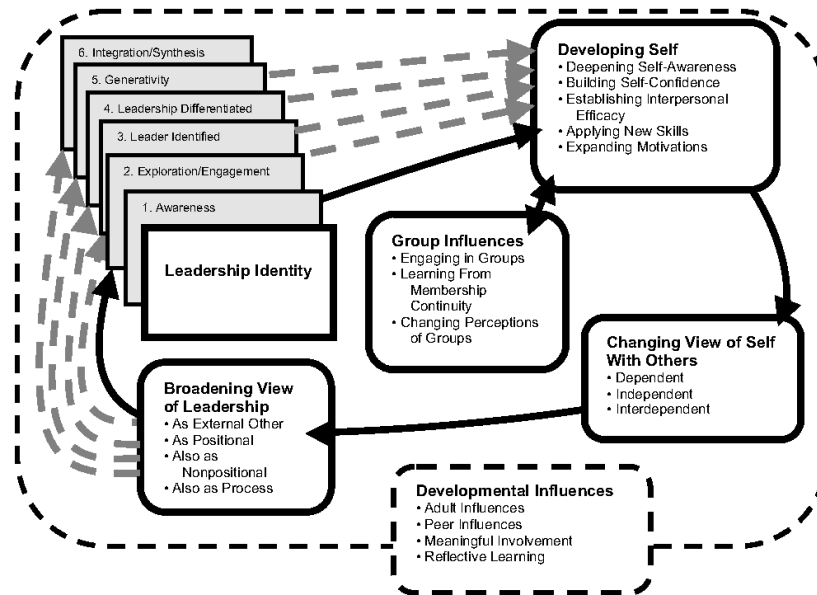
across stages of the model (see Figure 4). The key category included the following stages:

1. Awareness (Stage 1): Becoming aware that there are leaders "out there somewhere" who are external figures like the CEO of Facebook and authority figures like teachers or principals.
2. Exploration/Engagement (Stage 2): A period of immersion in group experiences where the individual interacts with peers by seeking opportunities to explore like interests such as sports, band, and religious groups like choir.
3. Leader Identified (Stage 3): Individuals in this stage view leadership as a position of authority and are aware of the hierarchical nature of the relationships in the group, where followers of the group look to the leader for direction.
4. Leadership Differentiated (Stage 4): Leadership is viewed as non-positional and as a shared group process.
5. Generativity (Stage 5): Individuals display an ability to look beyond themselves, have a commitment to developing leadership in others, and express a passion for issues or groups that they want to influence.
6. Integration/Synthesis (Stage 6): Acknowledge the personal capacity for leadership in diverse contexts and view themselves as effective in working with others with confidence. They do not need to hold positional leadership roles and know they are engaging in leadership (Komives et al., 2006).



**Figure 4**

*Leadership Identity Development Model*



*Note.* From "Leadership Identity Development: Challenges in Applying a Developmental Model," by S. R. Komives, S. D. Longorbeam, F. Mainella, L. Osteen, J. E. Owen, and W. Wagner, 2009. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 8(1), 11-47. <https://doi.org/10.12806/v8/i1/tf2>

As illustrated, each stage consists of developmental components that influence leadership development, including the role of changing peers and adults in the individual's lives, the opportunities and experiences for involvement, and time spent in reflective learning. As a result, "all of these appear to contribute to the individuals' development of leadership self-efficacy as an element of their identity" (Komives et al., 2009, p. 14).

In contrast, Komives et al. (2009) acknowledge that there is a growing body of research that relates racial and cultural factors to leadership development. "People of color may experience the Leadership Identity Development stages differently than their white peers" (Komives et al., 2009, p. 33).

## **Research Gap**

The result of extensive research leads to the firm conclusion that women are underrepresented in leadership roles, and historically, women have faced many barriers and challenges in attaining top leadership positions (Ely et al., 2011; Pacis, 2005; Sandberg, 2013; Warner, 2014). Conversely, in the last decades of the 20th century, there has been considerable progress in women's professional advancement in the United States (Warner, 2014). The number of all female women attaining leadership roles has increased over the years but at a slower rate than their male counterparts. According to Warner (2014), in 2001, there was a noticeable increase of 11% of women in corporate leadership roles compared to the 1980s, when there were no women in the top executive ranks of the Fortune 100. Yet, the percentage of women in top management positions and on corporate boards has stalled (Warner, 2014).

Additionally, evidence from a wide range of literature on women studies overwhelmingly supports the conclusion that minority women and women of color are far more removed from this path of attaining leadership roles because of the added intersecting barriers of gender, culture, and ethnicity (Ely et al., 2011; M. Moua, 2007; Salleh-Barone, 2004; Wesley, 2008). As the Asian American population in the United States has become one of the fastest-growing minority groups, the need to increase Asian American representation in leadership, particularly female representation, has grown, but it continues to be underrepresented (Pacis, 2005, p. 2).

Various researchers have concurred that there are few resources available for women leaders, such as a lack of role models, networking opportunities, mentoring, and

sponsorship needed for leadership (L. Moua, 2011; Pacis, 2005; Sandberg, 2013; Wesley, 2008). For instance, Thompson (2020) argues that,

There are few resources available for Hmong women who are looking to enter leadership positions and that along with the lack of Hmong role models and the language barrier that is often present drastically inhibit a Hmong woman's ability to gain skills needed to be a leader and, therefore, break into various leadership positions. (p. 9)

Furthermore, research shows that the Hmong culture is slowly becoming more progressive, and more Hmong women are pushing back on the strict gender roles the culture imposes, which signals a transformation to question the underrepresentation of Hmong women in leadership roles in mainstream America. More importantly, while the experiences of White, women of color, Asians in general, and other minority groups have been well-documented in the literature, little is still known about the lived experiences of Hmong women in their journey to leadership attainment.

As shown in this literature review, no up-to-date studies can be obtained that would explore how culture, gender, and ethnicity tell the story about the perceptions of Hmong women attaining leadership roles. The only available evidence on Hmong women comes from studies conducted on Asian women studies, so it is not applicable to the specifics of Hmong women. Therefore, the aim of this study was to fill this gap in research by investigating the lived experiences of Hmong women's journey to leadership attainment. It is believed that this study will provide valuable insight into leadership attainment for Hmong women and help inform researchers of both barriers and success of

such findings, increasing awareness and finding opportunities to pave the path for other Hmong women who aspire to lead.

### **Summary**

This chapter explored the review of literature on women, culture, ethnicity, women of color, women in the workplace, and barriers that women face. The literature matrix outlined the following themes:

- Gender and cultural expectations in Laos
- Gender and cultural expectations in the United States
- Women in the workplace and in leadership roles
- Women of color in the workplace and in leadership roles
- Hmong women
- Barriers to success of women in the workplace and in leadership roles
- Theoretical foundation – self-efficacy theory, motivational theory, social identity theory, and leadership identity theory
- Leadership

A historical view of the Hmong culture and a historical review of women, specifically women of color in leadership roles, was explored. In summary, it is evidently disclosed that women of color are underrepresented in executive leadership roles. As a result of the analysis, it is noted that culture, gender, ethnicity, and specific theoretical frameworks can serve as barriers and facilitators of success. Hmong women face intersecting barriers, along with the bamboo and glass ceiling effect, impacting their desire to seek or attain executive leadership roles as a culmination of all the variables considered for research of the qualitative inquiry of Hmong women's ascension to leadership.

In the final analysis, a theoretical framework was established specifying the importance and value of this research topic through the viewpoints of social identity, motivation, self-efficacy, and leadership. Each of the theoretical concepts illuminates a part of the experience that Hmong women face in their ascent to leadership. Thus far, there is little to no study on the underrepresented population of Hmong women leaders. As a result, there is a gap in research exploring Hmong women leaders and their lived experiences in their journey to leadership attainment. In this study, Chapter III thoroughly describes the study methodology. Chapter IV reports the results and findings related to the study of the lived experience of Hmong women in leadership roles. Chapter V will provide the conclusions and recommendations of the study.

## CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

### **Overview**

This chapter details the methodology for this qualitative phenomenological research study examining the lived experiences of Hmong women who have achieved leadership positions. The chapter presents an overview of the purpose statement and research questions being answered within this study. In addition, this chapter outlines a detailed description of the methodology employed, including information on the population, sample selection, method for data collection, and data analysis. The chapter concludes with the limitations of this qualitative research study and a summary of the chapter.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and understand the lived experiences of Hmong women who have achieved leadership positions. The study highlighted the actions, motivations, struggles, and cultural obstacles that Hmong women face in order to achieve leadership positions.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by one central research question and six sub questions.

#### **Central Research Question**

1. What are the lived experiences of Hmong women who have achieved leadership positions?

#### **Sub Research Questions**

2. What actions, personal or professional, were taken by you, as a Hmong woman leader, to advance your progress to a leadership position?

3. What motivations or efficacies inspired you, as a Hmong woman leader, to pursue the journey of leadership to a leadership position?
4. What type of support was received, as a Hmong woman leader, from family members or professional mentors by Hmong women leaders, while ascending to a leadership position?
5. What obstacles were encountered by you, as a Hmong woman leader, as you worked toward a leadership position?
6. What cultural, racial, or ethnic stereotypes created support or barriers for you, as a Hmong woman leader, in your ascent to leadership?
7. What advice do you, a Hmong women leader, offer others who emerge from underrepresented groups to advance to executive-level leadership positions?

### **Research Design**

A qualitative, phenomenological methodology was selected for this study to examine the lived experiences of Hmong women who have achieved leadership positions. According to Patton (2015), in a phenomenological qualitative inquiry process, the researcher "is making meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for a particular person or group of people" (p. 98). In this qualitative research study, the phenomenon is Hmong women who have achieved a leadership position. This study sought to examine the lived experiences of Hmong women in leadership positions by collecting and analyzing data from personal, in-depth interviews with a select group of Hmong women in leadership positions.

Qualitative research design emphasizes gathering data on naturally occurring phenomena. Data collection from qualitative research is in the form of words where

researchers must survey until a deep understanding is achieved (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument of data collection through in-depth interviews with people who have directly experienced such a phenomenon. The researcher captures how each participant experiences the phenomenon by "how they perceive it, feel about, remember it, make sense of it, and/or how they talk about it with others" (Patton, 2015, p. 115). Creswell (2007) concurs that "we conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study" (p. 40).

To obtain the qualitative phenomenological data for this study, the researcher used a semi-structured interview environment, personal face-to-face (via Zoom) in-depth, open-ended questions, and observations. The interview method was selected in order to ask critical and probing questions to obtain thorough responses from participants (Bailey, 2007).

### **Population**

According to McMillian and Schumacher (2010), "A population is a group of elements or cases, whether individuals, objects or events, that conform to specific criteria and to which we intend to generalize the results of the research" (p. 129). For this study, the population includes Hmong women leaders who have achieved leadership roles within their organizations in the United States. Currently, there is no data available to determine the exact number of Hmong women who hold leadership positions within California. However, based on the data available, an estimate of the potential participants can be developed. As of 2021, there were an estimated 321,000 Hmong individuals living



in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2021). Since 52% of the U.S. population is female, an extrapolation of that percentage to the overall Hmong population yields 166,920 Hmong female residents (USA Facts, 2021). Approximately 46% of females participate in the workforce, meaning about 76,783 Hmong females participate in the U.S. workforce (Zane, 2022). Finally, it is estimated that 21% of females in the U.S. workforce are in leadership positions where they have supervisory responsibility over others in their workplace (Institute for Women's Leadership, 2022). An extrapolation of this percentage yields 16,125 Hmong women in Leadership positions in the United States. These 16,125 Hmong women in leadership positions in the United States are the population for this study.

### **Sampling Frame**

According to Taherdoost (2016), "A sampling frame is a list of the actual cases from which the sample will be drawn" (p. 20). The sampling frame for a research study is the collective group for which the study's data and findings can be generalized. A target population is the narrowed group of individuals of interest for study from which the sample can be drawn (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The sampling frame for this study is Hmong women who have achieved leadership roles in California. Currently, there is no data available to determine the exact number of Hmong women who hold leadership positions within California. However, based on data available to the researcher, an estimate of the potential participants can be developed. As of 2021, there were an estimated 91,224 Hmong individuals living in California (Pew Research Center, 2021). Since 52% of the U.S. population is female, an extrapolation of that percentage to the overall Hmong population in California yields 47,436 Hmong female residents (USA

Facts 2021). Approximately 46% of females participate in the workforce, meaning about 21,820 Hmong females participate in the California workforce (Zane, 2022). Finally, it is estimated that 21% of females in the U.S. workforce are in leadership positions where they have supervisory responsibility over others in their workplace (Institute for Women's Leadership, 2022). An extrapolation of this percentage to California yields 4,582 Hmong women in leadership positions in California. These 4,582 Hmong women in leadership positions in California are the sampling frame for this study.

### **Sample**

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) state that "a sample is a group of individuals from which data is being collected" (p. 129). To develop the sample for this study, the researcher used a combination of three approaches: (a) purposeful sampling, (b) snowball sampling, and (c) convenience sampling.

#### **Purposeful Sampling**

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) explained that purposeful sampling provides researchers with a selection of "particular elements from the population that will be representative or informative about the topic of interest" (p. 138). The strategy employed to identify the participants was criterion sampling based on the research problem, purpose, and questions. The criterion sampling method allowed the researcher to select participants based on specific criteria (Patton, 2015). The following criteria were used when selecting potential participants:

- Participants were of Hmong descent.
- Participants had worked in a leadership/supervisory position for three or more years.
- Participants were willing to participate.

### **Snowball Sampling**

Snowball sampling or chain-referral sampling is defined as a non-probability sampling technique in which the samples have traits that are rare to find. This is a sampling technique in which existing subjects provide referrals to recruit samples required for a research study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

### **Convenience Sampling**

In addition to purposeful and snowball sampling, the researcher used convenience sampling. Convenience sampling is the use of subjects that meet study criteria and are easily accessible to the researcher (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Once identified, subjects were chosen according to the convenience of the researcher.

### **Sample Selection Process**

The study focused on Hmong women leaders who have attained a leadership position within their organization. Due to the limited number of Hmong women leaders in leadership roles and the challenge of locating them, the researcher engaged in extensive research to gain access to this population. This narrowed the sample of participants to only Hmong women located in California for this research study. The process used the following steps:

1. Potential participants were contacted via internet searches, chain referrals, personal networks, social media, and any other advertising opportunity available.
2. Potential participants who indicated willingness were contacted via email that identified the researcher, the purpose and objective of the study, as well as a follow-up phone call informing them of their rights while participating in the study.
3. The phone call further explained that participation in the study is fully voluntary and that they have the right to opt-out at any point.
4. Participants who agreed to participate received a formal letter for participation with assurance of confidentiality via email (see Appendix B).
5. From the list of willing participants, the 12 who were most easily accessible to the researcher were identified.
6. The 12 participants were sent informed consent materials (see Appendix C, D, and E). Once materials were returned, interviews were scheduled and administered.

### **Instrumentation**

The researcher is the essential instrument for collecting data for this qualitative study and defines the parameters and processes of data collection, analysis, and interpretation (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). For this specific qualitative study, the primary method of data collection was in-depth interviews of Hmong women who have obtained a leadership position in their organization to achieve an understanding of the lived experience of Hmong women leaders. The researcher began this process by using

purposeful and convenience sampling to appropriately select participants for the phenomenon being studied (Patten, 2012), and interview questions directly correlated to the purpose of the qualitative study.

### **Instrument**

Interview questions for this qualitative phenomenological study were conducted by the researcher, who serves as the essential instrument of the data collection process (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). The researcher carefully selected the instrument tool to address the same phenomenon from a previous study, *A Qualitative Inquiry of Asian American Women's Journey to Leadership* (Hayer, 2015). The 20 interview questions were adopted from Dr. Hayer's study, which looked further into the experiences of Asian American women in their ascent to a leadership role (Hayer, 2015).

The interview questions were constructed as open-ended responses to allow participants to share in-depth narratives of their lived experiences, which could yield rich information regarding personal and professional actions, self-efficacy, motivations, and obstacles. The interview questions were primed to understanding "the participants' perspectives – feelings, thoughts, beliefs, ideals – and actions in natural situations" (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010, p. 340). For this study, the literature review and the research questions guided the development of the instrument and interview questions (see Appendix F). The open-ended interview questions are intended to inquire about the lived experience of Hmong women in their ascent to leadership roles that were represented in the literature review.

The interview questions were pilot-tested with a few individuals that are not participants in the study (Patten, 2012). This is specifically important with semi-

structured questions because the interview questions do not follow a predetermined script. The interview questions were relevant to the participants and related directly to the research questions. The initial questions are designed to establish rapport with the participants to put them at ease. Additional questions were aimed to gain a deeper insight into the lived experiences of the participants. Concluding questions were designed to move toward the current and future perspectives of the participants.

### **Reliability**

Reliability is the trustworthiness of the research. According to Patton (2015), "credibility of a researcher's findings and interpretations depends on the researcher's careful attention to establishing trustworthiness" (p. 685). Trustworthiness can be established through prolonged time at the research site, time spent interviewing, and time building sound relationships with participants (Patton, 2015). Each interview question was asked of participants in the study to safeguard reliability (see Appendix G). The use of member checking, where each participant of the study will be asked to check the content for accuracy, was used to establish reliability. In addition, member checking was used to limit researcher bias and self-reporting errors (Creswell, 2007).

Triangulation of data was used to provide a more comprehensive set of data to offer greater credibility to the data results (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

Triangulation of data for this research study was comprised of interviews of Hmong women as well as documents and artifacts provided by participants of the study.

Transcribed interviews of each participant and document artifacts were reviewed by an external audit to ensure accurate documentation for the study.

Intercoder reliability is an indicator of measurement used to assess the reliability of qualitative research. Coding is done with two or more researchers who evaluate the same content and reach the same conclusions. Lombard et al. (2004) advise that reliability is vital to research; therefore, "without the establishment of reliability the content analysis measures are useless and cannot be considered valid" (p. 2). In order to establish reliability, researchers need to select the most appropriate steps needed to assess and report intercoder reliability. To ensure that the data is analyzed in a fashion that reflects accurate results, the process of intercoder reliability was conducted in the following order for this research study:

- Step 1: The primary researcher selected 10% of the collected data from interviews and related artifacts.
- Step 2: The primary researcher coded 100% of the collected data using NVivo software.
- Step 3: The primary researcher gave the themes developed in the coding process to a secondary researcher/coder.
- Step 4: The secondary researcher/coder scanned the data before coding to validate the themes already identified by the main researcher. If more or fewer themes were identified by the secondary coder, a discussion was held to consider coding themes.
- Step 5: The secondary researcher/coder then coded the information using the themes developed.
- Step 6: After coding data, the secondary researcher/coder gave coded information back to the primary researcher to compare the researcher and

secondary researcher/coder data frequencies for each theme (Lombard et al., 2004).

### **Validity**

Validity is ensuring that the instrument measures what it is supposed to measure; however, in qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument (Patton, 2015). To ensure the validity of the interview process, the researcher used a recording device during the interview, which was later transcribed. The fact that the instrument is the researcher, a threat to the study, is researcher bias. In order to reduce researcher bias, reflexivity was used by the researcher in this study (Patton, 2015). Reflexivity helps the researcher to constantly think about the potential biases and how the researcher can minimize the effects of the biases.

To address internal and external validity, a review of the research study's design, interview questions, data collection processes, and data coding was conducted by an external party in addition to the researcher (Creswell, 2007). To optimize the validity and credibility of the study, the researcher reflected and made the needed adjustments that were appropriately aligned with the purpose of the research study throughout the qualitative inquiry process of the study.

### **Field-Testing**

A field test of the interview questions and process was conducted with a test group of Hmong women volunteers who were knowledgeable and informed about the research topic. The field test was observed by an external third-party observer to ensure alignment between the purpose of the research study, the research questions, and the interview questions for the study. Feedback was requested by the external third party to



limit external and internal threats to the validity of the research study. In addition, feedback from the volunteered test group was solicited to increase consistency and reliability in the interview process. Feedback from the external third-party observer and field test group was considered and adjusted to the data collection process prior to the initial interview of participants.

### **Data Collection**

In adhering to the clearance and approval of the study involving human participants, the researcher completed the CITI certificate (see Appendix H). Prior to the data collection process from participants, the proposal for this study was presented to the University of Massachusetts Global Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval to begin data collection. The IRB was provided with the required information necessary to complete the study. Once the IRB had the opportunity to deliberate the quality, feasibility, and viability of the study, consent was given for this study. The data collection process then began.

As suggested by Patton (2015), data collection for this qualitative phenomenology research inquiry was collected from "... in-depth interviews, focus groups, open-ended questions, direct observations in the field, and analysis of documents" (p. 255). In seeking to understand this phenomenon of the lived experiences of Hmong women leaders who have achieved leadership roles, data collection for this research inquiry was focused on conducting participant interviews. Interview questions were open-ended. Documents and a journal were kept during the extent of the research study.

The participants were contacted via email that identified the researcher, the purpose and objective of the study, as well as a follow-up phone call informing them of

their rights while participating in the study. The phone call further explained that participation in the study is fully voluntary and that they have the right to opt out at any point. Through the use of pseudonyms, the identity of each participant in the study was protected and kept confidential. Signed consent forms, research data, and records were stored in a locked filing cabinet.

Data collection was conducted with in-depth interviews via Zoom, triangulation of data, and peer review. In-depth interviews were conducted using the semi-structured interview process, personal face-to-face interview, and in a place of the participant's choice to allow for confidentiality and ease. Participants were reminded about their rights and their voluntary participation in the study in addition to their assurance of confidentiality.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis involves data collection from in-depth interviews of participants and artifacts. In this study, the qualitative analysis "examines a story, a case study, a set of interviews, or a collection of field notes" (Patton, 2015, p. 570) to decipher meaning and draw conclusions. It helps the researcher make meaning of the experience of the participant to better understand what the experience is like to the larger population. Since the study's focus is on understanding the lived experiences of Hmong women who have achieved leadership roles in organizations, data collection was composed of face-to-face, in-depth interviews, and artifacts, which were analyzed to make meaning and draw conclusions. McMillian and Schumacher (2010) state that "qualitative analysis is a relatively systematic process of coding, categorizing and interpreting data to provide explanations of a single phenomenon of interest" (p. 367).

The face-to-face interviews were recorded using an online recording device as well as a handheld digital recorder during the semi-structured interview. The recorded interviews were transcribed by a transcribing service. Once the transcription was completed and reviewed by each participant with the use of member checking, analytical notes taken by the researchers and transcribed data were coded to be compared and contrasted. Coding is the process of synthesizing collected data for themes, patterns, categories, and plausible conclusions (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2015). The NVivo coding software program was used to analyze the participant's interview transcriptions for frequency of themes, sort themes, and map relationships among codes and categories (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). Moreover, the NVivo software was used to store the collected data. As the researcher reviewed and analyzed the collected data from NVivo for emerging themes, the researcher looked for a correlation between the qualitative analysis and the research question, which resulted in the research study's findings.

### **Inter-Coder Reliability**

In addition to the researcher's coding activity, an independent coder coded at least 25% of the data. The independent coder's results were compared to the researcher's results to determine whether researcher bias has affected the researcher's coding. The goal for the match is at least an 80% match between the researcher and the independent coder. If bias is found, results were adjusted to minimize or remove it.

### **Limitations**

The first limitation was that there was no available documentation identifying how many Hmong women currently occupy leadership positions in organizations. As a

result, it was difficult to create an overall context for the population and sample. The limitations of this study were the sample size due to the limited geographical area of participants and the time constraints of the researcher and participants. The first limitation applied to the sample size of this study was limited to only California. The sample size of a handful of Hmong women leaders who have achieved leadership positions may be too small to generalize the results to the larger population. An additional limitation applies to time constraints that affected the administration of the interview instruments. Participants may be under a time constraint to sit through the in-depth face-to-face interview, so they are less likely to share their lived experiences in their entirety.

### **Summary**

The chapter was presented with an overview of the problem statement, the purpose of the study, and the research questions. The selected methodology for the research study highlighted the lived experiences of Hmong women who have achieved leadership roles. This entailed the research design, population sample, data collection, and data analysis process.

In summation, the purpose of the qualitative research study was to illuminate the lived experiences of Hmong women who have achieved leadership roles. The instrument used to compile the data was the researcher, who conducted in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol was designed by the researcher and field-tested with volunteered participants and an external third-party examiner. The population of the study was Hmong women leaders who have achieved leadership roles in the United States. The targeted population was Hmong women leaders who had achieved a

leadership role in California. Triangulation of the data was collected through in-depth interviews, documents, and artifacts. Data collected from participant interviews and artifacts was transcribed and coded for emerging themes.

## CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

This chapter presents the purpose, research questions, methodology, and findings of the qualitative inquiry of the lived experience of Hmong women's journey to leadership attainment. The research methods and data collection procedures are described and followed by a presentation and analysis of the findings of the research.

The findings are organized by the research question, yielding evident similarities, trends, and themes that emerge from the data. Short stories and anecdotes are shared to express prominent influences on the participants to inform the analysis of the individual interviews.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and understand the lived experiences of Hmong women who have achieved leadership positions. The study will highlight the actions, motivations, struggles, and cultural obstacles that Hmong women face to achieve leadership positions.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by one central research question and six sub questions.

#### **Central Research Question**

1. What are the lived experiences of Hmong women who have achieved leadership positions?

#### **Sub Research Questions**

2. What actions, personal or professional, were taken by you, as a Hmong woman leader, to advance your progress to a leadership position?

3. What motivations or efficacies inspired you, as a Hmong woman leader, to pursue the journey of leadership to a leadership position?
4. What type of support was received, as a Hmong woman leader, from family members or professional mentors by Hmong women leaders, while ascending to a leadership position?
5. What obstacles were encountered by you, as a Hmong woman leader, as you worked toward a leadership position?
6. What cultural, racial, or ethnic stereotypes created support or barriers for you, as a Hmong woman leader, in your ascent to leadership?
7. What advice do you, a Hmong women leader, offer others who emerge from underrepresented groups to advance to executive-level leadership positions?

### **Research Methodology and Data Collection**

The research protocols of the study were designed by the researcher, reviewed by the dissertation committee, and approved by the UMass Global IRB. An overview of the research procedure is provided in this section, followed by the findings and analysis of the data. This study was focused on the qualitative phenomenological inquiry of Hmong women's journey to leadership attainment. As described by McMillan and Schumacher (2010), "the basis of phenomenology is that there are multiple ways of interpreting the same experience and that the meaning of the experience for each participant is what constitutes reality" (p. 346). This research study was intentionally designed to highlight the lived experience of the Hmong women leaders. The sample frame for this study is Hmong women who held leadership positions within California.

To attain rich information for this study, the configuration of purposeful and snowball sampling was utilized. The sample of participants for this study is Hmong women located in California. Potential participants were contacted via internet searches, chain referrals, personal networks, and social media. Through the network of the researcher, multiple participants were identified. Participants who indicated a willingness to participate in the study were contacted via email, which identified the researcher and the purpose of the study.

As established by the UMass Global IRB protocols, 12 Hmong women leaders were selected to participate in the study who were most easily accessible to the researcher and who met the following established criteria:

- Participants were of Hmong descent.
- Participants had worked in a leadership/supervisory position for three or more years.
- Participants were willing to participate.

Upon contact, participants who agreed to participate received a formal Letter of Invitation, Informed Consent, Participant's Bill of Rights, and Audio Release form. Each participant of interest received a phone call from the researcher that further explained that participation in the study is fully voluntary and that the participant has the right to opt-out at any point in the study. Each participant was given an opportunity to ask questions or seek any clarification that they may need. An interview date and time were scheduled with the participant.



## **Data Collection Protocol**

The researcher sought to gather data for this study from a semi-structured interview environment: personal face-to-face, in-depth, open-ended questions and observations. However, given the schedules and preferences of the participants, all interviews were conducted via Zoom. In scheduling the interview, the date and time were mutually arranged and agreed upon between the participant and researcher. At the beginning of the interview, a review of the Participant Informed Consent, Participant's Bill of Rights, and Audio Release was conducted. Time was provided for any questions to be addressed before the interview began.

Each interview was recorded using an audio-recording device and Zoom. Across the 12 interviews, the time frame ranged from 45 to 90 minutes. Each participant was informed of when the recording began and when the recording ceased at the end of the interview. At the end of the interview, each participant was thanked for their participation in the research study by sharing their lived experience in their journey to leadership.

As a part of the Informed Consent and Confidentiality, all information related to the participant's identity will not be linked in any way. All information will be identifier redacted. To provide confidentiality, the following procedures were implemented:

- All names of each participant were collected on the Informed Consent. However, each participant's name was not divulged in the study. To protect the participants confidentially, the participants were assigned a number.
- The interview transcripts were organized by the participant number (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 3).

- The interviews were scheduled by the researcher, and the date and time were agreed upon by the participant and researcher. Each interview was via Zoom and free from external distractions or listeners.
- The researcher is the only individual to have access to the signed Informed Consent Form and kept all electronic forms, transcriptions, and audio recordings in a secure location.

### **Population**

For this study, the population includes Hmong women leaders who have achieved leadership roles within their organization in the United States. To date, there is no data available to determine the exact number of Hmong women who hold leadership positions within California. However, based on data, as of 2021, there were an estimated 321,000 Hmong individuals living in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Approximately 46% of females participate in the workforce, resulting in about 76,783 Hmong females participating in the U.S. workforce (Zane, 2022). This lends the researcher to estimate that potential participants can be developed.

### **Sample**

The sampling frame for this study is Hmong women who have achieved leadership roles in California. Currently, there is no data available to determine the exact number of Hmong women who hold leadership positions within California. However, based on data available to the researcher, an estimate of the potential participants can be developed. The researcher used a combination of three approaches for the sample of this study: (a) purposeful sampling, (b) snowball sampling, and (c) convenience sampling.

This methodology aimed to build a diverse sample of Hmong women leaders in multiple industries. The sample size was 12 participants who met the following criteria:

- Participants were of Hmong descent.
- Participants had worked in a leadership/supervisory position for three or more years.
- Participants were willing to participate.

All 12 participants resided in California and could provide a diverse sample across multiple industries and leadership roles.

Participants were specifically selected to generate a diverse and rich information sample. All participants met the criteria for this study by being a Hmong woman in a leadership position in the state of California. Participant's ages varied, with no participant in the age range of 25 to 35 or an age range beyond 55. Five participants in this study were in the 35 to 45 age category, and seven participants in this study were in the 45 to 55 age category. The participants represented four different work industries, including business, education, health care, and politics. Two of the participants earned a bachelor's degree, four of the participants earned a master's degree, and six of the participants earned a doctoral degree (see Table 1).

**Table 1***Demographic Data from Participants' Interviews*

| Participant identifier | Hmong woman | Leader in California | Age   | Field/ industry | Highest level of education |
|------------------------|-------------|----------------------|-------|-----------------|----------------------------|
| 1                      | Yes         | Yes                  | 45-55 | Education       | Masters                    |
| 2                      | Yes         | Yes                  | 35-45 | Business        | Bachelors                  |
| 3                      | Yes         | Yes                  | 35-45 | Business        | Bachelors                  |
| 4                      | Yes         | Yes                  | 35-45 | Education       | Doctoral                   |
| 5                      | Yes         | Yes                  | 45-55 | Politics        | Masters                    |
| 6                      | Yes         | Yes                  | 45-55 | Education       | Masters                    |
| 7                      | Yes         | Yes                  | 45-55 | Education       | Doctoral                   |
| 8                      | Yes         | Yes                  | 45-55 | Education       | Doctoral                   |
| 9                      | Yes         | Yes                  | 45-55 | Education       | Doctoral                   |
| 10                     | Yes         | Yes                  | 45-55 | Education       | Doctoral                   |
| 11                     | Yes         | Yes                  | 35-45 | Education       | Masters                    |
| 12                     | Yes         | Yes                  | 35-45 | Health care     | Doctoral                   |

**Data Analysis Protocol**

This section contains a detailed presentation of the analysis of the data from the 12 interviews with the participants for this study. By conducting face-to-face interviews via Zoom with 12 Hmong women leaders in California, the researcher was able to collect a rich body of data required to make a thorough analysis of the data.

**Reliability**

To ensure reliability, each participant was asked the same questions. All questions were read directly as they were written so that no unintentional re-wording of the questions could influence the participants understanding and influence the outcomes of the results. To ensure that the data is analyzed in a fashion that reflects accurate results, the process of intercoder reliability was conducted in the following order for this research study:

- Step 1: The primary researcher selected 10% of the collected data from interviews and related artifacts.
- Step 2: The primary researcher coded 100% of the collected data using NVivo software.
- Step 3: The primary researcher gave the themes developed in the coding process to a secondary researcher/coder.
- Step 4: The secondary researcher/coder scanned the data before coding to validate the themes already identified by the main researcher. If more or fewer themes were identified by the secondary coder, a discussion was held to consider coding themes.
- Step 5: The secondary researcher/coder then coded the information using the themes developed.
- Step 6: After coding data, the secondary researcher/coder gave coded information back to the primary researcher to compare the researcher and secondary researcher/coder data frequencies for each theme (Lombard et al., 2004).

The face-to-face interviews were recorded using an online recording device on Zoom, as well as a handheld digital recorder during the semi-structured interview. The recorded interviews were transcribed by a transcribing service. Once the transcription was completed and reviewed by each participant with the use of member checking, analytical notes taken by the researchers and transcribed data were coded to be compared. Each transcribed document was coded into themes using NVivo. Lastly, a full analysis was conducted to yield themes of the data and engagement in a "systematic process of

coding, categorizing and interpreting data to provide explanations of a single phenomenon of interest" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 367). The outcomes of the analysis allowed for the presentation of the findings from the participants.

### **Presentation of Findings**

The focus of the research study was to understand the lived experience of Hmong Women in leadership roles. The research findings are structured by one central research question and five sub questions to describe the full essence of the lived journey of Hmong women in their attainment of leadership. The findings for this research are presented by research questions for each individual participant's experiences, quotes, excerpts, and narratives.

To describe the essence of the lived experience of Hmong women leaders, one central research question and four sub research questions were explored in this study. The qualitative study was examined at multiple levels to allow the researcher to gain a deeper awareness of the phenomenon experienced by a Hmong woman who served in a leadership role in California. In examining the data, 12 participants reported narratives and experiences through stories that impacted their journey to attaining a leadership position. A succinct synopsis of their lived experience is captured in the excerpts presented after the first central research question and each subsequent research question.

#### **Research Question 1: Lived Experience**

The central research question of the study was: *What are the lived experiences of Hmong women who have achieved leadership positions?* All 12 participants reported a variety of examples, insights, and experiences that were embedded in their lived experience to achieve a leadership position.

In response to Research Question 1, participants shared their experiences that yield the following themes:

- Unintentional/Leadership by Accident
- Relative/Family-Driven
- Mentors/Leaders
- Personal Drive to Succeed
- Redirection of Personal Skills
- Realization of Personal Leadership Skills

The theme with the highest response rate was Unintentional/Leadership by Accident, where seven of the 12 participants shared this theme with a frequency of 14. For example, Participant 4 shared,

I don't know that I was actually aiming to be a leader. I think it's just one of those natural progression where I started out in the classroom as a classroom teacher and then decided to challenge myself and leave the classroom. I think it was just one of those things where you don't really think about it; you're done with one thing, or you want to try something else, and you just keep going. And eventually, you end up in leadership.

The second most reported theme, Relatives and Family Driven, was cited as an important drive to attain a leadership role from five of the 12 participants with a frequency of 11. Participant 5 shared how being the oldest in her family led her to leadership by stating,

I've always had to take care of my family. There's 10 of us, and so, as the oldest daughter, I think I just had that innate ability to just always be leading and

teaching. And you don't think about it, but it's kind of like, 'Hey, I've been doing this work since I was five years old,' right? But at different capacities.

Another commonly cited theme was Mentor/Leader. Four of the 12 participants, with a frequency of eight, shared the importance of having a mentor or leader who impacted their experience of leadership attainment. According to Participant 10, she was very fortunate to have worked with different people who were her mentors and believed in her.

Interestingly, one participant from the 12 participants discussed their drive to succeed as a theme. Additionally, another participant shared the theme of Realization of Personal Leadership Skills, and another participant shared the theme of Redirection of Personal Skills. Participant 2 shared how she has a drive to succeed and keep going. And Participant 3 talked about how she didn't realize and embrace her personal leadership skills until much later in her career. Participant 9 shared in depth how she redirected her skills from the field of education into research and evaluation, leading her into a leadership position.

Table 2 presents the major themes and frequency identified for Lived Experiences.



**Table 2**

*Research Question 1: Lived Experience*

| Theme  | P1 | P2 | P3 | P4 | P5 | P6 | P7 | P8 | P9 | P10 | P11 | P12 | T | Frequency |
|--|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|-----|-----|---|-----------|
| By accident/<br>unintentional                      | x  | -  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | -  | -  | x   | -   | -   | 7 | 14        |
| Relative/<br>family-driven                         | x  | -  | -  | -  | x  | -  | x  | x  | -  | -   | -   | x   | 5 | 11        |
| Mentor/leader                                      | x  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -  | x   | x   | x   | 4 | 8         |
| Personal drive<br>to succeed                       | -  | x  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -   | -   | -   | 1 | 2         |
| Redirection of<br>personal skills                  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -  | x  | -   | -   | -   | 1 | 2         |
| Realization of<br>personal<br>leadership<br>skills | -  | -  | x  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -   | -   | -   | 1 | 1         |

*Note.* P = Participant; T = Total. Data sorted by Total response rate.

**Research Question 2: Personal and Professional Actions**

Research Question 2 asked: *What actions, personal or professional, were taken by you, as a Hmong women leader, to advance your progress to a leadership position?*

Themes from Participants 1 through 12 are presented in the following segments, with excerpts from participants highlighting examples for each theme.

In response to Research Question 2, participants shared their experiences that yielded the following themes:

- Values-Aligned Organization
- Educational Attainment
- Networking/Mentorship
- Sense of Responsibility
- Lessons Learned for Bigger Opportunities
- Belief in Skillsets/Confidence
- Communication of Leadership Aspiration

Values-Aligned Organization was the most frequently cited theme by participants. The majority of eight participants from the 12 responded with a frequency of eight and touched upon the importance of working and leading in a values-aligned organization.

Participant 6 shared,

One of the few women high school administrators, it was really hard. But because my team was so intact and we were really in alignment in our vision for leadership and climate and instruction and what have you, it made the job much more positive.

Educational Attainment was the second most cited theme, with six total participant responses from the 12 and a high frequency of 16. Each of the six participants out of the 12 who shared how educational attainment was a personal and professional action to leadership attainment mentioned educational attainment twice or more.

Participant 8 shared how attaining her degrees pushed her and prepared her for her role as a leader by stating,

I've gone to three different universities across the country, and I'd say that the hardest degree was my Ph.D. and it was the hardest because it was the one that pushed me completely beyond my boundaries. And it was the only degree that I had that I felt like giving up. And I share that was because in overcoming that, it allowed me to actually see how it really prepared me to be in the job that I have now and the jobs that I will have in the future.

Two themes with similar participant responses and frequency were Networking/Mentorship from five participants with a frequency of eight out of the 12 participants and Sense of Responsibility from five participants with a frequency of six. Participants who

attribute leadership attainment to the theme of Networking/Mentorship discuss the importance of networking with other women and how mentors, both professional and personal, contributed to their journey to leadership attainment. Likewise, participants who shared that they had a Sense of Responsibility to attain leadership were from the family dynamics of being an older child and having to take on the role of caring for their younger sibling(s).

The theme with a lower number of responses, which is important to highlight, is the theme of Lessons Learned for Bigger Opportunities. There was a total of three responses with a frequency of five from the 12 participants. Participant 10 shared,

I feel like all the failures in my life have been lessons learned for bigger opportunities. I think that had I not had all the times people have said no to me, or all the times that I did something, and it didn't [turn] out the way I wanted, I still feel that because of all of that, I'm a much better leader.

Responses from the theme of Belief in Skill Sets/Confidence were from two of the 12 participants with a frequency of four. For example, Participant 9 shared, "I think that the thing that has helped me is really my knowledge and experience and skills."

One theme that was surprisingly low was Communication of Leadership Aspiration, with two participant responses with a frequency of two, which was only mentioned once by each of the two participants. Participant 1 talked about how she worked for a leader whose leadership style was not well received by others, including herself. That is when she knew that she desired to be a leader. Participant 12 shared how she knew that going into medicine as a doctor was going to afford her a seat at the table in leadership.

Table 3 presents the major themes and frequency counts identified for Personal and Professional Actions.

**Table 3**

*Research Question 2: Personal and Professional Actions*

| Theme                                    | P1 | P2 | P3 | P4 | P5 | P6 | P7 | P8 | P9 | P10 | P11 | P12 | T | Frequency |
|--|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|-----|-----|---|-----------|
| Values-aligned organization              | -  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | -  | x  | x   | -   | -   | 8 | 8         |
| Educational attainment                   | -  | x  | x  | -  | -  | -  | -  | x  | x  | -   | x   | x   | 6 | 16        |
| Networking/mentorship                    | -  | -  | -  | -  | x  | -  | x  | x  | -  | x   | -   | x   | 5 | 8         |
| Sense of responsibility                  | -  | x  | x  | x  | -  | x  | -  | -  | -  | -   | -   | x   | 5 | 6         |
| Lessons learned for bigger opportunities | -  | -  | -  | -  | -  | x  | -  | -  | -  | x   | x   | -   | 3 | 5         |
| Belief in skills/confidence              | -  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -  | x  | -   | x   | -   | 2 | 4         |
| Communication of leadership aspiration   | x  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -   | -   | x   | 2 | 2         |

*Note.* P = Participant; T = Total. Data sorted by Total response rate.

**Research Question 3: Motivations and Efficacies**

Research Question 3 asked: *What motivations or efficacies inspired you, as a Hmong women leader, to pursue the journey of leadership to a leadership position?*

Analysis of the data and excerpts from the participants are presented in the following segments.

In response to Research Question 3, participants shared their experiences that yield the following themes:

- Advocate/Sense of Responsibility
- Family Struggle and Support
- Goals/Motivation
- Role-Models

- Overcoming Obstacles
- Perseverance

According to participant responses, Advocate/Sense of Responsibility was the most cited theme, with seven of the 12 participants listing it as being the most inspirational factor influencing them to pursue a leadership position with a frequency of 16. Repeatedly, participants shared the importance of advocating for other women and young women, referring to the idea that it is their responsibility. Participant 1 shared how she is an advocate for girls and will take the time to work with Hmong youth in order to see them succeed in life. Her constant reminder to them is, "You're smart, and don't lose sight of what you're doing!" (Participant 1). Participant 5 shared how she stayed in leadership because there are not enough women to continue doing the work and how she continues to advocate and inspire other women.

The second most cited theme is Family Struggle and Support. Six of the 12 participants responded with a frequency of 10 regarding Family Struggle and Support. Participant 7 mentioned seeing the struggles of her mother, grandmother, and other incredible women in her family who struggled as refugees who spoke no English and had no proper education, fighting their way from a war-torn country to the States. She described in-depth how her grandmother was abandoned by her grandfather and how her grandmother became the matriarch of the family. Participant 11 describes how her mother escaped a war-torn country with nine children, seeking refuge not only from a war-torn country but also from the abuse from her father.

The third most cited theme was Goals/Motivation. Goals/motivation were mentioned by five participants with eight frequencies. The fourth most cited theme was

Role Models. The theme of Role Models was mentioned by five of the 12 participants, with seven frequencies. Participant 10's response is an example of both the theme of Goals/Motivation and Role Models,

You cast the stone, and there's other little girls who look at you, and they're going, 'You know, I could be that, and I might be even better than that. I can do that, and I can go even higher than that.' That's been one of the motivating factors that has helped me to stay the course.

The fifth most cited theme was Overcoming Obstacles. Of the 12 participants, four responded with a frequency of eight. Participants shared how they overcame obstacles in their lives. Participant 9 shared,

I think I have to go back to my little humble beginnings of being a refugee, right? I was born in the 70s, and we all came through the refugee route and always felt like there were... the first years of my life were so traumatic that the thing that keeps me going all the time, and I always go back to it is, so many people died. So many people were not chosen to live. So many people did not have an opportunity.

Participant 2 shared, "I think my economical background when I... growing up poor, that also is my drive to succeeding as well."

The last theme noted regarding motivations of efficacies inspired by Hmong leaders to pursue the journey of leadership to a leadership position was Perseverance. This theme was noted by three of the 12 participants with a frequency of four.

Participants shared how they persevered through difficult situations. Participant 3 shared that when she has a difficult job or challenge, she will remind herself that she can do it and push through it.

Table 4 presents the major themes and frequency counts identified for Motivations and Efficacies.

**Table 4**

*Research Question 3: Motivations and Efficacies*

| Theme                            | P1 | P2 | P3 | P4 | P5 | P6 | P7 | P8 | P9 | P10 | P11 | P12 | T | Frequency |
|----------------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|-----|-----|---|-----------|
| Advocate/sense of responsibility | x  | -  | -  | -  | x  | x  | x  | x  | -  | x   | x   | -   | 7 | 16        |
| Family struggle and support      | -  | x  | x  | -  | -  | -  | x  | x  | -  | -   | x   | x   | 6 | 10        |
| Goals/Motivation                 | -  | x  | x  | x  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -  | x   | -   | x   | 5 | 8         |
| Role models                      | x  | -  | -  | x  | x  | -  | -  | -  | -  | x   | -   | x   | 5 | 7         |
| Overcoming obstacles             | -  | x  | x  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -  | x  | -   | -   | x   | 4 | 8         |
| Perseverance                     | -  | -  | x  | -  | -  | -  | -  | x  | x  | -   | -   | -   | 3 | 4         |

*Note.* P = Participant; T = Total. Data sorted by Total response rate.

**Research Question 4: Personal or Professional Support**

Research Question 4 asked: *What type of support was received, as a Hmong woman leader, from family members or professional mentors by Hmong women leaders, while ascending to a leadership position?* Themes from Participants 1 through 12 are presented in the following segments with excerpts from participants highlighting examples for each theme. In response to Research Question 4, participants shared their experiences that yield the following themes: Mentorship/Networking, Parents/Extended Family, and Spouses.

Mentorship/Networking was widely reported as the highest recurring theme, with all 12 participants responding with a high frequency of 43. Participants contribute their leadership success to Mentors/Networks in both their personal and professional lives.

Participants shared how friends, co-workers, and leaders supported them by encouraging them, supporting them, and just being present to guide them to leadership attainment.

Participant 4 shared how she attributes her leadership success to her friends, co-workers, and friends she made while attaining her master's and doctoral degrees. Participant 4 also shared that her superintendent has become a great mentor, along with other individuals, and that she has surrounded herself with like-minded individuals. Participant 12 shared how she works with five other Hmong women physicians who have become a great support system whom she has learned a great deal from.

The second most cited theme was the support of Parents/Extended Family. A total of 11 of the 12 participants with a frequency of 34 shared in great detail the support and encouragement that they received from parents/extended family on their journey to leadership attainment. Participant 1 shared,

I'll have to say the most support that I'd gotten was from my parents. My parents really believed in education, and especially my dad. He believed that women have just as many rights as men do in any kind of field, and my mom was just, she was just a fighter for women's rights and wanted my sisters and I to do as much as we could.

Participant 2 shared, "My parents were always my biggest supporters." Participant 4 shared, "My family is just very supportive, especially my parents." Participant 6 shared,

My mom has always been super supportive and really was progressive in her own way about making sure that I always reached for whatever I wanted to reach for, and always really nurturing and making sure that the conditions were right for me to do that.



Support from one's Spouse was the third most cited theme from participants. Six of the 12 participants with a frequency of six responded to Spouse support as a theme in their journey to leadership attainment. Participant 5 shared about how good it is to have a supportive and understanding husband. She said that he understands that oftentimes, she will be in meetings or working with other male colleagues and does not need to explain herself. Participant 5 went on to share how her husband trusts her and understands how important her work is to her and that he supports her.

Table 5 presents the major themes and frequency counts identified for Personal and Professional Support.

**Table 5**

*Research Question 4: Personal and Professional Support*

| Theme                      | P1 | P2 | P3 | P4 | P5 | P6 | P7 | P8 | P9 | P10 | P11 | P12 | T  | Frequency |
|----------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|-----|-----|----|-----------|
| Mentorship/<br>networking  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x   | x   | x   | 12 | 43        |
| Parents/extended<br>family | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | -   | x   | x   | 11 | 34        |
| Spouses                    | x  | -  | -  | -  | x  | x  | x  | -  | -  | x   | x   | -   | 6  | 13        |

*Note.* P = Participant; T = Total. Data sorted by Total response rate.

**Research Question 5: Struggles and Obstacles**

Research Question 5 asked: *What obstacles were encountered by you, as a Hmong women leader, as you worked toward a leadership position?* Themes from Participants 1 through 12 are presented in the following segments, with excerpts from participants highlighting examples for each theme. In response to Research Question 5, participants shared their experiences that yield the following themes: Mixed Expectations, Personal Fears and Doubts, and Lack of Role Models.

Overwhelmingly, the most cited theme was Mixed Expectations. Eight of the 12 participants responded with a high frequency of 60. Participants shared in detail and

offered examples of how the mixed expectations that they had as Hmong women leaders, both in their personal and professional lives, affected them. Participants shared the sense of responsibility that they have in the many roles they hold, such as being a daughter, daughter-in-law, wife, mother, sister, a women leader, and a Hmong women leader. Participant 10 shared an example of mixed expectations that she experienced as a Hmong women leader, stating,

Personally, the weight of being a mom, being a wife, being a daughter, being a daughter-in-law, and making sure that I'm able to fulfill everybody's expectations of me that was a huge obstacle that I really had to get over. The fact that I'm on a lot, I work a lot of hours, I mean, a normal day will be 12 to 14 hours... of work, so not being able to fulfill the duties that is expected as a wife, as a daughter-in-law, as a daughter, and as a mom- That weighs really heavy on my part because... sorry, it's my [foreign language]. Those things have weighed heavy on me. I think, too, the other thing is I got married at a very young age. I was 19 when I got married. When I embarked into leadership, it was also getting my husband to understand my hopes, my dreams, my goal that brought me joy.

The second most responded theme from the participants was Personal Fears and Doubts, which was highlighted as an obstacle in their journey to leadership. Of the 12 participants, eight responded with a frequency of 23. Participants shared how they were their own worst critics and enemies who doubted themselves or had fears of failing, which they had to overcome while on their journey to attain a leadership position.

Participant 11 shared in detail,

I think now I would say the biggest obstacle is myself. I think if you were to ask me this even 5 to 10 years ago when I was younger, I would've blamed something else, but now, I totally recognize that our greatest obstacles are ourselves, myself and that I hold myself back because of whatever I've created in my mind as the reason to hold me back.

Lack of Role Models was the least responded to theme. Three participants from the 12 participants responded with a total frequency of eight. Participant 2 shared her experience being the first generation of Hmong women in the United States, going to school and trying to figure things out on her own, even when she graduated college and started her first job. For Participant 2, there was no one, so having more Hmong women leaders to look up to and inspire other Hmong women like her is needed. Participant 5 talked about how she had to figure leadership out by herself because she struggled to find a role model, believing that there was no one who had done it before. Participant 5 stated that there is a need for role models so that she and other Hmong women can expand their network and skill sets.

Table 6 presents the major themes and frequency counts identified for Struggles and Obstacles.

**Table 6**

*Research Question 5: Struggles and Obstacles*

| Theme                     | P1 | P2 | P3 | P4 | P5 | P6 | P7 | P8 | P9 | P10 | P11 | P12 | T | Frequency |
|---------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|-----|-----|---|-----------|
| Mixed expectations        | -  | -  | x  | -  | -  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x   | x   | x   | 8 | 60        |
| Personal fears and doubts | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | -  | -  | -  | x  | x   | x   | -   | 8 | 23        |
| Lack of role models       | -  | x  | -  | -  | x  | -  | -  | -  | -  | -   | x   | -   | 3 | 8         |

*Note.* P = Participant; T = Total. Data sorted by Total response rate.

**Research Question 6: Cultural, Racial, or Ethnic Supports and Barriers**

Research Question 6 asked: *What cultural, racial, or ethnic stereotypes created support or barriers for you, as a Hmong woman leader, in your ascent to leadership?*

Themes from Participants 1 through 12 responses are presented in the following segments, with excerpts from participants highlighting examples for each theme. In response to Research Question 6, participants shared their experiences that yield the following themes: Eastern-Western Expectations/Mindsets, Familial and Cultural Expectations, and High Expectations.

The theme with the highest response was Eastern-Western Expectations/Mindsets. All 12 participants responded to this theme with a frequency of 60. Participants shared intimate experiences about how often they were held to both Eastern and/or Western expectations from family, colleagues, and others from their community or organization. Participants viewed the mindset of others as a support or a barrier to their ascent to leadership.

Participant 9 shared her experience with microaggression while working with older Asian women who gave her a hard time and told her that they were worried that the job would be very hard for her when she became a leader in the organization.

Likewise, Participant 3 shared,

I feel like being a Hmong woman leader means you're often juggling many identities at the same time, and you're often having to code-switch between, in some cases, just being very quiet in front of the whole entire family. And in other cases, being very aggressive when it comes to internal family dynamics. We don't have the luxury to just complain, or we're not allowed to. We're always looking for solutions and trying to problem-solve. So, in many ways, it's been a core of what I do now in my current role.

The second most responded to theme was Familial and Cultural Expectations. All 12 participants responded to the theme with a frequency of 53. Participants shared experiences that they encountered as a woman in the family or within the culture. Participants shared how they often were treated differently than their male counterparts within their family or community. Participant 2 shared her experiences as a Hmong woman who watched how her parents treated her brothers compared to her and her sisters and described it as being treated like second-class citizens. This inequity was a driving force to prove to her parents and the Hmong community that women are just as capable as men. Participant 5 shared about a time when she was in the Hmong community, introducing herself for work. Some Hmong men would shake her hand, while others just looked at her and didn't know what to do when she put her hand out for a handshake. Through this experience, she had to take a step back and think about what is culturally appropriate and not appropriate when she is in the Hmong community.

The least-responded theme was High Expectations. Two of the 12 participants responded with a frequency of four. Participant 4 shared how she holds herself to high

expectations, and so do others in the Hmong community. She shared that being a leader means that she is held to high standards, where she is respected and honored in the Hmong community because people are very proud of her and the work that she leads. Participant 9 shared that she is held to higher expectations than her male counterparts in her field, both by people in her organization and older Asian women that she works with.

Table 7 presents the major themes and frequency counts identified for Cultural, Racial, or Ethnic Supports or Barriers.

**Table 7**

*Research Question 6: Cultural, Racial, or Ethnic Supports or Barriers*

| Theme                                     | P1 | P2 | P3 | P4 | P5 | P6 | P7 | P8 | P9 | P10 | P11 | P12 | T  | Frequency |
|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|-----|-----|----|-----------|
| Eastern-Western expectations/<br>mindsets | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x   | x   | x   | 12 | 60        |
| Familial and cultural expectations        | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x   | x   | x   | 12 | 53        |
| High expectations                         | -  | -  | -  | x  | -  | -  | -  | -  | x  | -   | -   | -   | 2  | 4         |

*Note.* P = Participant; T = Total. Data sorted by Total response rate.

**Research Question 7: Advice**

Research Question 7 asked: *What advice do you, a Hmong women leader, offer others who emerge from underrepresented groups to advance to executive-level leadership positions?* Themes from Participants 1 through 12 responses are presented in the following segments, with excerpts from participants highlighting examples for each theme. In response to Research Question 7, participants shared their experiences that yielded the following themes:

- Be Inspired to Take Action for Advancement
- Shed Perceptions or Habits That Stifle Progress
- Be Part of the Advancing Equal Opportunity

- Develop Personal and Professional Networks
- Take the Opportunity
- Just do it

The theme with the highest response was Be Inspired to Take Action for Advancement. Nine of the 12 participants responded with a frequency of 16. Participants shared the importance of finding your passion and finding something that inspires you to take action towards advancing to a leadership position. Participant 4 shared, "Believe in yourself. Just believe in yourself and just do what makes you happy." Participant 7 shared how she was inspired by a Hmong man who told her at one of the lowest points in her life that Hmong women are very powerful and can be very influential. Another participant, Participant 10, shared,

I think for Hmong women out there who want to venture into leadership, I would say just because you're Hmong, and just because you're a Hmong woman, don't look at it as it's 'I'm Hmong and I'm a woman,' you actually should look at it as, 'man, I'm Hmong, and I'm a woman- And that puts me above everybody else.'

The second theme with the most responses from participants is Shed Perceptions or Habits that Stifle Progress. Eight of the 12 participants responded to this theme with a frequency of 23. Participants shared words of encouragement and advice to others about the importance of ridding yourself of cultural perceptions to make progress toward leadership attainment. Participant 9 shared,

Don't dwell on all the... kind of like the preconceived notions of what we should be, right? What other people or other cultures impose that we should be like, we should be submissive. We should be quiet. We should not be talkative. We should

not be loud. Not that those things I would aspire to be either, but that we should be confident, and we should say things with conviction, right? And we should be good on our word.

Participant 11 shared,

We experience so much that culturally and traditionally, we've been taught to just keep that in, to just repress it. That's not healthy. That's just not healthy in the work that we have to do, right? I mean, if we kept things in, I don't think we'd ever move forward in our journey.

The third most responded to theme was Be a Part of Advancing Equal Opportunity. Seven of the 12 participants responded to this theme with a frequency of 16. In order to address inequity for marginalized groups, women need to be a part of advancing equal opportunities for other women and, more importantly, for Hmong women. Participant 3 shared how important it is to hold onto your values and to uplift others. She encouraged others to challenge what is really culture and patriarchy and to address equal opportunity. Participant 12 shared the significance of giving back to others as you ascend through your leadership journey.

The fourth most responded to theme was from six of the 12 participants, with 11 frequencies being Developing Personal and Professional Networks is important for leadership attainment. Participant 6 shared,

Pull up your reserves from your family, from your friends, from mentors, reach out to other Hmong women who are more than happy to support. I actually think that we Hmong women don't do a good job of forming a network and supporting each other.



Participant 8 shared, "Develop a strong group of, I mean, multiple groups of peers, colleagues, and mentors." Participant 11 shared,

Key advice is to really build a network of trusted Hmong women or women that you can connect with. Hopefully, they're women of color if they're not Hmong women. To just have regular and ongoing conversations that are relevant to the experience of Hmong women.

The fifth most responded to theme was from five of the 12 participants with 12 frequencies shared how Hmong women should just Take the Opportunity to a leadership position. Participant 2 shared the following,

I guess the moral of my story is just to accept your fate or accept what's... just it's going through these uncharted territory is scary, but then you figure it out, and who knows what... who knows how well you'll succeed. And so... but yeah, so right now, I'm enjoying my role and learning, and I'm very glad that I've accepted that role.

Participant 6 shared,

If you want to lead, step up. We need you. Our children need to see people who look like them in positions of leader. Not in the cafeteria, not the instructional assistant, not the bilingual translator. Those are fine, but we need people to be in positions like yours, like mine, to move into that power seat, the superintendent seat. To start to retell a different narrative about what leadership ought to look like.

Participant 12 shared, "Going for those leadership positions when they do open up, and not limiting yourself."

The fifth most responded to theme with five responses from the 12 participants with a frequency of six advised other Hmong women aspiring to be leaders to Just do it!

Participant 5 advised,

Don't be afraid. Go for it. And do things on purpose. You don't have to just wait for it to land on your lap. Just go for it and see what happens. I think that we can all be very pleasantly surprised at the outcome.

Participant 6 explained how we need to saturate leadership with more Hmong women and start changing the narrative. She acknowledged that it's going to be hard, but Hmong women just need to go for it and do it.

Table 8 presents the major themes and frequency counts identified for Advice.

**Table 8**

*Research Question 7: Advice*

| Theme  | P1 | P2 | P3 | P4 | P5 | P6 | P7 | P8 | P9 | P10 | P11 | P12 | T | Frequency |
|--|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|-----|-----|---|-----------|
| Be inspired to take action for advancement                     | -  | -  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x  | x   | -   | x   | 9 | 16        |
| Shed perceptions or habits that stifle progress                | x  | -  | -  | -  | x  | x  | x  | -  | x  | x   | x   | x   | 8 | 23        |
| Be part of the advancing equal opportunity for self and others | -  | -  | x  | -  | -  | x  | -  | x  | x  | x   | x   | x   | 7 | 16        |
| Develop personal and professional networks and rely on them    | -  | -  | -  | x  | x  | x  | -  | x  | -  | -   | x   | x   | 6 | 11        |
| Take the opportunity   | -  | x  | -  | -  | -  | x  | -  | x  | -  | x   | -   | x   | 5 | 12        |
| Just do it   | -  | -  | -  | -  | x  | x  | -  | x  | x  | -   | -   | x   | 5 | 6         |

*Note.* P = Participant; T = Total. Data sorted by Total response rate.

**Conclusions**

As a group, Hmong women leaders described their lived experience as being an extraordinary journey that was saturated with complex layers. Their lives were deeply

impacted by life experiences early on, family circumstances, personal and professional disposition, the cultural expectations from themselves and others, the organizational environment, types of support and networking structures, as well as gender and cultural orientations. The experiences shaped their thoughts, belief systems, choices, and actions that defined their motivation and ability to climb up the organizational chain. The lived experiences of each individual formed a passageway in their lives that shaped their journey to leadership.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the purpose, research questions, methodology, and evidence from the findings of the qualitative study highlighting the lived experience of Hmong women leaders' journey to leadership. Findings were organized by the central research question and sub questions.

1. What are the lived experiences of Hmong women who have achieved leadership positions?
2. What actions, personal or professional, were taken by you, as a Hmong woman leader, to advance your progress to a leadership position?
3. What motivations or efficacies inspired you, as a Hmong woman leader, to pursue the journey of leadership to a leadership position?
4. What type of support was received, as a Hmong woman leader, from family members or professional mentors by Hmong women leaders, while ascending to a leadership position?
5. What obstacles were encountered by you, as a Hmong woman leader, as you worked toward a leadership position?

6. What cultural, racial, or ethnic stereotypes created support or barriers for you, as a Hmong woman leader, in your ascent to leadership?
7. What advice do you, a Hmong women leader offer others who emerge from underrepresented groups to advance to executive-level leadership positions?

This was followed by the presentation of the data through interviews of the participants.

The analysis of the data was presented by evident themes and excerpts from participants following the data analysis organized in tables.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This phenomenological qualitative study aimed to explore the lived experience of Hmong women leaders' journey to top leadership attainment. The purpose statement, research questions, research methodology, and data collection are presented.

The conclusion of this chapter presents a final summary of the study, significant findings, unexpected findings, and conclusions. These are followed by a call for action, recommendations for further research study, and concluding remarks and reflections from the researcher.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and understand the lived experiences of Hmong women who have achieved leadership positions. The study highlighted the actions, motivations, struggles, and cultural obstacles that Hmong women face to achieve leadership positions. By investigating the theoretical viewpoints of leadership, social identity theory, motivational theory, and intersectionality in their ascent to top executive leadership positions, a deep and thorough understanding of the lived experiences of Hmong women leaders was gained. Additionally, each participant's voice through the interview process added value to the phenomena of underrepresented groups based on gender, culture, ethnicity, diversity, equity, and inclusion.

## **Research Questions**

This study was guided by one central research question and six sub questions.

### **Central Research Question**

1. What are the lived experiences of Hmong women who have achieved leadership positions?

### **Sub Research Questions**

2. What actions, personal or professional, were taken by you, as a Hmong woman leader, to advance your progress to a leadership position?
3. What motivations or efficacies inspired you, as a Hmong woman leader, to pursue the journey of leadership to a leadership position?
4. What type of support was received, as a Hmong woman leader, from family members or professional mentors by Hmong women leaders, while ascending to a leadership position?
5. What obstacles were encountered by you, as a Hmong woman leader, as you worked toward a leadership position?
6. What cultural, racial, or ethnic stereotypes created support or barriers for you, as a Hmong woman leader, in your ascent to leadership?
7. What advice do you, a Hmong women leader, offer others who emerge from underrepresented groups to advance to executive-level leadership positions?

## **Research Methodology**

The research protocols of the study were designed by the researcher, reviewed by the dissertation committee, and approved by the UMass Global IRB. An overview of the research procedure is provided in the section, followed by the findings and analysis of the

data. This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological inquiry of Hmong women's journey to leadership attainment. As described by McMillan and Schumacher (2010), "the basis of phenomenology is that there are multiple ways of interpreting the same experience and that the meaning of the experience for each participant is what constitutes reality" (p. 346). This research study was intentionally designed to highlight the lived experience of the Hmong women leaders. The sample frame for this study is Hmong women who hold leadership positions within California.

To attain rich information for this study, the configuration of purposeful and snowball sampling was utilized. The sample of participants were only Hmong women located in California. Potential participants were contacted via internet searches, chain referrals, personal networks, and social media. Through networking, multiple participants were identified. Participants who indicated a willingness to participate in the study were contacted via email, which identified the researcher and the purpose of the study.

As established by the UMass Global IRB protocols, 12 Hmong women leaders who were most easily accessible to the researcher and who met the following established criteria were eligible to participate in this study:

1. Participants were of Hmong descent.
2. Participants had worked in a leadership/supervisory position for three or more years.
3. Participants were willing to participate.

Upon contact, participants who agreed to participate received a formal Letter of Invitation, Informed Consent, Participant's Bill of Rights, and Audio Release Form. Each participant of interest received a phone call from the researcher that further explained that

participation in the study is fully voluntary and that the participant has the right to opt-out at any point in the study. Twelve participants who directly met the criteria were selected for participation in the study. An interview date and time were scheduled with each participant for the study.

### **Data Collection**

The researcher sought to gather data for this study from a semi-structured interview environment, personal face-to-face in-depth, open-ended questions, and observations. However, given the schedules and preferences of the participants, all interviews were conducted via Zoom. In scheduling the interview, the date and time were mutually arranged and agreed upon between the participant and researcher. At the beginning of the interview, a review of the Participant Informed Consent, Participant's Bill of Rights, and Audio Release was conducted. Time was provided for any questions to be addressed before the interview began.

Each interview was recorded using an audio-recording device and Zoom. Across the 12 interviews, the time frame ranged from 45 to 90 minutes. Each participant was informed of when the recording began and when the recording ceased at the end of the interview. At the end of the interview, each participant was thanked for their participation in the research study by sharing their lived experience in their journey to leadership.

As a part of the informed consent and confidentiality of each participant in the study, all information related to the participant was not linked in any way. All information was identifier redacted. To provide confidentiality, the following procedures were implemented:



- All names of each participant were collected on the Informed Consent. However, each participant's name was not divulged in the study. To protect the participants confidentially, the participants were assigned a number.
- The interview transcripts were organized by the participant number (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 3).
- The interviews with each participant were scheduled by the researcher and participant and agreed upon. Each interview was via Zoom and free from external distractions or listeners.
- The researcher was the only individual to have access to the signed Informed Consent form and kept all electronic forms, transcriptions, and audio recordings in a secure location.

Throughout the research process, the researcher engaged in reflection on biases and perceptions. To minimize limitations, the researcher was mindful of all phases of the research process. A final review of all research data informed the development of themes, resulting in the determination of the major findings and conclusions of the study.

### **Population**

The population in this study includes Hmong women leaders who have achieved top-level executive leadership roles within their organization or industries in the United States.

### **Sample**

The sampling frame for this study was Hmong women who had achieved leadership roles in California. The researcher used a combination of three approaches for the sample of this study:

- Purposeful Sampling
- Snowball Sampling
- Convivence Sampling

This methodology aimed to build a diverse sample of Hmong women leaders in multiple industries. The sample size was 12 participants who met the following criteria:

- Participants were of Hmong descent.
- Participants had worked in a leadership/supervisory position for three or more years.
- Participants were willing to participate.

All 12 participants resided in California and could provide a diverse sample across multiple industries and leadership roles.

### **Major Findings**

The purpose of this study was to highlight the lived experience of Hmong Women leaders in their journey to top-level executive leadership positions. The major findings are organized in relation to each research question.

#### **Summary of Findings Related to the Central Research Question**

Research Question 1 asked: *What are the lived experiences of Hmong women who have achieved leadership positions?*

##### ***Finding 1: Leadership by Accident***

Fifty-eight percent of the participants referenced that they attained leadership positions by accident. The participants described the fear of failure and how they had no vision of seeing themselves in a leadership role until they were in the leadership role. Over time, participants built the confidence and ability to lead in a top executive

leadership position and expressed the importance of continuing to prove themselves by producing results.

***Finding 2: Relatives and Family was an Important Drive to Attaining a Leadership Role***

Forty-two percent of the participants referenced how relatives and family were an important drive to attain a leadership role. Participants shared how each of their families survived a war-torn country and how remembering their hard beginnings keeps each participant persevering through challenges. Growing up, the participants relied heavily on the educational and familial systems as both influenced their choices to attain a top-executive leadership position to live the American dream.

***Finding 3: The Importance of Having a Mentor or Leader***

Thirty-three percent of participants referenced the importance of having a mentor or leaders that impacted their experience to leadership attainment. All participants described the significance of having a network of mentors in their lives that supported them in their journey towards leadership, mentors both within the community and outside of their community. The influence of others and having confidants who believe in them employed the notion of self-belief. Participants shared the importance of giving back to the community by being a role model and mentor to other young women. Participants stressed the importance of being an advocate and having advocates to advance leadership roles among Hmong women.

***Finding 4: Personal Drive to Succeed***

Interestingly, one of the 12 participants referenced in-depth her personal drive to succeed. However, all the participants shared how their life experiences gave them the

will and drive to succeed in the leadership roles that they attained. Each participant embraced leadership regardless of the barriers and obstacles that they faced, whether it be cultural, familial, organizational obstacles, or forms of marginalized.

### **Summary of Findings Related to Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 asked: *What actions, personal or professional, were taken by you, as a Hmong women leader, to advance your progress to a leadership position?*

#### ***Findings 5: Values-Aligned Organization***

Sixty-seven percent of the participants contributed their success to a leadership position because of certain individuals within their organization who believed in them. They had leaders who saw their potential and intentionally provided them with opportunities to lead within the organization. Additionally, participants shared how the organization that they worked in had a positive environment, making their experience much more pleasing, resulting in the participant's willingness and desire to advance into a leadership position within their organization.

#### ***Findings 6: Educational Attainment***

Fifty percent of the participants shared that personal and professional life experiences shaped their ambition for higher education. Participants took the time needed to establish educational goals for their future in order to be successful. Educational attainment was mentioned by the participants, who shared the importance of education and how it was instilled in them from an early age.

#### ***Findings 7: Sense of Responsibility***

Forty-two percent of the participants described that they had a sense of responsibility because they were held in a position of being an older child and having to

take care of younger siblings, which naturally led them to develop leadership skills. Others expressed how they felt a sense of responsibility to mentor and inspire other young women. The participants shared how important it is to pave the path for others to follow, especially because, as pioneers, they felt like they landed into leadership positions by default and did not want the same challenges and obstacles for others. This sense of responsibility mentioned by these few participants is the notion of paying it forward.

***Findings 8: Networking/Mentorship***

Forty-two percent of the participants described the importance of having a network system in their journey to top-leadership attainment. Having a mentor, confidant, and friends is a key factor for their success in leadership. Earlier in their career, participants shared how they naturally defaulted into a leadership position. However, later in their careers, they recognized the importance of having a strong network of support and being a part of building a network for the younger generation of Hmong women who aspire to achieve leadership roles. Each participant described the importance of having a strong network to leverage influence to lead in their organization and make critical career decisions.

***Findings 9: Belief in Skill Sets/Confidence***

Seventeen percent of the participants shared how believing in their skill sets/confidence was a contribution to their success in attaining a leadership role. Participants shared that life experiences shaped their belief system and, over time, developed the confidence to understand that they had skill sets and talents that they could bring to the leadership table. Furthermore, participants voice how their culture and role as

a woman have influenced the participant's confidence and ability to lead. For some participants, the realization and recognition were sooner for some than others.

### ***Findings 10: Lessons Learned for Bigger Opportunities***

Twenty-five percent of the participants described the fear of failure and how they had no vision of seeing themselves in a leadership role. Regardless, each of their life experiences contributed to taking a leadership position. All the participants had a positive outlook on life, expressing in different ways that failures and obstacles were lessons learned for bigger opportunities. It took time for participants to recognize that they themselves were often the obstacles due to self-doubt based on structural and systemic obstacles and not themselves.

### **Summary of Findings Related to Research Question 3**

Research Question 3 asked: *What motivations or efficacies inspired you, as a Hmong women leader, to pursue the journey of leadership to a leadership position?*

### ***Findings 11: Family Struggle and Support***

Fifty percent of the participants recount a moment in their past where something or someone impacted their life either in a positive or negative way that led to actions of tearing down the barriers and obstacles that were standing in the way of excelling in life and ultimately leading them to obtain a leadership position. Participants described moments in their lives where they witnessed firsthand their family or members of their family struggle. However, these struggles became constant reminders of the difficult journey that so many endured, which afforded these Hmong women leaders the opportunities that they had. The participants contribute their success to the support of their family - parents and spouse.

### ***Findings 12: Overcoming Obstacles***

All the participants shared in one way or another how they overcame obstacles in their lives and continue to overcome obstacles that they face as leaders. Forty-two percent of the participants shared in depth how they were impacted by personal, cultural, and organizational obstacles. Participants experienced high emotions of having to work harder to prove themselves than their male counterparts in their own culture or others within their organizations. Participants described how their gender of being a Hmong woman affected them due to the expectations of having to care for family and the expectation that is put upon them with the culture.

### ***Findings 13: Role Models***

Forty-two percent of the participants shared the importance of giving back as a role model and the importance of having role models to look up to. Participants shared how some role models during their upbringing and journey to leadership were not necessarily Hmong women but women that they worked for or with. Women who believed in them became confidants and mentors.

### ***Findings 14: Advocate/Sense of Responsibility***

Fifty-eight percent of the participants were very passionate when they highlighted the importance of being an advocate for other young women. This meaningful purpose allowed the participants to give back to the Hmong community and to be a voice for others. The feelings that the participants experienced of being responsible for success were not viewed as a choice by the participants but rather a welcomed obligation. Repeatedly, participants discussed that in order for other Hmong women to succeed, they

knew that they needed to continue their work in a leadership role to foster and mentor other Hmong women. This is viewed as an important factor for their success as a leader.

***Findings 15: Goals/Motivation***

Forty-two percent of the participants shared how cultural barriers and life experiences shaped their drive to succeed in the leadership role acquired. Participants shared how cultural, familial, marginalization, and organizational obstacles were factors that motivated them to embrace leadership. Through self-efficacy and self-awareness, participants participated in professional development and intentionally took part in experiences and opportunities to grow in their areas of weakness while continuing to foster areas of strength.

***Findings 16: Perseverance***

Twenty-five percent of the participants highlighted how their upbringing and experiences were a factor in their ability to persevere regardless of the challenges and obstacles that they faced. Participants disclosed in detail that growing up in a war-torn country and living in poverty, watching their parents struggle is one key factor that motivated the participants to persevere through the challenges and obstacles that they faced. Additionally, participants recounted how they themselves married at a young age or watched other Hmong women wed at a young age and faced challenges. Experiencing these challenges and/or witnessing these challenges helped the participants persevere. Some leaned on family support, some on confidants and mentors, and some through their own sense of purpose.



#### **Summary of Findings Related to Research Question 4**

Research Question 4 asked: *What type of support was received, as a Hmong leader, from family members or professional mentors by Hmong women leaders, while ascending to a leadership position?*

##### ***Finding 17: Mentoring/Networking***

All participants shared the importance of the relationships that they had with key family members who fostered their growth into leadership, as well as mentors, colleagues, and friends. Participants described instances in their lives when key individuals inspired and impelled them into leadership roles. As participants stepped into leadership roles, they became more aware of the importance of authentic relationships that will continue a strong foundation of success in their leadership role.

The participants shared the importance of having a strong network of support and giving back by being a part of a network of mentors for the younger generation of Hmong women. Participants described the importance of having a strong network to leverage influence and learn from like-minded individuals in order to lead in their organization. Participants shared how the group of mentors and individuals in their network are pivotal when making critical career decisions.

##### ***Finding 18: Support of Parents/Extended Family***

Ninety-two percent of the participants shared the importance of support from parents and family members who supported them in their journey to top leadership positions. Many from an early age, many of the participants were encouraged to do well and were given opportunities to aspire to become successful. This includes being tasked with family responsibilities and expectations, leading them to become natural leaders.

Participants articulated how their parents emphasized the importance of education and independence.

Some participants shared how siblings were a support system for them. Some by means of finances and some by encouragement. Those who had older siblings shared how the older sibling was a role model who paved the path for success and became someone they looked up to.

Participants in the study attribute their leadership attainment to the support of extended family members such as their grandma and aunts. Strong women within their family modeled for them their determination, accomplishments, and strength through trials and tribulations.

***Finding 19: Spouse Support***

Fifty percent of the participants shared the importance of having a supportive husband, especially one who understands their goals and aspirations to become a leader and supports them throughout their journey to top-leadership attainment. Some shared how their husband was their biggest supporter who encouraged them to enter into leadership. In doing so, their husband took on the responsibilities of caring for the children and tending to the family to allow them the time to do the work required of them as a leader.

**Summary of Findings Related to Research Question 5**

Research Question 5 asked: *What obstacles were encountered by you, a Hmong women leader, as you worked toward a leadership position?*

***Finding 20: Mixed Expectations***

Sixty-seven percent of the participants conveyed in detail how they were held to mixed expectations as Hmong women leaders in both their professional and personal lives. People at work expected the participants to lead as a leader while at the same time expecting them to be submissive and docile in their approach, which oftentimes is not the attributes of leaders. Participants articulated having to be held to double standards and had to learn how to shift between the two cultures. When at work, participants made decisions, led teams of people, and were innovative. However, once they arrived home, they had the responsibility of caring for the family, tending to the household chores, and making sure that everyone, including their in-laws' needs, were met. The mixed expectations were a balancing act – balancing the community and cultural expectations as a Hmong woman and the expectations as a leader, all while trying to meet the achievements they desired for themselves.

***Finding 21: Personal Fear***

Sixty-seven percent of the participants shared how their own personal fears and doubts were a contributing factor as an obstacle to their journey to top-leadership attainment. Participants shared how they were their own worst critics, oftentimes doubting their leadership ability and feeling unworthy of being in the same space as other leaders or sitting at the leadership table. Participants had to learn to overcome their personal fears and doubts by being self-aware and felt that they had to work twice as hard in order for people to believe that they were a leader and that they had the knowledge and skill sets required of a leader.

### ***Finding 22: Lack of Role Models***

Twenty-five percent of the participants shared their experience of being the first in their family to attend college and explore the workforce without any guidance and had to figure things out on their own. They had to learn how to persevere through challenges on their own and navigate leadership without having someone to look up to as a role model. This motivated participants to continue their leadership journey in order to become a role model, someone other young Hmong women can look up to. Role models can also be a guiding force to leadership attainment for Hmong women.

### **Summary of Findings Related to Research Question 6**

Research Question 6 asked: *What cultural, racial, or ethnic stereotypes created support or barriers for you, as a Hmong women leader, in their ascent to leadership?*

### ***Finding 23: Eastern-Western Expectations/Mindsets***

All of the participants shared that they were often held to double standards to be the typical Hmong daughter and be a successful career woman. At times, those who supported the participants' successes were also the ones criticizing them. This was both within their community and the organization that they worked in. The participants shared how there is often a preconceived notion of who they are and what they should be, which often leads to experiences of microaggressions. Participants expressed that what hurt the most was that this microaggression oftentimes came from Asian and Hmong women or those that whom they least expected it from. The participants have had to learn how to navigate the world that they live in with the cultural expectations and pressures that come with being a Hmong woman and the work that they do professionally. The participants

shared that it requires a conscious effort to meet the demands and expectations of the East and West and that it can be very challenging at times.

***Finding 24: Familial and Cultural Expectations***

All of the participants shared personal experiences that they encountered as a Hmong woman regarding family and cultural expectations. All participants shared a sense of being treated like second-class citizens within their culture. Participants were expected to fulfill their role as a mom, wife, daughter, and daughter-in-law in the family, but not in a leadership or decision-making role. However, all women shared their experience of the various levels of support and inspiration from family members such as their mother, father, siblings, or spouse.

***Finding 25: High Expectations***

Seventeen percent of the participants talked about the high level of expectations they receive not only from their family but from those within the organization they work, as well as from themselves. Participants felt that they had to work twice as hard to prove themselves and were held to higher standards. Additionally, the participants voiced their experience of having to build their credibility and prove themselves in their organization as compared to their colleagues and male counterparts. The participants felt that this would bring value to them as a leader, where they can be given the same level of respect as other leaders, especially their male counterparts.

**Summary of Findings Related to Research Question 7**

Research Question 7 asked: *What advice do you, a Hmong women leader, offer others who emerge from underrepresented groups to advance to executive-leadership positions?*

***Finding 26: Be Inspired to Take Action for Advancement***

Seventy-five percent of the participants expressed the importance of taking action to advance their career. Participants tapped into their passion and found their purpose in life by leading. Participants shared the significance of sticking with something that they love, which empowered them to want to become a leader and advance their skill sets to become their authentic selves.

***Finding 27: Shed Perceptions or Habits that Stifle Progress***

Sixty-seven percent of the participants encouraged Hmong women to shed the importance of removing any thoughts and perceptions based on cultural views in order to make progress toward leadership advancement. Often times, the cultural perception leads Hmong women to believe that they do not have the skills to lead or that they are not supposed to be a leader. Participants further shared the importance of valuing oneself and recognizing that Hmong women have a lot to offer the world. They stated that by changing how one perceives self and acknowledging one's talents will build confidence in their skill sets, who they are as an individual, and as a leader.

***Finding 28: Be a Part of Advancing Equal Opportunity for Self and Others***

Fifty-eight percent of the participants passionately shared the need to be a part of addressing inequity for marginalized groups, especially Hmong women, who can often be perceived as a part of the model minority group. Participants shared the importance of being able to give back to other Hmong women by uplifting them, mentoring them, and helping them see how they can be a part of advancing equal opportunities for future generations.

***Finding 29: Develop Personal and Professional Networks and Rely on Them***

Fifty percent of the participants share the importance of developing personal and professional networks for leadership attainment. The participants stressed the importance of having mentors and people to rely on to support and prepare oneself for successes and challenges as a leader. Participants learned in their leadership journey that often times, to affect change, they had to learn how to leverage their support system, such as family members, friends, mentors, and other Hmong women and women alike, to support the initiatives and changes as a leader. The key is to build a strong network of trusted Hmong women and women in general that you can connect with and rely on.

***Finding 30: Take the Opportunity***

Forty-two percent of the participants articulate how they just took the opportunity to be a leader and encouraged other Hmong women to take the leadership opportunity. Often times, traveling the leadership journey seems scary because of the unknown, but not taking the opportunity to lead will limit their ability to affect change. Participants shared how they accepted the opportunity to lead because they knew that by doing so, they could become role models for other young women and begin to change the narrative about what leadership looks like for Hmong women.

***Finding 31: Just Do It***

Forty-two percent of the participants urged other Hmong women not to give up even when things are challenging. Overcoming the challenges leads to greater opportunities. Participants shared that at one or more moment in life, they made a choice to challenge barriers that they faced within their organization, resulting in the participants speaking up for themselves and aligning themselves with people who support and inspire

them. As leaders, the participants have shared the power of their voice and the importance of representation in their organization. This process of assertive advocacy allowed participants to develop a vision and drive to lead in top leadership positions by taking action. Participants shared that there will be times when a Hmong woman have to be assertive, and it's important to not shy away but to just do it. When taking on a leadership position and advocating for self, a shift in the narrative begins, and the perception of Hmong women will change.

### **Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to highlight the lived experiences of Hmong women leaders in their journey to top executive leadership positions. The conclusions are gathered from the lived experiences of 12 Hmong woman and their journey to top leadership positions. The findings of this study show that all participants were impacted by self-efficacy, opportunities, and influence.

### **Self-Efficacy**

#### ***Mastery Experiences***

All participants experienced some form of challenge that required them to tap into their skill sets, knowledge, and expertise to strengthen their own sense of self-efficacy. Equally, participants shared their experience of being challenged both in their culture and in their work organization. These experiences resulted in participants being more self-aware and confident in their leadership ability, leading to self-advocacy and assertiveness.



### ***Vicarious Experiences***

The essence of role models was an important factor that was shared by all participants. Each participant shared the significance of having a role model, specifically role models that come from similar backgrounds, gender, ethnicity, and experiences in their development as leaders. Participants expressed the importance of being a role model for others as they narrated that there are limited role models at the top of leadership positions, especially women, women of color, and Hmong women.

### ***Social Persuasion***

Being persuaded by others was a leading factor for participants in their pursuit of attaining leadership positions. Verbal encouragement developed a personal belief that inspired and motivated participants to explore leadership options, resulting in participants sharing that they went into leadership because someone believed in them. This required participants to take part in engaging in various experiences with their culture, community, and organization.

### ***Emotional and Psychological State***

Participants experienced various states of emotions that affected their emotional and psychological state based on their lived experiences. Participants shared how their emotions influenced their actions, but they also shared the importance of remaining calm and composed and regulating one's emotions. Unfortunately, this results in an emotional state of exhaustion. Self-doubt and fear emerged as a part of the participant's journey to top leadership attainment. Overcoming these thoughts and emotions was a factor that contributed to leadership success.

### ***Conclusion Regarding Self-Efficacy***

Based upon these findings, it is concluded that self-efficacy is necessary for leadership for Hmong female leaders and is developed from a combination of Mastery Experiences, Vicarious Experiences, Social Persuasion, and a developed Emotional and Psychological State. These experiences in isolation do not develop the confidence necessary for assertive leadership, but rather, it is the combination of experiences that produces the desired leadership traits.

### **Opportunities**

#### ***Empowerment***

With limited opportunities for participants to advance to top leadership positions, participants were driven to prove themselves, engaging in developing their skill sets and leveraging mentors to open opportunities into the path of leadership. Participants shared that once the support was acquired, they were able to move into leadership roles. However, in the leadership positions, participants found that one of the toughest battles they faced can sometimes be their own beliefs. This required participants to develop a strong network and mentorships to continue the leadership journey set forth.

#### ***Overcoming Obstacles***

Some participants sought challenges and obstacles as opportunities that led them into leadership roles. Through the process of facing challenges and overcoming life circumstances, empowerment occurred as participants worked to overcome them. As the process evolved to overcome obstacles, participants invested their time and effort in developing their skill sets by attending professional development training, advancing in higher education, and continuing to build a system of networks to support their journey.

Although these obstacles were viewed as challenges, participants who worked to overcome them led them to leadership success.

### ***Resources***

Participants leveraged family, confidants, mentors, and networks as resources in building their influence and power as a leader. This resulted in strong relationships and greater resources, leading to a broader and more connected network of personal and professional support through their journey to top leadership positions. Participants understand how resources can help them gain essential knowledge and skills to become successful leaders who can have a positive impact on others, especially leaders like young women who aspire to lead. Ultimately, the resources acquired provide participants the ability to overcome challenges they face and the confidence to be a leader and an advocate.

### ***Conclusion Regarding Opportunities***

Based upon these findings, it is concluded that the development of the strength, confidence, and self-esteem necessary for Hmong Women to become successful leaders comes from a combination of both positive opportunities, in the form of Empowerment by others and Resources they are provided and overcoming negative Obstacles. The balance of experience developed in combining positives and overcoming negatives develops the desired leadership traits.

### **Influence**

#### ***Underrepresentation***

A wide range of literature on women studies overwhelmingly supports the conclusion that minority women and women of color are far more removed from this path

of attaining leadership roles because of the added intersecting barriers of gender, culture, and ethnicity (Ely et al., 2011; M. Moua, 2007; Salleh-Barone, 2004; Wesley, 2008).

Participants conveyed the lack of representation of women in leadership positions with similar backgrounds, ethnicity, and lived experiences. It is shared throughout each participant's experience and reflection that barriers and obstacles are intersectional.

Participants are held to higher standards and felt that they had to work twice as hard to prove themselves in their organization and community.

### ***Marginalization***

The intersectional impacts such as gender, culture, class, ethnicity, and other paradigms that factored into the transformation process also impact leadership. This study indicated the existence of the same phenomenon where Asian American women face even greater challenges because they belong to two marginalized groups – they belong to the marginalized racial group Asian American and the marginalized group for gender being female (Kawahara, 2022).

Some participants reported that their presence was required, but often, they were not a part of the decision-making process, leading to individuals feeling a sense of insignificance. This occurrence is significant in that Hmong women experience this within their culture, where men have a higher status than women and hold decision-making rights as well as in their organization (Owens, 2007).

### ***Women as Role Models***

According to the information shared by participants, some of the Hmong women had male mentors as they moved into leadership roles. An insight shared was that the women who had male mentors were more insistent that the individual take on a

leadership position within the organization, which was interesting. The participants shared the importance of having a woman as a role model, someone who can relate to and mentor them. However, women's role models and mentors were limited. The lack of role models was a common theme and is what contributed to the participants feeling a sense of purpose in becoming a role model and mentor to fulfill this need for other Hmong women who aspire to leadership roles. The participants had a good sense that change in this area of women role models and mentors need to exist in order to ensure that women, especially Hmong women, are represented at the top executive leadership positions.

### ***Conclusion Regarding Influence***

Based upon these findings, it is concluded that Hmong women leaders have developed and seek personal and professional influence to address the Underrepresentation and Marginalization they have witnessed and experienced. As an expression of this desired influence, it is further concluded that the leaders in this study desire to serve as mentors to future Hmong female leaders as a measure of influence.

### **Implications for Action**

The implications for action are based on the findings of this study, resulting from the shared experiences of 12 Hmong women leaders. The implications for action yield that addressing underrepresented groups, the development of Hmong women in leadership roles, and women empowerment are necessary actions that must be taken to level the playing field.

## **Addressing Underrepresented Groups**

### ***Equal Opportunity***

Despite the established actions to support social justice for women, women's educational attainment, and strides into leadership positions, disproportion still persists (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Women, specifically women of color, encountered systems and structures that are inherently biased. This calls for action to address equal opportunity that still persists for underrepresented groups. Continuous efforts need to continue to address the status quo of inequity, specifically for women. It is suggested that professional development training and workshops be provided to promote practices that address equal opportunities. Furthermore, individuals need to insert themselves and be uncomfortable to advocate for themselves and others, particularly women of color.

### ***Promoting Awareness***

There is a need to address the long-term effects of discrimination impacting women. This begins with self-awareness and awareness. Women must first be aware that they are a fundamental group that must step up and lean into the causes to advance equal opportunities and address disproportionality. Based on the ideas of Ely et al. (2011), women are seen as ill-fitted for leadership roles because of cultural beliefs and the belief that men are favored in leadership roles. This belief displays a bias that interferes with the woman's ability to see herself as a leader to take up leadership roles. Women need to start by acknowledging and addressing their fears, be intentional with their efforts to build meaningful networks, and be willing to empower and stand together as a united front in their efforts to advance inequity and inequality.

## ***Unity***

Implications for this study yield the importance of unity in order to address challenges. This can be accomplished if women are actively working together to bring awareness to the challenges that they face. Educating other women in making mindset shifts is important in transformational change to address the intersectional challenges. Women are able to accomplish greater goals when working together, which might not be possible alone. The collective effort shifts the power and influence in creating change for a larger cause and not in isolated situations. The power of unity over time changes systematic processes that hinder growth in breaking down barriers and obstacles that impact a woman's leadership journey.

## **Development of Hmong Women in Leadership Roles**

### ***Empowerment***

As the Asian American population in the United States has become one of the fastest-growing minority groups, the need to increase Asian American representation in leadership, particularly female representation, has grown but continues to be underrepresented (Pacis 2005, p. 2). The extent of this study, illuminating the lived experience of Hmong women leadership, consisted of 12 Hmong women who overcame obstacles and challenges through perseverance, motivation, talent, passion, and self-development. These 12 women are role models for other aspiring women leaders in underrepresented and marginalized groups. The 12 participants in this study serve as inspiration, offering support, guidance, encouragement, and hope. As these Hmong women leaders continue to empower others, the underrepresented numbers will continue

to increase, rising in the number of Asian women, specifically, Hmong women leaders, sitting at the decision-making table making the decision.

### ***Advocacy***

Women, women of color, Asian women, and Hmong women are dynamically capable of making a difference in the world. It is evident from the stories of the participants that they, at one time or another, had to advocate for themselves and other women or had someone advocate for them. Women must be willing to challenge the status quo and face hurdles head-on within their organization and community. However, women must be willing to take on policies and politics that shift their power and influence to make an impact on underrepresented women.

Hmong women leaders who have achieved top-leadership positions must make the time to leverage resources to educate, mentor, and network with other underrepresented women, specifically Hmong women, as a means for advocacy. The new generation will aspire to fill the leadership roles and continue to bring awareness to address marginalized and underrepresented groups.

### ***Women Empowerment***

It is estimated that 21% of females in the U.S. workforce are in leadership positions where they have supervisory responsibility over others in their workplace (Institute for Women's Leadership, 2022). An extrapolation of this percentage yields 16,125 Hmong women in leadership positions in the United States. Women empowerment is highly recommended to make transformational change for Hmong women and underrepresented groups.



According to the International Centre for Women's Leadership (2014),  
A commitment to women's empowerment not only means enabling women to  
advance in such arenas but also building their capacity to fully and effectively  
participate as leaders, thereby ensuring their influence in all aspects of  
development and their elevation in societies worldwide. (para.1)

Hmong women need to face their fears and be willing to walk the path that leads  
to uncharted territory to explore new opportunities. Hmong women in leadership roles  
need to continue to be the voice of advocacy as a form of empowerment. Influence must  
be conducted through forms of research, advocacy, professional development, and  
consistent communication. Women's empowerment will prevail through challenges with  
consistent advocacy and empowerment. Hmong women owe it to themselves to "Just Do  
It!"

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Based on the findings of this study, there are three recommendations for further  
research: (a) A long-term study should be conducted to garner a deeper understanding of  
the obstacles and challenges faced by woman leaders of other marginalized groups and  
the way in which these women overcame such obstacles, (b) generational differences  
should be studied that includes those born in the United States and those who were not, as  
well as comparing behaviors and attitudes based on age group, and (c) a comparison of  
leadership styles among Hmong women leaders should be studied to identify the  
characteristics that experience the most success at overcoming the obstacles faced due to  
Eastern and Western influence.

### **Long-Term Study**

The first recommendation for research is conducting a long-term study that adds to the literature that provides a richer analysis of the lived experience of other underrepresented or marginalized groups. Additionally, the added qualitative research is necessary to highlight other groups of women to provide a deeper understanding of the differences and similarities that each group faces in order to further advance actions in closing the inequity gap.

### **Generational Differences**

The second recommendation for research is to explore the impact of generational differences between Hmong women leaders who were born in the United States or outside of the country. In addition, exploring the age group of Hmong women leaders would provide added information on the implications of addressing marginalized and underrepresented groups. Three of the 12 participants of this study were born in the United States, while nine of the participants were born outside of the country. Of those 12 participants, five ranged between the ages of 35–45, and seven of the participants ranged between the ages of 45–55. Both of these factors yield the type of data received in this particular study of the lived experience of Hmong women in leadership roles. Further study into generational differences can mitigate challenges and obstacles for women who aspire to lead in underrepresented and marginalized groups.

### **Leadership Style**

The third recommendation for this study is to further explore transformational leadership styles through the 360-leadership perspective of leaders for Hmong women leaders. According to Warner (2014), in the last decades of the 20th century, there has

been considerable progress in women's professional advancement in the United States. The 360-leadership survey is a tool to be used to provide more extensive insights into the leadership style of the specific marginalized and underrepresented groups. The specific results may provide additional recommendations to address barriers and highlight success.

### **Concluding Remarks and Reflection**

Women, women of color, and Hmong women have historically faced obstacles and challenges in their journey to leadership roles. Extensive research and literature firmly conclude that women are underrepresented in leadership roles, and historically, women have faced many barriers and challenges in attaining top leadership positions (Ely et al., 2011; Pacis, 2005; Sandberg, 2013; Warner, 2014).

This study helped to explain what transpired with 12 Hmong women in leadership roles as they navigated cultural and organizational obstacles while also dealing with their own doubts and fears as they strived to overcome these barriers and become change agents.

Participant 10 shared the importance of being grounded as a leader:

I know who I am, and I know what I stand for as a Hmong woman. And I am not searching for who I am, where I come from, my heritage, my history, my roots because I know my history, and I know my roots very well. It keeps you very grounded. I'm very grounded in who I am, where I come from, my ancestors, my history as a minority group of people. The struggles that we have gone through, so I'm very grounded in that, and because of that, I feel like there's my position as a leader because I'm able to be inspired by these others.

Participant 11 shared the importance of showing up today to be a change agent:

Culturally, as Hmong women, we are not necessarily encouraged and raised with the values to be outspoken, to speak our truths, to gather data, and to share that data honestly, even if it's data that perhaps may hurt the organization or hurt the family. We are raised to cover truths and to keep it within the family and to not bring shame, particularly to our parents' name, but to our family. There's that paradox of how we were raised versus how we are to show up today as professional executive leaders in the educational workplace. You're not supposed to hide the ugly truths; rather, you're supposed to speak through the problems of practices. You're supposed to identify a plan, and go through that plan and, speak to the data that you are gathering, and adapt as necessary. And I think, again, those are two different paradoxes between the cultural upbringing for me as a Hmong daughter and the world I live in now as a Hmong American woman professional.

From this experience, I have learned the importance of working together to make powerful influences, which I feel will be invaluable for generations to come.

Participant 3 spoke about the importance of Hmong men being a part of this power of influence by stating,

The role of men in this work and especially men in our communities. The importance of needing Hmong men to be a part of this work with us and the role that they have and responsibility they have to both other Hmong women but especially to other Hmong men, to understand the importance of the journey of women in this work.

Participant 4 shared the importance of working together as a system of support:

I have this obligation to help others, especially other Hmong people, and then help them to get to where they want to go, help them to achieve what they want to achieve because I think in our culture, that's so important, right? It's like our culture's very tight. We're a really tight-knit community. Our community's all about helping help each other. It is evident that women will continue to progress in their right to overcome inequity in their journey.

Participant 2, in her confident voice, said it best, "You have to break cultural norms!"

In my journey as a doctoral student and woman leader, I have learned a great deal through this process, which has led me to reflect on my personal and professional actions to address disparity and inequity for women, specifically marginalized and underrepresented groups.

This journey has been inspirational, especially my time with each of the participants who shared their life experiences and stories with me. To my participants, Participants 1 through 12, I commend you for the work that you do, the road that you pave, and the legacy that will inspire future leaders. As a role model and pioneer, your voice matters. Your voice is your power, your influence, and your leadership. I am in debt to you and cannot thank you enough.

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[http://godot.lib.sfu.ca/GODOT/hold\\_tab.cgi?jtitle=Northwest+Asian+Weekly&issn=&volume=31&issue=26&spage=5&date=23](http://godot.lib.sfu.ca/GODOT/hold_tab.cgi?jtitle=Northwest+Asian+Weekly&issn=&volume=31&issue=26&spage=5&date=23)

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## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Literature Matrix

|   | Gender and Cultural Expectations in Laos | Gender and Cultural Expectations in the United States | Women in the Workplace and in Leadership Roles | Women of Color in the Workplace and in Leadership | Hmong Women | Barriers to Success of Women in the Workplace and in Leadership | Theoretical Foundation | Leadership | Qualitative Study |
|---|--|---|--|---|-------------|---|------------------------|------------|-------------------|
| (Jun 23-Jun 29, 2012). Hmong American women break from traditional roles. <i>Northwest Asian Weekly</i> , p. 5, from <a href="http://search.proquest.com/docview/1032546965?accountid=10051">http://search.proquest.com/docview/1032546965?accountid=10051</a> from <a href="http://godot.lib.sfu.ca/GODOT/hold_tab.cgi?jtitle=Northwest+Asian+Weekly&amp;issn=&amp;volume=31&amp;issue=26&amp;spage=5&amp;date=23">http://godot.lib.sfu.ca/GODOT/hold_tab.cgi?jtitle=Northwest+Asian+Weekly&amp;issn=&amp;volume=31&amp;issue=26&amp;spage=5&amp;date=23</a> |  | x   |  |   | x           |   |                        |            |                   |
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## APPENDIX B

### Letter of Invitation

**Study:** The Lived Experience of Hmong Women in Leadership Roles

February \_\_\_\_, 2022

Dear Prospective Study Participant,

My name is Nou Courtney Vang, and I am a doctoral student in the UMass Global University Organizational Leadership program. You are invited to participate in a qualitative study to inquire and explore the lived experience of Hmong women leader's ascent to leadership roles. You were chosen to participate in this study because you are a Hmong women leader. In order to participate, you are required to complete an Informed Consent, which will be provided to you prior to your participation in the interview.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore and understand the lived experiences of Hmong women who have achieved leadership positions. The study will highlight the actions, motivations, struggles, and cultural obstacles that Hmong women face in order to achieve leadership positions.

**Procedures:** If you decide to participate in the study, the researcher will contact you and request your assistance with the following:

1. Your informed consent to participate in this study.
2. Your permission to interview you.
3. Your agreement to record and transcribe the interview and use the information for the purpose of this study.
4. Your completion of the Participant Questionnaire.

The interview will be approximately an hour and a half, and you will be asked a series of questions designed to allow me to learn about your experience as a Hmong women leader in an executive leadership role.

**Risks, Inconveniences, and Discomforts:** There are minimal risks to your participation in this research study. It may be inconvenient to spend up to an hour and a half in the interview. To alleviate any inconveniences and/or discomforts, the interview session will be held at an agreed-upon location or via Zoom.

**Potential Benefits:** Your participation is completely voluntary, and you will not be reimbursed or paid for any portion of the time spent engaging in the interview or any other purpose. Although there are no major benefits to you for participation, your voice and feedback can help add to the research and are intended to inform researchers, policymakers, and women who wish to attain a leadership role in the future.

**Anonymity:** To protect your privacy, any information or personal information that you provide for the study will not be linked in any way. Your responses will be coded and unlinked to any personally identifying information before the publication of the study.

Should you have any questions about the study, you are encouraged to ask questions at any time. Open communication with the research is advised and can be done with the research by phone at [redacted], email at [redacted], or in person.

Respectfully,

Nou C. Vang  
Doctoral Candidate, UMass Global University

## APPENDIX C

### **Informed Consent Document**

UMASS GLOBAL UNIVERISTY  
16355 LAGUNA CANYON ROAD  
IRVINE, CA 92618

**Research Study Title:** The Lived Experience of Hmong Women in Leadership Roles

**Responsible Interviewer:** Nou C. Vang

**Title of Consent Form:** Informed Consent Document

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore and understand the lived experiences of Hmong women who have achieved leadership positions. The study will highlight the actions, motivations, struggles, and cultural obstacles that Hmong women face in order to achieve leadership positions.

**Procedures:** I understand that in participating in this research study, I agree to partake in an interview that will be audio recorded. I understand that I may refuse to participate in or may withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. The length of the interview will take approximately an hour and a half. During the interview, the responsible interviewer will be asking a series of questions related to the study. I will be asked to share my experience as a Hmong women leader in an executive leadership role.

1. I understand that there is minimal risk associated with participating in this research. It may be inconvenient to spend up to an hour and a half in the interview. To alleviate any inconveniences and/or discomforts the interview session will be held at an agreed-upon location or via Zoom.
2. The interview will be audio recorded for a more precise data interpretation. The recordings will be available only to the researcher and the professional transcriptionist. Once the interviews are transcribed, the audio and interview transcripts will be kept for a minimum of three years by the investigator in a secure location.
3. All information will be identifier-redacted, and my confidentiality will be maintained. Any information or personal information that I provide for the study will not be linked in any way. My responses will be unlinked to any personally identifying information before publication of the study.
4. I will not be compensated for my participation in this study. My participation is completely voluntary, and I will not be reimbursed or paid for any portion of the time spent engaging in the interview or any other purpose before. Although there are no major benefits to me for participation, I understand that my voice and

feedback can help add to the research and is intended to inform researchers, policy makers, and women who wish to attain a leadership role in the future.

5. I understand that I may refuse to participate in or I may withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. Also, the researcher may stop the study at any time. I also understand that no information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent and that all identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowed by law.
6. Any questions I have concerning my participation in this study will be answered by Nou Vang, a UMass Global University Doctoral Candidate. I understand that I may contact Nou Vang by phone at [redacted] or, email at [redacted], or in person.

I have read the above and understand it and hereby consent to the procedure(s) set forth.

No, I do not wish to participate in this study

Yes, I am willing to help contribute to this important study

I, \_\_\_\_\_, consent to participate in the research conducted by  
Nou C. Vang.

Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



APPENDIX D

**Audio Release Form**

**Research Study Title:** The Lived Experience of Hmong Women in Leadership Roles

**UMASS GLOBAL UNIVERSITY  
16355 LAGUNA CANYON ROAD  
IRVINE, CA 92618**

**Responsible Interviewer:** Nou C. Vang

**Title of Consent Form:** Audio Release Form

I authorize Nou Vang, a UMass Global University Doctoral Candidate, to record my voice as a part of the interview process.

I understand that the interview may be audio recorded per the granting of my permission. I do not have to agree to have the interview be audio recorded. In the event that I do agree to have myself audio recorded, the sole purpose will be for video analysis to support data collection related to the study.

The audio recording will only be used for this research study and will be destroyed at the end of the study. As with all research consent, I may at any time withdraw permission for audio to be used in this research study.

By signing this form, I acknowledge that I have completely read and fully understand the above release and agree to the outlined terms.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, hereby give my permission to Nou Vang to use any audio material for her research.

Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX E

### Research Participant's Bill of Rights



Any person who is requested to consent to participate as a subject in an experiment or who is requested to consent on behalf of another has the following rights:

1. To be told what the study is attempting to discover.
2. To be told what will happen in the study and whether any of the procedures, drugs, or devices are different from what would be used in standard practice.
3. To be told about the risks, side effects, or discomforts of the things that may happen to him/her.
4. To be told if he/she can expect any benefit from participating and, if so, what the benefits might be.
5. To be told what other choices he/she has and how they may be better or worse than being in the study.
6. To be allowed to ask any questions concerning the study both before agreeing to be involved and during the course of the study.
7. To be told what sort of medical treatment is available if any complications arise.
8. To refuse to participate at all before or after the study is started without any adverse effects.
9. To receive a copy of the signed and dated consent form.
10. To be free of pressures when considering whether he/she wishes to agree to be in the study.

If at any time you have questions regarding a research study, you should ask the researchers to answer them. You also may contact the UMASS GLOBAL Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. The UMass Global Institutional Review Board may be contacted either by telephoning the Office of Academic Affairs at (949) 341-9937 or by writing to the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, UMASS GLOBAL, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA, 92618.

APPENDIX F

**Interview Questions Development Matrix**

| Research Questions  | Interview Questions  | Source  |
|---|--|---|
| <p>Central Research Question</p> <p>1. What are the lived experiences of Hmong women who have achieved leadership positions?</p>  | <p>1. Please describe your lived experience as a Hmong women leader who has achieved an executive-level leadership position.</p>   | <p>Eagly, A. H., &amp; Carli, L. L. (2007);<br/>                     Floyer, Y. (2021);<br/>                     Fong, Lina Y. S. (1997);<br/>                     Lee, G. Y. (2005);<br/>                     Moua, L. (2011);<br/>                     Saechao-Elizalde, K. M. (2014)</p>                   |
| <p>Research Sub Questions</p>   |  | <p>Xiong, T. (2015)</p>   |
| <p>2. What actions, personal or professional, were taken by you, as a Hmong woman leader, to advance your progress to a leadership position?</p>                                    | <p>2. What actions, personal or professional, were taken by you, as a Hmong woman leader, to advance your progress toward a leadership positions?</p>  | <p>Fendya, J. A. (1995);<br/>                     Komives, S. R.,<br/>                     Longerbeam, S. D., Owen, J. E., Mainella, F. C., &amp; Osteen, L. (2006);<br/>                     Koneck, C. M. (2006);<br/>                     Lee, S. J. (1997);<br/>                     Moua, L. (2011);</p> |
| <p>3. What motivations or efficacies inspired you, as a Hmong woman leader, to pursue the journey of leadership to a leadership position?</p>                                       | <p>3. What motivations or efficacies inspired you, as a Hmong woman leader, to pursue the journey of leadership to an leadership position?</p>   | <p>Saechao-Elizalde, K. M. (2014)<br/>                     Thompson, Perrin (2020)</p>  |
| <p>4. What type of support was received, as a Hmong woman leader, from family members or professional mentors by Hmong women leaders, while ascending to a leadership position?</p> | <p>4. What type of support did you receive, as a Hmong woman leader, from family members (parents, partners, siblings, or children) or professional mentors while ascending to the executive-level leadership positions?</p> | <p>Ackerman, C. E. (2021);<br/>                     Akhtar, M. (2017);<br/>                     Cherry, K. (2020);<br/>                     Hogg, M.A. (2001);<br/>                     Mcleod, S. (2020);<br/>                     Michael A. Hogg, Daan van Knippenberg &amp; David E. Rast III (2012)</p>  |
| <p>5. What obstacles were encountered by you, as a Hmong woman leader, as you worked toward a leadership position?</p>  | <p>5. What struggles or obstacles were encountered you, as a Hmong woman leader, as you worked toward a leadership position?</p>   | <p>Hayer, S. K. (2015);<br/>                     Lo, B. (2017);<br/>                     Saechao-Elizalde, K. M. (2014)<br/>                     Xiong, T. (2015)</p>   |

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| <p>6. What cultural, racial, or ethnic stereotypes created support or barriers for you, as a Hmong woman leader, in your ascent to leadership?</p> <p>7. What advice do you, a Hmong woman leader, offer others who emerge from underrepresented groups to advance to executive-level leadership positions?</p> | <p>6. What cultural, racial, or ethnic stereotypes created support or barriers for you, as a Hmong woman leader, in your ascent to leadership?</p> <p>7. What advice do you, a Hmong woman leader, offer others who emerge from underrepresented groups to advance to executive-level leadership positions?</p> | <p>Chu, S. (2020);<br/>Glass, Christy &amp; Cook, Alison. (2015);<br/>Kawahara, D. (2022);<br/>Sandberg, S. (2013)<br/>Williams, C. A. (2008)</p> <p>Bell, E. L., &amp; Nkomo, S. M. (2001);<br/>Goyette, K. (2015);<br/>Hayer, S. K. (2015);<br/>Li, P. (2014);<br/>Park, C.C., Chi, M.M. (1999)<br/>Salleh-Barone, N. (2004).</p> <p>Ely, Robin J., Herminia Ibarra, and Deborah Kolb (2011)<br/>Sandberg, S. (2013)<br/>Thompson, Perrin (2020)</p> |
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## APPENDIX G

### Interview Questions/Protocol

**Interviewer:** Nou Vang

**Interview time planned:** Approximately 1 ½ hour

**Interview place:** At the arranged location between the researcher and the participant

**Recording:** Digital voice recorder or Zoom recordings

**Introductions:** Introduce ourselves to one another.

**Opening Statement:** Thank you for agreeing to join me in an interview today. My name is Nou Courtney Vang, and I am a doctoral candidate at UMass Global University in the area of Organizational Leadership. I am an elementary school principal and work for Natomas Unified School District, and I have been in educational leadership for the last 10 years.

I welcome you to our interview conversation today to learn about your experience as a Hmong women leader in an executive leadership role. Thank you for joining me today to engage in dialogue about your personal journey to leadership, given the need for increased Hmong women in leadership roles that are underrepresented. The purpose of this study is to understand and illuminate the lived experiences of Hmong women leaders in executive roles. The information that we discuss will be included in my dissertation. Before we begin the interview, do you have any questions or concerns?

**Interview Agenda:** This interview will take approximately an hour and a half today. Prior to this interview, you signed an informed consent that outlined the interview process and the condition of complete anonymity for this study. You also were provided with the Letter of Invitation and the Participant's Bill of Rights. Thank you for signing the Audio Release Form prior to this interview. I will be recording this interview using a digital voice recorder in person or recording on Zoom. I will stop the recording at the conclusion of the interview. While you have signed the informed consent form, please know that you may choose to withdraw from your participation at any point in the process.

**Interview Question:**



1. What inspired you to become a leader in your career?
2. What inspired you to become a leader in your current organization?
3. How has your educational journey prepared you, as a Hmong woman leader, for your current leadership role?

4. How has your professional history, as a Hmong woman leader, prepared you for your current leadership role?
5. In what way, if any, has your gender – as a woman - affected your journey to leadership?
6. In what way, if any, has your cultural or ethnic background - as a Hmong woman - affected to your ascent to leadership?
7. In what way, if any, did any stereotypical attributes that are commonly associated with Hmong women affect your experience in any manner?
8. What supports did you experience, as a Hmong woman leader, as you sought to achieve a top-level leadership role?
9. What major obstacles did you experience, as a Hmong woman leader?
10. What other challenges did you experience as a Hmong woman leader?
11. What personal factors motivated you, as a Hmong woman leader, to stay on course?
12. What professional factors motivated you, as a Hmong woman leader, to stay on course?
13. Who or what would you identify as being a significant influencer in your journey, as a Hmong woman leader, to leadership?
14. What have you enjoyed, as a Hmong woman leader, about your leadership journey?
15. What key insights from your leadership journey, as a Hmong woman leader, can you share, as advice, with other women who aspire to lead?
16. What key insights from your leadership journey, as they related to cultural or ethnic aspects, can you share with other women of color or Hmong women who aspire to lead?
17. Is there anything else that you would like to add to describe the full essence of your lived journey to leadership that we did not explore in the questions asked?

**Closing Comments:** This concludes my questions for our interview today. Your lived experience in the journey to leadership is a valued one, and I am thankful to learn about you and your journey in our conversation today. Again, I thank you for your participation.

## APPENDIX H

### NIH Clearance



Completion Date 12-Feb-2022  
Expiration Date N/A  
Record ID 47379085

This is to certify that:

**Nou Vang**


Has completed the following CITI Program course:

**Human Subjects Research**  
(Curriculum Group)  
**Social-Behavioral-Educational Researchers**  
(Course Learner Group)  
**1 - Basic**  
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

**Brandman University**

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.



Verify at [www.citiprogram.org/verify?wfb59cb2-3d20-4821-870e-1d9d8df4ac2f-47379085](http://www.citiprogram.org/verify?wfb59cb2-3d20-4821-870e-1d9d8df4ac2f-47379085)