2011

Teenage Marriage and the Socioeconomic Status of Hmong Women

Pa Der Vang

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/pader-vang/1/
The copyright law of the United States [Title 17, United States Code] governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the reproduction is not to be used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research. If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of "fair use," that use may be liable for copyright infringement.

This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgement, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. No further reproduction and distribution of this copy is permitted by transmission or any other means.
Teenage Marriage, and the Socioeconomic Status of Hmong Women

Pa Der Vang* and Matthew Bogenschutz**

ABSTRACT

The Hmong, who began migration to the United States of America in the latter half of the 1970s, represent a largely unstudied segment of the Asian-American population. Traditional practices such as teenage marriage were widely reported in the early years after migration began, but have been left relatively unexamined more recently. Explicit focus on Hmong women has been largely absent in recent research. This paper examines the relationships between marriage patterns, education and earnings among Hmong women in the United States. Using results from a survey of 186 Hmong women, the results of this study indicate high rates of teenage marriage, as well as associations between early marriage, marital abuse, and both low earnings and lower levels of educational attainment among women married as teenagers compared to Hmong women who waited until adult age to marry. There were signs of encouragement, including higher than anticipated rates of educational attainment among the sample overall. Marital stressors such as spousal abuse remain prevalent, especially among Hmong women who married in their teenage years. Implications of this research are discussed for both practitioners and for future directions in research within the Hmong-American community.

INTRODUCTION

Teenage marriage is a common practice among the Hmong (Downing, 1984; Hutchison and McNall, 1994; Lee, 1997; Lee et al., 2006; McNall et al., 1994; Ngo, 2002; Swartz et al., 2003), and while the prevalence of this practice is not well documented, several studies report that teenage marriage among the Hmong continues after migration to the United States (Downing, 1984; Hutchison and McNall, 1994; Lee, 1997; Lee et al., 2006; McNall et al., 1994; Ngo, 2002; Swartz et al., 2003). Researchers concur that teenage marriage has dire consequences on the educational and income attainment of women due to early motherhood and disruptions in education (Astone and Upchurch, 1994; Bartz and Nye, 1970; Moore et al., 1993; Sharlin, 1998; Teti and Lamb, 1989; Upchurch, 1993). Among the Hmong, early marriage is a culturally accepted practice and is often a normal stage in identity development and life transitions of Hmong female adolescents.

This paper examines the relationship between teenage marriage and the socioeconomic status of adult Hmong women. This paper also looks at other factors associated with early marriage such as higher rates of marital abuse and teenage parenthood. We highlight the
importance of exploring teenage marriage among Hmong women because teenage marriage continues to be a common cultural practice among Hmong females, placing unique strain on the educational and economic achievements of Hmong women later in life (Donnelly, 1994; Downing, 1984; Hutchison and McNall, 1994; Liamputtong, 2002; Ngo, 2002; Ngo and Lee, 2007; Symonds, 1984; Thao, 1986; Vang, 1999). In addition, this population provides a unique opportunity to examine the impact of early marriage in a homogenous sample, in this case, first-generation and second-generation refugees from similar socio-economic backgrounds.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hmong are an ethnic tribe whose roots trace back to China, but currently, Hmong can be found throughout the world (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993; Ngo and Lee, 2007; Quincy, 1995). The Hmong began arriving in the United States in 1975 following the Vietnam War (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993; Ngo and Lee, 2007; Quincy, 1995; Vang, 2008). The Hmong provided assistance to the United States in its “Secret War” against the communist government in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic during the Vietnam War. Following the fall of Saigon, the US Army withdrew its military aid from the pro-American faction in the civil war of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. The Lao and Vietnamese governments viewed the Hmong’s assistance to the United States as a betrayal of the Communist government, leading to the political persecution of the Hmong immediately following the Vietnam War (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993; Quincy, 1995; Vang, 2008). In 1976, the US Congress recognized the Hmong as former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) employees, and authorized immigration to the United States (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993; Vang, 2008). According to the 2005 2007 American Community Survey, there are an estimated 194,798 Hmong in the United States (ACS, 2008). In December 2004, over 15,000 Hmong refugees immigrated to the United States after the closure of the final refugee camp in Thailand, possibly signifying an end to major migration of Hmong to this country (Hang et al., 2004). Early in their resettlement to the United States, cultural practices such as teenage marriage were examined for their effects on acculturation among Hmong girls including educational attainment and identity development (Hutchison and McNall, 1994; Lee, 1997; McNall, Dunnigan and Mortimer, 1994; Ngo, 2002; Swartz, Lee, and Mortimer, 2003). Recently, Lee and colleagues conducted a study on the effects of early marriage on income (2006). Their study of 233 Hmong participants ranging from 13 to 67 years showed that delaying marriage had a significant effect on earnings with those who married at age 19 or older earning significantly more (on average US$ 19,000) than those who married between the ages of 13 to 18. They suggest that future research should examine the relationship between teenage marriage and educational attainment (Lee et al., 2006).

Hmong Marriage

Teenage marriages usually take place when Hmong girls are between 15 to 17 years; but often, teenage marriage takes place much earlier (Donnelly, 1994; Fadiman, 1997; Foo, 2004; Lee et al., 2006; Liamputtong, 2002; Ngo, 2002; Symonds, 1984; Thao, 1986; Vang, 1999). Although acculturation towards a more Americanized lifestyle has heavily influenced the marriage practices of younger generations of Hmong women, traditional marriages remain commonplace among Hmong in the United States as evidenced by recent studies (Foo, 2002; Hune and Nomura, 2003; Ngo and Lee, 2007; Swartz et al., 2003; Symonds, 2004). Tradi-
Hmong marriage

tionally, Hmong marriages take place under several circumstances. These include elopement or mutual consent, arranged marriage, and bride capture (Donnelly, 1994; Foo, 2002; Symonds, 2004). Each of these circumstances requires negotiations between both families (Symonds, 2004). In elopement or mutual consent, the bride willingly goes home with her future husband (Donnelly, 1994). Once a woman enters the man’s home and a welcoming ritual has taken place (Lee et al., 2006), it is implied that she has consented to marriage. Later, if she chooses not to go along with the marriage, she may bring shame upon her family and face ridicule from the community. The suspicion of sexual relations between the couple is enough to bring shame upon her family. To preserve her family’s reputation, a Hmong girl may be forced to marry (Faderman, 1998; Foo, 2002). In arranged marriages, the union is negotiated between the families of the groom and the bride. In this case, the groom chooses a woman to be his future bride and, with the assistance of his male relatives, initiates negotiations with the bride’s family (Faderman, 1998). In an arranged marriage, the bride can either agree to the marriage or refuse to marry. If she is not in agreement but her family insists on the marriage, the arranged marriage is a forced one. Many times, especially in the United States where Hmong women are more acculturated, when the woman is adamantly against the marriage, the marriage does not take place (Donnelly, 1994). A forced marriage can also occur when the woman is pregnant in which case the parents of the bride insist that the couple marry (Symonds, 2004). A final form of traditional marriage practice, bride capture, occurs when the man literally captures his future bride and forcibly takes her to his home where a welcoming ceremony is conducted (Lee et al., 2006). The practice of bride capture is generally considered antiquated and its occurrence in the United States is not well documented due to the legal repercussions of capture or kidnap (Donnelly, 1994; Symonds, 2004). Because the occurrence of these traditional forms of marriage is not well documented in the United States, it is difficult to ascertain their frequency with any accuracy.

In their countries of origin, Hmong families for many reasons traditionally accepted teenage marriage. The Hmong believe that a person should be industrious, contribute to the family in the form of labour, and fulfil their role in society as soon as they are able (Lee et al., 2006; Symonds, 2004). For Hmong women and girls, their primary role in society is to eventually become a wife and a mother (Faderman, 1998; Foo, 2002; Lee et al. 2006; Symonds, 2004). In the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, household and familial responsibilities left little time for play and musings about personal identity during middle to late adolescence. Due to limited resources and the emphasis on survival in an agrarian society, children readily accepted their obligation to contribute labour resources to ensure family well-being (Lee et al., 2006). For girls, as soon as they were ready, their role was to marry (Lee et al., 2006). Menarche signified that a girl was ready for courtship with the ultimate goal of marriage and children (Symonds, 2004). Menarche typically occurs in early adolescence (Lesser and Pope, 2008). When a girl was ready for courtship, her parents did not prevent her from participating in courtship rituals such as ball tossing at annual New Year celebrations and home visitations from various suitors. For parents, it was safer for daughters to marry as close to menarche as possible to avoid possible premarital pregnancies, which would bring shame onto the family. In addition, traditionally, an unmarried girl who engaged in premarital sex was viewed as impure and not suited for marriage in which case girls readily accepted early marriage to avoid becoming a spinster (Hune and Nomura, 2003; Symonds, 2004). A groom’s interest in marriage was viewed as a sign of maturity and readiness for adulthood. In essence, with marriage, he could contribute labour resources to the family in the form of a wife and future children (Lee et al., 2006). The daughter-in-law was a new helping hand for the family while marriage increased the likelihood that the family lineage would continue with the arrival of grandchildren (Faderman, 1998; Lee et al., 2006). Although the original intent of teenage marriage has lost much of its traditional relevance in the United States, the act of early
marriage is a tradition that has been woven into the fibres of Hmong culture (Donnelly, 1994; Lee et al., 2006).

Social supports make it possible for Hmong teenagers to marry in the United States. Parents and older siblings supplement the teenage couples' expenses associated with housing, food, and other essentials. In addition, the family and kinship structure of most Hmong families is formed in a manner to provide instrumental support not only for aging parents, but also for young struggling couples (Lee et al., 2006). For example, households may consist of two or three generations that include aging parents, married and unmarried children, daughters-in-law, and grandchildren. In this household structure, not only do adult children care for their aging parents if necessary, but able-bodied parents may provide care for grandchildren while the adult children attend school or work. Although social supports may exist to support Hmong adolescent mothers in their academic and vocational pursuits, Hmong women remain among the lowest earning segment of the US population (Reeves and Bennett, 2004).

The traditional Hmong conceptualization of marriage does not include notions of legal sanction by a court of law as witnessed by the debate of Hmong cultural marriage in the United States (Minn. Stat. Sec. 517.05, 2002; Wis. Stats, Sec. 765.16, 2009). Among many Hmong individuals, marriages conducted in the traditional way and sanctioned by the culture are de facto marriages. Legalization by an American institution is normally pursued after the cultural marriage has taken place, although it is not often an important matter from the perspective of the Hmong community (Tan, 2006). Therefore, when a Hmong woman reports that she is married, the marriage is typically a cultural marriage that may or may not include legal sanction.

Teenage marriage is more common among Hmong teenagers than in the general mainstream population in the United States. From the last reports published about teenage marriage in the United States, it appears that the marriage rate among teenagers overall in the United States is minimal (SIECUS, 2002). The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) reported that between the years 1950 to 2000, the marriage rate for Americans aged 15 to 19 dropped from 9.5 per cent to 4.5 per cent (SIECUS, 2002: 2). The last year the Center for Disease Control reported marriage rates by age was in 1988 when the marriage rate for American women aged 15 to 19 was 2.89 per cent (NCHS, 1991: 5).

Although these rates of teenage marriage among mainstream American youth are small, the rate of teenage marriage among Hmong youth has not been well documented. Past studies have relied on small samples. No large scale studies showing prevalence of teenage marriage among the Hmong can be found. In 2003, the Lao Family Community Center of Minnesota found that among 187 girls in the St. Paul School District, 50 per cent reported being married (Meschke, 2003: 2). Swartz et al. found that 70 per cent of the Hmong teenage girls in their study of educational achievement of Hmong students were married (2003: 20). A more dated study by Downing reported that the marriage rate for Hmong students in this small study was 80 per cent (1984: 8).

Demographic Characteristics

The 2005-2007 American Community Survey (ACS) is a public online database provided by the US Census Bureau. The ACS provides population estimates that give context to the sample for this survey. The population-specific Hmong data subset informs this section of demographic data. The total Hmong population in the United States is estimated at 194,798 (ACS, 2008), though other recent estimates place the number of Hmong in the United States
between 170,000 (Reeves and Bennett, 2004: 1) and 250,000 (Foo, 2002: 147). The Hmong in the United States are typically young, with a median age of just 19.1 years and 47 per cent of the population being under the age of 18. The majority of Hmong in the United States (57.2%) arrived prior to 1990, and 14.2 per cent immigrated since 2000 (ACS, 2008).

Considering Hmong women specifically, 45.4 per cent are married, 37.9 per cent have never married, and lesser proportions are widowed, divorced, or separated. Educationally, 48.1 per cent of Hmong women graduated from high school and only 10.2 per cent completed a bachelor’s degree or higher education, as compared to 84.6 per cent of all American women who finished high school and 26.2 per cent who completed a four-year college degree. Hmong women with full time work status have a median income of US$ 27,005 per year, nearly US$ 7,000 less than American women in total (ACS, 2008).

**Teenage Marriage and Socio-economic Status**

Young adult females who married early overwhelmingly reported higher high school dropout rates, less college attendance, and more poverty than young adult females who did not marry early (Astone and Upchurch, 1994; Bartz and Nye, 1970; Moore et al., 1993; Sharlin, 1998; Teti and Lamb, 1989; Upchurch, 1993). However, the causal link between teenage marriage and socio-economic groups is unclear. Girls who marry early and become teenage mothers may become distracted from completing higher education, thus limiting their access into higher paying jobs (Astone and Upchurch, 1994; Burden and Klerman, 1984; Carlson, 1979; Howell and Frese, 1982; Lowe and Witt, 1984; McLaughlin et al., 1986; Moore et al., 1993; Sharlin, 1998; Teti and Lamb, 1989; Upchurch, 1993). On the other hand, researchers point to the hypothesis that low levels of academic engagement and lower socio-economic status in the family of origin may be factors in early family formation, in contrast to the more traditional notion that family formation leads to disengagement from school and thus lower earnings later in life (Bartz and Nye, 1970; Glick et al., 2006; Howell and Frese, 1982).

The case of Hmong girls offers researchers a rare opportunity to examine teenage marriage as a cultural practice among a homogenous group rather than as a possible result of low socio-economic status as suggested by previous research. This project allowed the researchers to measure the impact of teenage marriage on earnings and education among Hmong women from similar family backgrounds. Although Hmong continue to be the lowest earning Asian group in the United States, the academic achievement of Hmong girls seems to be unaffected by early marriage as shown in previous studies (Hutchison and McNall, 1994; McNall et al., 1994; Swartz et al., 2003). Hutchison and McNall found that among Hmong girls, there were no differences in the academic achievement of those who married early and those who did not (1994). Swartz and colleagues found higher educational achievement among Hmong students (70% of the Hmong students were married) as compared to non-Hmong students (2003). Although lower socio-economic family status may suggest the likelihood of Hmong girls’ entrance into teenage marriage leading to the perpetuation of low educational and economic status among these girls as suggested by previous studies, the academic achievements of Hmong girls seem unaffected by early marriage. In other words, the Hmong in the United States are of lower socio-economic status due to social, political, and historical forces. If Hmong families were provided similar levels of education and income opportunities as in the United States, how would the socio-economic status of the families of each of the subjects in the study differ? This is a question that cannot be answered within the parameters of this study. Therefore, the proposition that girls from lower socio-economic groups might be more likely to enter early marriages is not applicable.
in this case due to the unclear nature of socio-economic status among the Hmong and because early marriage is a traditional cultural practice.

Early marriage is condoned by the Hmong culture and seen as an appropriate stage of development for young Hmong. This brings into question the notion that early marriage is a disruption in the life course of these girls (Donnelly, 1994). With early marriage being a commonly accepted practice in the Hmong culture and stressors supposedly buffered by social supports, this might suggest that Hmong girls’ academic and economic achievements could remain relatively unscathed by their early entrance into marriage and parenthood. It is difficult to decipher the impact of teenage marriage, especially among a segment of girls who appear to do very well academically, as in the case of Hmong girls, when Hmong women are compared to the majority population in terms of economic and educational well-being. Comparing Hmong women to other race groups without controlling for the effects of culture on teenage marriage may cause the researcher to conclude that Hmong women are faring well.

Rather than comparing Hmong women with women from the mainstream population this paper conducts a comparison of Hmong women alone by comparing the educational and economic achievements of Hmong women who married as teenagers and those who waited until adulthood to marry. Comparing a homogenous group provides a clearer distinction between the effects of early marriage on the overall academic and economic attainment of women from the same ethnic, historical, and socio-economic class, thus contributing valuable knowledge toward the understanding of the relationships between early family obligations and later educational and economic advancement.

There have been few studies examining secondary educational attainment of Hmong women who marry early. Previous studies sampled from high school Hmong female adolescents or from Hmong women who were in college at the time of the study, not from adult Hmong women in later stages of their lives. Studies of Hmong females who were in school have shown that Hmong teenagers seemed to perform well in high school regardless of marital status. For example, McNall and colleagues provided one of the few studies that looked at the high school dropout rate of married Hmong teenage girls (1994). They found that although the marriage rate of Hmong girls was almost 50 per cent, married Hmong girls showed higher academic performance and lower dropout rates than that of non-Hmong students. Lee, in her survey of young adult Hmong women who were in college at the time of the study, found that Hmong women felt as though their biggest obstacle to completing college was teenage marriage and the responsibilities that came with marriage (1997).

In terms of economic well-being, little information is available that examines the earnings of Hmong women who married early. Reeves and Bennett found that the median annual earnings for all Hmong females in the United States in the year 2000 was a little over US$ 21,000 but there was no data regarding Hmong females who were married as teenagers (2004: 15). In past studies, participants were teenagers. It is difficult to look at educational attainment and earnings among teenagers. In this current study, we look at adult Hmong women to better measure education and earnings. In comparison to teenagers, adult women are in a life stage where actual educational completion and actual earnings from employment or lack of employment can be measured. This is in contrast to studies that examine high school or college students that must necessarily rely on projected outcomes and high school dropout rates.

METHODS

An electronic survey was distributed using several email list-serves that consisted of predominately Hmong recipients. These electronic list-serves provided communications between work-
Hmong marriage

ing professionals among organizations throughout the Midwest as well as across the United States. Additional survey respondents were then contacted using a snowball process. The survey was also placed on a website and posted on a Hmong women’s online discussion forum. Hmong women over the age of 18 were asked to complete the survey. In order to give consent, participants were asked to check a radio button in the survey. A skip logic mechanism in the survey prevented participants from continuing the survey if consent was not given, if they were not at least 18 years of age, or if respondents were not Hmong and female. Before giving consent, respondents were asked to read their rights and responsibilities. In addition, although a mailing address, phone number, and email address were provided where respondents could make requests for a paper version of the survey, no requests for hard copies of the survey were received. Data was collected over three months. A total of 197 women attempted the survey. We closed the survey when responses were no longer coming in. Nine women did not complete the survey. These nine surveys were omitted from the final analysis leaving 186 respondents who completed the whole survey.

The survey was comprised of 16 demographic questions soliciting various aspects of marital status, employment status, individual income, educational attainment, number of children, and age of the participants.

RESULTS

Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 16 in a two-step process. First, frequencies were compiled to gain general knowledge of the demographic distribution of the respondents. This was followed by a series of chi-squared analyses, which enabled cross-categorical comparisons.

Participant characteristics

A total of 186 women completed the survey, all of whom self-identified as being ethnically Hmong. This is a fairly young sample. The majority of respondents (60.2%) were in the 26-35 age range with 30.1 per cent reporting their age between 18-25, 9.1 per cent aged 36-45, and .5 per cent over 46 years. All women who responded to the survey indicated being at least 18 years of age. The distribution of selected sample demographics is displayed in Table 1.

Fifty-nine women (31.7% of the sample) reported being married before 17. Three women out of the total sample married at 13 or younger. Women who were married at the time of the study comprised 69.2 per cent (n = 126) of the sample. Of the women who reported a divorce, 56.4 per cent were remarried, while 43.6 per cent of divorced women remained single. Among women who were married at the time of the study or had been married in the past, 87.7 per cent married voluntarily, 9.7 per cent were involved in a family-arranged forced marriage, 2.1 per cent voluntarily participated in an arranged marriage, and one individual was kidnapped into marriage by her husband. Only 23 per cent (n = 44) of women in this study reported that they were over the age of 21 when first married. Sixty-four per cent of the women who reported a divorce (whether divorced at the time of the study or remarried) reported marrying before the age of 17. In comparison, 70.2 per cent of women who were still in their first marriage at the time of the study reported waiting until after 18 to marry, while 29.8 per cent married as teenagers.

The number of children reported by the women in this survey ranged from zero (32.8%) to more than nine (1.1%). Women who were single and had never married comprised 21 per
TABLE 1
SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Annual Income (US$)</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>&lt;$21,000</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>60.2</td>
<td>$21,001-$35,000</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>34.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>$35,001-$45,000</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46+</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>$45,001-$60,000</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$60,001-$80,000</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$80,001+</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remarried</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>High School or less</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>38.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>Four-Year Degree</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>47.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>Masters Degree</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Post Masters Degree</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>87.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary Arranged</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced Arranged</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kidnapped</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

cent of the sample and made up 19 per cent of the women who had no children. Among married women, 9.6 per cent of the women had no children, thus almost 91 per cent of married women were mothers. Among mothers, the age at first child is fairly evenly distributed between 15 and 22 years, with 18.8 per cent of participants reporting the birth of their first child between the ages of 15 and 18, while 37.6 per cent reported the birth of their first child occurring at or after 23.

Educationally, 38.4 per cent of respondents reported earning a high school degree or less schooling, 47.6 per cent earned a four-year degree, 9.2 per cent achieved a master’s degree, and 4.8 per cent reported having education exceeding a master’s degree, indicating a fairly well-educated pool of survey respondents. Of the women surveyed, the largest portion work in the health (22.6%) or social service (16.7%) industries. They typically reported annual earnings in the range of US$ 21,001-35,000 (34.4%) or 35,001-45,000 (21.5%), indicating higher earnings than would be expected for the Hmong population generally.

In order to determine the nature of relationships between variables, data from several variables were cross-tabulated and evaluated using chi-squared analyses. In each case, significance was evaluated against an established two-tailed probability level of .05. Age at first marriage was grouped into three segments in order to enable more meaningful analysis of the impact of marital age with social indicators. In this section of the analysis, age at marriage was grouped as middle to early adolescence (16 and less), older adolescence (17-19), and adulthood (20 or older). Results of cross-tabulations between age at marriage and socioeconomic variables of interest are displayed in Table 2, while distribution between age at marriage and marital stress indicators may be found in Table 3.

Teenage marriage and educational attainment

Age at marriage was significantly related to educational attainment ($\chi^2 (6, N=149) = 17.16, p = .009$). In this sample, women who waited until adulthood to marry were more likely to complete an education at all levels including high school, undergraduate, and graduate. Women who married in adolescence appear more likely to end their education at the conclusion of high school. Of women who married early in adolescence (16 or younger), 48.7 per cent of women
### Table 2

**CROSS-TABULATION OF AGE AT FIRST MARRIAGE WITH SOCIAL STATUS INDICATORS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Attainment</th>
<th>≤ 16 N</th>
<th>17-19 N</th>
<th>20+ N</th>
<th>Total N</th>
<th>v²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High school or less</td>
<td>19 48.7</td>
<td>26 56.5</td>
<td>17 26.6</td>
<td>62 41.6</td>
<td>17.16**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-year degree</td>
<td>17 43.6</td>
<td>18 39.1</td>
<td>33 51.6</td>
<td>68 45.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters degree</td>
<td>1 2.6</td>
<td>1 2.2</td>
<td>11 17.2</td>
<td>13 8.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-masters</td>
<td>2 5.1</td>
<td>1 2.2</td>
<td>3 4.7</td>
<td>6 4.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Income ≤ $21,000</td>
<td>3 7.7</td>
<td>5 10.9</td>
<td>5 7.8</td>
<td>13 8.7</td>
<td>23.89**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$21,001 - $35,000</td>
<td>11 28.2</td>
<td>24 52.2</td>
<td>15 23.4</td>
<td>50 33.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$35,001 - $45,000</td>
<td>12 30.8</td>
<td>9 19.6</td>
<td>10 13.3</td>
<td>31 20.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$45,001 - $60,000</td>
<td>9 23.1</td>
<td>6 13.0</td>
<td>16 25.0</td>
<td>31 20.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$60,001 - $80,000</td>
<td>3 7.7</td>
<td>0 0.0</td>
<td>12 18.8</td>
<td>15 10.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$80,000+</td>
<td>1 2.6</td>
<td>2 4.3</td>
<td>6 9.4</td>
<td>9 6.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Significant at p < .01**

### Table 3

**CROSS-TABULATION OF AGE AT FIRST MARRIAGE WITH MARITAL STATUS VARIABLES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Abuse</th>
<th>≤ 16 N</th>
<th>17-19 N</th>
<th>20+ N</th>
<th>Total N</th>
<th>v²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>22 58.4</td>
<td>22 47.8</td>
<td>18 29.5</td>
<td>62 42.5</td>
<td>7.84**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>17 43.6</td>
<td>24 52.2</td>
<td>43 70.5</td>
<td>84 57.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lived with In-Laws</td>
<td>38 97.4</td>
<td>34 73.9</td>
<td>43 70.5</td>
<td>115 78.8</td>
<td>11.27**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1 2.6</td>
<td>12 26.1</td>
<td>18 29.5</td>
<td>31 21.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Marital Status Married</td>
<td>21 20.2</td>
<td>28 32.1</td>
<td>55 52.9</td>
<td>104 69.8</td>
<td>33.52***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced and Remarried</td>
<td>8 38.1</td>
<td>12 57.1</td>
<td>1 4.8</td>
<td>21 14.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>10 58.8</td>
<td>5 29.4</td>
<td>2 11.8</td>
<td>17 11.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never Married</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>1 14.3</td>
<td>6 85.7</td>
<td>7 4.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significant at p < .05
** Significant at p < .01
*** Significant at p < .001

completed only a high school degree, 43.6 per cent attained a four-year college degree, and only 7.7 per cent obtained an advanced degree. The women who married in older adolescence (ages 17–19) were even more likely to terminate their education at high school or less (56.5%). Of the women who completed an advanced degree, the vast majority, 73.7 per cent, were in the group...
who had their first marriage in adulthood. In this sample, educational attainment generally tended to increase as the age at marriage increased, though there were some notable exceptions among women who married in early adolescence who attained higher education than those who married in older adolescence. This may be attributable to the fact that those women who married younger in adolescence may have more support in school to help them compensate for potential academic decline following marriage, while these supports may be less readily available for women who marry towards the end of high school.

**Teenage marriage and income**

Income was significantly associated with age at marriage (Table 2), with women who delayed marriage typically having marginally higher income than respondents who married early ($\chi^2$ (10, N = 149) = 23.89, $p = .008$). For example, more women who married in their teens than women who married as adults earned less than US$ 21,000 a year. Only one-third of women in the highest earnings group married in their teenage years, with the remaining two-thirds marrying for the first time at 20 or later. An interesting observation is, women in their first marriage tend to have personal income that exceeds what might be expected, while women who are single or divorced tend to have more limited entry to higher levels of income ($\chi^2$ (15, N = 182) = 30.15, $p = .011$). While explanations for this phenomenon cannot be supported through this data set, it is possible that women in secure relationships may have more financial support to pursue higher levels of education than may be available to women whose partnership status is less secure.

**Teenage marriage and marital stressors**

Results indicate the possibility that marital stress factors may be more prevalent among women who marry early (Table 3). The association between age at first marriage and spousal abuse was also statistically significant ($\chi^2$ (2, N = 146) = 7.84, $p = .020$), with indicators in the bivariate distribution that suggest less abuse among women who delayed marriage. While 42.5 per cent of respondents in the overall sample reported being abused by their partner, only 29.5 per cent of women who married after age 20 reported abuse, compared to over half (56.4%) who reported abuse in the earliest marriage age category (16 and under). These results suggest that early marriage may be associated not only with lower earnings and less educational attainment, but perhaps also with other sources of marital stress that may complicate educational and employment status. In addition, this finding indicates that living with in-laws may not be a social support for Hmong teenage brides after all.

While the relationship between marital abuse and educational attainment or personal earnings was not statistically significant, significant relationships were observed when living with the woman's in-laws during marriage was cross-tabulated with educational attainment ($\chi^2$ (3, N = 147) = 10.05, $p = .018$) and personal income ($\chi^2$ (5, N = 147) = 12.36, $p = .030$). The relationship between age at first marriage and living with the husband's family was statistically significant ($\chi^2$ (2, N = 146) = 11.27, $p = .004$), with younger age at marriage suggesting a greater than expected likelihood of living with the woman's in-laws at some point in the marriage. While it is noteworthy that living with the husband's family may be normative in many Hmong families (Foo, 2002; Symonds, 2004), our findings suggested that living with in-laws appeared to be a stressor for women. Living in the home of the woman's in-laws was associated with higher than expected levels of marital abuse, suggesting that there may be a complex relationship between age at first marriage, living with the husband's family, and marital abuse. Similarly, women who married at a young age were also significantly more likely than
women who delayed marriage to rely on financial assistance from their in-laws at some point in the marriage ($\chi^2 (4, N = 113) = 12.11, p = .017$).

Also statistically significant was the relationship between age at first marriage with marital status at the time of the study ($\chi^2 (6, N = 149) = 33.52, p < .001$), with women who married young exhibiting more tendency towards divorce, either with or without subsequent remarriage (Table 3).

**The Role of Age, Motherhood, and Generational Status**

Some limited analysis of the role of age and motherhood factors is permitted within the scope of these data. The issue of age may be seen as an overarching factor in the interpretation of the above findings pertaining to age at first marriage and social outcomes, since it is logically possible that a woman’s age at the time of the study is a determinant to educational and financial status. The age of the respondent was related with both income ($\chi^2 (15, N = 186) = 58.16, p < .001$) and educational attainment ($\chi^2 (9, N = 185) = 28.15, p = .001$), both following logically reasonable distributions in which trends in income and educational attainment increased with a woman’s age. A similar effect is observed when considering marital status and age ($\chi^2 (6, N = 182) = 23.12, p = .001$). Younger women tended to be single while older women reported more divorce. This finding may indicate the need for further study involving more statistical control mechanisms to determine the individual contributions of a Hmong woman’s age and her age at the time of first marriage in determining later marital stability and other social outcomes.

In a related way, motherhood factors, including number of children and the Hmong woman’s age at the birth of her first child may be of importance when considering later outcomes on social indicators related to economic well-being and relationship stability. Though issues related to motherhood (number of children and teenage motherhood) may be impacted by a woman’s age and her age at marriage, independent effects may also be present. While these effects may not be isolated within the scope of this data set, significant relationships were observed when considering the number of children a woman had and her marital status, with married women tending to have the most children ($\chi^2 (9, N = 180) = 52.56, p < .001$). Women who were still married were more likely to continue having children while divorce disrupts future conception. There was a general trend for a woman’s age at first marriage to correspond to her age at the birth of her first child ($\chi^2 (9, N = 125) = 99.88, p < .001$) following the logic that childbearing will begin around the time of marriage (McNall et al., 1994; Xiong et al., 2004). Number of children was not significantly related to income or educational attainment, nor was a woman’s age at the time of her first child’s birth significantly related to any of the primary variables of interest.

In addition to a number of other factors, generational status may also play a role in determining the social status of Hmong women. Though this survey instrument did not measure generational status, it is feasible that first-generation Hmong immigrants may adhere more closely to traditional marriage practices than women of the 1.5 or later generations. This issue of generational status is an important one to consider, particularly in moving forward, since the closure of the final refugee camp in Thailand is likely to result in fewer first-generation Hmong immigrants in the relatively near future.

**DISCUSSION**

These findings show that even among Hmong females, for whom early marriage is condoned by the culture, teenage marriage has negative effects on educational and income attainment.
In addition, women who marry early may experience more marital abuse and other forms of marital stress than women who marry as adults.

Differences in income were associated with marital status with women who were still in their first marriage earning more than women who were divorced, single, or married after a divorce. This may indicate several things. Perhaps, although directed to report only individual income, women may have reported household income (which included her husband’s income) in some cases. It may also be that, in the case of divorced women, divorce was higher among women who married as teenagers, thus showing the effect of teenage marriage on future earnings. In addition, 59 per cent of single women in the sample were 25 years old or younger while only 23.8 per cent of married women were under 26. It is reasonable to expect that women under 26 would not have the same work experience as older women, thus implying that younger women have not yet had the same opportunities for salary raises and job promotions as the older women. For this reason, it is difficult to say with certainty that either age at marriage or a woman’s age alone is the central factor in determining income status, though both variables seem to have some influence.

Additionally, it is important to note that the most common employment sectors identified by respondents were the medical and social service fields. While medically-oriented jobs may have wide variation in income levels, social service sector employment is typically associated with low earnings, even with increased educational attainment. This trend in employment sector may help to explain why there was not more marked variation in earnings with educational attainment. This finding would be consistent with female employment patterns generally, as women often do not gain entry into the highest paying employment sectors, despite a general trend towards rising educational attainment.

Despite the higher than anticipated status in educational attainment and income, many aspects of these findings maintain some affinity to previous literature (Hutchison and McNall, 1994; Lec, 1997; McNall et al., 1994; Ngo, 2002; Swartz et al., 2003). Of particular interest, teenage marriage continues to be quite common among the Hmong women in this sample. In addition, teenage marriage patterns do appear to have a relationship with lower earnings and less educational attainment. This is an important finding since it reinforces the notion that teenage marriage contributes to disadvantages in productive work later in life (Burden and Klerman, 1984; Carlson, 1979; Howell and Frese, 1982; Lowe and Witt, 1984; McLaughlin et al., 1986; Upchurch, 1993). This finding is in line with previous studies on the social status of Hmong women, suggesting that more work may need to be done to raise awareness of the drawbacks to teenage marriage within the community.

The fairly high education and income level of this sample regardless of age at first marriage and marital status may be due to sampling bias. We used an online study that was available only to women who had access to Internet, which implies a sample of higher socio-economic status. The relatively high educational and income status of the sample may have multiple effects. First, the high income and educational levels observed among members of the sample may actually lead to underestimation of abuse and other marital stressors, given that marital abuse has been associated with lower socio-economic status in other studies. The representation of high earners may not be entirely representative of the entire population of Hmong women in the United States.

Perhaps most importantly, women who reported marital abuse were more likely to be married as adolescents. Hmong women who married as teenagers were more likely to report marital abuse, lower income and lower educational attainment than other women in the study. While abuse in marriage and socio-economic indicators such as educational attainment and reported income are not directly related, poor outcomes on each of these factors is observed when women marry young, based on the results of this study, suggesting that marital abuse and socio-economic status may have a cyclical causation. The relationship among these
Hmong marriage

Factors should be investigated in more depth in future studies, since previous work has indicated that individuals of lower socio-economic status may be more likely to engage in domestic violence than individuals of higher socio-economic status (Hutchison, 2003; Jasinski, 2003). Regardless, the finding that marital abuse is associated with early marriage warrants serious consideration among community leaders and professional practitioners with a stake in the well-being of Hmong women, as well as further study.

Data on acculturation status was not collected in this study, but could have a significant impact on the social status of Hmong women. Teenage marriage is sometimes associated with acculturation patterns that more closely represent traditional Hmong culture, while delaying marriage, for instance, may suggest a higher degree of acculturation towards mainstream American culture. Among Hmong women, there is likely to be wide variation in the degree of acculturation. Length of time in the United States, affinity to traditional customs, and family pressures may all have strong influence on a woman’s decisions to pursue education. In future studies, it may be useful to incorporate survey items that test levels of acculturation in order to establish the influence that acculturative factors may have on marital status, education, earnings, and other social indicators.

Finally, it is vital to view the findings of this investigation within the context of Hmong cultural norms pertaining to girls and women. Early marriage and high value on being a mother and a wife rather than a wage earner are traditionally normative in Hmong culture. Although acculturation among more recent generations of Hmong women is beginning to impact conceptualizations of the role of women towards entry into higher education and the professional workforce, this transfer is likely to take time. Because the Hmong-American population ranges widely in acculturative status, these findings must be viewed with the knowledge that applicability may vary widely, and may be highly changeable as younger generations of Hmong women reach maturity.

LIMITATIONS OF METHODOLOGY

This study relied on an electronic survey that was distributed via email and the survey was posted on one Internet website. Although respondents were given the option of requesting a hard copy of the survey, no requests were made. This infers that only Hmong women who had access to Internet participated in the study. Many Hmong women may not be employed in jobs that provide them access to Internet or do not have incomes that allow them to have Internet at home. We were not able to include the population of Hmong women who do not have access to Internet in this study, thus omitting a large portion of Hmong women. It is reasonable to conclude that this study examines only Hmong women who may meet the criteria for higher economic status than other Hmong women in this population. In addition, this study was conducted in English with no translation of the survey, thereby excluding women without English proficiency. Moreover, while the survey was constructed in highly accessible language and format, the reliance on nominal response variables makes isolation of particular effects difficult. Finally, a sample size of 186 is fairly small relative to the large population of Hmong in the United States.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided a snapshot of the social status of a small sample of Hmong women in the United States, a largely under studied and misunderstood segment of the Asian-American community. In this analysis, teenage marriage was presented as a key element in understand-
ing the educational and earnings potential of Hmong women, with results reinforcing the notion that early age at marriage may continue to be a factor that is associated with lower economic and educational status of Hmong women in the United States. In addition, marital stressors appeared to be associated with early marriage and lower socio-economic status.

For practitioners working with Hmong-American women, and especially adolescents, the results of this study indicate the importance of understanding the cultural and personal contexts that drive relationship status, while underscoring that it is vital to encourage participation in higher education among Hmong girls, regardless of their marital status. Teenage marriage does appear, in this analysis, to be associated with lower earnings and educational attainment, with important implications for Hmong girls and women in the long term.

Future studies may seek to build on these findings by incorporating acculturative and generational status into models that explain the link between teenage marriage and later social status. Additionally, the Internet-based methodology of this study may have limited the scope of survey distribution, so further studies may be necessary to determine whether these findings will remain consistent with a more broad-based sampling strategy, as well as research designs which allow for greater isolation of variable effects. Finally, future studies may seek to place the social status of Hmong women within a broader context, with additional consideration of how Hmong women compare to other Asian-American groups, whose marriage patterns may differ significantly, thus having variable impacts on earnings, educational attainment, and other social indicators.

REFERENCES

American Community Survey

Astone, N.M., and D.M. Upchurch

Bartz, K.W., and F.I. Nye

Burden, D.S., and L.V. Klerman

Carlson, E.

Donnelly, N.

Downing, B.T.
1984 The Hmong Resettlement Study Site Report: Minneapolis-St. Paul, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Portland, OR.

Fademan, L.

Fadiman, A.
1997 The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, NY.

Foo, I.J.
2002 Asian American Women: Issues, Concerns, and Responsive Human and Civil Rights Advocacy, Ford Foundation, USA.

© 2011 The Authors. International Migration © 2011 IOM
Hmong marriage


Hamilton-Merritt, J.

Hang, M.K., J. Anderson, and P.J. Walker
2004 American Paif Niauav: Wat Thum Krabok Assessment Team Report, Ramsey County Department of Human Services, St. Paul, MN.

Howell, F.M., and W. Frese

Hune, S., and G.M. Nomura

Hutchison, I.W.

Hutchison, R., and M. McNall

Jasinski, J.L.

Lee, S.C., Z.B. Xiong, and F.K.O. Yuen

Lee, S.J.

Lee, S.C., R. Evans, J.G. Lesser, and D.S. Pope

Liampattong, P.
2002 “Gender, sexuality, and marriage among Hmong youth in Australia”, in L. Manderson et al. (Eds), Coming of Age in South and Southeast Asia, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Guildford and King’s Lynn, Great Britain: 249–265.

Lowe, G.D., and D.D. Witt


McNall, M., T. Dunnigan, and J.T. Mortimer

Meschke, L.L.
2003 The Lao Family SPRANS Assessment Project, Unpublished report conducted by Lao Family Association of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN.

Minnesota Statutes Section 517.05

Moore, K.A., D.E. Myers, and D.R. Morrison

National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS)

© 2011 The Authors. International Migration © 2011 IOM
Ngo, B.  

Ngo, B., and S.J. Lee  

Quincy, K.  

Reeves, T.J., and C.E. Bennett  

Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS)  

Sharlin, S.A.  

Swartz, T., J.D. Lee, and J.T. Mortimer  

Symonds, P.  

Symonds, P.V.  
2004  *Gender and the Cycle of Life: Calling in the Soul in a Hmong Village*, University of Washington Press, Seattle.

Tan, A.M.  

Teti, D.M., and M.E. Lamb  

Thao, C.T.  

Upchurch, D.M.  

US Census Bureau  

Vang, A.T.  
1999  "Hmong American students: challenges and opportunities", in Park C.C., and M.M. Chi (Eds.), *Asian American Education: Prospects and Challenges*, Burgen and Garvey, Westport: 219-235

Vang, C.Y.  

Wisconsin Statute 765.16  

Xiong, Z.B., P.A. Eliason, and D.F. Detzner  
2006  "Southeast Asian immigrants' perception of good adolescents and good parents", *Journal of Psychology*, 139: 159-175.

© 2011 The Authors. *International Migration* © 2011 IOM