

LAO REFUGEE WOMEN TAKE CONTROL

by Ruth Krulfeld

How do refugee communities mobilize, organize, and negotiate power within their new dominant societies?

The answer is especially important in this time of widespread xenophobia; funding cuts; and legislation against legal and undocumented refugees, immigrants, migrant workers, and their children. Refugees lose power through forcible uprooting, interim resettlement, and eventual resettling in new societies. Under these circumstances, refugees come with limited abilities to cope and often end up in the lowest social and economic strata of society. When self-empowerment occurs, it has far-reaching consequences for self-esteem, self-determination, and access to status and resources.

This article focuses on refugee women and their self-empowerment through the formation of a new organization for women, The Lao-American Women's Association (LAWA). My research with the Lao community began in 1981. Understanding the construction of organizations for self-empowerment has implications not only for academic research but also for public policy, provision of service, and human rights.

LAWA

LAWA began as an idea around 1993; in 1995 the association was granted non-profit status. LAWA is crucial to self-protection as well as self-actualization. Lao women, although influential within the home, are disadvantaged in the public sphere, where any power they may have is usually covert. One of the officers of the women's organization explained that women had to raise men's self-esteem by publicly showing deference to them, and even performing public rituals of self-deprecation relative to men. Another officer listed numerous cases of deferential treatment of men here and in Laos, such as the monthly offerings of flowers and incense women traditionally made in Laos in supplication--or, as she put it, "worship,"--to their husbands. In Laos, the husband attended

PTA meetings, always representing the family outside the home. According to gender cosmology in Lao Buddhism, women must be reborn as men in order to become monks, thus maximizing their chances to attain both great social status and enlightenment.

In mobilizing women to form LAWA after resettlement, the women challenged these gender restrictions--and confronted opposition. Since the planners and workers in this new organization all hold at least one--and sometimes two or more--full-time jobs, have families and great social demands on their time, their involvement in this new organization represents both daring and commitment. Such involvement is even more significant because challenging traditional status is very uncomfortable in a society in which non-confrontation is so highly valued--more so for women.

Focus of Research

My research focused on several questions: 1) Why did these Lao women decide to organize and continue in the face of strong opposition; 2) What was the opposition and why did it occur; 3) Which influences promoted this organization; 4) Were there any precedents for it; 5) Why did it occur when it did; 6) What problems arose both internally and externally; and 7) What was the impact of the organization on both women who joined and the Lao community?

New organizations such as LAWA are likely to begin only after refugees have acquired such necessities as learning a new language, job skills, housing, and financial security, permitting them to concentrate on less immediately demanding matters. LAWA was started 16 to 20 years after initial resettlement by most Lao refugees.

Addressing Community Problems

Who begins such an organization and why? The organizers of LAWA were interested in attaining public prestige and self-empowerment and alleviating certain community problems. Prior to LAWA, the organizations in this enclave refugee

society were male-run--most of them highly politicized and in conflict. There had been twelve opposed political parties in this relatively small population, all with the agenda of reclaiming the Lao government and each with a different idea of what to do with it when they got it back. Mobilization for these men's political organizations began early on. They were recently formed into one large association, with a board and membership comprised of men, under which all Lao organizations were to be subsumed. Even the PTA was male-run. The political conflicts between such organizations and the battles for personal power between men limited most other activity for community causes, except that already in-place, such as traditional cooperation to organize celebrations and rituals.

The women felt that the community was now established enough that major problems should be addressed. The existing male-run Lao organizations were doing no more than talking about problems. The women felt motivated to take action on such issues as isolation and alienation among the Lao elderly, the threat of loss of Lao culture, the generation gap between children who spoke only English and numerous Lao parents and grandparents who either spoke no English or barely understood it and who did not understand the culture in which their children were growing up. Health issues were also a concern, as was domestic abuse, alcoholism, gangs, and children in prison. As social services and outside funding have become increasingly restricted, the women felt the community had to break the pattern of dependency that had become established for many Lao. So, community concerns and lack of action by male-run organizations provided the initial impetus for Lao women to mobilize.

Women Take Action

The LAWA board members turned their attention to the following:

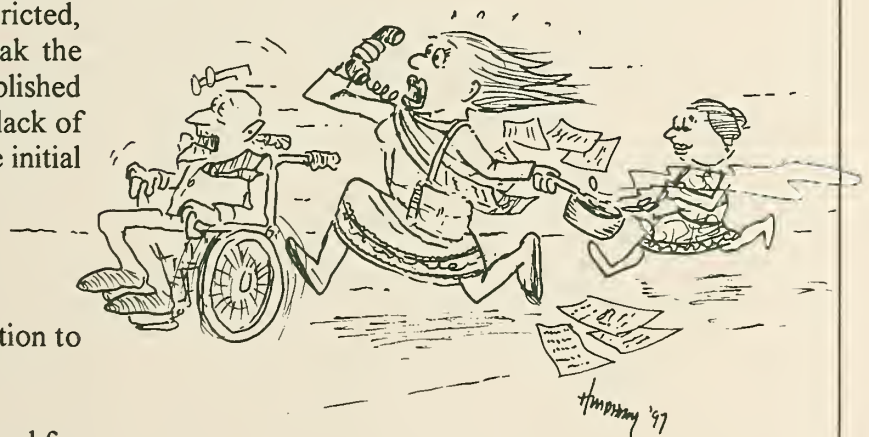
1) Running the Lao language and culture school for the purposes of preserving Lao culture, reducing inter-generational conflict, giving Lao children a sense of ethnic identity and self-esteem, and

reducing involvement of youth in gangs and other dysfunctional behavior.

2) Publishing and circulating a newsletter, with information on immigration, citizenship, health, resources for the elderly, schools, SAT exams, advanced placement courses, and women's conferences. Also included was recognition of students who make honors, stay in school and graduate; women who obtain degrees; and Lao who achieve honors in the wider society.

3) As far as time and resources permit, visiting and cooking for the elderly, the ill, and providing transportation to doctors.

4) At their general meeting in November 1996, the women planned to enlarge their mandate to include organizing monthly meals and meetings for Lao elderly and arranging transportation for them. Because of increasing problems for aliens obtaining welfare and health benefits, the women decided to provide classes to prepare people for the citizenship exam. They will also coordinate transportation to class and to the Immigrant and Naturalization Services (INS) for those who need it. They voted to set up a telephone hotline to remind women in the community to do monthly breast examinations and have annual pap smears. They also decided to teach Lao cooking, taking turns in holding classes in members' homes.



Running the Lao language and culture school constitutes a major drain on time and resources, especially since the five most highly committed women, who now constitute the LAWA board, do

all the coordinating and most of the work, with only sporadic help from the other 32 women in the association.

Precedents

Since the women maintain contact with family and friends in Laos, influences from that country and the Laotian diaspora also help explain why these women mobilized for power. The tradition of women in social action, although restricted in the public sphere, was not altogether lacking in Laos before refugee resettlement. Although a few women had the combination of boldness, education, and elite status to have their ideas heard and accepted, such gender power was highly restricted. A women's organization in Laos, begun as an auxiliary in the 1930s, cooked for Lao soldiers during the war for Lao independence from France. This organization only gained independent status and government recognition as the Women's Union after the communist revolution. Its members now work in what Lao women here termed "the quiet way that Lao women have" to campaign against polygyny in Laos. They also have submitted a grant proposal to the International Voluntary Service for training volunteers to educate the public in Laos about AIDS. One of the leaders of the women's organization here, who is a board member of IVS, translated their proposal.

American and world concern over women's status and access to public power probably has had an even greater affect on these refugee women. One recently received her B.A. with a certificate in women's studies from an American university. Although initially she was reluctant to become involved with LAWA, because of time pressures of study and family, she eventually decided she wanted to contribute to her community and took a position of leadership in the organization. She produces LAWA's newsletter, which she sends not only to the Lao community but to Lao all over the world.

Two older elite women have exercised some degree of overt power and continue to work individually for community action. However, LAWA was established and is led by women without such elite connections. Their lack of high social status in the

enclave community slowed the progress of the community in accepting the new organization, and did little to protect them from their opposition's criticisms and accusations. However, the board members believe that the older elite feminists have too little contact with the current situation here to act as leaders of this new refugee organization.

Obstacles

Obstacles have come from within the community. On numerous occasions hate mail was sent to the whole Lao community accusing the board members of the women's association of being communists and working for the embassy. This attack was carefully constructed to turn a refugee community that had suffered greatly at the hands of communists against the organization and its organizers, despite the lack of basis for these accusations. These letters, which named names and sometimes included crude caricatures, were always sent out to the Lao community at the time the women's organization publicized major initiatives. For example, the women mailed flyers to the community on the



registration dates for the Lao school, or on a fund-raising party they hosted, or when they sent invitations to the women of the community to attend the first general meeting since their initial mobilization. In one hate mailing, the LAWA insignia with its drawing of a traditionally clad Lao woman encircled by the name of the organization was replaced with the communist symbol. Another mailing calling them "communist bitches" was circulated before the second registration period at the school.

In my interviews with Lao men, I was told that these women were working against the established organizations, and that they ought to work within organizations that were already in place instead of duplicating effort. Some men said that they had heard awful things about these women and their organization. Two men told me that LAWA was really a pawn of the embassy and that the board members were communist, explaining how awful that is for people who suffered so much at the hands of the communists. The women told me that the men "want us to work for them silently in the background and they'll take credit for everything we do, just as they usually do. We refused to be part of that, although we did it by saying we would be glad to help them in any way possible." Two leaders of the women's organization felt that the officials of the male-run Lao organization were continually trying to co-opt them, since both women--one of whom is likely to be voted the next president of the woman's organization--were offered an official position in the male-run organization. Both refused, feeling that it was done to sabotage LAWA. Many of the men forbade their wives to go to LAWA meetings or join LAWA. Given the Lao value on avoidance of confrontation, the tactics employed by these men have been somewhat effective in keeping some Lao away from the women's organization and its projects.

The Lao school initially became divided with LAWA in charge of one day of classes and a male-run organization taking over the second day. Conflicts between them caused one leader to resign and declare that he was voting to give the whole school over to the women to run, so that the other man would have to work under female jurisdiction.

Basically, the women already controlled the school. The power play his action involved was obvious to the women who continue to sponsor the school. It is interesting to note that when the male leader resigned, he took with him the many children of his friends and relatives who had previously been enrolled. His resignation coincided with a community-wide rumor that the entire school had closed. This precipitated a crisis of declining enrollment, which the women creatively handled through a new way of attracting children to the school. Enrollment rose from a low of 5 students in 1996 to 26 by the end of the last academic year.

Perserverence and Results

Despite problems such as some interpersonal conflict among members, discouragement at lack of more immediate community-wide acceptance and appreciation for their efforts, the scarcity of funding and other resources, attempts to co-opt them, and the debasing criticism they have suffered, the women's commitment has continued. They keep trying to widen their mandate to alleviate other serious problems that plague the Lao community. The women gave several reasons for persevering in the face of great opposition. One important factor was that Lao women are accustomed to working together cooperatively with little public or individual recognition for their efforts. Typically, this is done in traditional areas such as cooking for the monks, ceremonies, and social events for which women go about getting things done and men take public and official credit.

Much of the women's dedication results from their success in accomplishing results no other organization or group in the community has achieved. This was helped by their ability to work together despite conflicts that have arisen. Their empowerment is evident in the strength of their commitment, and their roles are now public. Their newsletter circulates throughout the Laotian diaspora with its news of the activities of these women. The Lao school continues despite its ups and downs and plans are being made to address additional community problems. Some of the women have represented their community and organization at women's conferences and meetings

in the wider society and even internationally. They are proud of their achievements and speak with pride of their own empowerment.

Further Reading

Baxter, Diane and Krulfeld, Ruth, eds. 1997.
Beyond Boundaries: Selected Papers on

Refugee and Immigrant Issues. American Anthropological Association Special Volume.

Ruth Krulfeld is professor of anthropology at The George Washington University.