

Gena Lew Gong: Vang murder shows need to address domestic violence

By Gena Lew
Gong

On March 31, Becky Zyang Vang was shot and killed by her ex-husband, Neng Moua, who then turned his gun on himself. Various reasons have been circulating as to why this tragedy occurred, casting undue criticism on the Hmong community and questioning if her culture is partially to blame for Becky's death. While we may never know the exact reason this horrific act of violence occurred, one thing is clear: There is no excuse for domestic violence.

As a pan-Asian American women's organization committed to empowering women in the Central Valley, we at Central California Asian Pacific Women (CCAPW) feel a responsibility to speak up in support of women in our communities. We believe there is an urgent need to shed light on the larger problem of violence against women and girls and to offer community-based strategies for addressing, reducing and ultimately eradicating domestic violence.

Vang's death reveals larger problem

While men can also be victims of domestic violence, women are much more likely to be affected. According to a UNICEF report, "Violence against women is present in every country, cutting across boundaries of culture, class, education income, ethnicity and age. It is one of the most pervasive of human rights violations, denying women and girls equality, security, dignity, self-worth, and their right to enjoy fundamental freedoms."

In the United States, one out of every four American women will experience violence by an intimate partner during her lifetime. Women who are separated or divorced from their partner are the most vulnerable to violence, a fact that often discourages women from leaving abusive partners out of fear that it will put their own lives at greater risk.

Local efforts address issue

Last October, CCAPW held a forum on domestic violence, bringing together for the first time local leaders in criminal justice, social services, education and the Hmong American community. The goal was to examine domestic violence within the context of gender equity and to develop effective strategies for addressing domestic violence as it impacts the local Hmong community.

The forum participants and expert panelists — including a domestic violence survivor, then Fresno County District Attorney-Elect Lisa A. Smittcamp, and community professionals — discussed the complexity of the issue, particularly in the Hmong community, and drafted the following recommendations to create lasting change:

- Create safe spaces in communities to foster meaningful conversations about domestic violence. Elders, youth, women and men alike should be involved in open, non-threatening dialogues to develop shared language and understanding about the problem.
- Use innovative approaches to educate and create awareness about domestic violence. Host forums on school campuses, community centers, churches and even family gatherings to educate young people about healthy relationships, warning signs of abuse and their rights if they are involved in an abusive relationship.
- Ensure service providers effectively deliver intervention services that are culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of the Hmong community. Agencies must have staff who are informed and trained to effectively navigate the cultural complexities of victims' communities and who are skilled at cultivating trusting relationships that build upon the strengths of clients. Similarly, shelters must be prepared to accommodate diverse social, emotional and cultural

needs to help clients become self-sustaining.

Protect all women in community

For our part, CCAPW is forming an advisory committee to develop culturally appropriate strategies to assist Fresno's criminal justice system and social service agencies to more effectively serve Hmong American clients. Second, we are gathering local data on domestic violence in the Hmong community to accurately assess the magnitude of the problem. Third, we are continuing to facilitate community dialogue about domestic violence by holding another forum Oct. 10 at Clovis Community College Center.

Hmong American women are actively engaging in these and other efforts to end oppression and abuse globally. We stand proudly with them to empower and connect women to supportive networks where they will feel respected and their dignity and safety will be protected.

We want all domestic violence victims to know they are supported. We also want them to know that outside help and intervention are available, if needed. One life lost due to domestic violence is one too many. Let us work together as a community to ensure this never happens again.

Gena Lew Gong is president of Central California Asian Pacific Women (CCAPW), an all-volunteer, community-based organization with a 35-year history of empowering Asian Pacific American women in the Valley. To read CCAPW's Oct 2014 report on its domestic violence forum with the Fresno Hmong community, go to: <http://ccapw.org/newsletters/reports/>.