

EIGHT

“Unlikely Heroes”: The Evolution of Female Leadership in a Cambodian Ethnic Enclave

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In January 1989 the community of Stockton, California, was shattered by tragedy when a gunman opened fire on the children of a predominantly Indochinese elementary school. Within minutes anguished residents from the Cambodian neighborhood surrounding the school rushed to the scene. School officials scrambled to find interpreters who could help communicate with distraught parents and family friends. In the ensuing days, after it was learned that four of the five children killed by the gunman were Cambodian, leaders from the neighborhood met with officials of the Stockton Unified School District, urging them to cancel classes for a day of mourning.¹ Commenting on the role played by local Cambodians in serving as interpreters, counselors, and community leaders during and after the crisis, the local newspaper ran an article under the headline “Unlikely Heroes Emerge from School Tragedy.”² While the story focused on the bravery of these people and their devotion to helping community members, it overlooked what was perhaps the most “unlikely” aspect of the Cambodian leaders—they were women.

“There is no woman leader here.” That is what I was told repeatedly in two large cities in the Bay Area where I initially contacted people recognized by Cambodians and Americans as “Cambodian leaders.” Again and again I received the same response: Cambodian women are not active in community affairs. Voices of Cambodian women in the United States are rarely heard, despite the fact that many are experiencing rapid changes in their lives.

Some studies imply that Indochinese refugee women face unfavorable conditions or structural constraints which preclude them from assuming leadership roles. Bach and Carroll-Seguín found that such

women, especially those who entered the United States after 1980, have a higher degree of incorporation into "an ethnic community in which women are under greater constraints to remain in the home or are less able to make the interpersonal connections."³ Since an ethnic community functions to preserve traditional customs, norms, and values,⁴ one would expect that traditional gender roles would be reinforced and preserved within such a setting.

In Stockton, though, I found a different story.⁵ I first visited Stockton at the suggestion of an American woman who had contacts with Indochinese refugee organizations there. Soon after I arrived, I was introduced to women who were very different from the "traditional" refugee women described in much of the literature. Despite their incorporation into a tightly knit ethnic enclave, these women had assumed leadership roles in the Indochinese community as well as within the home. Against all odds, they had emerged as important figures in Stockton's Cambodian neighborhoods and in the city itself.

What these women accomplished was not simply a matter of their exceptional individual characteristics—indeed, they became leaders under conditions that placed great strain on individual psychological resources. Women's leadership emerged, rather, as a result of unique structural conditions in Stockton's ethnic enclaves—conditions that were shaped primarily by the state. Stockton has become a home for secondary migrants, and life in the city's ethnic enclaves has produced new opportunities and constraints that have led to a new division of labor between the sexes. Once the first seeds of female leadership were planted within the community, some women extended their leadership roles from the workplace and family into the community. This expansion of women's domains has been facilitated by social service projects that create formal settings in which women develop and exercise leadership.

SECONDARY MIGRATION AND THE ETHNIC ENCLAVE

A large proportion of Indochinese refugees living in Stockton, as in the rest of the state, are "secondary migrants," people originally placed in other states who subsequently chose to move to California. Secondary migration accounts for 40 percent of the Indochinese refugees in California. In the fiscal year 1986–1987, secondary migration rose by 96 percent, while primary migration increased by only 5 percent.⁶

The practice of hosting Indochinese refugees began in Stockton when a local Catholic bishop arranged for thirty families to resettle there. Since then, the Indochinese refugee population has increased rapidly: from about 3,000 in 1980 to over 30,000—or one-sixth of the

city's population—in 1988. (These numbers do not include U.S.-born children of refugee parents.) The greater Stockton area has the highest Indochinese secondary migration rate as well as the highest concentration of Indochinese residents in the state, 6.9 percent.⁷ Cambodians now are the single largest ethnic group among Stockton's immigrant population.⁸ In 1987 only 700 to 800 new arrivals came directly from refugee camps, whereas about 4,900 came as secondary migrants.⁹

The U.S. federal policy on sponsorship was intended to disperse refugees so as to prevent the development of ethnic enclaves.¹⁰ The aim was to encourage more rapid assimilation by forcing individuals away from other members of the same ethnic group. This policy failed, in part because of differences in the services and benefits offered by different states. California, for example, is known for its generous refugee assistance policy and welfare system.¹¹

Secondary migrants move not only to obtain better services, but also to be close to family and friends and to look for employment. Other motives for moving include the desire for a better climate or release from difficulties with initial sponsors and communities. Refugees who used to be unskilled workers, students, or soldiers, and others without marketable skills in the new country are more apt to become secondary migrants.¹² For instance, Boppha's family initially settled in Michigan five years ago. Her parents had some difficulties with their sponsor, who they feared would take their four small children away from them in the name of providing them a "better educational environment." The family moved to Atlanta, Georgia, but there the father could find only a part-time job at a dental clinic. So they moved to Stockton in hopes of obtaining more assistance for the children and better professional training opportunities for the father. Similarly, Rouen remembers her family's sponsor in Texas forcing them to attend Christian church services; in Stockton they are free to retain their Buddhist identity.

Because female-headed families are economically and socially more vulnerable, they are more likely to become secondary migrants.¹³ Among the many widowed and divorced mothers in Stockton is Channy, a widow with four sons who moved from Texas two years ago. In Texas she had to start working right away—in a factory, at an airport, and on an electronic assembly line—before she learned to speak English. She also had an obligation to send money regularly to her second husband in Thailand, from whom she was separated. "I had to work, work, work. I had no time to be with my children. My sister was here [Stockton] and told me to move here. . . . I spent lots of money to move over here. But now I don't go out for work, and I am glad that I can take care of my children."

During her second pregnancy, Sophorny's husband was killed before her eyes by soldiers of Pol Pot's regime. She sometimes suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder, which makes it difficult for her to concentrate in her English class.¹⁴ She moved from Tennessee four years ago with her teenage son and younger daughter. Her son is the family's only income-earner. They share a two-room apartment with another family, as do many other female-headed families in the enclave.

In an earlier era the pattern of secondary migration in the United States was from small towns to large cities such as New York, Dallas, New Orleans, San Francisco, and Los Angeles; the metropolises held the promise of physical and emotional support.¹⁵ But at least in California, the new trend is for Cambodians in large cities such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego to move to semirural agricultural towns in the Central Valley, such as Stockton, where housing and living costs are lower. "Those who couldn't make it in big cities go to the Valley," observed one refugee resettlement agency worker in San Francisco. Indeed, many of Stockton's secondary migrants are not, in a strict sense, "secondary" migrants: they have moved several times. A large proportion of them came from large cities in other states; many had difficulties even in their second or third residence; many have few transferable skills and little proficiency in English.

Mr. Sam, in his mid-thirties, used to live in Texas with his wife and five small children. He was a farmer in Cambodia, but he had always wanted to return to school and earn a college degree. He and his family moved to Stockton because of the more comprehensive social service support network, and he is now taking courses in a community college as preparation for becoming a social worker.

Sophy and her family arrived in Utah in 1982. After a brief period of English training, her husband started working in the kitchen of a restaurant at a very low wage. Sophy had a health problem, and they were unable to live on her husband's limited income and support from her relatives in the United States. Yet they felt obligated to send money to their relatives in Cambodia. On advice from one of Sophy's sisters who was living in Stockton, they moved there in 1984, looking for educational programs and a better climate. Both Sophy and her husband started English class, and Sophy received a scholarship to continue her education at a community college.

In contrast to Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Oakland, however, Stockton does not offer many employment opportunities. According to a 1987 survey, the area around Stockton has the lowest employment rate in the state among Indochinese refugees, 9.3 percent. In the Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Oakland areas, 39.2 percent, 34.2 percent, and 24.9 percent, respectively, are employed.¹⁶ While large cities need

unskilled laborers to fill low-paying jobs in restaurants, hotels, and factories, Stockton is a basically agricultural town in which the agricultural jobs have already been taken by Mexican and Chicano workers, and few employers need more unskilled labor. "In other cities . . . there are more factories and more industrial jobs. But here, a person needs a good education and skills to make it," said a director of a refugee service agency.¹⁷ "Cambodians are difficult to place in jobs, because of their limited resources and [poor] language proficiency," said a county officer. As a result, 70 percent of Indochinese refugees in Stockton are unemployed,¹⁸ and the unemployment rate for Cambodians is estimated to be between 80 and 90 percent.

The majority of the Cambodians in Stockton live in huge, exclusively Cambodian apartment complexes that house from 1,000 to 3,000 people. Some of these complexes used to be occupied by Blacks, Hispanics, and, most recently, Vietnamese. Most of the residents now are secondary migrants searching for a "home" in a foreign land. For them, the ethnic community offers an important source of support: it preserves traditional norms and values, and it provides a sense of security and identity.¹⁹ One woman, whose sentiments were echoed by many others, explained: "I want to live with our people. We miss our country. I felt lonely there [first resettlement place]. When I came here, it is like my village, like our home. We smile to each other. Sometimes I get bored, feel so crowded, but I like to live here with our people."

For women, this feeling of community is particularly important. Closeness to other women of their own ethnicity and background helps to engender security and solidarity. In other communities where the enclave is very small or ethnically mixed, women are especially reluctant to go outside for fear of attack. Some Cambodian women in Oakland and San Francisco told me that in those cities women and children do not leave their small apartment complex alone even in daytime, because they fear that other minorities in the neighborhood may attack them. One woman who has lived in Stockton since 1980 said: "When we came, there was no Cambodian apartment. We were afraid of going outside. My husband was attacked by whites and Blacks. But now, we are many. We are not afraid any more." Once they feel secure in their homes and neighborhoods, women also feel safer journeying outside their homes and neighborhoods.

The feelings of security engendered by the ethnic enclaves are made all the more important by the marginal economic status of most secondary migrants. In the apartment complex enclaves I observed, most of the families are on welfare, even though some family members have part-time jobs. The majority of them receive payments through AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children); those who have been in the

country for less than two years receive special refugee assistance. Few Cambodians have full-time jobs, and only a few others are able to go to school to learn English, acquire vocational skills, or earn college degrees. Because unemployment is so widespread, jobless men are less apt to feel isolated or depressed by their inability to serve as their family's primary "rice-winner." But when men who have had no jobs for long periods of time gather at the corners of the enclaves to drink and gamble, the women criticize them as "lazy and playing around." One woman who took a part-time job while her husband was unemployed remarked: "Even if they earned low wages, even if we had to take a cut from welfare assistance, we want to see our husbands working. We don't want our children see their fathers doing nothing." Channy, a single mother, said: "In Texas, everyone works. It's not like here. Men are lazy here."

STRATEGIES OF SURVIVAL

In Stockton the marginal economic status of secondary migrants and the lack of job opportunities for men combine to produce unexpected consequences for traditional gender roles.²⁰ Women's roles as homemakers and small traders, in particular, have taken on increased economic importance in the Cambodian enclaves. Women's traditional roles of providing food and clothing for family and community members have always been crucial in sustaining ethnic culture. But in Stockton these traditional roles and skills have evolved into informal economic activities that contribute cash to family incomes. Even in the semiurban home setting, many women use their skills to generate extra earnings.²¹

Food is one of the most important aspects of cultural heritage. In daily life and on ceremonial occasions, women play a major role in preserving cultural tradition by preparing food, and in Stockton many Cambodian women have transformed this role into a source of income and power. In one apartment complex, Chanda is known for making noodle soup on weekends, when the residents have weekly Buddhist gatherings. Other residents grow vegetables and spices around their apartments and exchange or sell the products to neighbors. Mora and her daughter buy various fruits and fish in big packages in a weekly open market downtown and bring them home; they then go around the neighborhood to sell the fish and fruit piece by piece. Keo, in her fifties, makes traditional sweets at home and sells them door-to-door, a dollar a package. Coconut jelly is her specialty and the neighbors' favorite. Always a good cook, Keo never sold her food before coming to Stockton. Now she earns up to \$50 a day from her sales, while her

husband, formerly a farmer, has no job. From the corner of her living room, Rath sells cups of shaved ice, with traditional sweets at the bottom, to children. Poum fries bananas in front of her apartment and sells them to a Cambodian grocery store. On side roads one often sees several parked vans from which various candies and snacks are sold by teenaged women.

Making ethnic dresses brings money as well. Frequent weddings and seasonal religious ceremonies create a demand for special clothing and decorations. Almost every other weekend there is a wedding in the apartment complex. Families and guests dress up, and ceremonies and reception gatherings last the entire day. On most such occasions, women wear traditional costumes, while men commonly wear Western suits.

A large number of orders for dresses keeps Sophy busy on evenings and weekends. She knew basic sewing before moving to Stockton, although she never had any formal training, but only in Stockton did she begin to supplement her family income in this way. She charges \$20 a dress (an extremely low price considering the time involved) for her labor. Channy, who received some training in sewing back home, supports her four young sons by making clothes to supplement the welfare checks. She sews the whole day in her family's only room. Sokhon, in her fifties, carries around a big bag of fancy cloth from Kampuchea and Thailand. She imports the cloth through personal connections and sells it in the neighborhood. Women who make dresses often call her to the door to see if good cloth for their next dress is available.

Most of the small economic activities carried on in and around the enclaves are conducted by women and children. One man who used to be a barber in Phnom Penh opened a barber stand outside of an enclave, and several other men specialize in ceremonial music and fortune-telling, but few men start such informal businesses. The women, however, do so when their families do not have enough money or their husbands cannot find jobs. Thus the women's traditional cultural skills have led them to new economic activities that make important contributions to the family.

In addition to opportunities in the informal economy, a growing recognition of the importance of education and training is also changing women's roles within the enclaves of Stockton. Because the Cambodian population is large and concentrated, many services and programs have been created in Stockton to serve men and women facing resettlement difficulties. In those communities where jobs are available, men—the traditional heads of households—become the focus for language and job-training programs. But in Stockton, where traditionally male jobs are scarce, new programs are focusing on the education of

refugee women; such efforts are symbolized by the new ESL (English as a Second Language) programs.

Needless to say, English proficiency is related directly to employment opportunities and is also a prerequisite for interacting with the majority population.²² Refugee adults are placed in ESL classes according to their sponsorship and their level of English proficiency, and they must attend classes to receive welfare and assistance in finding jobs. In most areas of the country, however, women with small children are exempt from this school requirement, and educational and training programs pay little attention to such women. In Stockton, though, one social service agency, backed by a local church, holds ESL classes every morning, as well as a weekly citizenship class, and almost all the staff and volunteers are women. The agency believes that "if we don't reach women, there will not be much chance for the next generation." A child-care room next to the classrooms enables mothers to attend class even though they are not required by the state to do so.

The ESL teachers observed that what motivated many women was a desire to obtain a driver's license. "When we started to talk about the driver's license, those women were so excited. That was what they were waiting for." Public transportation in Stockton is poor, and a driver's license provides women with unprecedented access to outside activities. Sareth, in her mid-forties, obtained her license after she moved to Stockton from Georgia. Her husband is old and sick; she is the only driver in her family. She takes her grandchildren to Cambodian language school, and she also attends the class to learn reading and writing. An ongoing survey in the Cambodian community in Stockton reveals that another motive for enrolling in ESL classes is that parents want to be able to talk with their children's teachers. Kech, for example, voluntarily attends ESL classes so that she can help her daughters in school.

There is even a class especially for women, organized by three cooperating social service agencies. Time and location are arranged at the convenience of women with small children, and some women carry their babies into the classroom. The women are encouraged to study with classmates who are friends from the neighborhood, and the open atmosphere eases young mothers' tensions and their hesitancy to attend ESL classes. A woman neighbor, Sophy, helps in the classroom by keeping attendance records, distributing materials, translating the instructions of an American teacher, and helping the students to ask questions. Such special arrangements are possible only in a community where a large enclave exists.

Social services programs such as these, designed for Cambodians, have created new job opportunities for refugees with professional back-

grounds and those who have attained English proficiency and done relevant college-level work in the United States. Some of the Cambodians who are recruited for social service jobs serving their own people work part-time in agencies while continuing their higher education. Initially, the Cambodians employed in these agencies were likely to be men who were in social services or government offices in their homeland. Such jobs provide both prestige and significant income, and these workers usually moved out of the enclaves, but continued to live near them. But because few Cambodians had both experience with social service work and a good command of English, those who acquired English proficiency and attended American community colleges were soon able to be hired as translators or assistant staff members in the growing social service sector.

Now, according to both Americans and Cambodians, women are more in demand in social service work than men, once they attain the same educational and language levels. Because very few women have these qualifications, there is a need for more female refugees with the levels of education and experience required to work with the refugee community. One example of an emerging job opportunity in Stockton is that of bilingual aide within the school system. Federal law requires that ninety minutes of instruction in the children's own language be provided each day, but this minimum is not being met. One school district in Stockton employs 105 Indochinese teacher's aides, most part-time, out of a total of 178; to meet the federal standard the district would need to hire 426 full-time aides.²³

Secretarial, clerical, and interpreter jobs in social service work are also increasingly available within the ethnic community. Many who take these positions learned how to help others from their accumulated experiences of helping family members and friends. Sophy, a part-time worker of this sort herself, described these jobs as requiring "patience" and "a tolerance for stress": "Men are not patient enough for these jobs." Several agency executives expressed their preference for women over men if they have the same qualifications. One American executive said: "It is common in this kind of work to employ women. There are more women who want to do this kind of work than men. It seems that some ethnic populations relate better to women than men. . . . Another thing is that the pay is so bad." Another director, who is himself a refugee, said: "Women are much easier to work with. They are more sensitive to workers and clients. Their concentration is much better than [that of] men."

Many small-scale American private social service agencies that are run largely by female workers encourage women's participation. One female director emphasized that many refugees need social workers

who can go into their communities and help them in their homes. Sophy herself was recruited to work for women's programs with encouragement and assistance from both American and Indochinese social workers. Similarly, when Mrs. Lim applied for her teacher's aide position in public school, she was supported by American female teachers who knew about her background. Dara is a physician's assistant in a public hospital's family clinic and a counselor for Cambodian patients. She is also a medical student in a state university program for which she was recommended and to which she was encouraged to apply by American doctors in the hospital. Other women work as interpreters in clinics and various program offices.

Sophy completed community college in Stockton. She started working while she was still studying. Now she has several part-time jobs in social service agencies as a Cambodian representative. She works for the 4H Club as a Cambodian group leader, for the Agricultural Building and the Women's Center as an interpreter and counselor, for the General Hospital as an interpreter and nurse's aide, and for the ESL class for women in her apartment complex as a teacher's aide. She never worked in Cambodia. She intends to try various jobs and choose one field in which to obtain a professional certificate and work full-time. She is now seeking a full-time position as an eligibility worker in the welfare office, where so far there are only two Cambodian eligibility workers, both male. Her desire to help other Cambodians and the program's needs are a perfect match.

When these women take jobs in the paid labor force, they have to struggle to move beyond the clerical and staff-assistant positions, which are usually part-time, ethnic-specific, and highly susceptible to governmental budget cuts. Sophy feels insecure in her position; budget cuts or a shift in agency priorities could easily cause her to be laid off. She is anxious to get full-time staff status to secure continuing financial support for her family. "Now is a turning point of my life," she said, "what job to choose and how to support my family."

The employment that public sector jobs provide for those women who have acquired skills in English is crucial in a community with limited economic opportunities. Such jobs also have a significant impact on the division of labor within both family and community.

DIVISION OF LABOR IN THE FAMILY

As we have seen, the opportunities and constraints in the ethnic enclaves are transforming women's roles. The first steps toward leadership often occur in the home, where women's informal economic activities contribute to family income and stability. These developments

are soon followed by changes outside the home. The feeling of security derived from the presence of a support system in the enclaves contributes to women's confidence in taking on alternative roles. As women obtain access to educational and employment opportunities, job skills, and the freedom offered by a driver's license, they gain power and status in the outside world. Together these changes help to produce a new division of labor in the family.

In the rural, agricultural settings in Cambodia, men and women have roles that complement each other. In the new urban or semiurban immigrant enclaves, however, some roles are strengthened while others are lost. This loss of roles is most pronounced for men.²⁴ Many of the traditional women's roles endure—taking care of children and managing the housework—and women are both strengthened and transformed by the various informal economic functions they take on. Men, on the other hand, face high unemployment rates, own no land, and have no offices to which they can aspire. Stripped of traditional opportunities for employment, men lose their "place to be" in the new society. While women's roles in the family persist, men are in a prolonged situation of "after harvest, waiting for the next cultivation season."

Thus, in the ethnic enclaves of Stockton, it is often women, not men, who have greater economic opportunities. Whether they work in the informal economy of the Cambodian community or in social service jobs in the paid labor force, women become the primary breadwinners in Cambodian families. And because they have been able to gain skills in English, a sense of security in the enclave, and a driver's license, these women come to serve as mediators between the family and the outside world.

Kiey is a good example. A high school senior, Kiey carries many of the responsibilities in her family; the expectations of her parents and the needs of her eight younger siblings rest on her shoulders. Her family came to Stockton three years ago from a refugee camp. Her parents do not understand English and are unemployed. In her family, she is the only driver and mediator with the outside world. During almost every year of the past decade, her mother has given birth, and Kiey often had to skip classes to take her mother to the hospital or to various welfare offices. She is in charge of transportation, shopping, negotiation with the apartment owner, filling out various forms, and much more. She is expected to provide income as soon as possible, since her family is obliged to send money to relatives remaining in Cambodia. She is torn between her wish to continue her education, the expectations of her family, and her own traditional values concerning her duties as a daughter.

These new roles for women are even more pronounced among couples forced to marry during the Pol Pot regime. Unlike women in more traditional marriages, wives in forced marriages often came to the United States with more marketable skills and higher levels of education than their husbands. Among these couples, many of whom are now in their mid-thirties, women are even more likely to take on the role of primary breadwinner.

Sophy was forced to marry a much older man of rural origin during her labor camp days. Her husband now has physical problems that prevent him from participating in the paid labor force. With her educational background, Sophy had a greater potential to find employment, and she had no choice but to become an income earner. She, her husband, their three sons, and her aged mother live off of Sophy's income from several part-time jobs, weekend dressmaking, a small amount of welfare assistance allotted to her, and the welfare assistance that her mother earns as sole member of a separate household.

Vanny, a woman in her early thirties who was forced to marry, works in a psychiatric hospital as an administrative assistant. She supports her two children and a husband. Her husband has less education and fewer marketable skills than she, and has a part-time job on weekends. She exercises control over many of her family's decisions.

While these women serve as mediators between the outside world and the family, their husbands take on work in the house. In Sophy's family, for example, gender roles were dramatically reversed after she began working. In Cambodia her husband made all the decisions; she was totally dependent on him for survival. Now, her husband always asks her permission to spend money or go out, and she makes decisions ranging from the children's education to how the family spends its vacation.

Changes in consciousness and attitude have occurred among men as well as women. Meah's older brother is supporting his parents and five younger siblings. He said that he doesn't mind if his (future) wife has more education than he and becomes active outside the home, as long as she does not "go around too much." He also does not mind sharing housework. He feels that "it is good if either husband or wife could get well-paid jobs and that whoever gets a job which brings in income should take it, and other members should cooperate."

Mr. Sam's baby son started to cry. He picked up the baby and changed his diaper. He participates more in child care than he used to, he says. "In Cambodia men also help with child care, but not as much as here. Not everyone is like me, 30 percent in Cambodia, 60 percent in America." In Stockton, men spend more time at home due to unemployment and women spend more time outside home and in school.

His wife is illiterate. "My wife is busy with the baby now, but I want her to go to school later, too."

THE EMERGENCE OF WOMEN COMMUNITY LEADERS

Some of the women who have taken active roles in the family extend their leadership roles into the world outside the enclave. As we have seen, both Cambodian and American concepts of gender have facilitated women's involvement in social service work as community liaisons, where women take jobs as mediators, educators, and social workers, jobs that reinforce the development of their leadership roles in both private and public spheres. However, not all women in the enclaves take advantage of these opportunities. So far, those who are visible as outstanding leaders are those who came to the United States with backgrounds and skills applicable to contemporary American society.

The ways in which these women evolve into leaders are diverse. Let us take as examples Mrs. Lim and Sophy. Mrs. Lim was known for her expertise back home before she started to work for the Stockton school district. From the beginning, she was identified as an official delegate of the community, especially in the field of education. She announces herself as the specialist and leader she used to be in Cambodia, and she is primarily interested in working in the Cambodian community. Sophy, on the other hand, became known to her neighbors in the enclave as a helpful woman with a good command of English. "Neighbors just came by for help. Then others heard about me and came." She had no intention of making events take the course they did. "I was very shy, but after getting jobs, I had to talk in front of many people. I don't want to say that I am the leader. I speak 'on behalf of' the people in this apartment complex, because if I don't speak, nobody speaks for us." Eventually her potential was spotted by the American manager of the apartment complex and by social workers who were looking for Cambodian assistants. She first was recruited by a supplementary food program for infants when she was using their services as a client. During the expansion of programs for Cambodian refugee women, she became involved in various projects as a part-time staff member. One result of her public and private activities around the ethnic enclaves is that she is frequently called upon to represent the interests and voices of the residents. She is happy to work on behalf of Cambodians, but plans to extend her frontiers to serve the general population.

To date, though, only a few women have been able to take advantage of the niches in Stockton's enclaves and climb into leadership roles. These tend to be women whose background has facilitated their adaptation to American society and allowed them to enjoy the new oppor-

tunities in the United States. Most important, especially during the initial stage of resettlement, is a woman's education, familiarity with urban or semiurban life, knowledge of Western culture, and ability to use available information and mobilize human resources. The earlier immigrants generally came from more well-off families and were better-educated. More used to classroom study, they mastered English faster than later immigrants. Given the same learning opportunities, those who are illiterate in their own language have many more difficulties than those who are literate or have some familiarity with Western languages. Early immigrants also found sponsors more quickly, as they often already had relatives in the United States.²⁵ And because there was no Cambodian community or enclave, the earlier immigrants also were forced to learn English quickly. Today one finds that an immigrant's knowledge of English depends more on educational and social background than on the length of residency in the United States.

We can see how a woman's educational and social background prepares her to meet the challenges of life in Stockton's Cambodian enclave by returning to Sophy's story. Her father, who was a military officer, was of Chinese ethnic background, and Sophy grew up in an urban area, the city of Swap. Sophy's mother had been a teacher and a nurse, although she stopped working after becoming a mother. Sophy was raised by her grandparents, who always reminded her to behave like a lady. When the evacuation to rural labor camps started, Sophy was a second-year college student in liberal arts and had studied French. In Stockton Sophy's professional interests and motivation were enhanced by her family's financial needs and by the growing need for female leadership within the Cambodian enclave.

For Mrs. Lim, a woman rich in skills and experiences, life in the enclave has served as a stepping stone for her to regain her former position. She was raised in Phnom Penh by her adoptive mother, who was a teacher, and she became a teacher herself, serving for many years in a teachers' college. Later she took an educational administration and planning position, while her husband worked for the royal guard. Both were close to high government officials allied with Prince Sihanouk, and they had close connections with several political leaders. She was also fluent in French. She and her family survived the Pol Pot regime, escaped to a Thai border camp, and in 1980 were sponsored by her son-in-law, who was then working in California as an engineer. A local church also provided support, and Mrs. Lim and her family converted to Christianity soon after arrival in Stockton. There, she mobilized former teachers and administrators in the enclave to start a language school for Cambodian children. She also utilized her extensive political

and social network from the homeland, which she reconstructed in the new country.

CONCLUSION

In Stockton, I found the unexpected: female leadership in a community with limited resources and in enclaves where one would expect traditional values to be strong. The extremely limited job opportunities in the Cambodian enclaves have, paradoxically, created conditions highly favorable to the emergence of women's leadership. In particular, new positions in social service programs created by the welfare state are propelling women into leadership roles. In Stockton the rapid growth and concentration of the ethnic enclave has prompted an expansion of service programs for the Cambodian refugee population. Because these positions often entail work similar to women's traditional caretaking role, and because the new programs have expanded opportunities available to women, these new jobs are often disproportionately filled by women.

These government jobs carry prestige, as well as providing an important source of income, and they have enabled Cambodian women in this community to obtain economic and social power. These women are now transforming the nature of their roles both inside and outside of the family; in doing so, they have moved into positions of leadership in the home and in the larger community. Their leadership has emerged as they have struggled to shape their own lives by taking advantage of opportunities present in a new country. After all, the women who were introduced as "unlikely heroes" are not individuals who just happened to become heroes in a moment of community crisis. Rather, their leadership has developed as a consequence of structural changes faced by new immigrants in Stockton's Cambodian community. Despite traditional culture and gender roles, female leadership will develop and emerge when groups are in a situation in which ethnic identity and unity are strong, the employment opportunities for women are greater than those for men, and the intervention of the welfare state is significant.

AFTERWORD: BEHIND THE WALL

I remember my initial apprehension and anxiety about establishing contacts with Cambodian refugee communities. These people had gone through so much; their experiences seemed like a wall before me that

I didn't know how to break through. The first two communities I tried to contact made me feel entirely out of place. I was afraid I'd be asked, "What are you—a female Japanese graduate student—doing here?" Even in Stockton, the idea that I would ever feel at ease seemed far-fetched. Who would have imagined that the first apartment I visited would eventually become almost a home for me?

I was brought to Sophy's apartment by the assistant manager of the predominantly Cambodian housing complex where she lived. During that first visit I stayed for three hours watching a Cambodian video in almost complete silence. Discouraged after waiting patiently for so long, I said it was time for me to catch the bus to go home. Sophy took a break from sewing and gave me a big fresh apple from a basket in the kitchen. "Very sweet. Take this and eat on the bus. Come and visit again." She smiled. Her husband didn't say a word—or even look at me—during that first visit. I thought he was annoyed with me, a stranger, or that he did not understand English at all. But two visits later he surprised me with a friendly greeting in English and an invitation to come into their apartment even though Sophy was not at home.

Every Cambodian family responded to me affectionately. When they found out that I had come to the United States alone to attend school—a situation most Americans and I took for granted—they nearly cried. "Oh, you are alone. Your family is not here. You must be lonely. Stay with us." "It is such a pity that you have to eat terrible American dormitory food. Eat with us." Being non-American unexpectedly became an advantage, as we shared concerns about staying in "a foreign land." Their sympathy for the "lonely foreign student" reflected the hardships they had been through, their separations and their efforts to reconstruct family and community life. Family concerns were always the start of our conversations. What I had thought would be a disadvantage turned out to contribute to establishing positive and trusting relationships with people. Dismantling the wall was a slow and frustrating effort for both them and me, but we gained insights and new perspectives at each stage of our relationship.

As my connection with these people grew stronger, however, I confronted a new dilemma. I was caught in a dual identity: between being an impartial observer and a friend; between reporting my observations and being concerned for their privacy. These conflicts were thrown into relief by two events that forced me to ask myself which role I valued more. The first was a death in one of the families I had become close to. One afternoon, when I made my usual visit to Mrs. Lim's school office, I couldn't find her. Her assistant told me that her husband had died. I recalled that I had eaten a baked salty fish with him on his porch some days earlier. I was shocked to lose my "away-from-home" father,

and I wanted to help with the funeral arrangements. Moved as I was to be treated as a special friend by the family, I also felt a conflict—I couldn't seem to separate out my role as an observer. The observer in me was interested: "The family are converted Christians. They are planning Christian and Buddhist funerals for consecutive days. How will they do this? Who is coming? I will be able to see the networks of relationships and power politics in this community." I felt terrible when I realized that I was viewing the funeral as an opportunity for sociological observation. I did in fact observe interesting things at the funeral, and I stored them away in my head as I usually did. But I didn't write field notes about this experience.

The second of these events was even more shocking. A gunman forced his way into the local schoolyard and began firing indiscriminately. Five children were killed and many others were wounded. Families were in turmoil; women I knew and cared about were facing horrifying challenges and were unexpectedly thrust into the limelight. After hearing the news, I wished I had wings and could fly there immediately. I cried over the families' double victimization, first in Cambodia and now here. But still I felt the conflict between my identities as observer and friend. How dare I make a study of my friends' suffering! I didn't want to be another reporter prying into their grief. So in spite of my urge to go right away, I waited for two and a half weeks. The community had changed. People were frightened. I did not ask about the crisis, but I did not need to. People told me their stories, all I had wondered and more. I listened and tried to help. But despite my ambivalence about my role, these conversations also contributed to my study, for the consequences of this crisis strongly supported my still-emerging hypothesis about women's roles in the community.