



Brief No. 6: **Rising Up Together**

INTRODUCTION

The State of Asian Minnesotans series concluded with reflections on the different ways we can re-imagine systems to be more inclusive and an invitation to build forward in community. With the current energy and engagement in local, state, and national policy, there are many opportunities to reap the benefits of strong voter engagement. A common theme of the series has been the importance of working toward proactive, inclusive rebuilding rather than reactive actions to harmful policies. Rising up together means not only centering the needs of those who need extra help right now but relying on their strengths to truly include them. With that in mind, Karen leaders talked about challenges currently facing the community and ways the community continues to show its resilience.

As the most recent Southeast Asian immigrant group to the Twin Cities, the Karen community faces unique and significant challenges to building stability and power. In building partnerships with pan-Asian Minnesotan power bases, it is crucial to keep in mind that, while the Karen community is still finding its footing, it has just as much expertise and value as longer established communities in Minnesota.

KEY THEMES

- 1.** It is important to recognize inter-ethnic relations within the concept of Asian-ness when building solidarity. "Asian" is a political identity and does not fully encompass the breadth of experiences of different cultures, ethnicities, and histories of people categorized as "Asian."
- 2.** In Minnesota, there is a history of established immigrant communities helping more recent communities; this is especially apparent between Southeast Asian communities.
- 3.** Building collective power means focusing on more than just deficits. While disaggregated data show many challenges facing the Karen community, the community is very resilient and holds many strengths.
- 4.** While it is important to center the needs of the most vulnerable members of the community, it should always be remembered that these community members hold the solutions to their own challenges. Supporting these community members rather than prescribing outside solutions builds a stronger, more sustainable foundation of collective power.

CONTEXT

The Karen are an ethnic group from mostly Burma and Thailand. As they do not appear on community surveys, demographic information may be lumped with Burmese or Thai ethnicities. Key data include¹:

- 65,000 Karen refugees have resettled in the United States, with an additional 11,619 of the Karenni ethnicity.
- They are the most recent and largest Southeast population to arrive (starting in 2004) in MN
- Minnesota is home to the largest Karen population both in the United States and outside of Southeast Asia, with an estimated population of 17,000.
- The majority of the Karen population practices Buddhism, which includes Animism; however around 90-95% of Karen people immigrating to the United States identify as Christian.
- The Burmese are the youngest Asian population group in Minnesota with an average age of 20.7 years, and nearly half of the population being children under the age of 18.
- 88% of Burmese people in Minnesota were born outside of the United States.
- Aggregated data on income shows a median household income for Asian Minnesotans as \$66,000/year, but disaggregated data show the Burmese median household income to be \$25,000/year. They are also more likely to be living in more overcrowded housing (more than one occupant per room) compared to other Asian subpopulations.
- 80% of Burmese Minnesotans have less than a high school diploma (compared with 21% of aggregated data on Asian Minnesotans).
- 85% of Burmese report speaking English “less than very well.”
- 69% of Karen speakers in the East Metro report speaking English “less than very well.”

SUMMARY

Director of Programs and Partnerships KaYing Yang facilitated a conversation between Karen leaders in which they reflected on historical challenges faced by the Karen community and the community's response, impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, opportunities to collaborate, and what the future holds. While the data show numerous and significant barriers facing the Karen community, it is important for adjacent communities and potential collaborators to center the resilience and strength of the Karen community. Adjacent communities and potential collaborators should also always consider ways to bolster existing assets in the Karen community to provide greater access and success for Karen people.

Challenges Facing the Community

Walls Get Taller, Tables Get Longer

Many of the challenges facing the Karen community are, in and of themselves, not new or necessarily specific to Karen Minnesotans. These challenges, which show up most overtly as barriers to access, are created by cycles of inequity rooted in American capitalism and systemic racism (See SOAM 1).

¹ Data from *Invisibility Perpetuated: the Complex Economics of Asian Minnesotans* (2019), accessed at <https://caalmn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Invisibility-Perpetuated-the-Complex-Economics-of-Asian-Minnesotans.pdf>

At the same time, the community response to these challenges has been to come together to support itself as best it can. Further, while barriers to access continuously evolve to reduce access (See SOAM 2), longer established immigrant communities and communities of color are building solidarity in new and exciting ways and paying forward the help they received.

The impacts and potential repercussions of distance learning have been central in the national conversation around education, concerning achievement gaps in high school graduation rates and overrepresentation in the legal system already existed for Karen youth. Education administrator Hsajune Dyan asserted that the language barrier exacerbates already difficult to navigate education and legal systems. Hsajune Dyan cited the December 8, 2020 fatal car crash in St. Paul that took the life of Eh Da Lay as an example of young people lacking understanding of legal consequences for their actions and called on the community to take collective responsibility to support the family and each other.

Hsajune Dyan noted that recent Karen college graduates are being recruited by St. Paul Public Schools to increase communication

and engagement. He cited the recruitment and retention of Karen staff in schools as a crucial component to improving educational outcomes for Karen students.

Education and the opportunities it provides are an important consideration for Karen people building toward a more stable future. There is also an immediate need for better education and access to education around workers' rights. With 69.9% of Karen Minnesotans earning less than \$35,000 annually and overrepresented in historically anti-workers' rights industries such as food processing and manufacturing, many Karen people face a cycle of poverty regardless of work ethic or determination.

Eh Tah Khu, Co-Executive Director of the Karen Organization of Minnesota, discussed the "benefits cliff" that effectively traps many Karen workers in lower paying jobs, where they are vulnerable to exploitation. In many Karen households, only one person works, even though the average Karen household number is five people. This can be attributed to many Karen households being multigenerational, meaning only one person may be able to work. This adds important context to the average median Karen household income being \$35,000 since it does not go very far in covering even basic needs like food and rent, let alone a hospital bill. This income shortage causes many Karen Minnesotans (and many low-income Minnesotans at large) to be reliant on public benefits just to make ends meet.

Higher paying jobs are not necessarily a solution to this since an increase in individual salary may end eligibility for public benefits such as Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) or Medical Assistance. The increase in household income needed to bypass this "benefits cliff" (where a family would go from reliance on public assistance to complete financial autonomy) is, unfortunately, unrealistic under current work conditions.



The current shortage of affordable housing compounds these issues. According to the American Community Survey, only 9.6% of Karen Americans are homeowners. With rent for a 2-bedroom apartment in the Twin Cities currently averaging over \$1,300 per month¹, it can be a struggle to find affordable housing appropriate for larger, intergenerational families. Additionally, predatory landlords have been known to exploit renters unfamiliar with their rights using fear of immigration policing.

Access to housing and healthcare are human rights (see SOAM 3) and conditional access to either effectively traps Karen workers and anyone else whose family structure does not mirror the Western nuclear family paradigm in low wage jobs where they are vulnerable to exploitation (and retaliation, should they try to organize). While there are some employers who seek to place Karen workers in safe, well-compensated jobs, this is not the overall norm and the fates of Karen community members unable to work traditional jobs hang in the balance.

Though Minnesota has a comparatively robust social service infrastructure, many community resources have yet to catch up to meet the needs of the Karen community. A lack of culturally specific/culturally responsive community resources, including adequate translation, mean that barriers to otherwise available public services and resources persist.

Entwined in all of this is the need to address historical and community trauma and support holistic mental health. Kaziah Josiah highlighted that much of the older Karen generation has experienced war and trauma in the past and continue to face stressors such as social isolation due to language, financial burdens, and employment-related challenges. Further, predominant mental health treatment models, when accessible at all, are based on a Western view of mental health that is inappropriate for many Southeast Asian people (see SOAM 4).

While the Karen community is beginning to better understand the impacts and importance of mental health care, more resources are still needed for many in the community to gain a more comprehensive understanding. Similar and, at times, connected to Minnesota's social service infrastructure, the emerging culturally specific mental health resources are not enough to meet the growing need.

Community Strength

Looking from the outside in, it can be tempting to center a community's deficits in the interest of helping. Although well-intentioned, this approach erases a community's strengths and feeds into a service model that is unsustainable and may ultimately cause harm. While the data show various outcomes of the numerous challenges facing the Karen community, what is not measured in official surveys is the Karen community's resilience and strength to persist through systems designed to exclude them.

In facing a deficit in linguistic and culturally appropriate information on COVID-19 and other events and policies that impact them, the Karen community has repeatedly come together to support itself.

¹ <https://www.startribune.com/how-much-is-rent-in-twin-cities-this-guide-breaks-it-down-by-area-unit-type/414996293/>

In the webinar, Kaziah Josiah lifted up examples of church gatherings and other community events being used as public information forums. She also mentioned the rapid shift to virtual platforms both to keep people connected and to keep people informed; with the lack of sufficient translation, these formats may be some community members' primary source of information about the pandemic and the government response.

Community leaders quickly began talking to each other to spread accurate information. Eh Tah Khu convenes regular meetings with religious leaders to supplement KOM's ability to spread information from the Center for Disease Control and Minnesota Department of Health. He credits the plurality of Karen-led and Karen-focused organizations in Minnesota (both religious and otherwise) in providing strong community support. This wealth of organizers and experience also fosters creative responses to the pandemic and other issues facing the community. As a testament to the strong community relationships and trust, Eh Tah Khu shared that KOM has worked with over 3000 people since March to connect them with resources and aid.

Without being reductive or essentialist, aspects of the Karen community's resilience are rooted in historical collective trauma experienced by time spent in refugee camps. Hsajune Dyan drew connections to this in talking about the strong sense of community identity for Karen people and increasing instances of Karen high school and college graduates returning to the community to help the next generation be successful. Further, he talked about his community's will to succeed being evident in the hard work people do and the increasing numbers of Karen-owned small businesses opening.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has been shown to have an outsized impact on communities that were already vulnerable (See SOAM 3). For the Karen community, additional barriers exist in measuring exact impact since Karen is not listed on current census forms so the Karen community is lumped together with the greater Burmese community. Additionally, the language barrier is likely erasing the Karen experience in reporting (ex. coverage of Marner Saw's death that didn't interview any Karen people).

Anecdotally, we know that a large number of Karen Minnesotans have been infected by and died from the virus. Additionally, we know that a larger number of Karen people face increased risk of exposure because of jobs considered essential, job loss, and domestic violence as these factors have been reported across all communities. Shortfalls in reporting tactics and lack of language-appropriate resources currently prevent the

collection of solid numbers. It should be noted that all of the panelists in the webinar had been affected by the virus through infection or deaths of loved ones.

Outsized infection rates with high fatalities have compounded existing gaps in access to medical treatment. The lack of translators and culturally appropriate care providers have resulted in growing mistrust of healthcare providers, who are increasingly seen as a source of death. In the webinar, Hsajune Dyan lifted up the example of Karen community members seeing family going into the hospital and not coming back as a contributing factor to this and highlighted the need for future mediation and community interaction to heal this critical relationship.

Further, distance learning in response to COVID-19 has been detrimental to educational achievement for Karen students who were

already at higher risk of disengaging or dropping out. Hsajune Dyan drew on his experience with educators, students, and families, recognizing that everyone is working hard to succeed but that the resources provided are not enough and not always compatible.

Community Partnerships: Setting a Longer Table

What are ways for the Karen community to feel welcomed and connected to the larger community of Minnesota?

Throughout the webinar, the need for more and better translation was highlighted. While this is a matter of pure survival in the case of COVID-19 information, a more equitable future depends on timely translation of information and increased representation in government, educational, and commercial institutions.

The panelists discussed different ways to engage with the Karen community such as cultural events and making space in community action (such as the CAAL Day at the Capitol). Learning about Karen people from Karen people builds stronger collaboration and community, giving the Karen community a platform to tell its own story as well as increasing the number and scope of conduits into institutions in which they are underrepresented.

This approach has been used in successful collaborations with mental health providers and nonprofits but is still in a relatively new state with limited capacity. Kaziah Josiah lifted up an example of growing chemical dependency among youth needing culturally specific programming. Successful culturally specific programming has included Karen therapists as well as wrap-around services that approach clients as whole people, addressing contributing factors such as housing and employment. While successful, these programs still have limited capacity when compared to the community need. In the meantime, a group of Karen young people and college students are working to supplement these efforts through mentorship programs.

In addition to seeking out genuine relationships with Karen people and the larger community, supporting nonprofit service providers and Karen-led organizations will help to strengthen the whole community and ensure specialized needs are being met.

The Future

As pan-Asian movements continue to grow and build solidarity with other communities, it is crucial to center and celebrate voices within our community that may otherwise go unheard. By letting communities name their own vision for the future, we can help support it to become a reality.

Looking to the next twenty years, the webinar panelists envisioned a more self-sufficient community with greater Karen representation in commerce, education, and politics. Their hope was that, with greater representation, systems that are currently difficult to navigate could be re-imagined and rebuilt in ways that center inclusion and access.

Eh Tah Khu envisioned more physical space for Karen Minnesotans in the form of more homeowners to sustain multi-generational living and, eventually, a community center that could help to fully

leverage the community by creating a place to work across religious and cultural differences. Kaziah Josiah hoped for increased political engagement among the Karen community. In looking to the future, Hsajune Dyan expressed excitement for the time when the Karen community will have the chance to pay forward their wisdom and learnings to support the next generation of immigrants.

Now that we know the vision, we can support it into reality.

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

The final State of Asian Minnesotans session uplifted the importance of understanding the Asian Minnesotan community not only as a whole, but also as specific communities with their own challenges and assets. This conversation raised the following questions to be explored further:

- 1.** How can communities, including the Karen community, continue to push partners and allies to uplift their strengths and solutions from an asset-based frame, while drawing important attention to the systemic barriers and challenges they face?
- 2.** As COVID-19 continues to affect the Karen community disproportionately, how can government agencies, healthcare providers, institutions and partners better provide data to illuminate what is happening within communities and work with the Karen community to coordinate timely access to information, vaccines and treatment?
- 3.** What does it look like to build a meaningful pan-Asian identity to grow and sustain political power, that still recognizes and uplifts differences within specific ethnic communities, and builds inter-ethnic solidarity?

Summary by Jon F. Jee

REFLECTION

by Thomas Htoo

2020 has been a year that is full of challenges, and to see the impact of these challenges, leaders in the Karen communities were invited to speak at the Coalition of Asian American Leaders' last SOAM event, "Rising Up Together." The Karen community are the newest and latest immigrants in the United States, and there is a lack of representation in almost all the fields (education, economic, legislature etc.) because many Karen parents, the primary provider for the family, are forced into low-income jobs due to the lack of skills and language barriers.

Many Karen families who immigrated to the United States previously lived in refugee camp in Thailand where access to education and skills job training are limited, and there are no job opportunities. In this new country where education and skills are the essentials criteria for well-pay job opportunities, the Karen are the victim of working in low-pay jobs and underrepresented in the work-fields that affects their daily life (education, healthcare, economic, legislature, etc.). During the time of COVID, it is very important to lift up one another, listen to one another, and provide help, support, and resources to those who need it. Therefore, Karen leaders are asked to share the situation in the Karen community because of the impact of COVID-19, and to share ways to support them and provide resources.

The speakers shared that majorities of the Karen families are multigenerational families. Grandparents who are 65+, parents, and children who are under the age of 18 all live in the same house, and parents are the only provider for the families. Many Karen families are trapped in low paying jobs because of the "benefits cliff." The fear of losing public benefits such as health care and other government support programs for low income families prevents Karen families from pursuing higher paying jobs. Higher paying jobs also demand more skills, ability to speak English, and constant learning, and since such jobs may also disqualify them from the government support mentioned above, they are less likely to pursue them. Therefore, they are trapped in low income jobs and living paycheck to paycheck. In addition, most low-pay jobs also have a higher chance for COVID-19 exposure, therefore many Karen workers are vulnerable and are the victims of such a system. Many Karen families are aware of COVID-19 and are fearful of the virus, but since some workers are the sole provider for the families, they have to continue to work.

Families in the Karen community also have mistrust in the American healthcare system. This is due to misinformation, very little translated information that older Karen understand, and the low representation of the Karen people in the healthcare field. Additionally, some Karen families' mistrust came from their experience with the health care system, in that their loved one goes to hospital but never returns. Bitter experiences like these lead to more mistrust and discourage Karen families from seeking help. Karen families are at higher risk to get COVID-19 because of job exposure, but as mentioned above, many are unlikely to get help due to the mistrust of the healthcare system. In addition, since everything is digital and online, it makes it even more difficult for older people in the Karen community since they are not familiar with the technologies.

Being the latest and newest group to settle in the country, families in the Karen community are

also still in the process of rebuilding their lives. This means parents work, and children attend school. Karen students are among the people who need help and attention the most when it comes to academics. However, COVID-19 has pushed schools to practice virtual learning. For students who already feel disengaged due to language barrier, and are at risk of dropping out, virtual learning has become a challenge for them, their teachers and their families. In addition, the majority of schooling has been done in school previously before COVID, but now some parents, who are working, have to care for their children while their children learn at home. The school teachers and staff are working hard in keeping the students engaged and active, and are providing necessary resources, but it is still not enough.

The speakers also provided the strength of the Karen community and shared their views on what they would like to see for the Karen community in the future. While there is low representation of the Karen people in almost any field, the Karen as a community quickly learn to be resilient and work together to help support one another during the time of COVID-19. When jobs were shifted from workplace to home, schools switched from classroom to virtual, and the lockdown took effect, the Karen community leaders quickly learned to navigate the new system to spread accurate information to the Karen families. As the newest and latest arrivals of immigrants in America, the Karen are very resilient and hard working. The speakers envisioned that in the next twenty years, there would be more Karen homeowners, Karen businesses, and more representation in the fields such as healthcare, education, economic, legislative, etc, that affects our life on a daily basis. As a new community, the Karen community needs other communities to support, advocate, and stand in solidarity with them.



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