**Changing Meanings, Changing Locations: An Investigation into the Meanings of Gender in Female Kachin Baptist Refugees at a Denver Metro Community Center**

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# ABSTRACT

In this study, I complete in-depth qualitative interviews to understand the gender dynamics of female Kachin Baptist refugees at a Denver metro area community center from their time in Myanmar to their acculturation in the United States. This study aims to see if gender norms or practices change, and if so, by which mechanisms or processes causes persistence or change. Additionally, I am to understand how the perspective of masculinity is defined within an American and Burmese context. I discover that gender practices as a whole do not change greatly, but rather, the norms and value systems of the respondents do change, as motivated by gender egalitarian structures in the United States and church structures as a whole. Masculinity is viewed as a system of power, protection, and strength by the respondents. Relevant mechanisms of change and persistence are discussed, such as patriarchal church structures, refugee status, familial structures, and gender egalitarianism within the context of the church. I also discuss relevant findings from other similar research studies in an effort to show similarities in mechanistic behaviors. These findings can be utilized by a non-governmental organization or other support agencies to build programming and support for their arriving communities in aiding for their acculturation processes.

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# 

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# INTRODUCTION

### Preface

When I was working on a curriculum to give to high school aged immigrants and refugees, I realized that there was a significant dimension about the cultural experience left out of the picture – gender. This started to make me think: how much does gender play into process of integrating immigrants and refugees? How does religion matter in the integration process? Given that religion often has a powerful influence on gender norms and practices, how do gender, religion, and integration intersect to shape the lives and identities of refugees and immigrants? I discussed with my colleagues only to find that gender and religion were often not talked about in the context of integration, perhaps because these are sensitive topics to discuss.

Doing a brief review of the literature, I discovered that this was a question many researchers have had in the past, and I decided to look towards exploring a population in which gender dynamics are not well understood – Kachin Baptist refugees, an ethnic and religious minority from the country now known as Myanmar.

### Brief Overview

In this paper, I examine the lives of the Kachin Baptist women who have undergone the refugee resettlement process, attempting to understand if gender norms and practices change from Myanmar to the United States.

I will begin this paper by investigating the current literature regarding current theoretical perspectives on gender, religion, and immigration. Next, I highlight intersectional perspectives of each concept and discuss theories of gender performativity, with regard to how people immigrant and emigrate, looking at ways to interpret culture and religion. I then discuss my qualitative methodology, including the interview question framework development and the data interpretation process. I examine my interview data to understand how gender is understood before arrival and after arrival, then apply theoretical perspectives to understand why and how gender ideologies persist or change, especially within the context of refugees.

# A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this section, I explore the status of the current literature regarding theories of movement, gender, and refugee status. I will begin by describing the issue/research question at hand, then provide my framework for defining gender and refugee status. I will then showcase some of the literature regarding the ways gender and movement have been explored previously, then showcase some of the theories of gender and religion, highlighting femininity in particular. I will then provide a brief overlook of Myanmar’s history, highlighting the triple oppression of the Kachin Baptists of the Kachin state.

The topic of gender and immigration has been the subject for study for many years. Women tend to experience a better acculturation process due to gaining more social mobility and social capital within movement (Connor et al. 2016) which could possibly result in more personal autonomy and conflicts within the household. However, it is important to note that the status of gender roles and norms in the United States is dependent on class, race, and location with in the country (Connor et al. 2016).

## Issues at Hand

Our current notions of social constructivism indicate that gender is a human phenomenon that is relative towards history, time, and place, meaning that the movement of people, whether voluntary or involuntary, results in the experience of differential definitions of gender. Meanwhile, social institutions such as religion, culture, and government aid in constructing hierarchical meanings of gender identities, some of which may transcend time and place. In this paper, I explore how the norms and practices of gender change for Kachin Baptist refugee women, highlighting how femininity and masculinity contextualize within the United States for the experience of a refugee. At the time of publication, I have not seen any other ethnographic approaches to the gender dynamics of the Kachin state/Myanmar, however, there are many pieces of literature that highlight various cultures from around the world.

## Defining Gender and Movement

For the sake of this research, I will be using the social dramaturgical model as the framework for my understanding of gender, coupled alongside the performativity frameworks as established by Judith Butler.

### Social Dramaturgy

The dramaturgical model of social life theorizes that everyone is an actor within society, conducting our own actions, behaviors, and beliefs alongside a larger narrative or script that we align with norms and mores. Actors, thus, are people who possess some inherent meaning and motive within the greater structure of society, looking to fulfill some sort of purpose and meaning. (Gronbeck 1980). Deviancy from the “script” risks the loss of social capital and potential for people to lose their social standing. Social identities, as a result, derive their meanings and social implications via these actions, behaviors, and beliefs. Following this, some scholars have come to view gender as a kind of performance conducted by behaviors and actions that creates both gender identity and expression (Goffman 1959; Deegan 2014), in which one “does” gender, as highlighted by West and Zimmerman (1987).

Gender, thus, can be operationalized into a subset of numerous categories, including how we dress, how we talk, and how we conceptualize other gender identities. For this particular research project, we will focus on identifying how informants perform gender in their daily lives. Goffman further establishes two separate types of behavior: on-stage and back-stage behavior. On-stage behavior is defined as the behavior that people present themselves with in a general public setting, allowing other actors of society to produce meanings and interpret the significance of their behaviors alongside the script of mainstream society. Back-stage behavior offers a look into how the individual interprets gender free from the restrictions of the larger script, portraying what might otherwise be interruptive towards the larger narrative. For this study, I examine both back-stage and on-stage behavior, as the ways that women portray their own gender identities to men might be different than what they consider on their own. This framework allows me to separate how individuals feel regarding their own personal journey throughout the integration process regardless of the social influences that push them in various directions.

As with any social theory, critics have claimed that this model is too simple (Gronbeck 1980). Dramaturgy reduces an actor to a simple player within a greater network, and makes it seem as though actors have little agency. With this, I couple dramaturgy with Judith Butler’s performativity to discuss how gender can be the product of both society and agentic action.

### Gender Performativity

Butler proposes that gender is not necessarily a single action or belief, but rather, a set of patterns that continually are shaped by larger institutional forces (Butler 1988). Repetition of certain acts is important to properly establish gender, as the act of repeating something implies that it has undergone social processes of fitting the action into the narrative of social structures. Thus, gender is not just something and individual possesses or takes on, but rather, it is imbued on the individual as shaped by social institutions. Autonomy can be utilized to challenge previously held notions on gender, however, they do risk the issue of being sanctioned for “unexpected” violations of norms or mores.

Butler constructs her theory of gender to state how gender acts as a survival tool – in order to be properly received in a certain time or place, one must shift their own actions and behaviors or risk the violence and upheaval of other actors. From a social functionalist perspective, gender provides a utility of survival and understanding that is much easier for the individual (Pope 1975). Deviation from the script or from what is considered “expected” produces challenges to such labels, resulting in discomfort or other negative sanctions. Butler challenges the notions that Goffman constructs, stating that one’s gender is simply not as simple as a “role,” but rather, an act – an act that is networked within a complex stringing of institutional powers and regulations.

Coupled alongside Judith Butler’s approach to gender, stating that, “ …gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence,” (Gibson, Law, and McKay 2001), we come to understand the importance of viewing gender as a culmination of various institutional powers that shapes individuality. Goffman and Butler combined show the importance of how gender creates individual behaviors and actions, but also highlight the importance of the social context of the actors. Using both perspectives of gender, I will analyze how the respondents interact with societal pressures of “doing gender” in certain ways, while attempting to imbue their own notions of gender that may challenge the culture of the receiving country.

## Defining Movement – Immigration Theories

### Defining the Migrant/Refugee

It is important to understand the sociopolitical forces that define people moving. In this particular study, I seek to understand movement through the lens of a refugee or an asylum seeker. These phenomena of human movement can be showed in the legal definitions produced by the United Nations. According to the United Nations, a refugee is considered to be:

“A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries.” (UNHCR n.d.)

In essence, we define a refugee on the basis of sociopolitical forces – the ways that people are positioned within their political, social, religious, and ethnic structures gives rise to motivate people to move in the face of oppression For the sake of this paper, we will exclusively look at self-identified refugees as various other identifications could provide a more complex mechanism of understanding gender dynamics.

### Understanding How Refugees Acculture

The acculturation of refugees is essential to understanding how gender is conceptualized by Kachin Baptist refugees. To understand these models, we have to realize the complexity of the refugee: where they come from, what current socioeconomic statuses they carry with them, how readily can they speak the language of the receiving country (Schwartz et al. 2010). We begin by defining culture as a modular set of beliefs, ideas, and material possessions that help define and set apart a group of people, regardless of how political structures frame a given group of people (Shore 2002).

We define acculturation as the process of acquiring a certain culture, however, it is important to note that acculturation does not necessarily mitigate one’s previous culture. We see that acculturation can easily become a white-washed phenomena, in which most scholars consider the process of acculturation being Anglo-centric (Spickard 2007), implying that a value-judgement occurs, one is forced to convert their previous culture for Western norms (Schwartz, Montgomery, and Briones 2006). Ultimately, it is incredibly difficult to specify by what means someone becomes accultured. As Schwartz et al. states in their 2010 publication,

“We contend that at least among…refugees, acculturation represents changes in cultural identity (Schwartz, Montgomery, & Briones, 2006), where cultural identity represents one’s cultural practices, values, and identifications. Moreover, if acculturation comprises distinct components—both in terms of heritage and receiving cultural dimensions and in terms of practices, values, and identifications - acculturation is likely not a singular process that occurs at a single pace. To say that a person is, or is not, “acculturated” is likely an oversimplification of a complex phenomenon. One would have to specify what one means by “acculturated” and to identify the dimensions in which this acculturation has, or has not, occurred.” (Spickard 2007)

Spickard (2007) the transnational diasporic model, which accounts for the fact that people do not necessarily rid their previous identities when moving to another location, rather, migrant bodies formulate diasporas with several different loci across a general region. This allows for a multitude of different phenomena to occur, namely, chain migration, or the ability for people to move back and forth between their home and receiving locations. Diasporic models, however, fail to account for lower socioeconomic status or the generations that occur beyond first generation migrants. Using this model, we will seek to understand how refugees adopt gender in a particular locus of culture within the Denver-Metro area, formulating a compromise within their own personal definitions of gender.

## Intersecting Gender and Movement

The dominant culture of the United States can pose a challenge to previously held sociocultural definitions of gender, especially for immigrants/refugees coming from societies vastly differently considerations of gender. The cultural differences can pose a major culture shock for many individuals who have never been exposed to certain norms of gender (Minority Rights Group n.d.). Gender norms are some of the first identities established as a child, in which they become significantly solidified by adolescence (Marsicano, Lydie, and Bajos 2011), which suggests that later life course movements to areas of vastly different gender norms could result in a significant identity struggle.

## Intersecting Gender and Religion

Religion holds incredibly vast dynamics within the scope of structures within churches. I define religion in the symbolic-interactionist and anthropological approach of Michael Banton, which states that religion is a set of symbols that are collectively held by a group to possess intense and pervasive moods or feelings seeking to define human existence in a literal way (Banton 2004). Religion, therefore, holds certain beliefs of gender to certain notions, creating and defining the ways in which gendered bodies interact with religion to craft unique experiences. Within the scope of the Kachin, especially within this particular congregation, women make up the largest proportion of the congregants. Additionally, religion plays a crucial role to them – being a religious minority in their home country, religion is very important to their own identity, which gives rise to a moral structure that can be used to explain their gender practices and norms.

### The Historical and Modern-Day Perspectives of Gendered Religion

Religion transcended into lots of the political structures of early American and European societies, conducting that women were the subject of objectification. Biblical texts come at the lens of women being subordinate and the object of their father, until the woman can be passed along to their husband. Power-control theory, as Miller and Hoffman state, controls a significant amount of behavior within religious contexts, especially within the context of a patriarchal household. The more male-dominated a household becomes, the more likely that women tended to be more religious (Collett and Lizardo 2009).

The United States has seen shifts in constructing more gender equity within religious spaces, however, there still tends to be difficulties in achieving such equity. Strides have been made to include more women in positions of power, however, substantial inequalities are still present. Much like the glass ceiling analogy that has been previously made to describe the inequalities present within the workforce, Sally Purvis describes a “stained glass ceiling,” discussing the ways that women are continually graduating from seminaries and filling positions of power traditionally held by men (Purvis 1995). In general, clergywomen tend to struggle in gaining upwards mobility within churches, as patriarchal formations within churches promotes the upwards mobility of men.

### Commitment Models in Religion

An important aspect of this study is understanding the levels of commitment subjects have towards a given religion. We begin by looking at Kanter’s Commitment Theory, which details three layers of commitment within a given religion (Kanter 1972). Instrumental commitment is defined as the ways that a congregant adheres physically to the congregation. This detailed via processes like dedicating time, giving money, volunteering for the congregation, or attending services are included under this level of commitment. Affective commitment is defined as the ways that congregants commit to each other, detailed via processes like spending time with one another and developing relationships. Moral commitment is defined as commitment to the moral philosophies and symbols as described by the religion, given by the ways in which one truly believes in the order and morality of a given religious structure.

Drawing on some of the elements of Kanter, this study aims to understand how the moral, affective, and instrumental commitment of being within a Kachin Baptist congregation crafts the ideas of gender performativity and norms. While this study will not look at the religiosity of the respondents, it is certainly important to consider that the respondents utilize all three dimensions of religiosity to define their own ways they feel connected. All three of these dimensions play crucial ways in which one may identify or not identify with certain aspects of their religious affiliation.

## Intersecting Gender, Religion, and Movement

Within the context of Kachin Baptists, it has been incredibly difficult to gather information regarding their intersectionality of religion/movement/gender due to the volatility of the reason. The intersection of gender, religion, and immigration has not been researched, especially within the context of the Kachin Baptist. For the sake of this study, some case studies will be utilized to showcase ways in which migration has provided a framework to understanding the shifts in gender, but should only be taken in this light, as the cultural differences and sociocultural differences that occur on a regional level vary the outcome of such shifts significantly.

### Somali Canadian Immigrants

In a 2018 study on Somali Canadian immigrants, the process of integration was found to be a utility for gaining social capital (Karimi, Bucerius, and Thompson 2019). Given the ecclesiastical nature of Islam in Somalia, many theorists perceived the stark differences between conservative-Islam and liberal-Canadian values would clash to create significant backlash, however, gender-egalitarian identities are achieved through aligning the moral values of their Islamic-driven beliefs alongside the dominant culture’s structures of gender, providing social capital that eases individuals into the integration process. The clash of one’s religious beliefs to a completely different dominant culture, rather, takes on a non-linear path that avoids disowning one’s beliefs from Islam through secularization. The concept of cultural capital, especially gender as a form of cultural capital, will play a crucial role in understanding the mechanistic powers of gender ideologies.

## Unanswered Questions – Where We Currently Stand

Myanmar boasts an interestingly different perception of gender identities and roles that is quite different from surrounding southeastern Asian countries (Peletz, 2009) likely due to British colonization that instilled several conservative notions of gender norms with a dichotomous male-female archetype. Colonization has helped to influence anti-LGBTQ+ movements that prohibit same-sex marriage and established anti-sodomy laws which have plagued Myanmar politics for decades (McFetridge, 2014). With substantial progress made in the United States to celebrate LGBTQ+ individuals and diverse gender identities, this has quite the possibility to create issues of culture shock for Burmese refugees, especially alongside the intersection of religious and ethnic teachings conflicting with American values.

### Aims of the Study

This study focuses on a congregation of Kachin Baptist cis-gendered women from a Denver-metro area community center and aims to examine their current understandings of gender. This particular ethnic group helps us understand how their gender identities interact with the dominant norms of gender within the United States. I aim to understand the processes that these women undergo through the transition from their home countries to their receiving countries to see if certain shifts occur or if they do, the mechanisms by which such shifts do occur. I aim to show how the process of adapting one’s own religious, cultural, and regional beliefs into a holistic sense of self identity helps develop social capital to ease the integration process.

### Purpose

As more and more refugees/immigrants begin to resettle into the United States, non-governmental organizations (“NGOs”) begin to play a more critical role in the resettlement process. Many organizations turn to the education of cultural shock and education as a way to further integration refugees and immigrants into the United States, however, understandings of gender and sexuality are rarely discussed, often due to a lack of knowledge surrounding how we conceptualize shifts in gender ideologies within these populations. This study suggests ways that NGOs might better understand shifts in cultural norms that occur with immigrants and refugees from their home countries to their receiving countries. In addition, since the Kachin state of Myanmar has remained a volatile and largely unstudied location, I hope to aid in the body of knowledge that may continue studies into a fascinating culture that has largely been left out of academic narratives.

## A Deeper Look into the Kachin

To gain a better understanding of the resettlement process, it is critical to understand the history that brought the Kachin population to the United States. The Kachin people constitute a multitude of ethnic identities that occupy the northern part of Myanmar (Minority Rights Group n.d.) which consists of roughly 3% of the total population of Myanmar, equating to roughly one million people (Jaquet 2018), constituting themselves as an ethnic minority dominated by Bamar and Shan ethnic groups. It is important to note that the Kachin ethnic identity is separate from the modern-day Kachin political state, where the Kachin still remain an ethnic minority within the state. Most Kachin people identify as Christian, predominantly Protestant and Baptist, as a product of British colonization from centuries prior (Hogan 2018).

Decolonization led to the Burmese[[1]](#footnote-1) state in 1948 when Burma declared independence, in which the Kachin ethnic groups were promised of their own autonomous region, located in the heart of a resource-filled area (History et al. n.d.). Due to shifts of governmental powers, the Burmese state adopted interventionist behaviors, depleting the region of many of the funding gained from the resource extraction in the area. Regional development funding was stripped from the political state, creating a dependence on natural resources that was already being compromised by the overbearing Burmese state. The Kachin, being predominately Christian, were further persecuted under Burma declaring Buddhism as the official religion of the state (Minority Rights Group n.d.).

After dealing with the oppression of the Burmese state, the Kachin took matters into their own hands through the formation of the Kachin Independence Army (“KIA”) in the early 1960s, producing guerilla conflicts in 1962 (Hogan 2018). The push for “Burmanization” began afterwards in an effort to continue to push the ethnic group out of the political state. The dominant Buddhist religion led to an influx of conversion activities and discriminatory practices in an effort to mitigate the spread of Christianity, including things like exemption from forced labor, lower prices for foods, and better educational opportunities (Minority Rights Group n.d.). Soldiers were urged to marry Kachin women in an effort to force conversion upon marriage.

The influx of violence between the KIA and Burmese state led to a multitude of internally-displaced refugees and externally-displaced refugees towards Thailand and other south-eastern Asian countries (History et al. n.d.). The Burmese army continued attacks on Kachin civilians through crimes like rape, robbery, and summary executions. Multitudes of ceasefire agreements have been made in order to mitigate the violence, only to find such efforts to be stagnant. With many of the natural resources of the area still being operated by the Burmese government, Burmese military presence began to increase in the region after 1994, doubling the number of battalions and causing a substantial increase in human rights violations (Minority Rights Group n.d.). Since 1962, roughly 130,000 civilians have been displaced as a result of the violence with numbers likely underestimating the true nature of the conflict due to the volatility of the region.

The persecution of the Kachin shows the triple threat of these refugees, whereas this ethnic group experiences religious persecution, ethnic persecution, and resource deprivation. Being a religious and ethnic minority, these identities culminate to formulate an interesting perspective that can intersect uniquely with gender.

# DATA AND METHODS

### Background of Subjects

The United States has been the receiving country for thousands of refugees and immigrants for several decades, in which within the past four decades, the United States has had the highest immigration rates in the history of the United States (Schwartz et al. 2010). Denver has historically taken in refugees and immigrants for many years. According to Colorado’s Department of Human Services, over 51% of the immigrants resettled in Colorado were refugees under the United Nations definition. Burmese refugees made up the second-largest country of origin for the state of Colorado (Colorado Department of Human Services 2018), making up the highest proportion of Eastern Asian refugees from 1970-2017. Despite many legal setbacks set up at a federal government level, Colorado has consistently worked to produce sanctuary policy to allow immigrants and refugees live a more comfortable lifestyle. While federal policy prohibits the formation of formal sanctuary states, many de facto cities have formed within Colorado. Gov. Jared Polis has continually advocated for refugee communities, stating on multiple occasions that Colorado will always be welcome to take on asylum seekers (Politics n.d.). The current political climate of the United States has created great hostility towards immigrants and refugees, which has produced a culture of xenophobia and nationalism. This sort of culture can be directly seen in President Donald Trump’s recent travel bans, placing barriers in front of many citizens attempting to obtain visas for travel, in which Myanmar was a victim of (Eaton 2020).

The subjects are all from a community center based in the Denver-metro area. This community center is made for all different types of immigrants/refugees from any backgrounds, providing a multitude of different services from immigration legal services to financial assistance. Part of the facility contains a multi-faith center, which allows cultural groups to come together and celebrate their specific religious practices. The Kachin Baptist congregation practices every week on Sunday afternoons. The congregation consists of roughly 20-30 individuals, mainly women, aged in their mid-20s to mid-40s. According to the pastor of the congregation, nearly all of the congregants identify as refugees of the Kachin state of Myanmar. The religious services are typically completed in Jinghpaw, known colloquially as Kachin.

### Research Structure

I began the research process by working closely with the faculty of the community center, discussing plans of research etiquette, ethics, and conduct. I began working on an IRB proposal submission and also drafted up a research contract that would work with both the religious services coordinator, research services coordinator, executive director, and pastor of the congregation.

Initially, this research project was geared towards understanding the changing meanings of masculinity in men. Due to a failure to recruit an adequate amount of men for the subject pool, the research project turned to understand femininity and began recruiting women. I was able to interview one man, in which I rarely, if at all, utilize his data. This is due to the fact that one male respondent is not representative of masculinity whatsoever and cannot adequately show differences in gender ideologies.

In terms of subject demographics, I aimed to find self-identified cis-gendered women ages 20-55 who also identify as Kachin Baptist. All subjects had to have grown up in Myanmar and have lived in the United States for roughly 1 year prior to the interview process. Due to the lack of funding and available resources, I selected to have all subjects be comfortable speaking English, which was a way to find subjects that may have had more acculturated.

For this study, I decided to utilize open-ended interview questions. My interview question formatting came from “The Practice of Qualitative Research” by Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Levy. I additionally had a great amount of help from the research coordinator of the community center, who’s background came from urban anthropological research. The research coordinator and I worked to establish questions that adequately assessed the following: demographic information of the subjects, personal backgrounds of the subjects, norms of gender (both before and after arriving to the United States), and practices of gender performativity (both before and after arriving to the United States). A full list of the interview framework, with follow-up questions and probes, can be found in Appendix B.

After receiving permission from the congregation leader, I began to speak at their congregations on Sunday afternoons. While I never participated in their religious services, I usually observed from the back of the congregation to observe how they practiced their own religion and engaged by “performing gender.” I conducted three thorough observations of their services, looking at how their religion was practiced, what gender performances were apparent, and what ways the subjects interacted with each other, beyond gender. Subjects were invited to schedule interview times with me after the services were completed. Posters regarding the research project were posted in the community center, allowing potential subjects to contact me to determine eligibility. I collected contact information of all eligible subjects and reminded them through phone calls and texts when their interviews were approaching.

All interviews were conducted in the community center in a closed-room to ensure maximum privacy. After explaining the procedure alongside their rights and responsibilities, I began recording the interviews. All interviews took place within the span of 60-90 minutes. Afterwards, the interviews were then transcribed (using Transcribe) and coded to interpret themes and elements common across all interviews.

For the coding process, I decided to utilize a branching technique, starting first with the analysis for major themes. The transcripts were broken into small pieces, that were all separated via these major themes. Within each major theme subset, I proceeded to find sub-themes or categories, and proceeded to separate each group until uniquely independent themes could be determined. These were then organized into a coherent manner to analyze trends and other patterns within the data across themes. These themes were checked multiple times in order to analyze consistency in my analysis.

### Positionality

The interview and data were interpreted by myself, in which I am a cis-gendered, white man. I am an outside member of this community and have never identified as Kachin, as a refugee, nor as Baptist. It is important to note that in all circumstances, I am actively trying to avoid any ethnocentric approach to the data, however, given the inherent biases and privileges I possess, there will be some inherent bias in the interpretation of the data. To attempt to avoid as much bias as possible, I utilized a method of checking codes through multiple layers to attempt to prevent ethnocentrism, which included a repetitive analysis of codes found in my branching technique.

# RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, I use my interview data to discuss gender norms and practices change, if at all, from Myanmar to the United States. It is important to remember that all of this is as seen from the lens of my interviewees. I will focus on two major issues that were discussed in the interviews – what gender norms and practices were like prior to coming to the United States; and how gender norms and practices manifest as in the United States. I will conclude by discussing possible mechanisms by which gender norms and practices persist or change.

## Gender Understandings in Myanmar -- Prior to Arrival in the US

### Gendered Economy and Egalitarian Spaces

According to my interviews, Burmese society is characterized as having very binary and dichotomous gender roles. The workforce was mentioned by all the respondents as being a very gendered area of life, in which many jobs were considered “masculine” while few jobs were considered to be feminine as women were more likely to hold domestic care positions or be wives. The respondents discussed that masculine job positions include construction, jade mining, and fishing; and most “feminine” jobs were usually in the domestic sphere as a caretaker or housekeeper. As Naw states, when asked why she believes women are not in typically “masculine” Burmese careers, she states, “Usually they don't want women to be climbing on the top of things they don't like it. Women are bad at that sort of jobs and they don't want to hurt them. It's tradition, you know.” This statement reveals elements of a biological essentialist perspective of gender – believing that your genetic makeup inherently makes you more prone to certain roles or social identities. Often, this is the product of family socialization.

In some instances, it was common for women (especially those of lower socioeconomic statuses) to go out and sell the products of their garden or crafts in local markets, which was considered more of a hobby among the respondents rather than work. This is a unique sphere for men and women to interact via commerce, which can help craft and socialize more egalitarian forms of gender conceptualization. Kyi describes how men typically sell jade at these markets as well, as jade is a critical component to the economy for the Kachin. However, the products that are sold at these marketplaces are mostly the products of the domestic labor of these women.

From a young age, boys are expected to support their families financially. Since family is a critical support system for many Burmese citizens, it is imperative that helping the family financially happens at some point in their life. Naw states,

Sometimes, the boys have to work in a tea shop and they have to support their families. And then, our people thinking...in the United States, 18 years old is like teenager, but our country not like that. For some its 6 or 7 year old, they go and make things. They go out of the house and they need to go and do everything. They don't have [an] education… They be thinking that 18 years old isn't important enough. Sometimes, families are poorer, they don't have jobs, they don't have income, so it depends. Some [boys] would collect....trash essentially, they gather it all together, and then they sell it so that they can get money. Some try selling something in a market, like watermelon, saying ‘Buy something! Buy something!’

It's apparent here that the family socializes children, specifically boys, to be financially supportive of their families, which could be the key to socializing certain behaviors later on in life, such as taking on a “breadwinner” role.

Alongside the marketplace, the sport of soccer plays a role of being another form of a gender egalitarian space, however, this is only pertinent for younger children. All of the respondents made comments of how they played soccer as a kid, however, as they progressed through childhood, they began to adopt more gendered leisure activities, such as shopping, socializing with friends, hiking, or watching Korean dramas. These dimensions of entertainment will be discussed in further detail later.

### Familial Relations and Ties

The family in Burmese culture plays a significant role in the daily activities and gender expectations. Family is often the first exposure for a child in terms of gender roles, expectations, and division of household labor (Waite 2000). Therefore, these early years of childhood development shape notions of gender that can transcend the lifetime of the child. Each of the subjects defined their own personal family in terms of not only their parents and siblings, but also grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles. Many discussed how extended family provided a large component of their own childcare growing up. As Chewa describes, “My mom and dad, they doing business [referring to work], so I was growing up with my sister-in-law, cousin, sister. In 2000, my mom passed away, my dad, take care of me, my sister, older sister.” As Chewa hints at, it was a common practice for extended family to take on the role of caretaking, which was also considered to be a feminine task.

At some point, each of the women described having to take on a caretaker position in their families, usually in times of great need. As stated above, it is imperative that each family members assists with some sort of tasks of caretaking in some capacity. For women, caretaking and housekeeping roles were the most common positions to hold. Chewa describes her story of having to step up in a dire time for her family:

Because my mom had passed away in 2000, one of my younger brothers was four years old at the time, so and then, I had two younger sisters and two younger brothers so, me and my older sister, we needed to take care like a mom, because my big sister, she also passed away in 2002, and since my mom passed away in 2000, so, we need to take care of my brother and sister like a mom. My dad also he need to make business because he needed to support us with school, and then, everything.

Chewa describes two key gender ideologies here: firstly, that the mom must hold a caretaker status; secondly, that regardless of the absence of a parent, the father must continue to serve his family financially, meaning that he will likely work outside the house. This shows how gender ideologies shape daily life and how children are socialized.

The family provides the first exposure to religion, and often, the religious community acts as an extended family for women. Being bound religiously creates a community and network for these women that transcends bloodlines and creates a continually expansive network of individuals to collaborate and share social capital. Each of the subjects mentioned that their first exposure to the Kachin Baptist church was via attending services as a child in Myanmar. From a young age, children in the Kachin Baptist church was given a choice of when they would like to be baptized. Chewa discusses the role of family in her baptism, saying:

In other religions, they don't baptize as late as we do. For Catholics, they baptize when they are young, like babies, even though they don't know anything yet, but they baptize. Before our baptism, we baptize if you believe in Jesus. If you not believe it, take your time, if you're not ready, it's okay.

Knowledge of the church doctrine is powerful, which is why families try to expose children to church doctrine as soon as possible. Chewa later joked that while it is mostly the choice of the individual to become baptized, it was really the parents that forced you to take the “leap of faith.” Faith can play a critical role in the socialization of different families as well.

Hayma discussed in her interview the differences between rural and urban families. She mentioned how living in the city, she didn’t have as big of a family as many of the other women in the congregation. While she still had her parents, grandparents, and siblings alongside her, she felt that her family was comparatively not as strong as other families. Rural families, however, tended to be much larger and contain many more cousins, aunts, uncles, etc. Hayma hints at some of the theory of Tönnies’ concepts of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft, in which Gemeinschaft refers to a more rural and traditional sense of social bonding, while Gesellschaft refers to a more urban sense of social bonding (Bond 2009). Hayma talks about how rural communities tended to lack a lot of the resources of the urban communities, such as education. For this reason, the church played a significant influence in the education of these residents, ultimately driving religious ideologies, and indirectly, religious norms/values of gender, into their socialization. Later in this section, I will discuss how the religious doctrine of these subjects shapes their gender norms, and thus, rural communities relying on religion as a source of education means that the church can play a critical role in shaping gender ideology. However, from here, it is clear to see that Hayma sees a much tighter familial bond in rural communities.

Religion played a critical role in developing the family as well. The respondents discussed arranged marriages, and how often, the pastor of the congregation would choose another man in the congregation for each young woman, which was a practice typically carried out when the respondents were 14-16 years of age. The fathers of these young adults decided whether or not the marriage would happen, alongside the support of the pastor. All of the women mentioned that religion played a critical role in their decision to become a mother as well.

The division of labor growing up was a gendered concept as well, both as children growing up in Myanmar, and undertaking the division of labor as newlyweds. Many of the respondents commented how their father was either rarely, if ever, present in many domestic care situations. Often times, the mother or female-identifying family members were the ones who were expected and completed tasks such as cleaning or cooking. Four of the five respondents mentioned getting married in Myanmar prior to arriving in the United States, while one respondent was married in the United States. For the respondents that married while in Myanmar, each respondent described a process by which their husband has a separate set of objects and things separate from the rest of the household.

When the respondents had children in Myanmar, it appears that most of the chores are not necessarily gendered, at least at a young age. Respondents described having their children complete a wide variety of chores, from folding laundry to putting away toys. Myia describes, “They usually had to clean the house. Clean the floor, the windows. When they play with their toys, and when they finish, they keep cleaning *(motions putting toys in bin)*.” However, as Waite describes in their 2000 article, the impression of their parents’ gendered division of labor rubs off onto their kids. Kyia was describing a time that her kids were asking to help her with chores, stating:

My daughters and little cousins.... you know in Asian people, I'm worried that they won't make things clean enough. My daughters always say, "Oh, I want to do the dishes!" but I'm always worried that they aren't going to do it good enough. I'm worry a lot *(laughs)*

Here, we see a perfect example of how the children of the respondents are socialized into various gender ideologies. Kohlberg’s Stages of Gender Development discuss how this process is laid out at a young age. Parents provide the first exposure of a dichotomous view of gender, presenting the world as “mommies” and “daddies,” through which the child begins to conform themselves to a binary form of gender (Ruble et al. 2007). This is the first stage of child development that produces a sense of their own gender, and eventually, the child understands gender outside the perspective of their own body, but then goes on to understand their own gender identity in juxtaposition with members of other gender identities[[2]](#footnote-2). This theory has been also applied to multiple cultures and has been found to be applicable in some case studies, however, it has never been considered in the context of Burmese culture (De Lisi and Gallagher 1991).

Outside of the context of chores, interviewees described children engaging in gendered play. When asked about some of the common activities for girls, Chewa described a wide variety of things, such as shopping, socializing with friends, hiking, or watching Korean dramas. As girls grow older, they begin to take care of more aspects of the house, but many find joy in some aspects of the domestic care of the household. Hayma discussed enjoying taking care of her garden and selling the products of their garden at local markets. Often times, chores were used as leverage to go out and socialize. Myia describes how she was allowed to go out after finishing her garden chores:

In our country, most of the time, we have a garden. So behind our house, we do like gardens, we have like cilantro, we have like veggies, we also have to worry about watering. So after school, we have to go home, we have to water them, and after our responsibilities were done, we can go anywhere. Otherwise, they don't allow us to go out at night, so we have to finish the job first and then we can go.

What was interesting to see was that often, when asked about free time, the respondents replied with chores as making a large component of their childhoods outside of their normal hours of either being in school or church. All the respondents answered my question scheme of “What do you like to do in your free time” usually describing childcare or pursuing a career alongside their studies in order to ensure financial stability for the family.

Here, we see that there is a significant difference in terms of social patterns and meanings behind gender identities in Burmese culture. The formation of binary views of gender becomes engrained and solidified through the continual patterns of integration, socialization, and belief structures of religion and culture. In the next segment, I work to show how these meanings and structures transfer to life in the United States.

## Gender Understandings After Arrival in the US

### Persistence of Gender Practices and Ideologies

In general, the respondents said that most of the ways that they perform and practice gender remain the same. Men still play the roles as breadwinners, women play large parts of the domestic sphere, and generally, not many changes have occurred to make households more egalitarian. When it comes to the division of labor in the household, respondents still reported doing a majority of the housework, childcare tasks, and only one respondent had a job.

Respondents, however, discussed that there are attempts in trying to have men play a larger role in the household. A majority of the respondents discussed talking with their partners to try and establish a more balanced scheme in terms of how chores are assigned and how men can play a larger care-taking role in their children (besides the monetary component they provide). When Naw was asked if she’s had any conflicts with her husband about chores in the United States, she discusses,

Yes, yes, sometimes. First time…he wanted everything ironed, and it seemed like everything I did was for him. Now, we discuss and then decide...okay, so here's how we'll do things.

We clearly see that there are attempts to have communication and discourse about the distribution of household chores. However, domestic practices still remain quite gendered, similar to how it was practiced in Myanmar. As Ataca and Berry discuss in their research regarding Turkish couples in Canada, we see that this newfound sense of autonomy and discourse causes a personal development of the individual discovering their own personal sense of self within the United States, but also having to deal with the subsequent marital conflicts that result from the difficulties of formulating a cultural compromise (Ataca and Berry 2002). American culture does provide some push and urge to create more gender egalitarian spaces within the household, as Chewa discusses when referencing the ways that jobs and money force households to become more egalitarian:

Here, that's why husband and wife has to balance work well, otherwise, husbands only work and then the woman is only not working, like some countries don't have this. Time is very important here.

With women having opportunities to occupy spheres they may have otherwise been absent from, such as the workplace, it appears that the call for creating these spaces becomes recognizable.

In many ways, life still remains quite similar to that in Myanmar. Children are still expected to complete the same chores, women still care for the house and kids, and men still work jobs that are typically physically demanding and tasking. Family still plays a crucial role in the United States, and often, the church provides a way to create an extended family. All of the women discussed that the church was really important towards their social circle, as their weekly services provide a two-hour time to catch up, let the kids play with each other, and share solidarity within their own religion.

In my personal observations of their church services, I was surprised to find that the services were largely comprised of women. The service was generally structured as follows: a song to call order, the pastor speaking for a brief moment, roughly 3-4 Bible passages read by women of the congregation, the pastor holding a sermon, and a song to depart with. Women played a crucial role in the functioning of the service, which mostly consisted of female-presenting speakers. According to church doctrine, a woman is not allowed to serve the role as pastor, however, women are allowed to take the same classes and workshops that allows one to become a pastor of the church. When asked about how the churches structure women and men in the church, the respondents said that the church calls women to having children and spending time with their children. As Hayma states,

Right now, there's a lot of female pastors throughout the religion[[3]](#footnote-3). However, Kachin Baptist they do not allow female pastors. It's because of women have nothing that they can do [to the church] because they need to take care of the baby, take care of their kids, you know.

Hayma was one of three respondents to cite that childbearing and domestic practices were the largest deterrent for women to hold leadership positions within the church. This sense of gender ideology stems from a concept as discussed by Michael Rea called “gender as a divine attribute,” in which we attribute the ideas of masculinity and femininity within religious structures (namely, Christianity) to provide theological substance for gender differences (Rea 2016). The idea of associating God or Jesus with masculine traits means that leaders are identified as masculine. This sort of belief is apparent with Chewa, who in her interview, stated that she believes men are called to be leaders since Jesus was a man. Naw also described how in Myanmar, most men are viewed as “god-like” and said, “…they think that husband is like a God.” In essence, the church seems to reinforce patriarchal structures, and the household works to mimic these. However, it’s difficult to know which way the causal arrow points – most likely the influence is mutual.

A practice that carried over from Myanmar to the United States was individualism within religion. All of the respondents discussed having some aspect of interpreting the Bible not only from the lens of their pastor, but on the basis of their own personal beliefs and interpretations from their readings of such. This is similar to other forms of Protestantism, which emphasizes individual relationships with God. Dissonance with the pastor is not frequent, however, it seems as though that when the pastor says something that the respondents do not agree with, it is common for the respondents to maintain their own understandings. Kyi agreed that most of the time, she agreed with their pastor, but also recognized the possibility of dissonance:

Pastor [removed for personal identifiers]...most of the time, I take some of what he says, then I realize what I believe myself from the Bible. Some pastors, they preach differently, it really depends on the Bible. Some preach about histories, like that, it really depends on the pastor... I listen, I realize, and I learn from it. I do my own thing about reading and learning the Bible.

What we see with Kyi is reflected in the other respondents – the idea that one is autonomous within their own belief structure and thinking.

When asked whether or not they believe that women should hold the title of “pastor” within the church, three of the five respondents felt that the option should be available, but that most women would probably not take the opportunity to do so, citing that women would likely be too busy to take on the role of the pastor on top of their domestic duties. As Pemala described the obligations of women in caring for their children on top of being a pastor, she said:

It depends on the persons. It's a lot of work to become a pastor, like you have to take a bunch of different classes, go to school, help out with lots of church functions. Yeah, they're able to if they have the time. It usually means that women are giving up a lot of time to study the Bible and take lots of time to go to classes.

It appears that the structure of the church gives women little actual power, and the ideology that a woman’s godly duty is to “have kids” mitigates the desire and probability of women in the church from taking on leadership positions within the church. Later in this section, we will dissect more of the church’s structure in how this may play a role in terms of constructing gender norms in America and Myanmar.

### Attempting to Reform Gendered Structures and Practices – The Power Paradox

As discussed earlier, gender norms and practices formed in Myanmar persist; however, there is definitely a shift in the ideology and ways that the respondents conceptualize and understand femininity and masculinity in the United States. A major highlight of what the respondents discussed was coming to the United States with a newfound sense of freedom and autonomy. As Chewa put it,

When I was here, I had to adjust because it's very different, it's completely different than what Myanmar countries had. Everything is totally very different. So, I have to look at what is available here, what does it look like, and I just have to follow. It's because there's like freedoms of speech, freedoms of everything, I'm much more available in what I want to do in a good way.

With a newfound sense of self comes changes in the actions and behaviors of the respondents. All respondents reported sharing similar feelings to Chewa, in that now, they can adopt the preferences and practices of American women. This meant that each respondent believed that it was okay for a woman to hold a job in the United States, and they believed that their husbands were allowed to be stay-at-home parents should they ever want to be. As Chewa says,

It depends on the family. If they have enough money to pay and support the child, then yeah. Most of women, they just stay at home taking care of the house, but it depends. Sometimes they switch it up.

What ultimately juxtaposes this new sense-of-self, however, is the fact that gendered practices do not change greatly and still remain in very separate spheres.

The respondents reported having an ability to provide input into situations against their husbands as well. In cases, mainly minor arguments or disagreements, women felt that they were much more willing to speak their mind and dissent towards their husbands. In essence, women feel a sense of cultural power to speak their mind and possess more autonomy towards decisions that affect themselves or their family. Naw in particular brought up a point about notions of gender in Myanmar versus the United States, as she said her gender values and practices are ultimately location dependent. She discusses how she felt in Myanmar versus the United States:

In our family, men is always right. We obey to them, we obey our husbands, and we can't complain about nothing, because we just can't. In our country, we really can't talk back. In here, it's different, right? In our country, we need to show our respect and do what he says. If we ever cook something, we have to give it to our husbands. We have to make sure he's fed. After that, we can eat…. I don't like my husband controlling me at all. You know, I'm not in my country! But I'm always sitting here thinking, ‘oh, my husband is always right.’

We can clearly see that there is an element of cognitive dissonance with how she practices gender and how she truly feels about gender. Something critical from Naw that we see is that despite feeling more powerful and having a greater sense of self, the resources and ability to disestablish these systems of inequality are still gendered. This establishes a power paradox, in that women feel more agency and seem to have more egalitarian views but lack the resources or power to change their situations. Importantly, Naw implies that it’s a popular cultural practice in Myanmar that husbands/men do control women and dictate their own actions and opinions, highlighting how the United States is known more for more gender egalitarian practices[[4]](#footnote-4).

When it comes to religion, there is quite a lot of dissonance of gendered structures as well. Many of the women interviewed discussed feeling uneasy and unappreciative of the ways that women are portrayed within Kachin Baptist, often citing that they do not necessarily agree with the church’s view of gender. Religion provides a critical moral backing for a lot of these respondents, and the fact that the structure of the church provides little-to-no backing of gender egalitarian ideologies, it becomes incredibly tough.

### Dimensions of Freedom – Viewing America as Egalitarian

The respondents mentioned a variety of different ways that they feel they can express their own new sense of freedom and autonomy within the United States. One of the first ways, as stated earlier, was a freedom of decision and dialogue, in that women felt compelled that they could speak their mind and express their own opinions. There still is, however, some aspects in which it is not okay to speak your own mind, especially against your husband. As Naw says, “I like my rights. I can speak when I want…I can get married, like any other girl.” Other respondents described having a keener sense of self expression, describing the ability to appear and act in certain ways that might otherwise go against the grain in Myanmar. Chewa talked about her integration process and shared insight on her ability to feel comfortable expressing herself in front of other people:

It took a little bit of times to get used to it and adjust and see. Sometimes, we are very shy, but in our country, most of the girls from other countries are also very shy. But in here, we are so confident that now, even I gained a lot of confidence - I can talk in front of so many peoples, I can sing, but before that, I was so shy and nervous because I don't have any of those skills. We learn from other people and what they do.

Chewa feels like a new person – she feels that she could be her authentic self in the United States and be able to show her humanity in ways that she would have otherwise been restricted to beforehand. Additionally, we see with Chewa that this is a socialized behavior gained in her integration process – she saw how other men and women acted within the United States and allowed herself to conform to those ideologies.

On the other hand, Hayma and Naw felt less confined in terms of beauty. Naw mentioned having to never worry about makeup, or that if she decides not to wear makeup, she feels that she avoids being judged. Hayma discussed being able to break from the confines of age:

Woman and men, between the woman and the man, lots of differences, but in the United States, we feel more like the same. I feel like they don't care about ages. Young or old, here, I like it here because old women and old ladies are really fancy (laughs) In our country, that old lady, may be fancy, but, people judge a lot, like ‘oh look at that ugly lady!’ and here, it's no judgement.

We see here that femininity in Myanmar restricts the ability for women to feel like their true selves, and ultimately, it’s likely that the way that masculinity is constructed that contributes to the ways that women feel a desire to look, act, or be a certain way. The ability to break out of these confines in America provides a sense of cultural capital that is essential towards integrating within American culture, but also gives leverage that can power social movements to create more gender egalitarian spaces. Both of these themes are discussed below in greater detail.

### Perceptions of Masculinity

An interesting finding from this study was the fact that the original intent of the study was unable to be completed due to the fact that men were uncomfortable discussing the context of masculinity and femininity within the United States. This may indicate that men felt conflicted about their lives in the US, or it could be that Kachin Baptist men feel uncomfortable discussing such information. Regardless, men may be grappling with a lack of power or agency.

Masculinity (through the lens of the female respondents) was viewed in terms of three key themes: power, protection, and leadership. Within the context of power, women viewed men as intrinsically having more power, alongside being more physically capable than women. However, this power can be utilized for good, in the instance of role models. Every respondent held an expectation that men should inherently be good role models for all around them, including children and extended family. It’s important that men thus treat people with respect, live up to their breadwinner roles, and encourage such within people around them.

Despite wanting change and more of a say within their domestic relationships, women still viewed masculinity through the lens of protection. Four of the five respondents said that they viewed men as a protector and safeguard, and they viewed this as a benefit. The one male respondent also viewed his sense of masculinity from this lens, stating that he, “…felt obligated to take care of his wife and girls…give them protection like Jesus would.”

In summary, we see that the ways that gender is normalized can be different from each other. When refugees come to the US, the appearance of gender egalitarianism in this new context provides space for women to speak their minds, however, the patriarchal structures within refugee households remain largely unchanged. While attempts are made to create more egalitarian spaces, the ways that gender is practiced still fairly separate and binary. In the next segment, I will evaluate some reasoning that could provide causation as to how these changes occur and discuss how norms and practices could shift.

## Mechanisms of Change/Persistence

### Religion and Theological Structures

For the respondents, Baptist religion plays a critical role in forming belief structures and how they morally navigate their lives. As Aune and Guest discuss, there are plenty of ways in which gender is constructed in the Bible via essentialism, while simultaneously, the Bible can also be read in egalitarian ways (Aune and Guest 2019).

We start our discussion looking at how the Bible refers to the divine with masculine pronouns and in masculine contexts, it creates a linkage of masculinity to power and the divine. Jesus was referenced frequently by m respondents, saying how they must follow his actions, follow his beliefs and continue his legacy. This indirectly influences patriarchal structures, especially with the lack of presence of most female-identifying figures within the church. Secondly, as many of the women reference, there is a calling to certain gender norms and behaviors. Women say that God calls them to be good and effective mothers, while God calls men to be strong, powerful, and good role models for others. Thus, religion has an important influence on gender norms and practices, and in this regard, there is continuity from Myanmar to the United States –Kachin Baptists maintain their beliefs. Lastly, men are considered leaders. As stated earlier with Jesus being a leader, the church reflects such patterns in its own structures. Calling men to being leaders and allowing them to dictate the religion transfers directly to the household and reproduces patriarchal structures as a whole. This sort of ideology can be seen in how Aune and Guest describe Christianity being utilized as a motivator for certain gender ideologies. In essence, the ways that the Bible structures gender shapes a certain way of life, and ultimately, the Bible forms a foundational structure in how its adherents believe certain things. Certainly, many of the respondents were quick to say that the Bible shapes their understandings of gender.

On the other hand, as Aune and Guest describe, there are ways in which the Bible can promote gender equality. Women often used phrases such as “God views us equally in His eyes,” or talked about how God does not engage in discriminatory behavior. Aune and Guest describe ways that God should really be viewed as being a gender-less figure within the church, as some view God as being on a much higher level of existence and possessing no characteristics (2019). The respondents of this research study seemed to not hold such beliefs, however, the Aune and Guest study shows the fluidity of understanding gender in a Biblical sense.

The way that the church is structured, both in terms of leadership and practices, hinder changes in practice as well. The lack of women in power and leadership positions within the church provides barriers towards women providing their own say and opinion within church related matters. This isn’t to say that women aren’t allowed to provide input, however, the ease of access towards such capital is hindered for women rather than men. Some of the practices, however, also strip women of autonomy. The practice of arranged marriages, for example, provides little to no say for the participants of the marriage, especially women. The lack of autonomy in important decisions, especially as divorce is strongly stigmatized in the church, give women little power over an incredibly important life decision. Classes that lead towards positions, like becoming a pastor, are available for women, but due to the domestic workload that women experience in their households most are unable to take such classes. Additional barriers, such as the fact that the pastor position is held exclusively for men, provide hindrances for forming gender equality. This sort of rule is unique to the Kachin Baptist church, as women are allowed to become pastors within other Baptist congregations

In a case study by Gap Min, who looked at the leadership structures of a Korean immigrant congregations[[5]](#footnote-5), we see how detrimental the lack of women in leadership provides to the quality of experience within the church. Gap Min showcases that the cultural beliefs of gender hierarchy coupled with the church’s emphasis on age as a social status, has created structures within the Korean church that reflect gender ideologies that transfer out of the congregation and into the lives of women in non-congregational settings (Min 2008). From this, we see a large impact of how structures within the church construct gender outside the church, and thus, the leadership structures within church settings reflect a lot of the gender ideology that is performed outside of the context of the church.

Consequently, the South Korean Evangelical Church also provides a space for gender egalitarian ideologies. As discussed by Chong in her 2006 publication, the church serves as a way for women to not only enforce a gender binary and domestic sphere, but to help escape from it (2006). From what we saw with the women respondents, we see that the creation of a female dominated congregation could create a more of a social netting where women can craft a social network to go above and beyond their lifestyles at home (Chong 2006).

Because of the focus on individual understandings of religion in the Kachin Baptist church, there is a unique opportunity for members to have their own theological beliefs. Each of the respondents could recount at least one time of disagreeing with their pastor, in which they were able to create and craft their own schema of thought when it came to their own religion. This could provide a hotbed of innovation within their own religion, meaning that the respondents are able to solidify their own personal beliefs within the church but also able to go against the status quo of the church, acting against the majority sentiment at the time.

### Refugee Status – Grounded from Afar

What ultimately makes a refugee’s gender identity different from any other immigrant? We must recall the drama of a refugee – the fact that one must be stripped away from their familiar environments, not by choice, but by the threat of danger, war, and crime. Likely none of these respondents would have ever envisioned coming to the United States intentionally, however, the ways that case workers and international organizations such as the UNHCR cause many refugees to be placed all throughout the world in unfamiliar contexts. These new establishments of gender constructs might cause fear or uncertainty in a time of conflicting moral structures, so reverting back to their internalized definitions of gender provides this grounding mechanism to produce some continuity. In essence, we see reverting to home gender ideologies as a way to formulate something that feels normal in a time of crisis. This could very well explain why many of the respondents still held a lot of the same gender practices or beliefs – they wanted to feel like home without being at home.

Of course, this explanation requires a lot more detail and thought. First, we must consider the fact that not all refugees will think the same. Some refugees may hold looser ties towards their home countries, while other refugees may hold stronger ties. It truly is a manner of attainment of cultural capital and the dedication towards pursuing the home culture when socializing to a new gender ideology.

An experimental framework that studied Kachin Baptist immigrants could answer how greatly the refugee process translates into the gender acculturation process and should be considered in future endeavors of this experiment. If tangible, categorizing respondents with the level of connection to their home culture would provide a substantial backing to see how ties towards a region provides the ability to acculturate with a new set of gender ideologies.

### Dominant Burmese Culture – Forming a Compromise

When the respondents were asked if they felt like Americans, each one responded that they felt “Burmese/Kachin-American.” The formation of a hyphenated identity is incredibly powerful, showing that there is a compromise of the identities from both within the Kachin state and the United States. The integration process is an incredibly long, difficult, and draining process that often results in this formation of a compromise to fulfil the desires of one culture and fit the needs of another. Naw recounts how in Myanmar, the ability to hit your kids as a form of discipline is much more socially approved:

We can bring the kid in our house, and if the kid behaves badly, Americans just say, ‘Oh wow, you're being so bad!’ (laughs) Here, if they do something bad, I just sit there all angry saying ‘HEY! I WANT TO PUNCH!’ because when they are mad, they also punch me, so my mindset is that I want to punch my kids too. I don't want to shout, I just tell them ‘you know, mommy won't ever punch you.’ But our culture is really into shouting. Sometimes, we forget, and then we shout. It's hard to change.

What we see here is a perfect example of Goffman’s on-stage versus back-stage behavior, in which it’s incredibly difficult to fathom having to leave one’s culture behind (Deegan 2014). Naw is experiencing the formation of a compromise, in which she struggles to leave behind her old culture for a new one. This is true for all newcomers. Just as Connor et al discovered with respect to Somali refugees, women have a personal struggle to attain the culture of the United States while wanting to retain values and cultural beliefs of their home culture (Connor et al. 2016). However, the major benefit of losing one’s own personal culture may be the achievement of new cultural capital, which helps to more easily integrate into the receiving culture. Here, we define cultural capital as the possession of certain cultural goods, as outlined in Shore’s definition of culture. Cultural capital plays a crucial role in the ways the respondents describe on-stage behavior, but not necessarily in the ways that off-stage behavior works. As we see in Karimi et al’s 2019 publication: …doing gender and constructing gender identities according to certain sociocultural norms could be viewed as a form of cultural capital, comparable to language skills or educational attainment...” (Karimi et al. 2019). Thus, the attainment of gender behavior as a form of cultural capital helps affect the integration process as a whole and can affect the ways that gender norms and practices persist or change throughout the integration process.

Additionally, in Chong’s 2006 article, we see some similar findings between Kachin familial structures and Korean familial structures. In Chong’s article, she finds that these Korean families develop “familism,” whereas the structure of a family becomes so engrained and structured that the roles and identities formed within a family must persist in order for the structure of the family to maintain continuity. In essence, the Korean family becomes so reliant on each other for certain aspects/roles that shifts in practices or norms could cause a significant disruption and result in the family structure collapsing.

# CONCLUSION

## Applications of this Study

I hope that the findings of this study can be utilized by non-profit organizations and other NGOs to provide substantial assistance towards helping their local communities integrate into the receiving communities adequately and effectively. As stated previously, gender and religion are often left out of integration discussions and programs. Since these are incredibly critical issues for these respondents, I hope that these findings can help to shape programming that adequately trains staff in these dimensions. Additionally, I hope that my study could be replicated with other immigrant and refugee populations to highlight the ways that their specific communities undergo the resettlement process, and to better understand how gender and religion shape integration for these populations.

## Largest Takeways

For Kachin Baptist women, we find that the norms and ideas about how gender is structured does indeed change with locational differences. The resettlement and acculturation process allow women to engage with a diverse set of gender egalitarianism values, which provides motivation to craft a new value set. However, most of the practices of gender persist from Myanmar to the United States.

### Prior to Arrival

I discovered that for Kachin Baptist women, life in Myanmar was incredibly gendered. Life was organized around the principles of gender, stating that men and women ought to complete different jobs, chores, and leisure activities. We saw how our respondents were socialized into their own gender identities, showing how the formation of gender egalitarian spaces was quickly dissolved into gendered walks of life as they aged. Parents and extended family members recreated these constructions in their daily lives, charging their children to complete certain chores around the house. As they grew older, friends and schools became more influential agents of socialization, furthering the gendered processes reflected in their experiences.

The church plays an insurmountable role in bringing families together, aiding in the construction of the extended family for many of these respondents. The church produced a patriarchal structure that was often reflected in the household, leaving women with no autonomy to make their own decisions or choices regarding important household tasks. This reflects back towards Power-Control theory, in that we see more patriarchal households producing more religious female family members. From here, we can associate religiosity towards strength of adherence to church doctrine, which could indicate how closely the church reflects their gender ideologies.

### After Arrival

Several of my major findings were unfolded in this section, namely, the persistence of gender practices and ideologies. There was ultimately a conflict of interest that formulates within the respondents, in which America’s gender egalitarianism engraves itself in the respondents’ ideologies, but women still hold the same ideologies as they did in Myanmar. This conflict is indicative of the acculturation process, formulating a compromise of beliefs between the home country and receiving country.

The respondents discussed a desire to reform patriarchal structures they live in, especially the domestic sphere, but ultimately found little traction in trying to make a more egalitarian household. The respondents formulated what I would call a “power paradox” in which women begin to gain more gender egalitarian ideologies, however, fail to properly construct new households in this regard.

The United States was viewed as the epitome of gender egalitarianism by the respondents, in which the United States helped them formulate new norms and values about their own personal identity within gender. More specifically, the respondents discussed having the strength to show disapproval towards others, look/appear differently, and feel more confident than they would in Myanmar.

Masculinity as a whole was viewed from three key perspectives: strength, protection, and honor. From an outside perspective, men play a critical role of being good role models, especially as parents or church leaders. Women tended to view men as being separate, but equal, in that they hold different gender norms and roles that ought to be separated to maintain congruency.

### Mechanisms of Change and Persistence

There are three key mechanisms that could explain the change and persistence of some ideologies and practices over others: religious and theological structures; refugee status; and dominant Burmese culture.

The church produces an interesting perspective of both creating gender differentiation while simultaneously providing a space for gender egalitarianism. Women are unable to climb any leadership structures due to the belief structures of the church, however, find that the church provides a way to seek similar people with similar ideologies. The church provides a community that acts as an extended family, crucial for helping formulate any progressive gender ideologies.

With refugee status, the drama of movement causes one to find solace in holding certain gender ideologies. Unlike an immigrant, who may desire to place themselves voluntarily, it’s more likely that the refugee label causes one to hold more Burmese gender identities.

Lastly, Spickard’s transnational diasporic model suggests that these refugee communities formulate diasporas, in which these communities help continue certain gender ideologies and practices over others. In essence, in familiar environments with people who hold similar gender ideologies, one may find it easier to keep Burmese ideologies over the new dominant culture.

## Final Thoughts

In this study, I conducted interviews recruited from a Denver-Metro area community center’s Kachin Baptist congregation to understand the gender dynamics of their community, particularly in women, throughout the integration process from Myanmar to their receiving community. Utilizing the lens of performativity, I found that while there is some change in gender norms, however gender practices remain relatively the same from Myanmar to the United States.

Prior to arrival in the United States, we explored how the respondents experienced an incredibly dichotomous view of gender, as men and women lived very different and separate lives. The hierarchy of gender was reinforced through social institutions of Myanmar, such as the church or government, which created gendered divisions of labor both outside and within the household. Afterwards, we looked at how gender was perceived and understood within Burmese cultures in the context of American cultures, seeing how norms/values of gender change, but practices do not. This resulted in the formation of a “power paradox,” where women feel a sense of greater egalitarianism, but their lives are not greatly changed. I discussed the ways that the church both hinders and provides some possibilities for creating more egalitarian practices, while the production of a hyphenated culture creates internal conflict, often resulting in a “compromise” of cultural practices.

Future scholars wishing to explore these issues should aim a larger sample size while focusing on other portions of the United States to account for the diversity of gender interpretations within receiving communities. Additionally, considering how masculinity shifts alongside femininity should be a fruitful subject for investigation. One thing this study was unable to do was to understand gender from a class and broader geographic perspective. Gender has an incredibly different meaning class to class, so being able to interpret the class of different refugee groups and how this may affect gender norms and practices should be another avenue of investigation.

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# APPENDIX A – TABLE OF SUBJECTS

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **NAME** | **GENDER** | **AGE** | **MARITAL STATUS** | **OCCUPATION** | **NUMBER OF KIDS** | **YEARS IN US** |
| Hayma | Female | 46 | Married | Stay-at-home Mom | 3 | 4 |
| Kyi | Female | 38 | Married | Stay-at-home Mom | 2 | 10 |
| Myia | Female | 29 | Married | Stay-at-home Mom | 2 | 3 |
| Pemala | Female | 25 | Married | Stay-at-home Mom | 2 | 5 |
| Chewa | Female | 25 | Single | Food Service | 0 | 3 |
| Pastor | Male | 45 | Married | Pastor | 2 | 10 |

**TABLE ONE. DEMOGRAPHICS OF EACH RESPONDENT.**

# APPENDIX B – INTERVIEW FRAMEWORK

*Note: In this interview schema, the barebones are displayed. Often times, I tried to weave these phrases or questions into conversation. Often times, instead of saying things like, “What does your religion say about being a man?” I would ask, “Tell me about a time you felt like you saw a man being a man in God’s eye.” This framework more or less guides me in the general direction I was aiming in each interview.*

You are taking part in a research study about gender perceptions and roles. We will not use your real name in this project, nor will I record/utilize any identifiers that could provide any input to your identity. Feel free to decline to answer any questions you like or make you feel uncomfortable. You are not required to answer any of these questions. You are welcome to take a break at any time during our interview. If any of these questions need further clarification, please feel free to ask. Should you want to no longer be a part of this research project, you can let me know at any time. I’ll be recording our interview per your consent. Audio files of this interview will only be in my possession and will be kept secure with me.

For this interview, I want to begin looking at where you currently are.

* Do you work?
  + If so, what do you do?
  + Occupation Fields
* Do you have kids?
  + If so, how many?
  + If so, give a rough age range.
* Are you married?
  + If so, how long have you been married?
* Does any extended family live with you currently?
  + If so, in what relation to you?
* How old are you?

For this interview, I want you to look back at when you were in Myanmar.

* Where did you grow up?
  + Who took care of you?
  + Did either of your parents work? If so, who, and what did they do?
* What was your family like?
  + Did you have to do chores as a child?
    - If so, what chores?
  + Did any extended family take care of you? Aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins?
  + Who else lived with you?
* Did you get married in Myanmar?
  + How did you meet your significant other?
* Did you have kids in Myanmar?
  + If so, did your kids go to school?
  + If so, what chores did your kids have to do?
  + If so, what did your kids like to do?
* Were you religious in Myanmar?
  + If so, what do you identify as religiously?
  + How did you join that church/religion?
  + What did it mean to be religious?
    - What did you do to practice your religion?

Now, I want you to think about your religious beliefs as of now. I ask that you share anything that you find valuable and important for any of these questions. There is no wrong answer when it comes to any of these questions.

* If someone were to ask you to describe your religion, what would you tell them?
* What does your religion say about being a man?
  + What do men do?
    - What things does God want him to do?
    - What things does God not want him to do?
  + What is a man’s purpose?
  + What do women do?
    - What things does God want her to do?
    - What things does God not want her to do?
  + What is a woman’s purpose?
  + What do men look like?
    - What do men wear?
    - What do men look like?
    - What’s okay or not okay for a man to do?
  + What do women look like?
    - What do women wear?
    - What do women look like?
    - What’s okay or not okay for a woman to do?

Now, I want you to think about your time in Myanmar before coming to the United States.

* Back then, what was your definition of being a “true woman?”
  + What did that mean?
* What did women do in Myanmar?
  + What activities did women do?
    - Sports, hobbies, etc
  + What jobs were women typically in?
  + What activities did men do?
    - Sports, hobbies, etc
  + What jobs were men typically in?
  + How were men/women sanctioned for not conforming to typical expectations of their gender identity?
* Within your religious group…
  + What positions did women typically hold?
  + What position did men typically hold?
* At home…
  + What chores did you normally do?
  + What chores would men normally do?
  + Who had jobs/made money?
  + Who took care of the kids?
* If your own personal meaning of a “true woman,” did you feel like a true woman?
  + Why or why not?
  + What made you a true woman?
  + Did you ever feel pressure to “be a woman?”
    - If so, in what capacity?
  + Were you ever made fun of or harassed for “not being a woman?”
    - If so, in what capacity?

After coming to the United States and given your time here:

* What is a “true woman”?
* What tasks do women do?
* What does a woman look like?
* Is it okay for a woman to…
  + Take care of her kids?
    - Why or why not?
  + Stay-at-home with her kids?
    - Why or why not?
  + Not have a job?
    - Why or why not?
* Is it okay for a man to…
  + Take care of her kids?
    - Why or why not?
  + Stay-at-home with her kids?
    - Why or why not?
  + Not have a job?
    - Why or why not?
* Do you feel like an American true woman?
  + Why or why not?
  + What makes you a true man?
  + Have you ever felt pressure to “be a woman?”
    - If so, in what capacity?
  + Have you ever been made fun of or harassed for “not being a woman?”
    - If so, in what capacity?

For any of those ideas that you described above, I want you to think how you came to that conclusion. Did any of your beliefs change from Myanmar to the United States regarding…

* Your beliefs on what it means to be a man?
* Your beliefs on what it means to be a woman?
* How might your religion influence any of these opinions?

Do you have anything else that you would like to tell me that you think is important for this research project?

1. For the sake of this paper, when discussing the country, I will utilize the term “Myanmar,” but when describing Myanmar as an adjective, I will utilize the term “Burmese.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I personally believe that this theory lacks the ability to describe key features of gender identity formation, including the formation of non-binary or non-conforming gender identities. However, this thesis will only consider the scope of this Western binary view of gender. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Here, Hayma was discussing the Baptist church as a whole, comparing the Kachin Baptist church to the American Baptist church. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. By no means do I want to argue that the United States is a gender egalitarian society. Rather, the outside perspective of the United States to members of other cultures and backgrounds view the United States as being more egalitarian, especially when the respondents compare their own cultural experiences and backgrounds to the current gender practices of the United States. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Korean immigrant churches are structured incredibly differently from the Kachin, both in terms of culture and in terms of theological structures. I want to utilize this study to showcase some of the ways that binary and essentialist views of gender affect the outcome of women’s experiences within a Christian setting. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)