

Transgressing Masculinities and Displaced Bodies: Myanmar Male Sex Workers in Northern Thailand

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Abstract

Masculinities are developed and transformed in relation to specific historical and geographical contexts. In Myanmar, the ideal man is constructed in association with power, self-autonomy, productivity, and heterosexual virility—qualities that form the core components of normative masculinity. In contexts of displacement, however, masculinities are shaped not only by the gender ideals of migrants' homelands but also by the socio-cultural realities of host societies. Displacement introduces new pressures and possibilities that reshape gendered identities and sexual subjectivities, compelling individuals to reconceptualize and reconstruct their masculinities. Political instability and economic precarity in Myanmar have forced many men to migrate to Thailand in search of livelihood opportunities. While most engage in low-paid labor in sectors such as agriculture, construction, and service work, some enter the sex industry in pursuit of higher income and economic mobility. Male sex work, however, remains socially stigmatized and morally condemned within their rural-based moral communities, as well as in the host context of Thailand, where Buddhist moral norms continue to shape ideals of what constitutes a "good man." Drawing on ethnographic research with twenty-nine Myanmar male sex workers, this paper examines how masculinities are transgressed, negotiated, and reconfigured in the context of migration. Focusing on displaced bodies and gendered lives, it explores how Myanmar men who provide sexual services to other men navigate stigma, morality, and survival. The paper argues that under conditions of displacement, hegemonic masculinities are not simply reproduced but are strategically reconstructed and transformed into femininities and queer in response to new social, economic, and moral landscapes.