

Living with Vulnerabilities: Queer Lives Under Buddhist Heteronormativity in Rural Southern Shan State, Myanmar

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Abstract

This study explores the lived experiences of queer people in rural Southern Shan State, Myanmar, who negotiate strict social and moral contexts. Due to Buddhist heteronormativity, queer lives are characterized by structural vulnerabilities that are deeply embedded in socio-cultural frameworks. The study utilizes a qualitative methodology, primarily conducting semi-structured interviews to collect data on queer life stories in rural communities. This method provides this study to examine how queer individuals navigate their identities with moral concepts of Kamma (karma) and Hpone (spiritual power), which mostly distinguish non-heteronormative identities as morally suspect. In Southern Shan State, Buddhist norms produce strict gender roles that link biological sex to social and moral duty. Drawing on Michael Foucault's theory of subjectivity and Lauren Berlant's theory of the intimate public, this study examines how Buddhist heteronormativity shapes queer subjectivity in everyday life by producing vulnerabilities and queer intimate publics at the same time. The findings reveal that queer individuals are more likely to be vulnerable in this situation since both the state and Buddhist communities shape queer identities in vulnerable positions. This study also shows that queer lives are marginalized from community traditions and social heritage because of dominant social and cultural beliefs and norms. This study contributes to enhancing the voices of queer individuals and recording the resilience of excluded lives within the strict moral environments in rural Myanmar.