

Stigmas Beyond Boundaries: Cultural Resilience of Myanmar Widows and Single Mothers in Mae Sot Community, Thailand

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Abstract

This phenomenological study examines the lived experiences of stigma and cultural resilience among Myanmar widows and single mothers who migrated to Mae Sot, Thailand, particularly following the 2021 military coup. Drawing on semi-structured and in-depth interviews with twenty-five purposively selected Myanmar migrant women — recruited through NGO networks and snowball sampling to ensure access to hard-to-reach participants — the research explores four interconnected dimensions: migration motivations and pathways, legal and economic challenges, gender-specific difficulties, and coping strategies within host communities.

Findings reveal that political persecution, especially among Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) participants, constitutes the primary migration driver, often compounded by economic hardship and domestic instability. In Mae Sot, respondents navigate intersecting vulnerabilities rooted in legal precarity, age-based employment discrimination, chronic health conditions, and gender-specific stigmatization. Single mothers and widows face particular marginalization through sexual harassment and derogatory treatment within their own migrant communities, while institutional mechanisms for protection remain largely absent. The absence of legal documentation and systematic exclusion from factory employment due to age restrictions (typically 18–30 years) lock older women and those with health conditions out of formal labor markets. Survival depends critically on NGO assistance, supplemented by peer support networks and familial motivation — particularly motherhood — which serves as both a source of vulnerability and resilience.

The study identifies significant gaps in social protection frameworks and highlights how patriarchal norms operate across borders to reproduce gender-based marginalization. This research contributes to understanding the gendered dimensions of political displacement and the specific vulnerabilities faced by single mothers and widows in cross-border migration contexts, underscoring the necessity for comprehensive approaches that move beyond temporary humanitarian assistance toward sustainable integration and dignified livelihoods.