

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Social exclusions of a Burmese refugee woman's migration journey in the United States

Jue Wang\* and Lan Kolano

Department of Middle, Secondary, and K-12 Education, Cato College of Education, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, North Carolina, United States of America

**Abstract**

With the rise of global migration, an increasing number of women are seeking autonomy and opportunity through movement; however, many face systemic barriers and gendered risks both during their journeys and in host countries. This article examines the structural vulnerabilities faced by migrant women by tracing the life story of Aye, a Burmese refugee who resettled in the United States (U.S.). Her migration journey reflects broader gendered dynamics in global migration. Drawing on narrative inquiry, this study highlights how exclusion from healthcare, education, employment, and legal protections shapes women's migration experiences. It traces how Aye, despite encountering compounded constraints across migration to Malaysia and the U.S., continuously negotiated access to essential resources through self-agency. Her narrative reveals the persistence of gendered expectations within both public systems and family life, even after resettlement. The article underscores the importance of equitable access to education, work, and self-development opportunities for migrant women's survival and autonomy. This study calls for a more grounded and policy-relevant understanding of refugee integration, one that recognizes equitable access as both a lived necessity and a transformative right for migrant women.

**Keywords:** Migrant women; Gendered migration; Structural vulnerability; Equitable access; Self-agency

**\*Corresponding author:**Jue Wang  
(jwang88@charlotte.edu)

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**1. Introduction**

In recent years, cross-border population movements, especially from developing countries to developed nations, as well as among developing countries, have significantly impacted international relations (Castles, 2017). By 2020, the number of international migrants had reached 281 million, representing 3.6% of the global population living outside their country of birth (UN's International Organization for Migration, 2024). According to the United Nations Women (2024), women and girls account for roughly half of all international migrants. They also make up about half of all migrant workers who send money back home, known as remittance senders. Women often migrate to improve their livelihoods and economic prospects, among other reasons. For many, migration enhances their autonomy, agency, and independence by providing opportunities for a better life. However, it can also expose women and girls to serious risks, including exploitation, human trafficking, forced labor, and gender-based violence (GBV) (Fleury, 2016).

While existing literature often conceptualizes integration through frameworks of belonging, legal citizenship, or cultural assimilation, these perspectives frequently overlook migrant women's needs for autonomy, self-realization, and professional development. For many migrant women, integration remains difficult due to structural barriers in host societies. However, their aspirations for personal growth and independence become a powerful source of motivation, prompting them to actively negotiate access to the resources necessary for self-development. This study draws on the story of Aye and her intergenerational family history to illustrate how migrant women navigate the tension between caregiving responsibilities and personal ambition. Rather than centering integration policies solely on cultural adaptation, this paper argues for a rights-based, access-oriented approach that prioritizes women's autonomy. By ensuring equitable access to education, employment, and healthcare, integration policies can support migrant women not only in surviving migration but in building independent, self-directed futures.

## 1.1. Literature review

This literature review examined existing scholarship on refugee integration, with particular attention to three interconnected themes: gendered barriers to employment and education, the structural conditions shaping refugee women's experiences, and the concept of belonging. It first explored gendered norms and their impact on refugee women's access to work and education. The review then examined how belonging has been theorized in migration studies and how it differs from related concepts such as assimilation. Finally, it identified key gaps in the literature concerning structural access and proposes a need to expand beyond belonging-centered approaches to better support migrant women.

### 1.1.1. Gender norms, employment, and educational barriers for immigrant women

The rise of female migration has been a notable consequence of globalization. Before the 1970s, the majority of migrant laborers were male. However, global economic expansion and the diversification of labor markets have simultaneously reinforced traditional gender divisions of labor and created new dynamics that shift household responsibilities and economic power toward women. Female migrants are no longer simply accompanying family members; they now constitute a significant share of the labor force and are often the primary breadwinners within migrant households (Ullah & Chattoraj, 2023).

While some scholars argue that globalization has opened up opportunities for women by decentralizing

power and generating employment, others remain skeptical. Critics point out that although women's participation in the labor market has increased, domestic responsibilities, particularly caregiving, remain unevenly distributed. In some cases, transnational corporations have even exacerbated gender inequality by exploiting women as a cheaper, more flexible labor force (Kabeer, 2021). The consequences of globalization may thus disproportionately harm women, particularly through the intensification of poverty (Çağatay & Erturk, 2004). Due to their disadvantaged position in the labor market, heavy involvement in the care economy, and reproductive roles shaped by traditional gender norms, women face systemic barriers to resource access and upward mobility. This phenomenon is widely recognized as the "feminization of poverty" (Ullah *et al.*, 2023, p.2).

Women refugee migrants face distinct gender-based challenges. In many patriarchal societies, women have limited bodily autonomy, an issue that not only constitutes a violation of global human rights norms but also restricts their access to leadership and decision-making roles (Earth & Sthapit, 2002). Even in resettlement contexts, entrenched gender norms continue to marginalize refugee women, preventing their full participation in public, social, and professional spheres (Gálvez, 2023). GBV is another critical issue in the context of migration. Priddy *et al.* (2022), for example, documented the severe GBV experienced by Rohingya women in Myanmar and the ongoing challenges they face in refugee camps in Bangladesh, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Rohingya, a persecuted ethnic minority in Myanmar, have long suffered from systemic ethnic violence, forcing nearly a million to flee to precarious conditions across the border.

In crisis and emergency contexts, GBV becomes increasingly prevalent, with vulnerable populations, especially women, at heightened risk of abuse, exploitation, and violence. GBV is often rooted in gendered social roles and power structures, targeting individuals based on their gender or the roles they are expected to perform. Cultural taboos, social stigma, and fear of reputational harm often prevent women from reporting such violence, further entrenching their vulnerability. These persistent gender norms severely restrict women's mobility and limit their access to critical services such as healthcare, education, and legal protection, thereby exacerbating structural inequalities.

Employment plays a crucial role in refugee women's independence and integration, yet numerous barriers inhibit their full participation in the labor market. Refugee women consistently experience higher rates

of unemployment and underemployment than their male counterparts (Iglesias *et al.*, 2022). Caregiving responsibilities within the family often limit their time and flexibility to search for or sustain employment (Koyama, 2015). Externally, they encounter systemic barriers such as workplace discrimination rooted in cultural stereotypes, non-recognition of foreign qualifications, gaps in employment history, and the non-transferability of skills (Campbell, 2018; Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2000). These challenges not only hinder economic participation but also deepen patterns of dependency and social marginalization.

Education is frequently identified as a pathway to empowerment and socioeconomic mobility, yet refugee women continue to face considerable obstacles in accessing and completing formal education. Language barriers, disrupted educational histories, and financial hardship remain significant impediments to educational attainment (Burke, 2022; Hartley *et al.*, 2019). Recent work by Burke *et al.* (2023) identified seven critical barriers that restrict refugee women's access to higher education, including rigid gender expectations, intensive caregiving duties, and experiences of racism and xenophobia. As a result, many refugee women report feeling like outsiders within academic institutions and remain disconnected from mainstream educational trajectories. This disconnection not only undermines their sense of belonging but also limits their capacity to advance professionally and build sustainable livelihoods.

### 1.1.2. Sense of belonging in migration studies

The concept of belonging has become a central concern in migration studies, particularly in relation to refugee and migrant integration. Unlike assimilation, which assumes that migrants must adopt the dominant culture to become insiders, belonging is understood as a more subjective and multifaceted experience. While assimilation retains a hierarchical structure that casts migrants as outsiders striving to enter a pre-established cultural order, belonging emphasizes emotional attachment, social inclusion, and the individual's self-positioning within various communities (Chattoraj & Gerharz, 2019).

Belonging, as Gilroy (2000) and others have argued, is not a straightforward process in multicultural societies. Individuals may feel attachments to multiple social groups, including family (Walsh, 2006), co-ethnic diasporas, and national identities (Westwood & Phizacklea, 2000). In the context of migration, these attachments often become fluid, and migrants may simultaneously occupy the position of an insider in one context, such as within an ethnic or religious enclave, and an outsider in another, such as in mainstream national institutions. This dual positioning is

particularly evident in migrant-receiving societies, where belonging operates on multiple levels: as an insider to the dominant cultural group or as an insider within already-established immigrant networks.

Belonging is shaped by both socioeconomic and sociocultural factors, and it frequently functions to reproduce binary distinctions between insiders and outsiders. Migrants often find themselves navigating this borderland, experiencing a partial or aspirational sense of being included without fully achieving it. As a result, belonging is less a fixed status than an ongoing, situated negotiation (Ullah *et al.*, 2021). Chattoraj's (2022) study of internally displaced Tamil populations in Colombo, Sri Lanka, illustrates this process of "becoming insiders" despite their formal inclusion being delayed or contested. Similar dynamics have been observed among privileged migrants. Ullah *et al.* (2021), for instance, showed that even skilled and economically independent Southeast Asian migrants, despite holding legal status and high social capital, may still position themselves as outsiders due to persistent cultural barriers, institutional discrimination, or ideological exclusion. These findings emphasize that belonging is not guaranteed by privilege, legality, or economic contribution; rather, it is contingent upon deeper social recognition and interaction.

Existing studies show that belonging is often conditional, hierarchical, and exclusionary, shaped by dominant cultural norms and state practices. This raises an urgent question: what happens when belonging is unattainable, undesirable, or insufficient? Despite legal status or years of residence, many migrants continue to experience exclusion due to language barriers, cultural dissonance, or gendered expectations. This paper responds to this gap by proposing a shift from belonging-centered integration models toward a focus on access, not just to legal recognition, but to healthcare, education, livelihood, and personal autonomy. By foregrounding the lived experience of a Burmese refugee woman, this study rethinks integration not as a matter of cultural fit but as the ability to claim and exercise rights in material, embodied, and socially embedded ways.

## 2. Data and methods

### 2.1. Research design

This study used a qualitative narrative approach to explore the resettlement experiences and identity formation of a Burmese refugee woman. Narrative inquiry is particularly effective for understanding how individuals interpret their past, present, and future within the context of broader societal structures (Elliott, 2005). This method captures personal stories' temporal and relational aspects, revealing how lived experiences are shaped and understood over

time. The focus extends beyond merely recounting events; it aims to uncover how stories are constructed, presented, and imbued with meaning.

This study also used a constructivist approach, highlighting that narratives are co-created by researchers and participants. It draws on Gadamer's (2004) idea of the "fusion of horizons," which underscores the importance of personal histories and cultural contexts in storytelling. By promoting open dialog and active listening, the researchers allowed narratives to emerge naturally, enabling a deeper exploration of participants' experiences. As Gubrium and Holstein (1997) point out, interviews are dynamic processes that generate meaning through interaction. This reflexive engagement ensures that the narratives remain true to the participant's voice while offering deeper analytical insights.

## 2.2. Data collection

Data were collected through multiple methods to provide a holistic and triangulated understanding of Aye's experiences. Six focus groups were conducted with other Burmese refugees, comprising a total of 21 participants, to help contextualize Aye's story within broader cultural and social frameworks. Participants were recruited through the non-governmental organization (NGO) where Aye worked, which also served as an after-school program for Burmese refugee families whose children attended its programs. As Plummer (1995) noted, narratives gain depth when individual stories are examined alongside the collective meanings shared within a community, such as linguistic barriers and gender expectations, enriching the interpretation of Aye's narrative.

Following the focus groups, three semi-structured interviews were conducted, designed to elicit detailed narratives across different stages of Aye's life. The interviews were organized chronologically, a key component of narrative research that emphasizes temporality in storytelling (Elliott, 2005). The first interview focused on Aye's early life in Burma, her migration experiences in Malaysia, and her eventual resettlement in the United States. The second interview explored her adaptive strategies, cultural resources, and reflections on identity. The final interview addressed her sense of integration and lingering feelings of exclusion, particularly her self-identification as a "guest" despite formal citizenship.

Participant observation further complemented the data collection process. Over a 3-month period, the researcher volunteered at the NGO where Aye works, enabling the researcher to witness her daily interactions and role as a community member. Observational data were systematically recorded in detailed field notes, capturing contextual nuances that interviews might not

reveal. Informal conversations during this period added spontaneous reflections that offered additional insight into Aye's lived experiences. Integrating interviews, focus groups, and participant observation aligns with Riessman's (2008) recommendation for data triangulation, enhancing the credibility and depth of qualitative findings.

The two researchers contributed to the data collection process in complementary ways. Researcher 1 conducted the individual interviews and participant observation, spending three months volunteering at the community organization to build rapport and gather in-depth, contextual data. Researcher 2 led the focus group interviews and contributed to participant recruitment and study design. With a decades-long relationship with the NGO, Researcher 2 brought extensive experience conducting research and evaluation in this setting, ensuring ethical continuity and cultural responsiveness throughout the project.

## 2.3. Data analysis

The data analysis employed a holistic-content narrative approach, focusing on Aye's complete life story to interpret the meanings embedded in her lived experiences (Lieblich *et al.*, 1998). This method treats the narrative as a coherent whole, allowing the identification of interwoven themes across time, rather than fragmenting her account into discrete categories (Elliott, 2005; Riessman, 2008). The goal was to honor the emotional, symbolic, and relational dimensions of Aye's experiences, particularly as they relate to identity, agency, and access.

The analysis unfolded in several stages. First, all interviews and field notes were transcribed verbatim and carefully reviewed multiple times by both researchers to ensure immersion in the data. Second, preliminary coding was conducted independently by the first author using an open coding strategy to identify recurring patterns, concepts, and expressions relevant to the research questions (Saldaña, 2016). Codes included concepts such as "forced migration," "economic responsibility," "gendered expectations," "freedom," and "feeling like a guest."

Third, these initial codes were then reviewed collaboratively by both researchers, who brought different positional and professional perspectives to the interpretation process. Through a series of reflective meetings, the research team grouped codes into higher-order thematic categories, such as access and agency, gendered constraints, negotiating belonging, and transformative resilience. The team used memo-writing and thematic mapping to clarify how these themes emerged across Aye's narrative and intersected with focus group data.

In line with Lieblich *et al.*'s (1998) holistic-content framework, the researchers paid particular attention to key turning points in Aye's story, such as her decision to migrate for her mother's medical care, her response to marital abandonment, and her re-entry into education and work. These moments were analyzed not only for their content but for how they reflected evolving patterns of autonomy, resistance, and adaptation.

Focus group data, while not analyzed as deeply as the central case study, were coded thematically to contextualize and validate Aye's narrative within the broader social experiences of Burmese refugee women. These discussions reinforced common challenges and served as a comparative backdrop that added texture and depth to the central case.

This iterative and collaborative approach ensured that the analysis remained reflexive, culturally grounded, and sensitive to power dynamics, preserving Aye's voice while critically engaging with the broader systemic structures shaping her experience.

## 2.4. Ethical considerations

Ethical protocols were strictly adhered to ensure the safety, confidentiality, and dignity of participants. Informed consent was obtained before data collection, and pseudonyms were employed to protect participant anonymity. Special attention was given to the ethical implications of power dynamics, especially in the context of refugee research, where participants may feel vulnerable or marginalized. To address these concerns, the researchers adopted a collaborative and respectful approach, prioritizing Aye's agency in sharing her story throughout the research process (Plummer, 2001).

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Intergenerational migration history: A legacy of women's agency

Aye's family migration trajectory reflects how, under the unequal conditions of global economic development and regional political instability, women are often compelled to migrate for economic reasons due to familial responsibilities. Her family's story highlights the gendered vulnerabilities experienced during migration. Women face layered exclusions in this process, shaped by educational, economic, linguistic, and cultural barriers, as well as restrictive gender expectations within the family. While individual agency plays a crucial role in how women navigate and survive such exclusionary environments, structural change is also necessary to support and protect their efforts. Despite living in a society that placed structural limits on women's education, independence, and social participation, both her grandmother and mother

modeled resilience and strategic negotiation of access, offering early lessons in how to survive and adapt through self-determination.

Her grandmother, left to raise six daughters alone after her husband became a monk and "was not interested in women or other things," refused to remain economically dependent or immobile. Initially, she chose to support her six children through sewing, but with limited opportunities and still unable to afford her family, she decided to migrate to the capital city, Yangon. As Aye explained, "Because in a poor city, a lot of people's income is not enough to pay for sewing work. So, instead of waiting, she worried about her future. So that is why she moved to another city so she can get money daily and then save money to live." This decision to relocate to Yangon was not just a survival strategy; it was a deliberate act to gain material access to income and stability. It repositioned her family geographically and socially, providing new opportunities in the face of rural poverty and war-related instability.

This legacy of agency continued through Aye's mother, who carried the burden of caregiving from a young age. "My mom has to stay home. She took care of her five sisters. Her mom's working. So, when her mom worked, she had to take care of her sisters and did chores and everything." Despite having little time or support to attend school, Aye's mother pursued learning informally: "she wanted to go to school, but her mom never allowed her... There is one temple, like a religious place... So, she learned to read there." Her resourcefulness, even in limited circumstances, reflected a refusal to accept exclusion from knowledge as permanent.

After marrying Aye's father, who worked at a bank in a different city, Aye's mother remained the primary caregiver. Still, she sought financial independence. "So, my mom's life was so poor, so she did not want to stay at home. So, she has a very small grocery store, and then she can sell food, and then she sells vegetables. So, we have groceries." For her, access to stability meant creating income autonomously, even while raising four children mostly on her own.

This emphasis on education and self-sufficiency became central to how she raised her children. Despite having little formal education herself, she pushed all four of her children to study hard. If the results did not meet her standards, Aye recalled her mother would punish the children by hitting their palms with a stick, with the number of strikes corresponding to the number of points they missed. Aye's early educational experience was influenced by inadequate school support and fear of punishment from her mother and brother. Aye described her struggle: "I do not understand anything what teacher said... My brother, he always got good scores, and then he said, 'You do not know

how to do that.' He taught me one time and two times, and then he is angry. He's been mad. I do not understand. My tears... I forgot because I was scared of him."

Even in this emotionally difficult environment, her mother actively sought solutions. When a skilled math teacher moved into their neighborhood, she paid for tutoring: "my mom knew that I was weak at math... so that is why she gave the teacher money... and then I can overcome it because he teaches really well." This targeted support helped Aye gain confidence and overcome her fear of math. Eventually, all four children in the family were admitted to university. Aye studied physics, while her brothers pursued engineering, math, and international relations.

These stories reflect how Aye's access to education, confidence, and mobility was not granted by systems but actively built through the labor and foresight of women in her family. While formal institutions, schools, work structures, and even families limited women's options, her grandmother and mother modeled an alternative: self-agency as a strategy for seeking integration in a new cultural context for survival. Their actions created pathways that were not designed for women, and Aye inherited not just their struggles but also their strategies. This intergenerational agency became the foundation from which she later navigated life in Malaysia and the United States. When Aye recounted the stories of her grandmother and mother, it became clear that structural constraints on women's autonomy often necessitated migration as a means of survival and child-rearing. Within this process, what these women sought was not belonging, but access to resources, safety, and opportunities. The intergenerational self-pursuit of integration emerged as a form of legacy, passed down through maternal lines.

### **3.2. Constrained choices, strategic negotiation: Aye's migration journey through Malaysia and the United States**

Aye's migration journey was shaped not by displacement in the conventional refugee sense but by a constellation of structural exclusions, gendered family obligations, and health-related precarity that left her with few viable choices. Her story illustrates how access to education, income, legal protection, and healthcare must be negotiated relationally and strategically, rather than assumed through formal pathways like citizenship or refugee status.

After completing 2 years of university in Burma, Aye's education was abruptly halted by national unrest. "I studied for 2 years," she recalled, "after that we [had] big

conflicts and then school closed for about 3 years. Because they strike people... people cannot gather, and they are not allowed to be in groups." Although the institution had shut down, Aye continued to support her family by working in a bamboo weaving factory while attending online classes, eventually completing her degree.

Even after earning an accounting diploma through a British Embassy program and working as an accounting assistant, with a salary three times higher than her previous job, Aye still could not meet her mother's medical needs. As the only daughter, she felt a deep personal obligation to care for her. "Because I am close to my mom, she suffered all the time. So, I do not want to see it... If she has no money, she cannot go to the doctor, has no medicine, and has no treatment." To generate more income, Aye migrated to Malaysia through an employment agency and took a job in a factory as a human resource assistant. Her salary was again triple what she had earned in Burma. She explained: "so I keep some money, so my salary is higher, my mom got more, but she always said, I have no money, no money, I need this, I need this... So, it made me go to another country... that is why I went to Malaysia."

Her life in Malaysia, however, was defined by legal and social constraints. During the week, workers were not allowed to leave the factory. Though weekends offered the chance to go outside, Aye typically chose to work extra shifts for double pay: "I work Monday to Friday, and Saturday and Sunday, I work extra... So I do not have break time." For 2 years, she worked nearly nonstop, her health gradually deteriorating as a result.

Eventually, Aye developed a serious kidney condition. A doctor warned her that she would need dialysis. But without legal residency or health coverage, Malaysia could no longer offer her access to care. Returning to Burma was equally impossible. "If I go back to my country, I cannot make money... [If I stayed in Malaysia] with no legal permit, people will put me into jail... Some girls were sent to Thailand... a lot of undocumented people, especially women, were made into sex workers." Her reflection reveals the compound vulnerabilities faced by undocumented women in transit states, vulnerabilities intensified by gender, class, and health.

To avoid both detention and untreated illness, Aye made a difficult decision: she married a man with refugee status to gain protection and relocate to the United States. "So I chose the second option," she said. "It was a risky decision for my marriage, but I made it to support my family." Strikingly, after arriving in the United States, her

condition improved rapidly, "After I got married, I got better... I recovered."

Aye's narrative reveals how access is the defining concern of refugee and migrant life. Her trajectory was shaped not by a linear path to integration but by successive negotiations: leaving school, moving abroad, working under exploitative conditions, and entering a strategic marriage. These decisions were not purely personal; they were shaped by the interplay of national policy, gendered responsibility, and bodily vulnerability. Her story underscores that survival and dignity for migrant women often depend not on formal rights or recognition, but on contextual, improvised, and high-risk strategies to maintain access to protection, income, and health.

### 3.3. Reclaiming agency through access: A new chapter of freedom and purpose

Aye's journey in the United States highlights the ongoing efforts of women to gain meaningful access to work, independence, safety, education, and a voice in society to achieve a sense of belonging. Her story illustrates that even after migrating to another country, the gendered constraints of the country of origin often persist within the household. Confronted with external societal barriers and internal gendered expectations, it is ultimately access to employment opportunities that provides women with a path to reclaim their identity and independence.

In 2011, Aye migrated to the United States. Initially, the migration to the United States seemed to offer stability. She gave birth to two children and became a housewife, adhering to her husband's wishes. Yet, she felt confined and disconnected. "I could not speak or understand English," she recalled, "so I could not see my future." When her husband proposed that she work while he stayed home, Aye eagerly accepted, finding purpose in factory work. But this shift was temporary; when he tired of domestic life, she was expected to return to the home. Still, the period of work ignited something in her: a sense of possibility through independence, not submission.

Their marriage reflected a deeper cultural conflict, which comes from her country of origin. Aye, raised in a city with a lineage of independent women, challenged her husband's rural, patriarchal expectations. "I told my husband, you should marry a countryside girl because they listen to whatever you say... Look at me, not that way." Her resistance, especially around cooking and obedience, eventually led to a rupture. One day, after an argument, her husband left. "I said, go ahead," she recalled. "And I did not know... I went to the market. When I came back, he was no more at home. He was gone, really gone."

At first, the abandonment devastated her. "I cry. One day, two days, three days, I cry, cry. I feel like people think your husband left you, so they are gonna think it is my fault." But after this initial shock, she experienced something transformative. "And after that – no. I am free right now." Her realization echoed across her life: from childhood confinement to labor restrictions in Malaysia, and now, to full autonomy. "When I lived with my parents, no outside... when I was in Malaysia, we cannot go out after 9 p.m.... after getting married, 24 h stay home... So, I got my freedom. I was so happy."

With this freedom, Aye mobilized her agency. She turned to a local church for housing support and drew from her savings to care for her children. When her children returned to school, she sought work and found a position as a teaching assistant at an NGO supporting refugee children. This job gave her not only income but also a sense of belonging and a safe environment for her children. "I was so happy," she reflected. "They helped me."

Still, her new life was filled with complex challenges. As a single mother, Aye had to leave her young children at home alone while she worked, which led to significant safety risks. This concern was echoed by other participants in the focus group, many of whom were parents limited to low-wage jobs with long hours, leaving them unable to care for their children after school. Aye described a frightening incident involving her child being home alone, "One day, my son used the microwave for instant noodles... and maybe he did not pour water. Smoke came out... the neighbor asked, 'Where is your mom?'" Incidents like this forced Aye to reflect deeply on the difficulty of balancing parenting and employment on her own.

In 2020, after 2 years of her husband's leaving, he contacted her about returning. "He called me again and again," Aye said. Though hesitant, she agreed, not from dependence, but for her children's safety. She explained, "I did not want him, but my children need somebody." His return was on new terms: no longer did he expect obedience, and Aye continued to make her own decisions. Her narrative reflected a clear shift in power, "Because I got freedom, right?" she said. "Now I can do what I want."

Aye obtained her citizenship in 2015, despite gaining legal citizenship, Aye's sense of identity in the United States remained unsettled. She described herself not as a resident, but a "guest." "Honestly, I am like a guest... If I had grown up here, I would have been familiar with the culture." She praised the country for its safety and support, "I have always appreciated Americans..."

they provided us with a lot,” but continued to feel socially peripheral. Her daily struggles, buying drinks, navigating stores, and joining workplace events became reminders of linguistic and cultural dissonance. “I feel like shame,” she admitted. “I want that color, but I do not know the name.”

Although Aye experienced a lack of belongingness, she remains hopeful about the future. This hope stems from the access she has gained to self-actualization, through education, she envisions professional advancement; through employment, she achieves economic independence. These forms of access empower her to look forward with optimism. While the experience of being an outsider remains part of her everyday life, the hope brought by access allows her to continue living with resilience and purpose.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Reframing integration through access and agency

Aye's life story highlights that integration for refugee women is not primarily about emotional belonging or cultural assimilation, but about meaningful and equitable access to education, employment, healthcare, safety, and autonomy. Her identification as a “guest” despite formal citizenship captures the enduring disconnect between legal status and lived inclusion. This echoes broader migration literature (Bosniak, 2006; Ullah *et al.*, 2021), which shows how structural exclusion persists even when surface-level indicators of integration are achieved.

Rather than seeking symbolic belonging, Aye's narrative reveals an ongoing pursuit of functionality, stability, and self-determination. Access becomes the means through which dignity, survival, and future-building are negotiated. Her story shows that refugee integration cannot be fully understood without considering material realities, job access, child care, safety, language barriers, and how these are navigated daily.

### 4.2. Intergenerational resilience and feminized survival

A significant finding from this research is the intergenerational transmission of female agency. From her grandmother's urban migration to her mother's informal education and income generation, and Aye's own trajectory across countries and jobs, women in her family consistently resisted structural and cultural constraints by strategically pursuing access. These actions were not framed as acts of empowerment in abstract terms but as urgent and practical responses to exclusion.

This legacy supports Ullah and Chatteraj's (2023) notion of the “feminization of survival,” whereby women adapt and persist through socially sanctioned responsibilities, often invisible, yet creatively transform hardship into opportunity. Aye's use of marriage as a strategy for legal protection, her shift from submissive housewife to a working single mother, and her re-negotiation of marriage terms upon her husband's return reflect resistance embedded within necessity.

### 4.3. Gendered constraints and conditional empowerment

A central finding of this study is the cyclical and relational nature of constraint and empowerment. Aye repeatedly gained access through education, jobs, and networks, only to face new gendered expectations, especially within the household. Her initial empowerment through factory work in the United States was reversed when her husband required her to return to unpaid domestic labor. Similarly, her children's needs led her to allow her estranged husband back into the home, not out of personal dependence, but as a strategic decision.

This highlights a critical insight: access and autonomy for refugee women are often conditional, shaped by familial roles, health, and social stigma. Empowerment, therefore, is non-linear and often negotiated within constrained environments rather than emerging from absolute freedom or policy support.

### 4.4. Reclaiming integration through action, not identity

The study also shows that while Aye's sense of social belonging remained tenuous, her narrative conveys a strong sense of purpose and transformation. Rather than internalizing marginalization, she actively constructed a life of meaning through work at a refugee-serving NGO, parenting, and continued learning. This affirms the importance of shifting from belonging-based to access- and action-based models of integration.

Her transformation from dependency to self-definition, “I am free now,” did not stem from external validation but from functional access to resources and the ability to make decisions. Her hope for the future stems not from acceptance by others but from control over her own trajectory.

### 4.5. Limitations

This study is based on a single narrative, which naturally limits its generalizability. While Aye's story provides in-depth, context-rich insight into the lived experience of a Burmese refugee woman, it should not be viewed as representative of all refugee women's trajectories.

Individual narratives are shaped by unique personal, cultural, and social contexts.

However, the use of triangulated methods, including focus groups and participant observation, helps contextualize Aye's experience within broader patterns among Burmese refugee women. Common challenges identified across participants include unsafe housing, low-wage employment, cultural stigma, and caregiving burdens. These shared struggles underscore the relevance, though not the universal applicability, of Aye's narrative.

Narrative inquiry values depth over breadth, prioritizing the complex, situated ways in which individuals interpret and respond to structural conditions. This study contributes not definitive claims but a deep, embodied account that can inform more grounded understandings of integration policy and gendered vulnerability.

## 5. Conclusions

This study has illuminated how the migration journey of a Burmese refugee woman, Aye, reflects the gendered contours of exclusion and survival in the context of forced migration and resettlement. Through an in-depth narrative analysis, it reveals that access to education, employment, legal protection, and healthcare is a more immediate and enduring concern for refugee women than symbolic belonging or formal citizenship. Aye's story underscores how refugee women draw upon intergenerational legacies of agency to navigate constrained environments, often relying on relational and strategic decisions to maintain autonomy and sustain their families.

The findings challenge dominant models of integration that emphasize emotional or cultural assimilation, advocating instead for a rights-based, access-oriented framework that centers material conditions and structural inclusion. Aye's experience shows that empowerment is neither linear nor guaranteed by legal status but emerges through the ongoing negotiation of access under gendered, institutional, and social constraints.

While limited in scope, the study provides a rich, grounded account that contributes to understanding the lived realities of refugee women. It calls for integration policies and support systems that recognize women's practical needs and caregiving responsibilities and offer flexible, reliable pathways to self-determination. For refugee women like Aye, integration is not only about being welcomed but also about being able to flourish.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

## Author contributions

*Conceptualization:* All authors

*Data curation:* All authors

*Formal analysis:* Jue Wang

*Investigation:* All authors

*Methodology:* All authors

*Writing—original draft:* Jue Wang

*Writing—review & editing:* Lan Kolano

## Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (Approval ID: IRB-23-0623). Informed consent was obtained before data collection, and pseudonyms were employed to protect participant anonymity.

## Consent for publication

The participant provided informed consent for their data to be used in this study and published in anonymized form. Consent was obtained through both verbal and written processes, during which the participant was informed about the purpose of the research, how the data would be used, and their right to withdraw at any time. The participant was also made aware that, although her identity would remain confidential through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying details, her narratives and experiences might be quoted or described in published materials.

## Availability of data

Due to the sensitive nature of the data and the confidentiality agreement with participants, the datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available.

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