

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

#### 6.1 Theoretical and Methodological Approach of the Study

Similar to many scholars who have studied the issue of migrant domestic workers across time and space, I have found that domestic work and those who do it are subject to stigma and discrimination, based on an inequality rooted in class, race, gender, age and migration status. The ideology that marginalizes domestic workers is also reproduced and taken for granted in reality across time and space. In many places, the people who do paid domestic work are women who have little financial, political and social capital to convince men and the state to recognize their work in the social and political domains. However, this study has attempted to shed light on the everyday lives of Burmese Muslim female migrant domestic workers in Chiang Mai, Thailand, by looking at the ways in which these women have used their marginalized identities, including their gender as women, their class as domestic workers, their ethnicity as Burmese, their religion as Muslims and their migration status as migrants, as social capital, and as part of their negotiation tactics. I have argued that the Burmese Muslim female migrant domestic workers are not only passive agents or victims of the inequality they face, but in fact are active agents who use their subordinated identities to negotiate in the resettlement area in which they reside.

In Thailand the issue of Burmese Muslim migrants has rarely been studied. Many scholars have studied Shan migrants living in Chiang Mai across many settings and from a number of perspectives, mainly due to the abundant number of Shan migrants in the city and due to the belief that the Shan share a similarity in linguistic and cultural terms with the local northern Thais. In order to fill this gap in knowledge on the minority groups present in Chiang Mai, as well as in the global academic sphere, here I have attempted to describe the flows of Burmese migrants that take

place between Burma and Chang Klan Muslim migrant community in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand.

In order to understand these flows, from the places of origin to the resettlement area in Chang Klan, I have used three approaches, the modernization, economics and actor-based approaches, in order to understand what factors have led these women to migrate from their home villages in Burma, and then settle in their host society in Chiang Mai.

Understanding these women's migration decisions based on "modernization factors", I have found that modernization is one main factor that encourages these women to leave their home villages. When looking at pictures of Thailand taken by their friends, relatives or family members - those working in Thailand, what the women migrants see is a society that is more modern than their own. Modernization then plays a role while they are living and working in the host society. Given that, after they arrive they often work in Thailand for some period of time, so these women accumulate, not only money, but also the skills needed to consume modern products. Moreover, modernization is the main reason why these women choose to stay longer (if not forever) in the host society. Some women told me they like living in Chang Klan more than their home villages, because in Chang Klan they can find work and earn money, plus the community is more comfortable than their home villages (in terms of infrastructure like a water and electricity supply, and the presence of televisions and the internet etc.). However, consuming modernity does not come free of charge for the migrants, as many women in my study complained that they cannot save money as they spend it all on buying goods and services

Economic factors are another reason why the women decide to migrate. Many women told me that there are not many jobs available at home, that they cannot earn enough money to buy household products and do not have enough money to send their children to school or their parents to hospital. Most of the Burmese Muslim female migrant domestic workers in Chang Klan area I spoke to told me they send remittances back home every month, and that without these remittances, their children could not go to school, their parents could not access healthcare services, and family members could not continue with their farming activities in Burma.

Most of the women in this study stated that they chose to come to Thailand by themselves, even though their status as Muslim women meant it was not easy for them to migrate from their home community to the host community in Thailand. However, the economic hardship faced in their home towns allowed them to negotiate their status as good Muslim woman, good mothers, good daughters and good wives - as those who can earn money and support the family. Most of the women who migrate to seek work in Chang Klan have their own informal networks in the city before they migrate – whether friends or the relatives of family members. These migrant networks help to reduce the costs and risks faced by these women migration, but more than that, the flows of migrants themselves are maintained and sustained by such migrant networks.

It should be noted that here I have used the modernization, economic and actor-based approaches as the basic theoretical approaches used to understand the Burmese Muslim females' migration decisions and their continuing migrations from Burma to the Chang Klan area. As a result, it was not my intention to fix their movements based on push and pull factors alone.

The theoretical significance of this study is that the boundary between each factor is blurred, and so we cannot clearly separate one factor as a push and another as a pull factor, because even just one factor can act as both a push and pull at the same time. Moreover, the modernization, economic and actor-based approaches play a key role in describing the lives of the female migrants, not only in terms of pushing them from their places of origins, but also in pulling them towards the place of resettlement. These approaches also help explain why some women continue to stay and work, or leave the host society.

## **6.2 Research Findings: Merging Conceptual and Empirical Perspectives**

As proposed in Chapters IV and V, the conceptual framework of this study is linked to three main concepts: Intersectionality, Social Capital and Tactics of Negotiation. In Chapter IV, I explored the ways in which the Burmese Muslim female migrant domestic workers in Chang Klan community have been able to turn their gender, ethnicity and religious identities into social capital, while Chapter V showed

the ways in which these women have used their class and migration status as negotiation tactics. Here I will conclude the study with some crucial remarks on the major research findings, based on theoretical debates drawn from the conceptual framework.

### **6.2.1 Gender as Social Capital**

As discussed in the above theoretical discussion, the inequality associated with domestic work and domestics workers is rooted in class, gender, ethnicity and migration statuses. Each identity seems to marginalize and subordinate the Burmese Muslim female migrant domestic workers in the host community; however, the several cases explored in this study have shown that these women still manage to use their gender as social capital.

In this study I have identified gender as representing social capital for the Burmese Muslim female migrant domestic workers in Chang Klan area on two levels, the individual and group levels. In terms of the use of gender as social capital at the individual level, this is related to the gender norms attached to domestic work, which is seen as women's work in most settings, and this has allowed the study women to access the employment market much more easily than the male migrants. In this community, it seems that women can find work more easily than men; however, the women in my study are not homogenous; they are from different places of origin, are of different ages, and have varying marital and migration statuses. What they have in common is that each has used her gender as social capital, though in different ways. Some women have benefited from their ages, since young women can work as live-out domestic workers given that this kind of work requires intensive labor. Some women have been able to benefit from their single status, because it has allowed them to stay at their employer's house, meaning they do not have to pay the rent, electricity, water or food bills. Some women have benefited from their marriage status, as in the case of one transnational wife married to a Burmese Muslim refugee who currently lives and works in the US, and who now has a privileged economic status due to the remittances sent by her husband every month.

In addition, there is the ways in which the Burmese Muslim female migrant domestic workers use gender as social capital at the group level, as seen by the ways in which they use and form their own migrant networks. These women's networks can also be counted as social capital, and can be seen as informal, based as they are on friends and the relatives of family members. These networks help to reduce the costs and risks associated with their migration, plus help newcomers find jobs, accommodation, money and information. The women maintain and sustain their networks in the host community through *bpaithiaw* (leisure) activities, which they share. These activities on the one hand strengthen networks among the women and create solidarity, and on the other, reduce their level of homesickness and allow them enjoy their free time, after working hard as domestic workers.

### 6.2.2 Ethnicity as Social Capital

This study has sought to understand ethnicity, in terms of Burmese identity, as a form of social capital - in the way it helps facilitate the lives of those living in the Muslim migrant community in Chang Klan. The status of being 'Burmese' in Thailand is not a privileged one, in fact the Burmese in Thailand are subordinated, due to the fact that the Thai state sees them as "aliens", as "illegal migrants", as "people who carry disease", as "people who come to steal Thai people's jobs" and as "people who are against the interests of national security". However, being a Burmese in Chang Klan allows the migrants to benefit somewhat from their marginalized identities.

Some local Thais display negative attitudes towards the Burmese Muslim migrants, saying that they have come to steal their jobs; however, many households and many shops in Chang Klan community rely heavily on the cheap labor provided by the migrants, especially in terms of domestic work. The Burmese Muslim female migrant domestic workers are in great demand among employers in Chang Klan, because they represent "docile" labor from the Thai employer's point of view. These Burmese Muslim female migrant domestic workers also work hard and accept low wages.



However, as my study has shown, being seen as cheap and docile labor allows the migrants to find work quite easily, especially work not attractive to local Thais such as domestic work. The Burmese migrants in this community have created their own migrant community by sharing a sense of belonging. The grocery stores in Chang Klan allow the migrants to buy on credit, so they can buy household goods and the ingredients needed to cook meals, plus live their lives, only paying at the end of the month or when they can. This is one of the reasons why the migrants are able to accept low wages.

### **6.2.3 Religion as Social Capital**

Many scholars who have studied migrants in host societies refer to how important religion is in migrant's lives. Parreñas (2001), who studied migrant Filipina domestic workers in Italy and the USA, found in her study that church centers act as support sites, those which provide opportunities to join in with spiritual activities, plus provide a variety of social services including legal assistance, free medical care, job placement referrals and language classes. Shan migrants in Chiang Mai; meanwhile, use Buddhist temples as support sites, so that when the Shan first arrive in Chiang Mai, they can go straight to the well known temples in search of other Shan people, Shan food, news about jobs, accommodation and other forms of support. For Muslims, a mosque is a key center for them; the space within and around a mosque acts as a place to pray, a place of gathering and a place of sharing.

Tracing back through the history of the Muslim caravan traders, I described the network of mosques that linked the Muslims from Yunnan to Chiang Mai. Mosques are important for Muslims, not only for religious, but also social, economic and political reasons. In more contemporary times, mosques have linked the Burmese Muslims' places of origin with their resettlement location in Chang Klan area. Once they arrive in Chang Klan community, some of the Burmese Muslim newcomers stay at the Mosque in Chang Klan, to gain access to information about jobs and accommodation, and to seek out other forms of support from the other Burmese Muslims in the area.

Not only men use space at the Mosque for their own benefit themselves; poor women also benefit, for during Ramadan, the month of fasting for Muslims, many Muslims pray and eat at the Mosque in the evening. The Mosque at this time is full of local Muslims and during Ramadan these Muslims donate money to the poor. The Burmese Muslim female beggars; therefore, came across the Burma-Thai border to visit the Mosque and receive a donation. Many Burmese Muslim male and female migrants came to work at the mosque during this time, to clean, cook and serve and to receive pay plus free food. This Mosque is an important support site in many ways, as it links Muslims together, plus is a source of work, money, accommodation, free food and other important information for the migrants.

Ethno-religious issues play a role in the lives of the migrants before, during and after their migration. Before they migrate, the Mosque acts as a link between the migrants' place of origins and their resettlement location, reducing the costs and risks associated with migrating for the Burmese Muslim migrants. When they arrive at the resettlement location, the Burmese Muslims benefit from their ethno-religious links in many social, religious and economic ways. On the social side, they are able to meet with other Muslims, and this allows them to create a Burmese Muslim migrant network and a Burmese Muslim enclave migrant community. In religious terms, they can go to relax at the Mosque, eat *halal* food and send their children to study in the Islamic school. In economic terms, they can access jobs here in the community and in the case of the Burmese Muslim female migrants domestic workers, they can benefit from being Muslim because some Muslim employers prefer to hire Burmese Muslims, because they share similar beliefs in Islam.

#### **6.2.4 Class and Tactics of Negotiation**

Class differences are rooted in domestic work and the people who do the work. Domestic work marks a difference in class between the higher statuses of the employers - who can pay someone to do their household work while they join professional careers and enjoy their leisure time. Employers are local people who represent a different class to the workers, due to the fact that the employers are middle-class, with a higher level of education, more money and also citizenship of the country. In contrast, the migrant workers normally come from poor families and bring

with them little or no educational background; also their statuses are as undocumented migrants in Thailand.

Being subordinated by their employer, the host society and the country of their resettlement, the workers, who are the ‘weak’, employ many tactics to negotiate. Even if domestic work seems like a lower class of work, many Burmese Muslim female domestic workers manage to achieve upward mobility from starting as lower class - as domestic workers, to then becoming workers of a ‘higher’ class; for example, as grocery store and junk shop owners. From starting as domestic workers, some women who have stayed in the community for a period of time have been able to accumulate social, financial, and economical capital, which has allowed them to move up in terms of class within the host society.

#### **6.2.5 Migration and Tactics of Negotiation**

Migration status marks the differences that exist between the local Thai Muslims and the Burmese Muslims, in such a way so that local families are able to sustain jobs for the migrants, while the receiving state enjoys the cheap labor of these migrants, which in turn helps to support the economic growth of the country. As discussed in Chapter V, the Burmese Muslim female migrant domestic workers employ tactics such as turning against state power and offering themselves as unpaid labor for local families in Chang Klan community in exchange for legal documentation. Moreover, being migrants in Thailand means the Burmese Muslim migrants are restricted in terms of their movements and their right to own property in Thailand; however, some migrants have still managed to obtain property like motorcycles, items which reflect a symbolic power for the migrants in a number of ways, such as their economic status, their freedom of movement and their symbolic resistance. The migrants employ tactics such as using their employers’ names or their Thai friends’ names to buy motorcycles and to negotiate their migration statuses in Thailand.



### **6.3 Theoretical Discussion on Intersectionality, Social Capital and Negotiation Tactics among Burmese Muslim Female Migrant Domestic Workers in Chang Klan Community, Chiang Mai in Thailand**

The reason I became interested in the Burmese Muslim female domestic workers was because of their intersectional identities, including their race (Burmese), religion (Islam), their class as domestic workers and their migration status as marginalized, subordinated and vulnerable persons in a host society. When these identities come together and intersect, it makes all the women 'weak' from the perspective of their employers, the host community and the receiving state. However, as I have attempted to show here, where there is inequality and where there is resistance, these Burmese Muslim female domestic workers, who are considered 'weak' due to their marginalized identities, have been able to use their genders, religion and ethnicity to develop social capital and to earn and make a living. They have also been able to employ a variety of tactics to negotiate within the host society - Chang Klan Muslim community in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand.

This study proposes two main arguments. First, even if these women are being exploited by their employers, host society and host state due to their vulnerable and marginalized identities, they are not only victims and passive agents of the inequality structure, for in their daily lives they have been able to turn their ethnic identity as Burmese, religious identity as Muslim and gender identity as woman into social capital. And as the 'weak' component of the inequality structure, they have also been able to use their class and migration statuses as tactics of negotiation - to achieve their life goals and achieve upward mobility.

Second, ethno-religiosity plays a crucial role in the lives of the female Burmese Muslim migrant domestic workers in many ways, and in this regard, Chang Klan Muslim migrant enclave community has helped facilitate their lives and has become an exceptional space for them, one in which they have been able to fulfill their religious, economic and social aspirations.