

Negotiating Educational Identities: Life Histories of Karen Women in Minnesota

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Maiya Yang

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Gerald W. Fry, Adviser

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Maiyia Yang

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, to the Karen women, and to refugees all over the world, your life histories and experiences matter.

Abstract

The ways in which educational identities have been presented and understood is incomplete. An educational identity should be how individuals or groups identify themselves and others as educated based on their understandings of what it means to be an educated person. In applying this concept of an educational identity, the purpose of this life history study is to understand how Karen women in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area negotiate their educational identities from their lived experiences in Burma, Thailand, and the United States.

The guiding research questions in this study are: 1) How do Karen women negotiate their educational identities in different sociocultural contexts, and 2) How do Karen women's lived experiences in Burma, Thailand, and the United States shape their understanding of what it means to be educated? Using primarily interviews and participant observations, this study elicits insight about the educational experiences of nine Karen women to understand how they construct and negotiate what it means to be educated in different sociocultural contexts. The participants are between 21-43 years old and have been or are currently enrolled in formal or non-formal education.

The findings in this study reveal that the Karen women negotiate their educational identities using two main components: level of education and experiences. Level of education refers to years of formal schooling, whereas experiences refer to non-formal and informal ways of learning. Moreover, the women's life histories illustrate how sociocultural contexts shape how they negotiate their educational identities. In answering the second research question, the findings elucidate that what it means to be educated in

Karen culture is when the educated person demonstrates respect, maintains a good reputation, gives back, and is independent. In addition to contributing to the literature about educational identities, refugee women, the Karen in Minnesota, and the educational experiences of refugees and immigrants, the findings from this study can also inform educational policies and programs.

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List of Acronyms

APIASF	Asian & Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund
CBO	Community-based Organizations
CFOB	Canadian Friends of Burma
IEP	Individual Education Program
INS	Immigration and Naturalization Service
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRC	International Rescue Committee
KED	Karen Education Department
KHRG	Karen Human Rights Group
KNU	Karen National Union
KOM	Karen Organization of Minnesota
KWO	Karen Women's Organization
NGO	Non-governmental Organizations
NLD	National League for Democracy
OPE	Overseas Processing Entity
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Chapter 1: Introduction

There seems to be a difference, too, between asking whether a person has been educated and whether he is an educated man; for the former could be taken as meaning just 'Has he been to school?', whereas the latter suggests much more than this. ~ R.S. Peters, 1970, p.17

What does it mean to be an educated person? This is not a new question, but an important one. The responses to this question shape and determine educational systems and curricula, as well as how people perceive each other and themselves. In addition, the responses reflect the changes in the value and purpose of education. For some, the number of years of formal education is what determines an educated person. In these occasions, levels of education have become indicators of class and status, representing prestige and demanding respect (Fry, 1981).

What characteristics does an educated person exhibit? How is the image of an educated person constructed? Do constructions of the educated person change based on lived experiences and how? What sociocultural factors shape the way people negotiate and identify themselves and others as educated? These are questions that I will address in this study by exploring the concept of an educational identity among Karen women in Minnesota.

The first section of this chapter includes a discussion on my experiences and observations that led to how and why I choose the topic for this study. The rest of this chapter outlines the problem, states the purpose and research questions, provides the context of the study, explains the significance, and describes the research design.

1. Double standards for the “educated”

When I started the Ph.D. program, I noticed that the way people treated me was different once they knew the reason I was in school. The people either showed me more respect and kindness or they disregarded me and became very critical of my actions. I did not like this sudden change in the way people interacted with me. I did not want people to think of me as someone who put herself on a pedestal because of my education level or as someone who would judge them for not being “educated” enough. I thought that perhaps these interactions were isolated incidents until I have experienced it multiple times in various contexts. I tried to understand why these people would change the way they interacted with me, which led me to reflect how I understand what it means to be educated. I grappled with this question and realized how my understanding of what it means to be educated has changed over the years due to the different experiences that I have had. Throughout my dissertation research, I have reevaluated my own educational identity as well as reconsider what it means to be educated in different sociocultural contexts.

In the past, I have held individuals who I thought were “educated”, as defined by their level of education, to contradictory standards. On the one hand, I expected these people to know everything, for them to be well-rounded and knowledgeable. If they did not know something that I thought they should, I became very critical of their “educated” status. On the other hand, if they were able to articulate or demonstrate what they know, I saw them as showing off. This way of perceiving the “educated” person was problematic. I noticed that people held me to these contradictory standards as well. I

wanted to find a way to encourage people to reconsider how they understand what it means to be educated.

Growing up in the United States as a refugee child has shaped my research interest to want to work with refugees and immigrants. I wanted this study to be meaningful for myself and for the participants. I chose to focus on the Karen in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area because, like the Hmong, they have lived in refugee camps in Thailand and have resettled to Minnesota. Concomitantly, I did not know very much about the Karen history, people, culture, or experiences. I wanted to learn more about the educational experiences of Karen women and to provide a venue for the women to share their lived experiences and stories.

2. Statement of the problem

Our assumptions in the literature in mainstream education about the educated person reflects certain values about and approaches to education that may or may not be the same values and approaches to education for refugees; therefore, there is a disconnect in both our understanding and our educational process. This study focuses on two problems. The first problem is the lack of information about the experiences of Karen women and how they understand what it means to be educated. The second problem is the lack of literature that explores educational identities. The following sections will elucidate these problems.

2.1 The lack of literature about the experiences of Karen women. Minnesota is home to numerous immigrant and refugee communities; it is also home to one of the most recent diasporas, the Karen (pronounced Ka-Ren in English, Ka-rieng in Thai,

Kayin in Burmese), a major ethnic group from Burma.¹ There are approximately 6,500 to 8,000 Karen living in Minnesota (KOM, 2009; Koumpilova, 2014). However, this number is increasing because Minnesota is the most popular destination for secondary migration in the United States (Gilbert, Hein & Losby, 2010). According to Gilbert, Hein and Losby (2010), Karen re-migrate to Minnesota because of the high level of social services available as well as the welcoming atmosphere. Peg Kennedy, the cultural service manager at Roseville area schools confirms that, “[s]upposedly this is the beginning of the Karen influx. When I meet with resettlement agencies, they say the Karen is supposed to be the largest group yet—larger than the Hmong, larger than the Somali” (Minnesota Department of Human Rights, 2010, para. 20). With the growing Karen population, the dearth of literature about the Karen, particularly their educational experiences is problematic. With limited sources, how will social services and programs cater to the needs of the Karen? How will schools and employment programs help Karen students succeed without knowing the students’ educational experiences?

Despite the disruption of social structures as a result of migration, schools have consistently played an important role in the integration process. For refugee and immigrant youth, schooling is “the first sustained, meaningful, and enduring participation in an institution of the new society” (Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008,

¹ Burma is also referred to as Myanmar. Although the military government changed the name from Burma to Myanmar in 1989, some countries have not recognized this change. Resisting the name change has become a protest against the human rights violations committed by the military government (Lang, 2002; Steinberg, 2010). Changing the name was supposed to mitigate the ethnic conflict since the name Myanmar does not privilege one ethnicity over the others, unlike Burma. In May 2013, when the President of Myanmar visited the U.S, “the Obama Administration referred to the country as Myanmar, as a courtesy gesture of respect for a government that is pursuing a transformative reform agenda” (APIASF 2014, p.2).

In this paper, the term Burmese refers to all ethnic groups from Burma, whereas Burman refers specifically to the major ethnic group (Lang, 2002; Steinberg, 2010).

p. 2). Thus, it is important to know about the educational background of the Karen and to understand the types of education and schooling they have received and are receiving. In addition, it is crucial to understand how they make sense of their educational experiences. Although there are studies and literature about the Karen people and their resettlement experiences, little has been written about Karen women's educational identities. Readily available resources about the Karen emphasize the human rights violations and abuses that occurred in Burma.² This lack of information about the educational experiences of the Karen is problematic, especially for programs designed to ease the resettlement experience and to make the education system better. What assumptions are educators and administrators making if they do not know about the educational experiences of the Karen? From the life histories of nine Karen women, I drafted narratives about their lives and education to provide insight about their lived experiences. In addition, this study will contribute to the existing, though limited, literature about the Karen people and their educational experiences, especially in Minnesota.

2.2 The lack of literature about educational identities. By combining the concept of identity as constructed, reconstructed and co-constructed (Moore, 2006; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000) with the philosophical questions about the meaning, value and purpose of education, educational identity is understood as how individuals or groups identify themselves as educated persons. Individuals do not need to have formal education to have an educational identity, in fact, I argue that everyone has an educational identity. Educational identity as applied and understood in this study

² Organizations like the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) direct their attention and resources to document the abuses in Burma as a method to advocate for change (KHRG, 2000).

includes formal, non-formal, and informal ways of learning. Constructions of an educated person require individuals to have a working definition of what it means to be educated. An educational identity, like other forms of identities, affects how individuals perceive themselves and the people around them. Not only is an educational identity important for social interactions, but it is also important in designing and implementing educational policies and programs.

Studies that hint at the concept of an educational identity refer to it as an academic identity. Academic identity refers to how the students identify with their academic studies and disciplines, which focuses on formal education. It is important not to confuse academic identities as used in other studies with educational identity as defined above. Academic identity has been presented as layers of student identity (Colyar & Stich, 2010; Mehan, Hubbard, & Villanueva, 1994; Nasir & Saxe, 2003), shared national identities (Viljoen & van der Walt, 2003), or how individuals affiliate and identify with their academic disciplines (Zerubavel, 1995).

Layers of student identities refers to students having multiple academic identities. Mehan, Hubbard, and Villanueva (1994) explain how students have dual academic identities, one for school and one in their neighborhoods. The students in Mehan, Hubbard, and Villanueva's (1994) study work hard and focus on their school work at school, but in their neighborhoods, they do not present themselves as hard workers because it was not considered cool to study. Although different in their approaches, studies about educational identities are equally important to studies about academic

identities; therefore, accentuating the problem of having a lack of studies that focus on educational identities.

By combining the practical and conceptual problems discussed, this study contributes to the bodies of literature about the Karen women's experiences and educational identities.

3. Statement of study purpose

The purpose of this life history study is to understand how Karen women in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area negotiate their educational identities from their lived experiences in Burma, Thailand, and the United States. The ontological and epistemological assumptions in this study can be traced to interpretivism, which I will discuss in chapter three. The focus on life history suggests that knowledge is constructed from personal experiences. In addition, the emphasis on place (Burma, Thailand, and the United States) implies that context affects how Karen women negotiate their educational identities.

4. Research Questions

The guiding research questions in this study are: 1) How do Karen women negotiate their educational identities in different sociocultural contexts, and 2) How do Karen women's lived experiences in Burma, Thailand, and the United States shape their understanding of what it means to be educated? The first question assumes that context affects how educational identities are negotiated. The second question accentuates how lived experiences influence the construction of the educated person.

5. Context of the study

The participants in this study are Karen women who resettled to the United States as refugees and are currently residing in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area. The metropolitan area is developing to be a hub of the Karen community, making it a valuable and appropriate location for research. Aside from the setting, it is essential to know more about the historical and political events that triggered a Karen diaspora and developed Karen ethno-nationalistic identities. As important background and context, the following paragraphs briefly outline the history of Burma, the origin and culture of the Karen, the role of education and religion and the refugee and resettlement process.

5.1 Burma/Myanmar

5.1.1 Geography and demography. Burma or Myanmar is the second largest country in terms of area in Southeast Asia (Clements & Kean, 1994). As illustrated in Figure 1: Map of Myanmar, it borders India, Bangladesh, the Bay of Bengal, and the Andaman Sea to the west, and China, Lao People's Democratic Republic, and Thailand to the east. Although Naypyidaw is the capital, the United States government recognizes Naypyidaw as only the administrative capital, whereas Rangoon³ is still the "capital" (CIA *Factbook*, 2014). Surrounded by mountains on three sides and water on the fourth side, Burma is roughly the size of Texas (Aung, 1967; CIA *Factbook*, 2014).

³ The current government changed the spelling of Rangoon to Yangon at the time they changed the name of the country. The U.S. government still uses the previous spelling.



Figure 1: Map of Myanmar

(United Nations, 2008)

As of July 2014, the estimated population of Burma is 55 million (*CIA Factbook*, 2014). The majority (68%) of the population is Burman with 9% Shan, 7% Karen, 4% Rakhine, 3% Chinese, 2% Indian, and 5% other (*CIA Factbook*, 2014). Based on these statistics, approximately 3.85 million people in Burma are Karen. Although the *CIA Factbook* distinguishes the different ethnic groups, Myint-U (2001) argued that the

“modern Burmese” is an amalgamation of various linguistic and ethnic groups as a result of its historical influences. Burma has always been ethnically diverse and the following section illustrates the ethnic tensions and disputes that has produced Karen refugees in Thailand.

5.1.2 Historical and political events. Prior to colonialism, the early kingdoms and empires of Burma were heavily influenced by Chinese and Indian traditions. Two of the first kingdoms in Burma were established by the Mon to the north and the Pyus near the Irrawaddy valley. Buddhist philosophies from India and merchants from China converged at the Irrawaddy valley where the Pyus kingdom ruled. After gradually integrating into and eventually overpowering the Pyus kingdom, the first Burmese empire was established. There were three Burmese empires prior to colonialism. Each of these empires struggled with uniting the multifarious ethnicities in the region.

When the Burmese government oppressed the people in the Arakan and Manipur regions, it forced some of the people to escape to British India. Burmese refugees attracted the British Indian government to intervene in Burma’s affairs. This conflict became the first Anglo-Burmese War, which lasted from 1824 to 1826. As a result, Britain gained control over Assam, Manipur, Arakan, and Tennasserim. The second Anglo-Burmese War in 1852 started from an incident in December 1851 when “the governor of Rangoon fined the captains and crews of two British ships 1,000 rupees for reported customs violations” (Myint-U, 2001, p. 23). Aware of the consequences of war, the British naval commander in Rangoon still chose to mobilize British fleets. The second Anglo-Burmese War ended in the annexation of Lower Burma. Although most of

Burma was colonized by the end of the second war, the Burmese government and monarchy were still active. The pretext for the third Anglo-Burmese War in 1885 was a dispute between the Burmese government and the Bombay Burma Trading Company (Myint-U, 2001). The provincial governor accused the company of illegal logging and wanted compensation. The British Indian government refused and thus settled this dispute through war. After total annexation, the Burmese monarchy was dethroned. According to Myint-U (2001), the decision to occupy all of Burma was a political strategy to limit French influence in Indochina. In 1886, Burma was annexed as part of British India (Clements & Kean, 1994). Finally in 1937, Burma was recognized as an independent colony. The separation between Burma and India was an opportunity for contestation.

As university students, Aung San and U Nu led a strike to protest against the British. Since the British army in Burma consisted of non-Burman ethnicities, it was easier for Burmans to join Aung San in an anti-British Burma Independence Army (Steinberg, 2010). In 1942, during the Japanese invasion, Aung San and his colleagues sided with the Japanese thinking they will be granted independence after defeating the British. During the invasion, the Karen and the Kachin (another ethnicity) fought alongside the British against the Japanese and Burmans. An important event that exacerbated the conflict between the Burman and the Karen was when the Burmans massacred the Karen in Myaungmya. When Aung San realized that the Japanese never intended to grant Burma her independence, Aung San and his colleagues joined forces with the British and defeated the Japanese (Clements & Kean, 1994).

In 1947, Aung San negotiated for independence from Britain. In his negotiations, Aung San convinced the British that it was unnecessary to separate the minority regions from Burma proper since there was a uniting consensus among the minority groups (Steinberg, 2010). As a result, some of the Karen leaders were unhappy because they were promised an independent Karen state. On July 19, 1947, Aung San and several members of his cabinet were assassinated by a political rival. Steinberg (2010) described Aung San as:

a vigorous, magnetic, young nationalist leader whose forceful personality was critical both to negotiations with the British and to encouraging the minorities to keep within what became the Union of Burma. He was trusted by the minorities; no other leader at that time or since then has played such a role. He advocated some type of federalism with the minority areas and suggested sharing the state's resources with them (p.42).

Burma was granted independence in 1948. With Aung San's untimely death, U Nu became the prime minister; however, he was unable to deliver the promises to the minority groups. For the ten years following independence, communist and ethnic groups "who felt underrepresented in the 1948 constitution" were part of the civil wars that destabilized the country (Clements & Kean, 1994, p. 14). By 1958, U Nu eventually agreed to a military coup, which lasted for 18 months (Steinberg, 2010). This constitutional coup was successful because it restored order, stopped the rebellions and prepared the people for the election, where U Nu was re-elected prime minister. With its previous success, the military staged another coup in 1962 to suppress ethnic disputes and

to perpetuate military control (Steinberg, 2010).⁴ As a result, a new constitution was drafted to reflect the military government. By 1988, the military government, under General Ne Win's command, operated under the name the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). As the name suggests, once law and order were restored, the government changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997.

The National League for Democracy (NLD) was created to counter the SPDC and bring the government back to the people. As the daughter of Aung San and part of the NLD, Aung San Suu Kyi soon became an iconic figure demanding for a democratic Burma. Aung San Suu Kyi's activism throughout Burma eventually became a threat to the junta, placing her in house arrest in 1989. Even after promising a fair election in May 1990, the junta could not give up "382 seats or 80 percent of the positions" to the NLD (Steinberg, 2010, p. 92). Thus, the "fair" elections are predetermined. The election, in November 2010 was also fixed. The election results caused a riot, forcing 20,000 people to seek refuge in Thailand (*The Guardian*, 2010).

5.1.3 Education in Burma. Before the British conquest, the education system in Burma consisted of monastery schools (for boys becoming monks) and lay schools (for the general public, including girls) (Kaung, 1963). Monks taught and ran the monastery schools according to Buddhist scriptures for young boys who aspire to be monks. The lay schools were operated by male volunteers who taught Buddhist scriptures to young boys who were not planning to become monks, and to young girls.

⁴ The Burmese military is also known as *tatmadaw*.

After the Anglo-Burmese wars, the education system grew as more Christian missionary schools were established. Kaung (1963) argued that Christian missionaries did not influence the education system as much as they were credited to. For Christian missionaries, education came in second; education was the means to missionary ends. The first missionary schools did not convert the students; rather, the educational influence in the community was minimal (Kaung, 1963). Ikeya (2011) asserted that “[t]hrough education, missionaries hoped to instill Christian and Eurocentric conceptions of femininity, morality, and domesticity in the native female population” (p. 32).

It was not until the 1840s when a group of missionaries came across the Karen living near the Irrawaddy valley that “Karen education” began (Kaung, 1963). Skeptical, Kaung (1963) declared that “Karen education” was just another Christian village missionary school. Kaung (1963) prejudicially asserts that the Karen were easily converted because they were “a race with a less well-grounded culture and religion” (p. 64). However, William Englund, a pastor at the First Baptist Church in Saint Paul, Minnesota, suggests that the reason why some Karen are Christians is because “in their own legends, they had a story about a white brother that would return to them a lost golden book. [...] So when missionaries showed up with a Bible and this good news, they immediately adopted it not as some kind of Western or foreign idea, but as their own book being returned to them” (Minnesota Public Radio, 2010, para. 14-15).

Instruction in minority languages is not allowed in government operated schools in Burma. As a consequence, it is difficult for non-Burmans to learn and keep their language and cultural heritage in the formal education system. For Karen students, it was

in these missionary schools that they could learn in Burmese, Karen and English.

Although there are no tuition fees, there are limited resources and school supplies in the Karen villages. The Canadian Friends of Burma (CFOB, N.d.) argues that the State Peace and Development Council “spends less than 1.1% of the total GDP (gross domestic product) on education” (para. 2).

5.2 The Karen. Traced back to Mongolia, Tibet and China, most of the Karen in Burma live outside of the Karen (Kayin) State since the Karen State was demarcated after Burma received its independence. Most Karen live in bigger cities and near the Irrawaddy River and Delta (IOM Bangkok, 2006; Barron et. al., 2007). Although there are three groups of Karen: Sgaw, Po, and Bwe, most of the Karen in Minnesota are Sgaw and Po. Barron et al. (2007) estimated that about 70% of the Karen in the refugee camps in Thailand speak Sgaw and only 7% speak Po. Both Sgaw and Po are monosyllabic, tonal, and agglutinative. Although these two languages share similar word roots, they are mutually unintelligible because of pronunciation. The Karen have an oral tradition; thus, they did not have a written language until Dr. Wade, an American missionary, used the Burmese consonants to capture the Karen language into a written form (Smeaton, 1920).

5.2.1 Karen culture. One important aspect of language is name. In the Karen culture and in Burmese culture there is no distinction between first and last names (Steinberg, 2010). Individual names bear no relation to the names of their family members, such as a common surname. Instead, individuals are identified in relation to their parents, for instance Aye Paw is the daughter of Bo Gyi. In cultures where the last name plays a vital role in family and social structure, this alternative interpretation is

interesting and important because it may provide insight into the Karen people's frame of reference and world view.

Courting and marriage traditions not only reflect the rites of passage in a culture, but they also reveal gender relations within that culture. Early encounters with the Karen described the marriage traditions as straightforward, meaning a man chooses a woman, asks her parents for permission, and then consults a match-maker (Smeaton, 1920; Barron et al., 2007). After the wedding, the man usually moves in with the woman in her family home before they resettle elsewhere (Barron et. al., 2007). There are also times when a woman moves in with the man and his family. Although both of these instances are practiced, accepting the husband to move in with the wife and her family is rare in patriarchal traditions. Karen culture is matrilineal; families are traced through the female line (Barron et al., 2007). Within traditional Karen culture in Burma, there are expected gender roles for men to hunt, plow, and maintain the home while women raise children, cook, clean, fetch water, and chop firewood.

5.2.2 Development of Karen ethno-nationalism. The Karen leaders in Burma believed they were entitled to a Karen nation, which developed the Karen National Union (KNU). With the uprising of the Karen National Union (KNU), many Karen were discriminated against and forced to relocate near the Thai-Burma border, in the Karen State. The instability in Burma has been attributed back to when the Burma was still a British colony. According to Barron et al. (2007) and Steinberg (2010), under British rule, some of the Karen converted from Buddhism to Christianity, took advantage of the educational opportunities, and formed an elite class. However, after Burma became an

independent state, the major ethnic group, the Burman, took over. This shift in power relations became more complicated when the KNU pushed for self-determination.

With over 50 years of opposition and internal conflict among the different ethnic and political groups, the SPDC saw many Karen as threats especially because the KNU fought and advocated for a democratic nation and an independent Karen State (Bowles, 1998; Steinberg, 2010). With literate and educated Karen leaders, they were able to unite various Karen groups; thus developing a Karen ethno-history and forming ethno-nationalistic identities (Rajah, 2002). Cheesman (2002) argues that the Karen are not homogenous; the “Karens are bound neither by a common language, religion, region, nor many of the other characteristics conventionally used to designate an ‘ethnic group’” (p. 200).⁵

Ethno-history suggests that all of the different Karen groups come from the same place; thus, solidifying their strong sense of bond and pride (Rajah, 2002). Ananda Rajah (2002) explains that cultural constructs of atavistic ethno-history creates ethno-nationalism, which projects ethnic identity as a nation. Rajah (2002) proposes that the Karen ethno-nationalist identity is a product of modernity and Christianity. Modernity implies established notions of nation-state, which was exposed to ethnic communities through colonialism. Prior to colonialism, ethnic communities existed without feeling like they needed to have boundaries and sovereignty. Once these ethnic communities change the way they see themselves as a group, into one that needs boundaries and

⁵ The plural form of Karen is Karens. Cheesman (2002) argues that there is more than one type of Karen ethnic group, which is why he used Karens to refer to all of the different types of Karen ethnic groups. Cheesman (2002) also uses “pan-Karen” or the Sgaw Karen word for “entire race”, *dawkalu* to refer to all of the Karen ethnic groups.

sovereignty like their colonizers, then they are exhibiting characteristics of Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" (Rajah, 2002). In essence, the desire to establish a Karen nation is an indication of modernity.

Rajah (2002) states that American Baptist missionaries were able to connect with the Karen due to the similarities between Karen narratives and the story of Creation. As the missionaries interacted with the Karen, they were able to help devise a writing system and establish a literate community. This change meant that educated Christian Karen were able to mobilize and unite different Karen groups. Karen ethno-history was created and shared among the leaders who eventually organized themselves to be the Karen National Union (KNU). In addition, villages under the KNU taught Karen ethno-history, which ultimately was extended into the refugee camps in Thailand. Rajah (2002) asserts that in the camps, Karen ethno-nationalism is being recreated.

Due to the massive human rights violations such as forced labor, displacement, detention and torture, unlawful taxation, killings and rape (KHRG & Delang, 2000), many Karen were forced to seek refuge in Thailand in fear of prosecution. There are currently nine Burmese refugee camps in Thailand; out of these there are seven where the majority are ethnic Karen. In Thailand, the education in the seven refugee camps where the majority of its population is Karen is run and organized by the Karen Education Department (KED). As the former education department for the Karen villages in Burma, the KED was ousted by the military junta (IOM Bangkok, 2006). The curricula in the camps is designed and run by the KED based on the education curriculum the Karen State which coincides with the teachings of the KNU promoting Karen ethno-

nationalism, which is different than the Burmese curriculum outside of the Karen State. In the camps, the education department coordinates all education activities, standardized community education and curriculum development. The education in the camps are organized and implemented by the refugees themselves; however, there are occasional foreigners who come to train the teachers and lead non-formal education sessions. In the camps, the language of instruction is Karen, with opportunities to learn Burmese and English.

The next section on refugees and resettlement is vital to understanding the politics and procedures that greatly affected the experiences of Karen refugees in Thailand.

5.3 Refugees and resettlement. The stated purpose of the refugee camps is to provide basic necessities for individuals who cannot integrate into the host communities or return to their home country. Refugee camps are generally located in remote areas. Moreover, refugee camps are supposed to be temporary settlements for individuals who have experienced, witnessed and/or committed atrocities; however, this is not always the case. For some, like in Thailand, refugee camps have been established for over 25 years.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) can officially define individuals as refugees only when the host country has signed the United Nations 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees. If the host country has not signed the Convention on the Status of Refugees, then both the government of the host country and the UNHCR have to recognize individuals as refugees in order to make their statuses legal. Although Thailand has been a generous host for numerous refugee communities over the past 30 years, the Thai government has not signed the Convention on the Status

of Refugees (Bowles, 1998). Thus, there have been disputes between the UNHCR and Thai government regarding the status of refugees since the government sometimes defines them as migrant workers.

In 1984, the first Karen refugee camp was established in Thailand. At the beginning, the refugee camps were organized as small villages. As more refugees fled to Thailand, security became an issue and the people needed more assistance, which brought in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the UNHCR. The Thai government played a crucial role in establishing and developing the refugee camps. Since the establishment of the camps, the Thai government mandated for NGOs to provide food, medicine, clothing, and other essential items. It was not until 1996, however, when the Thai government mandated NGOs to help provide education and assistance in the camps (Bowles, 1998). There may have been alternative forms of learning prior to the establishment of schools in the camps, but it has not been documented. Nevertheless, the efforts to increase the quality of life and education in the refugee camps are inadequate, regardless of the Thai government and NGOs' efforts to improve the refugee experience (Oh & Van der Stouwe, 2008).

Obtaining refugee status is important, not only to receive protection and social services, but also for those who decide to resettle to a third country. Resettlement is not an easy process and not an easy choice. Resettlement also has had a great impact on the organizations working in the refugee camps. Organizations like the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) argue that resettlement is draining their resources by selecting their best trained teachers and administrators (KWO, 2010). Despite complaints by KWO and

other community-based organizations (CBOs) that hoped to establish and sustain themselves in the camps, Karen refugees are still resettling to a third country. For the Karen who choose to resettle, they know they cannot stay in the camps or return to Burma.

The resettlement process starts with a meeting between the host countries, the UNHCR, and the receiving countries. Once these stakeholders have agreed on how many refugees will be moved and when, the UNHCR approaches the refugee camp commanders to announce and inform refugees about resettlement. At this time, refugees can sign up to relocate. Refugees can choose where they would like to apply for resettlement from the list of receiving countries.⁶ Harkins, Direkwut and Aungkana (2011) explain that once the UNHCR has the list of interested refugees, they refer these individuals to either the correspondents in the receiving country, or in the case of the United States, the Overseas Processing Entity (OPE) to interview and conduct preliminary medical screenings. When the refugees pass the interviews and physical exams, their information is passed to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which will process the paperwork to exit the refugee camps, exit the host country, and enter the resettlement country (Harkins, Direkwut, and Aungkana, 2011).

In Thailand, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) serves as the Overseas Processing Entity for the United States. The number of resettlement cases accepted depends on the conflict and the receiving country's relationship with the refugee's

⁶ The 12 receiving countries for Burmese refugees from Thailand are: the United States, Australia, Canada, Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Japan, and the Czech Republic (UNHCR, 2011).

country of origin. In addition, refugees with serious health problems and criminal records are ineligible for resettlement even though may still be eligible for UNHCR protection.

As illustrated in Figure 2: Burmese refugees from Thailand by receiving country (2006-2010), 48,989 refugees have resettled to the United States. Informants in resettlement organizations suggest that the reason why so many refugees resettle to the United States is because the U.S. is willing to accept more refugees, meaning it will be easier to reunite with families, and because the U.S. is more accommodating to the health conditions of the refugees. For instance, older refugees with health conditions are more likely to be accepted into the United States compared to the other receiving countries. In 2011, the U.S. Overseas Processing Entity estimates that 9,500 – 10,000 refugees will be resettled (Harkins, Direkwut, and Aungkana, 2011).

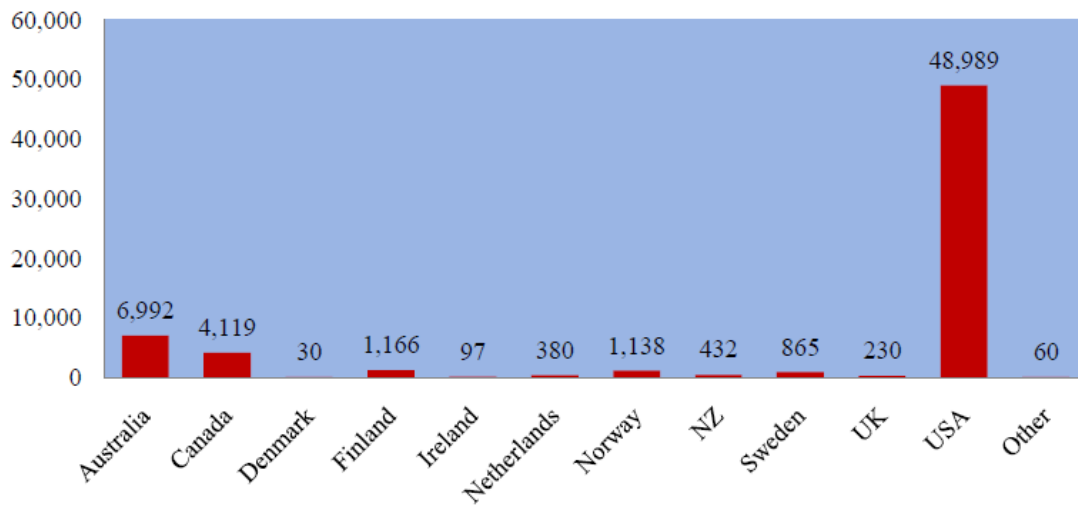


Figure 2: Burmese refugees from Thailand by receiving country (2006-2010)

(Source: IOM, 2011; retrieved from Harkins, Direkwut, & Aungkana, 2011, p. 49)

The information about the Karen history and resettlement processes presented above is to provide a profile of some of the elements and characteristics that may affect the lived experiences of the Karen women in this study.

6. Research Design

An ethnography is when the researcher is immersed into the environment and culture of the participant and tells the stories from the participant's perspective. David Fetterman (2010) explains that ethnography is "both a research method and a product" (p. 1). Some ethnographic research methods include participant observations, interviews, and fieldwork. Although this study is not an ethnography, it is ethnographically informed because I used ethnographic techniques when I interview and engaged in participant observations.

This ethnographically informed life history study follows the lives of nine Karen women ages 21-43 who have resettled or re-migrated to the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area. These women have been enrolled or are enrolled in some kind of formal or non-formal education. These women were selected using purposeful sampling; however, the selection process was flexible to incorporate network sampling, as long as the contributors are willing to participate. The life histories of these women were collected using interviews. I have observed how the participants performed their educated identities in public as well as how they interact with their families. Data analysis of this study includes both published and unpublished texts that are data collected by other organizations, interviews, and observations. The social relations, influence of place, and educational identities that are constructed, reconstructed, and co-

constructed in the interviews and observations were coded by theme and analyzed using the constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Life history is an appropriate methodology because it is suitable for identity studies in the educational context (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Furthermore, life histories are appropriate for studies seeking to understand the lived experiences of refugees (Moussa, 1993). Fetterman (2010) explains that “life histories are usually quite personal; the individual is usually not completely representative of the group; however, how a key actor weaves a personal story tells much about the fabric of the social group” (p. 53). In trying to understand the “fabric of the social group”, the focus of this study is to learn about the lived experiences of Karen women as they make sense of and reflect on their lives, culture and educational experiences.

7. Significance of the study

Learning about the Karen community in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area is not just a refugee or an immigrant issue, but a larger social issue of integration and accommodation. Anti-refugee or anti-immigrant sentiments combined with cultural ignorance may create animosity among communities. The literature about other refugee or immigrant groups has documented some of the problems that could reoccur for the Karen community, such as the Hmong and Somali influx. Some of these problems include cultural misunderstandings (Dsilva & White, 1997), conflicting ethnic, cultural and gendered identities (Ngo, 2002, 2010; Lei, 2003; Lew, 2006; Lee, 2004), and barriers to academic success (McBrien, 2005; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2008; Ngo, 2010). After a cultural analysis of the misunderstandings between Vietnamese refugees and established

residents in Louisville, Kentucky, Dsilva and Whyte (1997) called for research that will contribute to “building bridges between cultures” (p. 67).

The lack of employment opportunities and the increasing number of resettlements will most likely create anti-refugee sentiments, thus calling for a more open-minded and understanding society. This study about the Karen community in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area speaks to the idea of “building bridges between cultures,” as well as, contributes to the dearth of literature and resources available about the Karen. In highlighting the significance of studying refugee women’s identities, Hajdukowski-Ahmed (2008) states that “[e]ven though over 75 percent of the world’s refugees are women and children, the needs of refugee and asylum-seeking women are overlooked in the legislation, social policies, and services that affect them. Policies and practices—such as those associated with resettlement, reception centers, return programs, and zones of protection—may affect men and women differently” (p.30).

The importance of trying to understand the educational identity of Karen women is because it affects attitudes, judgment, and interactions with others as well as how individuals understand themselves. Not only does this study build on existing theories and research about refugee women’s identities in an educational context, it also adds an educational identity component that incorporates the philosophical understanding of what it means to be educated. Conceptually, this study will explore the relationships between lived experiences, what it means to be educated, and how it shapes educational identities. Equally important is the practical significance of this study which provides insight into

the experiences of Karen women that may help shape educational and public policies for immigrant and refugee service providers.

8. Organization of the dissertation

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters. This introductory chapter presented the problem. It explained the purpose and significance of conducting a study to investigate the educational identities of Karen women in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area. This chapter also introduced the research questions, context of the study, background of the Karen people, and the research design.

Chapter Two is divided into four parts. The first part situates the study within the identity framework. The second part expands the concept of an educational identity and how cultures produce the educated person. The third part discusses the educational experiences of refugee and immigrant students, in particular ideas of the model minority. The last part is a review of the available literature about the Karen in Minnesota.

Chapter Three discusses, in detail, the research design that was introduced in the first chapter—life history. It explains how the participants are selected, how to “access” the data rather than “collect” the data, (see Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006), and discusses how the data are analyzed.

Chapter Four introduces two of the nine Karen women and their life histories. The two life histories were drafted from the interviews and they reflect the collaboration between the researcher and participants. I organized and synthesized the interviews, as well as integrated direct quotations from the women into the retelling of their

experiences. The two life histories were written from a first person's perspective to capture their voices and lived experiences in Burma, Thailand, and the United States.

Chapter Five consists of the remaining seven of the nine Karen women's life histories. This chapter presents a condensed version of the women's life histories that pertain to answering the two guiding research questions. Each life history chronologically follows the life experiences and educational experiences of the women. Furthermore, in the life histories, I have integrated my interpretive commentaries.

Chapter Six answers the two guiding research questions about negotiating educational identities and what it means to be educated. The field notes from the observations and interview transcripts are coded by theme and analyzed using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Chapter Seven discusses the findings and implications of the study. It also acknowledges the limitations, offers recommendations for future research, and provides insight on the significance of the study and researcher's reflections.

Chapter 2: Literature review

[A]s others take up certain discourses to identify us, we also draw on discourses to make meaning for ourselves. This process opens up room for multiple, contradictory positionings as we identify or do not identify with the subject positions to which we are summoned. Put another way, expectations from others *who we are or should be* may collide and conflict with *how we want to identify ourselves*. ~ Bic Ngo, 2010, p. 65, emphasis in original

1. Introduction

The (re/co)construction of identities can no longer be explained as single and linear; rather, more theoretical and empirical work that embraces multiple identities is vital to help explain the experiences of immigrant children (Suarez-Orozco, 2001). However, the concept and perception of multiple identities is often understood as linear and non-contradictory. Bic Ngo (2010) captures the complexity of negotiating refugee and immigrant identities in *Unresolved identities: Discourse, ambivalence, and urban immigrant students*. Ngo (2010) illustrates that immigrant student identities are non-linear, contradictory, ambivalent and unresolved. To illustrate the complexity of educational identities, this chapter situates the study within the identity framework, explores the constructions of educational identity studies, and discusses the discourse about the educational experiences of immigrants.

2. Identities

The study of identities has become ubiquitous. In addition, identity studies have accentuated the complexity of understanding and constructing identities (Ngo, 2010). In theories of identity, there are two constructs that explain how people identify themselves and others. The first construct is identity theory. Hogg, Terry, and White (1995) define

identity theory as a set of concepts that “explain individuals’ role-related behaviors” (p. 255). Identity theory assumes that individuals define their roles, and that identities are meaningful through social interaction. On the contrary, social identity theory explains in-group relations and processes. Moreover, social identity theory consists of two ideas: categorization and self-enhancement. In categorization, the characteristics of a group define the people in that group. Self-enhancement places the self into a group while presenting other groups as problematic.

The similarities between identity theory and social identity theory are 1) both theories recognize the relationship between the social and the self, and 2) both theories are essentially defining the self (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). However, the differences between identity theory and social identity theory are the various definitions of the self in relation to the context. Another difference is that identity theory focuses on role behavior while social identity theory examines in-group behavior. Despite the differences between identity and social identity theories, Cerulo (1997) argues that changes in group agency, the identification process, and the expansion of cyberspace has shifted identity studies.

Cerulo (1997) suggests that the relationship between the individual and the collective is converging within literatures of identity; thus, the concept of a social identity has expanded to include both individual and collective identities. Cerulo (1997) asserts that the shift from individual to collective identities is due to 1) social and nationalist movements that emphasize group agency and identity, 2) the studies on identification processes for groups to determine how “distinctions are created, maintained, and

changed”, and 3) new technologies that expand individual identities to include cyberspace (p. 386).

Brewer (2001) explains that individual identities focus on the self as a person, whereas collective identities place the self with a group as whole. Moreover, Brewer (2001) elucidates that the relationship between “me” and “we” in social identity are equal, in that neither has priority over the other. Reicher (2004) asserts that the idea of a social identity was developed “to provide a point of pivot between the social and the individual”; therefore, social identity needs to be contextualized (p.928). Nevertheless, identities are dynamic. As Burke (2006) explains, “[i]dentity change involves changes in the meaning of the self, changes in what it means to be who one is as a member of a group, who one is in a role, or who one is as a person” (p. 92). Despite how certain identities are more resistant to change, Burke (2006) argues that with slow, persistent pressure such identities will change, and over time, identities that are similar will converge.

In disciplines like social anthropology, identity first appeared as “ethnic identity” or “ethnicity” (Sokfeld, 2001). Identity studies have been popular with immigrant students because of the multiple, shifting, and complex identities of immigrant children. In the literature about refugee identity in educational contexts, many have coupled refugees with immigrants (McBrien, 2005); therefore, it is important to discuss the differences and similarities between the terms.

An immigrant is one who moves from one country to another with the goals of resettling in the new country, often for economic reasons. A refugee is one who crosses

international borders because of fear of prosecution if they remain or return to their home country. The distinction usually refers to refugees as involuntary while other forms of immigration are voluntary. Although there are individuals who fit the definition of a refugee, if the host country refuses to recognize them as such, the individuals are denied assistance and social services designated for refugees in that country (McBrien, 2005; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2008). Sometimes, these unrecognized refugees are then labeled as illegal immigrants. McBrien (2005) suggests that both refugees and immigrants face racial, ethnic, religious and cultural differences in addition to discrimination and racism. In this study, references to immigrants are inclusive of refugees.

The following examples and studies alluded are not about the Karen refugees in this study; rather, they signify important aspects of the life experiences of refugees and immigrants and/or educational identities. As Ngo and Lee (2007) recommends “researchers interested in the education of Southeast Asian American students might examine the way identities and experiences are being transformed—shaped, contested, and reconstructed—in U.S. schools and society and the role(s) of teachers, peers, and schools in this process” (p. 443).

2.1 Ethnic identities. Ethnic identity has been an important and useful construct for understanding the experiences and worldviews of refugee and immigrant communities. In reviewing the literature about the construction of ethnicity, Haines (2007) found that the notion of ethnicity has the general advantage of conveying a people’s uniqueness in a way that provides some potential balance between factors of biology and culture—of nature and nurture—and also a balance between what is

passed down over time and what is created anew. Compared to race, ethnicity seems to imply a more humane sense of the cultural aspects of people's lives: their beliefs, language, family lives, social relations, and—most emblematically—their cultural expressions. It also usually implies at least some fluidity, some potential for change. (p. 286)

Using a national survey of newly arrived refugees in 1995 and 2001, Haines (2007) examined how newly arrived immigrants perceived their ethnic identities. Haines (2007) found that constructions of ethnicity among immigrants expand beyond conventional definitions to include race, religion, and nationality.

Studies about ethnic identity for immigrant populations emphasize the immigrant group's effort for ethnic solidarity and resisting assimilation. Scott (1982) examined the ethnic identities of the early Hmong refugees in San Diego. In this situation, both internal (Hmong leaders) and external (service providers) forces threatened ethnic group identity. Given the Hmong history of oppression by the dominant group and the culture of collectivism, it is understandable why the Hmong in San Diego live and settle in clusters. Scott (1982) argued that the lack of a consistent and shared national identity and the experiences of injustice and marginalization strengthened ethnic group identity for the Hmong. Moreover, in-group differences were not significant enough to jeopardize ethnic solidarity. The Hmong leaders in this case played a contradicting role because they wanted to maintain a strong ethnic identity as well as make sure that the Hmong community fits in to mainstream American society. In addition, since many of the

Hmong families in San Diego relied on government support, their ethnic group identity was compromised as social service providers pushed the Hmong toward assimilation.

In constructing Hmong identity, Lee (2002) explains that educational experiences and interactions help interpret what it means to be Hmong. Lee (2002) suggests that “through their interactions with other students and through the formal and hidden curriculum, non-White immigrant students learn that Whites are viewed as the only ‘real Americans’” (p. 233). In essence, this realization affects how immigrant students, like the Hmong, construct their ethnic identities in the United States. By trying to camouflage their ethnic identities due to fear of criticisms from peers and teachers, some of Hmong students have compromised their academic opportunities. Constructing ethnic identities among refugee and immigrant youths extracts deeper social and cultural issues such as the “clashing” of cultures and determining “authentic” ethnic identities (Maira, 2002).

2.2 National identities. Using concepts of boundaries to explain identities, Bash (2005) conducted a study about the educational experiences and perceptions of refugee children from Kosovo who were living in London. Bash (2005) argued that space, place, time, and boundaries shape refugee experiences and their (individual and collective) perceptions of their identities. Although space and place, eventually were discussed as components of boundaries, Bash (2005) asserts that spaces influence educational experiences and the amenability of places means that it can even exist as a community. Boundaries, through spaces and places, are important to the human experience especially for refugees and can significantly influence the way people construct and negotiate their

identities. For refugees, the feeling of belonging or fitting into a place is especially important in identity formation and affiliation.

As immigrants settle in new countries, their national identities and allegiances may change to that of the new country. However, as refugees, this may not necessarily be the case. For Karen refugees, national identity is of vital importance given their history and struggles. Nationalism for the Karen is not necessarily pledging their allegiances to Burma, but to an imaginary Karen nation. South (2007) claimed that Christianity and missionary schools created a pan-Karen national identity. This concept of a pan-Karen national identity is birth to organizations like the Karen National Union (KNU). The KNU has perpetuated Karen nationalism within Burma and in the refugee camps. Karen nationalism recreated their ethno-history, but it will be difficult for Karen with strong national identities because they have no nation state to return to (Rajah, 2002).

2.3 Cultural and gender identities. The literature about refugee and immigrant identities has stressed the impact of culture and gender on constructing and negotiating identities. In a study investigating the practices of early marriage in the Hmong culture, Ngo (2002) discovers that early marriage, for some, is a way of contesting to family structures and schooled experiences. In essence, early marriage was an act of trying to get away from their parents' control rather than upholding cultural values. The patriarchal Hmong culture requires Hmong women and girls to conform to gender roles that, in the past, may hinder their educational opportunities. Ngo (2002) explains that "Hmong identities and experiences occur through a process that is negotiated

‘horizontally’ through relationships and practices, as well as transmitted ‘vertically’ from generation to generation” (p. 165). In constructing cultural and gender identities, Ngo (2002) elucidates how some Hmong women have employed cultural practices for their personal gain.

Like others, Vietnamese refugees also have trouble adjusting to mainstream American culture. Phan, Rivera, and Roberts-Wilbur (2005) deconstruct how Vietnamese refugee women develop their identities, particularly highlighting the influences of gender and culture. Phan, Rivera, and Roberts-Wilbur (2005) analyze identity development from a case study about a 1.5 generation Vietnamese woman (Thuy) who is conflicted with whether or not she wants a Vietnamese wedding or American wedding. Thuy’s identity development process is non-linear as she contemplates her identity as a woman and as a Vietnamese. Her obligation as a Vietnamese daughter makes her feel guilty if she does not choose a Vietnamese wedding. Concomitantly, the influences of mainstream American culture on Thuy’s identity favors an American wedding. Eventually, Thuy will have both ceremonies, to preserve her Vietnamese identity and confirm her American identity. Phan, Rivera, and Roberts-Wilbur (2005) explain that since Thuy was not born in the United States, her situation was more complicated because of the expectations for her to uphold her cultural and gender identities. However, if Thuy had been born in the United States, the expectations for her to preserve her cultural and gender identities will be more lenient and flexible.

The identities of refugee and immigrants have been crucial to understanding their experiences. Although the literature about refugee and immigrant identities explores

numerous concepts, I have limited the concepts to ethnic, national, cultural and gender. These concepts appear to be most important in understanding how Karen women construct and negotiate their educational identities. The next section explores how educational identities have been presented in the literature about identities and about educational experiences.

3. Educational identities

Educational identity as defined in chapter one implies that individuals must have a working definition of what it means to be educated. Although Levinson, Foley, and Holland (1996) hint at the connection between how cultures produce “educated people” and how it shapes student identities, explicit relationships between the meaningfulness of education and identity have yet to be made, calling for a deeper understanding of this concept. Levinson and Holland (1996) explain that studying cultural productions permits researchers to examine the resources available at a site and how people can use those resources. Furthermore, they highlight the value of context in defining the educated person. These assumptions and approaches are similar to the ones in this dissertation.

Culturally constructed identities of the educated person have been linked consistently to attending school. Levinson’s (1996) study in a Mexican secondary school illustrates how cultures construct social statuses and produce schooled identities. The participants in Levinson’s (1996) study suggested that a “schooled identity” distinguishes students who attended school from those who did not and those who dropped out. Levinson (1996) investigates how schooling produces new social identities. According to Levinson (1996) social identity is “the self-understandings, acquired from social

discourses and often symbolically charged through emotional attachment, which an individual has of him/herself” (p. 212).

The secondary school where Levinson (1996) conducted his study was in San Pablo, a place diverse in race and class. He learned that in urban areas, students from indigenous groups were identified as “poor” not as “Indians” whereas in rural areas, these students were identified as “Indians”. In essence, the distinctions between race and class differed depending on location. At the time of his study educators were expected to unify the country based on culture and “Indian” culture became a symbol of national culture.

For the students, the advantages of schooling derived from the idea that children who attended school were becoming “somebody”. Students who were identified as schooled were encouraged by each other and by the community to differentiate themselves from the drop-outs and the non-schooled. Levinson (1996) describes that “while adults and older siblings provided important messages, the cultural production of schooled identity still took place largely in and through the realm of student culture, that is, in the informal domains of student-organized activities, in and out of school” (p. 220).

One important element that Levinson discussed was the gender differences among schooled identities and opportunities for obtaining schooled identities. Girls’ schooled identities were constructed against early marriage, encouraging girls to maintain a career path. Levinson (1996) concludes that regardless of race and class, students who were identified as schooled saw themselves as equals. On the contrary, children without schooled identities were perceived as lower than those who had schooled identities. For students from less privileged backgrounds, “the culture of equality came to signify a

means of empowerment, of acquiring the same of kind of cultural capital within an educational field” (Levinson, 1996, p. 230). From the idea that schooling produces social identities through the construction of a schooled identity, Levinson (1996) suggests that the social self becomes the educated person. Essentially, being schooled meant being educated.

In Levinson’s (1996) study, attending school became a social identity, one that dissolved issues of class and race within the community. The process of forming a schooled identity, Levinson (1996) illustrates is a result of how cultures produce and distinguish educated persons. The notion that cultures produced educated persons is a concept that has been examined through the lens of identity as self-making (Luttrell, 1996) and resistance (Skinner & Holland, 1996; Shaw, 1996).

In comparing how different school cultures produce the educated person, Rival’s (1996) study is another illustration of how the educated person is constructed and understood. The two sites in Rival’s (1996) study, both regarding the education of the Huaorani, a native group in Ecuador, are the state school and the longhouse. Since Huaorani’s have an oral tradition, Huaorani leaders learned how to read and write from missionary schools in order to preserve their culture. Most importantly, they believed that education is crucial in maintaining their cultural identity; thus, when a school was built in a Huaorani village there was not much opposition to the project even though the purpose was to modernize the people. Material goods were handed out and available for purchase because the teachers thought that Huaorani students will do better with the goods. Rival (1996) clarifies that both the Huaorani community and teachers believed

that “to be educated is to be modern, and to be modern means to consume imported, manufactured goods” (p. 56). Essentially, formal education meant that the families had to change their lifestyles; moreover, “[t]o learn new skills is to learn a new identity so one becomes at once educated, modern, and ‘civilized’” (Rival, 1996, p. 57).

The second site in Rival’s (1996) study is with the Huaorani people in the forest. In contrast to the first site, being educated as a Huaorani means to grow, participate, and interact with the Huaorani people, and eventually become self-sufficient. Rival (1996) describes that Huaorani children are encouraged to be independent and that “Huaorani pedagogy is that action should result from the exact correspondence between feeling (*huë*) and desire or will (*â*)” (p. 160, emphasis in original). Moreover, walking, talking, and eating meat are three important stages of becoming independent. Rival’s (1996) descriptions of how different sites and cultures define and produce the educated person, demonstrates the positive and negative impacts of schools. Both Levinson’s (1996) and Rival’s (1996) studies exemplify how cultural and social identities, gender, and place helps explain the cultural production of the educated person.

3.1 *Una buena educación.* The assumptions inherent in formal and non-formal education curricula may or may not reflect the values of the students and parents. One important construct is that of the educated person, *una buena educación*, translated literally as “a good education”. The construct of *una buena educación* appeared in two dissertations, one about Puerto Rican parents’ perspectives on bilingual education (Rubio, 1994), and the other on the life histories of how Latina mothers perform their educational identities (Villenas, 1996). Villenas (1996) defines that

[t]he goal of education was not academics nor material achievement, but rather, to bring up good, decent and hardworking people who have respect for parents and elders, and who keep their obligations to their families. Therefore, women who are the centers of their *hogar* [home] have a powerful role in the home and community. She is in charge of imparting *una buena educación*, something that no institution is in charge of providing. (p. 273)

Villenas (1996) analyzes the performance and power relations between herself and the Latina women in her study to identify how the women perform their educational identities. From her analysis, Villenas (1996) identifies three ways in which the women present themselves as educated. The first is acting as teachers, the second is stressing their education through duties and behaviors, and the third group of women acts as peers to the researcher. Villenas (1996) frames her study within Levinson, Foley, and Holland's the cultural production of the educated person, illustrating how different cultures and contexts produce different forms of an educated person.

In the context of Villenas's (1996) study, to be educated is to be a good person. *Una buena educación* is an important concept that emphasizes the value of informal and moral education, something that is often neglected in the formal education curricula. *Una buena educación* proves to be a useful concept to help interpret and understand how Karen women negotiate their educational identities as discussed in chapter seven.

4. Educational experiences of refugees and immigrants

The educational experiences of refugees and immigrants have played an important role in constructing their identities. This section explicates the discourse about refugee

and immigrant education in the United States. In an analysis of the literature review about the educational barriers and needs of refugee students, McBrien (2005) writes that a study by Trueba, Jacobs, and Kirton (1990) “found that one of the major criteria for the label [most needy learning disabled] was the children’s inability to communicate well in English” (p. 350). In essence, the inability to speak English well was interpreted as a learning disability. The power of schools to define a student as learning disabled due to the challenges of navigating through the school system and learning a language demonstrates how schools come to justify non-immigrant students’ and teachers’ gender and racial profiling of the immigrant students. Furthermore, the physical and social isolation of immigrant students impedes the students’ learning abilities (McBrien, 2005). Gitlan et al. (2003) points out that when communities and schools have a welcoming discourse for diversity, the successes or failures of the students are theirs alone and not associated with the institutions responsible.

As a way to deflect the responsibilities of the institutions, schools link student failures and troubles with the students, parents and other outside factors. The isolation from the mainstream classrooms, a lack of social and academic support, lowering expectations and rigor, depression, and dropping out of schools are some of the problems that immigrant students face (Lee, 2004; Lee, 2002; Ngo, 2002; Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008; Lew, 2006; McBrien, 2005; Lopez, 2002).

Ogbu (1987) states that cultural differences should not be seen as a barrier, rather it should be perceived as an identity. In spite of Ogbu’s (1987) suggestion, cultural

differences between the immigrant culture and mainstream U.S. culture has been portrayed and understood as a barrier to education.

4.1 Binary discourses. The educational experiences of immigrant students have often been presented as binaries. Ngo (2010) criticizes that the discourses about urban, immigrant student identities have been presented as limited and static. Urban student identities are either depicted as dysfunctional and failing or resilient and successful (Ngo, 2010). As for immigrant identities, the discourse portrays a “clash” of cultures between the immigrant’s culture and mainstream U.S. culture (Ngo, 2010; Maira, 2002). Discourses about immigrant students have also illustrated the clash of cultures between in-groups, in particular generational differences, the 1.5 generation as traditional and the second generation students as Americanized (Lee, 2005).

Thinking beyond binaries, Ngo (2010) calls for individuals to understand, accept and expect identities to be ambivalent and unresolved. She reminds us how important it is for students, parents, teachers, administrators, and policy-makers to understand and accept that identities are unresolved, complex and ambivalent in order to create and replicate culturally relevant curricula, pedagogies, and policies.

Ngo’s argument about unresolved identities is important in understanding the identities of Karen refugee women in Minnesota. It is crucial that I accept and expect the various aspects of the Karen women’s identities (e.g. educational identities, cultural identities) to be ambivalent and unresolved. The concepts related to and the definitions of educational identities that researchers have used have been presented as contradictory through describing how different sociocultural contexts shape the participants’

understandings of what it means to be educated. Concomitantly, it is unclear if the researchers interpret the contradictory educational identities as resolved or not. Nevertheless, the concepts and definitions of educational identities are complex as evident by the multiple and various ways that it has been applied.

4.2 The model minority stereotype. The educational experiences of Asian immigrant and refugee students have been discussed in relation to the model minority construct. How does the “model minority” concept affect or influence the way Karen women might understand and define what it means to be educated? The model minority stereotype emerged in the mid-1960s during the civil rights movement in the United States (Suzuki, 1989, Ngo & Lee, 2007). As blacks and other minorities protested, the success stories of Asian minorities appeared, “calling attention to the seemingly phenomenal success of Asian Americans. They were extolled as a ‘model minority’ who had overcome racism and ‘made it’ in American society through hard work, uncomplaining perseverance, and quiet accommodation” (Suzuki, 1989, p. 14). In other words, Asians were the model for other minorities to follow because they can make it without special assistance; thus, implying that African Americans and other minorities fail because of themselves not because American society privileges whites (Ngo & Lee, 2007). Furthermore, Ngo and Lee (2007) argue that “the model minority stereotype is used to silence and contain Asian Americans even as it silences other racial groups” (p. 416).

Suzuki (1989) stated that the 1980 census data had confirmed the “model minority” image that median family income and education levels of Asians were higher

than whites. This statistic was later refuted because there were more Asian families where both spouses worked; Asian children stayed with their parents longer, and Asian families were bigger. All of these factors contributed to making the average Asian household income higher. Suzuki (1989) problematized that once the statistics were disaggregated most Asians were unemployed and earned much less than the whites. It is important to note that at the time, three fourths of the Asian population was Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and Indian (Suzuki, 1989).

As the number of Southeast Asian refugees increased, diversifying the Asian community, the model minority stereotype has created negative implications for struggling Asian students. With the assumption that Asian students are motivated overachievers, they are “frequently excluded from educational opportunity programs that provide supportive services to minority students” (Suzuki, 1989, p. 17). Ngo and Lee (2007) review the educational experiences of four Southeast Asian groups: Vietnamese, Hmong, Lao and Khmer. They demonstrate how these Asian groups challenge the model minority stereotype by highlighting their academic struggles.

As a result of the model minority stereotype, Asian immigrant students are ideologically blackened (Lee, 2002; Lew, 2006). Lew (2006) indicates that academic success is associated with acting or being white whereas academic failure is associated with acting or being black. Asian immigrant groups who embrace the model minority stereotype are ideologically whitened. Lee (2004) references Tuan (1998) that “Asian Americans achieve the status of honorary whites at the expense of African Americans” (p.123). In other words, instead of the whites suppressing the blacks, they are using the

Asians to suppress the blacks. However since some refugee youths, like the Hmong do not measure up to the model minority stereotype, Lee (2004) argues that they are ideologically blackened. Thus, this concept of ideological blackening or whitening is contingent on how compliant these immigrant groups are to the status quo. The more a group complies, the whiter they are and the more they resist, the blacker they are.

5. Karen in Minnesota

The available literature on the Karen in Minnesota addresses economic, religious, social, and educational issues. Many Karen have expressed their frustrations about how difficult it is to find a job (Joshi, 2005). In addition, some Karen feel that social service providers are neglecting them compared to the Hmong refugees. David Zander, a research analyst from the Council on Asian-Pacific Minnesotans, assures that it is just a perception since the Hmong refugees outnumber the Karen refugees (Joshi, 2005).

The sources about the Karen in Minnesota highlight the importance of religion, in particular Baptism (Olson, 2004; Joshi, 2005; Bright, 2008). The First Baptist Church is one of the most influential and important organizations that provide spiritual and social support. Other forms of social support are from local organizations such as the Karen Organization of Minnesota (KOM) and the public sector. Since many “Karen live in the Arlington Avenue and Westminster areas or in Roseville (Bright, 2008, para. 1), this change is challenging for cities, like Roseville, that are not used to providing for immigrant communities. Peg Kennedy, the Cultural Services Manager at Roseville area schools, states that Roseville is used to getting the more educated population—“St. Paul’s successes”—which means that they do not have the necessary resources in place to

support refugee communities, like the Karen (Minnesota Department of Human Rights, 2010).

The educators in Roseville area schools have also expressed concerns about how Karen students are struggling. Language is posited as a barrier for academic progress. Furthermore, “Karen children are learning rudimentary English and there’s little chance students older than sixth grade will ever take traditional classes” (Goessling, 2007, para. 8). Interestingly, culture has not been posed as an obstacle to education; however, the number of Karen students is overwhelming for the Roseville area schools. Onstad, an English language learner (ELL) teacher, expressed her concern about not meeting the No Child Left Behind adequate yearly progress goals because of the number of new Karen students with limited English (Goessling, 2007).

In a clinical research study conducted in the Twin Cities, Amelia Storm (2011) focused on the resettlement experience of Karen refugees. Storm (2011) used convenience sampling and the snowball method, which is useful for sampling subcultures with members that interact with each other. Her exploratory study interviewed four men and one woman, aged 26 to 40 years old, who all speak English and have lived in the Twin Cities for at least two years. Storm’s (2011) findings suggest that the refugees who have lived in the cities were able to navigate the U.S. system better than the ones who grew up in the villages. Moreover, Storm (2011) concludes that resettlement was easier for individuals who took the initiative to learn about new things while receiving support from family and friends because they were able to cope and balance between mainstream U.S. and Karen culture.

More recent studies about the Karen in Minnesota include two dissertations, one on the use of alcohol in the Karen communities due to displacement (McCleary, 2013) and the second on Karen resettlement experiences (Lytle, 2015). Jennifer McCleary (2013) conducted a comparative study in the refugee camps in Thailand and in St. Paul, Minnesota to explore how displacement affects how the Karen refugees perceive and use alcohol. McCleary (2013) outlines several important findings from her study. The first builds off of the existing literature about how alcohol use changes as a result of displacement and resettlement. The second highlights how displacement and resettlement disrupts cultures, increasing the use of alcohol which may not necessarily comply with cultural values and beliefs. The third finding stresses how communal ways of thinking shapes the way Karen refugees use alcohol, either as an illustration of selfishness or as an incentive to quit.

Kathleen Lytle's (2015) study on the resettlement experience of Karen refugees in Minnesota underlines the fear of the Burmese army, the frustrations of living in the camps in Thailand, and most importantly, the challenges of adjusting to life in Minnesota. Some of the challenges that Lytle (2015) outlines are issues related to housing, employment, language, cultural adjustments among the youth, and mental health. Furthermore, Lytle (2015) elucidates the value of building a strong cohesive Karen community that can help build and maintain social and cultural capital.

6. Conclusion

This chapter elucidates how identities are constructed, presented, and understood through analyzing the ethnic, national, and cultural and gender aspects. In addition, this

chapter illustrates how various and multiple factors influence and is influenced by educational identities. Concepts of what it means to be educated is contextual as well as the outcomes of “cultural productions” (Levinson and Holland, 1996). The educational experiences and structural issues that other refugee and immigrant groups have encountered have provided a platform to help understand the Karen experience. In addition, I explored the binary discourse of immigrant education to demonstrate the complexity of identities and how notions of the “model minority” affect various Asian populations.

Chapter 3: Research design

Life histories offer the opportunity to observe a particular society through the lens of individual lives. Unlike autobiographies, the initiation for which generally comes from the subject herself, a life history comes about as the collaboration between two individuals, often an insider speaking about herself and her society and an outsider asking questions from her own frame of reference. ~ Mirza and Strobel, 1989, p. 1

1. Researcher background

As a researcher, I understand that establishing rapport with the Karen community and participants is vital to the outcome of this study. Wolcott (2008) warns that life histories may make the participants feel like they are gaining less information from the study compared to the researcher. Therefore, it was important that I embraced Ruth Behar's (1996) concept of the "vulnerable observer". Knowing that life histories are personal and may be sensitive, it was only fair if the participants learned about me in order to establish an honest and trusting relationship. At the same time, I am aware that regardless of how I present myself, I am still a researcher. My role as the researcher resembles the outsider/insider/outside construct that Rubio (1994) described. I am an outsider because I am not Karen. I am an insider because I am familiar with the refugee experience and the educational experiences of refugees in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area. I am an outsider because I am a researcher.

I was hopeful that my experiences in refugee camps and with the Karen would contribute to building rapport. I was born in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in northeastern Thailand. Although my family and I resettled to Minnesota when I was three years old, my experiences as a refugee child growing up in the U.S. education system and society has provided insight about the experiences, frustrations, thoughts, and struggles of

refugee families. In 2007, I had the opportunity to visit a Congolese refugee camp in western Tanzania. Although the population and context were different from the Karen in Thailand, I found that there were some common refugee experiences, such as the desire to be free (to travel and work) and the desire for peace. In 2010, I was accepted to work for the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Thailand to help with the operations sector in resettling Karen refugees. I was stationed at the IOM sub-office in Mae Sariang, which was responsible for two of the refugee camps, Mae La Oon and Mae Ra Ma Luang.

Prior to working for the IOM, I was introduced to the Karen people and culture when I volunteered to help tutor adult English language learners at the Minnesota Literacy Council. I continued learning about the Karen people and experiences as I conducted a mini-ethnography with a local Karen woman who introduced and taught me more about gender relations in the Karen culture. I also attended workshops about the Karen people and culture that local organizations offered. Furthermore, I have attended the Annual KOM Gala where many Karen and organizations that work with the Karen were present.

One of the assumptions in this study is that with new and different experiences, individuals may understand and interpret their past experiences differently. Not all of the Karen women have been familiar with the model minority stereotype long enough to reassess how it may affect their experiences and the interpretations of their experiences in the United States. To illustrate how experiences and identities change overtime with

regards to the model minority stereotype, I am sharing my educational experience and how I may have been affected by the stereotype.

The first time I remember being introduced to the model minority stereotype was in civics class in high school. I was in 9th grade and when the teacher asked us if we have heard of the model minority stereotype, no one raised their hands. He explained the stereotype and he said Asians are the “model minorities”. He then continued to elaborate on the characteristics of the model minority stereotype and how Asian cultures fit within the stereotype. I remember feeling somewhat offended because it seemed like he was criticizing Asian culture. I don’t remember him explaining any of the implications or dangers of the stereotype. I’m not sure if he did. Being the only Asian student in the class, he used me as an example to illustrate how I fit the stereotype—as the quiet, Asian student who does not cause trouble and gets good grades. At that time, I only saw how the model minority stereotype aligns with certain concepts of the American Dream. I owned up to the stereotype because I did not understand the implications. The stereotype was only perpetuated as I became the only Asian student in many of the advanced placement classes.

At that time, I did not understand what was going on and I felt like I did not know enough to object and criticize the stereotype. As I reflect back on my experiences, I understand why I did not challenge the stereotype. The sociocultural context and my experiences up to that point did not push me to contest because it was to my advantage to embrace the stereotype. In a high school where the student demographic was predominantly Caucasian, it was easier for me to “fit in” by being “ideologically

whitened” (Lew, 2006). Of course, I did not know that embracing the stereotype would place other Asian or minority students who were struggling at a disadvantage, denying them academic assistance that would help them succeed in school. During that time, the model minority stereotype was the American Dream and I did not distinguish the difference. I believed that if I could work hard to get to where I was then so could other people. It wasn’t until I continued my educational journey on to college and graduate school where I was exposed to more and different ways of thinking that helped me develop a critical stance and perspective on the model minority stereotype. My educational experience as a female, Asian student who came to the United States as a refugee is similar to the young Karen women that I interviewed in this study. With these common identities, I hope that my background and experiences will help me understand and interpret the educational experiences of the Karen women and how they understand the model minority stereotype.

2. Conceptual framework: Interpretivism

The philosophical approach in this study is based on the ontological assumption that reality is constructed and subjective, and the epistemological assumption that knowledge is co-constructed and based on personal experiences. Mirza and Strobel’s (1989) explanation above demonstrates how the ontology and epistemology inherent in life history is suitable for this study. Life history is a methodology within interpretivism, a paradigm that encompasses the ontological and epistemological assumptions of this study (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006).

As one of the major philosophical traditions, interpretivism is often framed in opposition to positivism. Positivism operates from the assumption that through experimental design, research can be objective with deductive reasoning (Williamson, 2006). Although interpretivistic studies are also designed, they are inductive, subjective, and they favor naturalistic settings (Williamson, 2006). Interpretivism is a philosophy, (Schwandt, 2000; Williamson, 2006) as well as a paradigm, (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2006) and a research inquiry tradition (Erickson, 1986). In addition, the term interpretivism is often used interchangeably with qualitative research; however, these two terms are not synonymous because qualitative research can be positivistic.

At the heart of interpretivism is meaning-making, not only from the outsider's perspective, but more importantly from the insider's perspective while acknowledging researcher subjectivity. Embracing an emic approach, interpretivism attempts to get "inside the head" of the actors, to see the world from their eyes (Schwandt, 2000). Miles and Huberman (1994) note that interpretivists believe they are just as attached to the concepts studied as their participants. Schwandt (2000) highlights that human action is "inherently meaningful" in interpretivism (p. 191). Although the interpreter is "external to the interpretive process", interpretivists respect the way things are in the world and believe that the actor's intended meaning is objective knowledge (Schwandt, 2000, p. 194). It is this objective knowledge that researchers need to be subjective about in order to understand the participant's intended meaning.

3. Rationale for life history

Life histories are ethnographically informed collaborations between the participants and the researcher. Goodson and Sikes (2001) clarify that “[l]ife history work is interested in the way people *do* narrate their lives, not in the way they *should*” (p. 16, emphasis in original). What differentiates life history from life story is the process in which the story is told and presented. Life story is the story, itself. Goodson and Sikes (2001) explain that life story is the first layer of understanding lived experiences because “life stories remain uncoupled from the conditions of their social construction” (p. 17). The second layer of understanding lived experiences is life history. Life history includes the life stories and situates it within an historical context (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). In life history studies, the role of the researcher is to work with the participants and present the stories from the participants’ perspectives. Concomitantly, the researcher shapes the study by identifying what and how the questions are asked; thus, it is important to understand how the researcher may influence the development, interpretation, and presentation of the life histories.

Since the purpose of this study is to understand how Karen women negotiate their educational identities, life history is an appropriate methodology because it offers a holistic approach to studying identities in educational contexts (Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Moore, 2006). Fetterman (2010) notes that researchers who use life histories receive both an in-depth understanding of the individual’s life and valuable insight from an emic (insider’s) perspective. Thus, using life history will produce responses that answer the main research questions, which are: 1) how do Karen women negotiate their educational

identities in different sociocultural contexts, and 2) how do their lived experiences in Burma, Thailand, and the United States shape their understanding of what it means to be educated?

4. Research sites and recruitment

This study was done in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area. The rapidly increasing Karen population in Minnesota marks it as both an appropriate and important location for studying Karen educational identities and experiences. Harkins, Direkwut, and Aungkana (2011) stress the value of studying about the Karen in Minnesota because it is currently “home to the largest Karen population in the United States” (p. 56). There are several sites of observation in this study, which included the public Karen New Year celebrations, English language worship and Karen language worship, Karen Sunday school, citizenship classes, and in the participants’ homes. For the interviews, the participants selected the places they wanted to interview. I conducted interviews at the First Baptist Church, in the participants’ homes, libraries, and coffee shops.

I have recruited the participants through key informants, in particular Pastor Bill at the First Baptist Church. He introduced me to several of the Karen women leaders and from them, I was able to find more participants. Even with key informants, it was still challenging for me to find women who were willing to participate. I interviewed the first two women from April 2012 to August 2012. I had to take a one year break for personal reasons and resumed the interviews from August 2013 to January 2014. I interviewed nine Karen women. The women are between 21 and 43 years old and they all resettled to the United States as refugees. All of the women live in the Twin Cities metro area and

almost all of them attend the same church. All of the women are Christians and they speak English. I chose not to use an interpreter which meant that I could not interview Karen women who did not speak English. I understand that is one of the limitations to this study, but I wanted the life histories to be from the women and not filtered through an interpreter.

All of the women have had some formal education in Burma, Thailand, or the United States. It is important not to assume that women who are not currently in school do not have an educational identity. By including women with various experiences and educational backgrounds, I have gained a deeper understanding of how Karen women negotiate their educational identities in different sociocultural contexts. The nine women's life histories illustrate enough similarities and differences that allowed me to identify themes as well as capture a wide range of experiences.

5. Ethical considerations

Regarding ethical considerations, my background greatly informed my role as the researcher and my approach to this study. As a 1.5 generation Hmong refugee woman, I understand the hesitation of participating in a study, which is mostly related to ethical concerns and time commitment. Nevertheless, as someone who has been involved in research studies, both as the participant and researcher, I am determined to produce ethical research that is accommodating to the participants' schedules. I have been reflexive and the questions I asked are the ones that I am comfortable and willing to answer. I shared this information with each participant before I interviewed them.

As one of the most important ethical considerations, confidentiality is vital, not only because I am asking the Karen women to share their personal experiences, but because I am working with a small community. As with close knit communities, regardless of how I present the information some of the Karen might still be able to identify each other. To ensure confidentiality, all of the participants were given Karen pseudonyms and any personal information they wish not to be associated with had been discarded. Many of the participants consented to using their real names because they said that these were their stories. For these women, I asked them to sign and date the consent information sheet indicating that I could use their real names. To ensure that I was presenting their stories the way they wanted, I drafted their life histories and gave it to them to review. They all approved of how their stories were written and presented.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Minnesota has exempted this study from review which meant that I was only required to provide the participants with a consent information sheet. The consent information sheet does not require the participants' signatures. When I recruited the participants, I provided them with a copy of the consent information sheet for their records and explained the purpose and procedure of this study. The information sessions clarified that participation is voluntary and they may choose to withdraw from the study without jeopardizing their relationship with me or the University of Minnesota. I also informed the participants about the benefits and potential risks of the study. The benefits are 1) the women will have the opportunity to provide insight about their life and educational experiences; and 2) they will be able to contribute to the bodies of literature on educational identities and the

Karen in Minnesota. Although the potential risks in this study are minimal, one important factor to remember is that life histories may trigger sensitive feelings. The participants had the opportunity to ask me questions. I also informed them that if they had any questions and they wanted to speak to someone else about this study, they could contact my adviser. I directed them to where all the contact information was on the consent information sheet. I explained that I wanted to audio record the interviews and asked for their permission. They all consented. Lastly, if the women agreed to allow me to use their real names, I asked them to sign and date the consent information sheet stating they have consented to me using their real names. The women who allowed me to use their names signed two copies, one for my records and one for themselves. After the information session and once I have obtained informed consent, I proceeded with the study.

I provided all of the participants with a copy of the list of questions that I intended to ask. I also informed them that I might ask additional questions to help me understand their responses and they all agreed. At the beginning of every interview session, I remembered to ask for verbal consent before recording the interviews.

6. Trustworthiness

In conducting a study, it is essential that it is trustworthy. The trustworthiness of interpretivist studies, because they have different ontological and epistemological assumptions than positivist studies, should be evaluated in a way that reflects its assumptions. Lincoln and Guba (1989) describe four criteria that a trustworthy study

should have. These four criteria are: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility is matching the participants' realities with the researcher's realities. According to Lincoln and Guba (1989), there are six techniques (prolonged engagement, persistent observation, negative case analysis, progressive subjectivity, and member checks) that assure how studies are credible. Prolonged engagement is to "overcome the effects of misinformation, distortion, or presented 'fronts,' to establish the rapport and build the trust necessary to uncover constructions, and to facilitate immersing oneself in and understanding the context's culture" (Lincoln & Guba, 1989, p. 237). Persistent observation adds depth to the study. Negative case analysis tries to understand the study by analyzing the unusual cases. Progressive subjectivity focuses on the negotiation and (re/co)construction of thoughts by monitoring the researcher's and participants' subjectivity. Finally member checking is confirming the researcher's interpretations with the participants. The research and data analysis methods section below describes how this study embodies credibility.

Transferability refers to capturing Geertz's (1973) notion of a "thick description". Rather than designing a study that is generalizable, the importance of transferability is to provide as much detail about the study as possible. Lincoln and Guba (1989) note that the transferability of a study is not the researcher's responsibility to make it applicable, but of those who are referencing the study. In addition, dependability is carefully tracking the processes and method decisions in order for other researchers to understand the study. This study exhibits transferability and dependability through my description of the

process, the presentation of the life histories, the data analysis, and discussion of the findings. Lastly, confirmability requires that information and findings in the study are rooted in the data. As evident in the last four chapters of this dissertation, the themes that emerged in the data analysis chapter and discussion in the conclusion derived from the data in the women's life histories and my field notes.

7. Research and data analysis methods

In interpretivist inquires, data are not collected; rather, they are accessed (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006). Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2006) elucidate that “[d]ata’ in this approach, are not things given, but things observed and made sense of, interpreted. What is accessed are sources of data; the data themselves are generated, whether by the researcher interacting with visual/tactile/spatial sources or coproduced in conversational and/or participatory interactions” (p. xix). In this study, I used interviews, participant observations, and observations to access the data and inform the data analysis.

This study embodies all of Lincoln and Guba's (1989) descriptions of credibility. I started in April 2012 and finished the research in April 2015. In the year that I did not conduct interviews, I engaged in participant observation as a tutor for the citizenship classes at a local church as well as observed Karen public events. The main research method was interviews and I had two to five interview sessions with each participant that ranged from 30 minutes to 4.5 hours. The interviews were semi-structured in order to invite the participants to share their experiences or ideas that were most important to them. During the interview sessions, I took field notes to record any observations that the

audio recording could not capture. I was also able to observe how the women interacted with their families when the family members were present.

This is a life history study and every case is unique; however, it is the uniqueness of the women's experiences that that helped me understand how they interpret and negotiate their educational identities in different sociocultural contexts. Prolonged engagement in this study allowed both the participants and myself to reconsider and understand on how we negotiate our subjectivities from the time we started the interviews to the time I did the member checking. After the interviews, I transcribed and drafted the life histories. I have over 30 hours of interviews and over 600 pages transcribed. The first draft of the life histories ranged from 20 to 40 pages per participant depending on how much they shared. The participants read their life histories and either provided feedback by email or we met in person and went over what I wrote. I made the changes they asked until they were satisfied with how their life histories were presented. I resynthesized and rewrote their life histories to incorporate my interpretive commentaries and shared that with the women again. Two of the life histories I included in chapter four are the longer drafts written from the women's perspectives. The remaining seven life histories in chapter five are the short versions. Each woman confirmed that my interpretations concurred with her interpretations.

Whether or not I observed or engaged in participant observations depended on the situation. Most of the field notes I took from participant observations where when I volunteered as a tutor for the 10 week citizenship classes that started in February 2012 and October 2013. As a tutor I attended the classes with the Karen students and after the

lecture, I engaged in conversation with the students and helped explain the concepts from the lesson. I was also a participant observer during worship at church. I attended church as a member instead of a researcher and reflected on my observations and experiences afterward. The times when I only observed were during the New Year celebration and the public events organized by the church or the Karen Organization of Minnesota. In the observations, I took field notes during the events when appropriate. In the instances when it was inappropriate to take field notes during the events, I took field notes or audio recorded my observations immediately afterwards. In the observations and participant observations, I paid attention to interactions and representations of culture, gender, and any actions that might hint or reflect what it means to be educated. I also observed for discrepancies or confirmations of the women's experiences based on their interviews. Since many of the participants are community leaders, I was able to observe how they act and interact with other people in the community. For the women that I observed, how they identified themselves during the interviews aligns with how they embodied their roles as leaders in the community and how they interacted with other people.

In data analysis, I referenced my field notes to look for discrepancies between what went on and what was presented in the literature because how people identify themselves may not actually reflect their culture or who they are (Hander, 1994). I uploaded the audio recordings of the interviews onto my computer and my iPod. I downloaded a free software application on my iPod called *Slow Music Player*. This application helped me slow down the audio recordings up to 50 percent to ease the transcribing. I listened to the interviews and transcribed them. Once I have completed

the transcriptions, I downloaded a software called *Scrivener* to help me organize the data as I started open coding. Following Strauss and Corbin's (1998) methods of writing memos and coding, I used Scrivener to add memos and link them to the raw data.

Once I have identified and coded the interviews, I triangulated and compared the codes across all the participants' interviews to see if there were any common themes. Lincoln and Guba (1989) suggest that triangulation is unnecessary in qualitative studies, since triangulation is arguably a positivist term. Albeit, I found that triangulation was useful in this study because I was able to cross-reference how different participants construct and negotiate their educational identities. I have checked the themes with the participants to ensure that my interpretations are correct and made any changes they recommended. I refined the themes that run across each of the participants' life histories. Since this is an exploratory study, I have mainly use inductive methods in determining the themes and understanding the analysis.

8. Constructing the life histories

Originally, all the life histories consisted of a discussion about the meaning of their names, childhood memories, becoming an adult, relationships, life in the U.S., multiple identities, what it means to be Karen, and their perspectives on the value of education. The life history interviews that I have conducted were extensive and thorough; however, this dissertation only focuses on the women's life experiences that pertain to understanding how they negotiate their educational identities. The life histories in chapter four follow the original life histories; however, I have edited them to exclude any experiences that do not directly shape how the women negotiate their educational

identities. I have also reduced the life history data in chapter five. This section provides a brief description of why it was important for me to conduct thorough life history interviews and what each of the different discussions inferred about the Karen women's experiences.

In traditional Karen culture, they have no last names. Only when they registered to resettle to a third country were they required to have a last name. For some, they divided their names and made the last syllable of their name, their last name. For others, they added a last name, usually the name of a parent or grandparent. This process changed the meaning of their names and sometimes it changed how they identified themselves.

The discussions about childhood memories serve to illustrate the participants' experiences in the places where they grew up. Childhood memories ranged from funny and entertaining to heartbreaking and traumatic. These memories may help explain certain cultural norms and expectations, living conditions, and the resources available.

As a part of growing up, becoming an adult is a crucial stage in marking the changes in responsibilities, expectations, and choices that each women had to make. The emphasis on becoming an adult is important because definitions of what it means to be educated are centered around the experiences and knowledge that adults have. In essence, being educated means that the individual is becoming more adult-like. Each of the women have their own definitions of what it means to be an adult based on their experiences.

The women discuss the value and importance of relationships with their parents, siblings, spouses, children, other relatives, and community. Through their relationships, the women were able to discern what it looks like to show respect to each other in the Karen culture, especially the elders. The relationships also reveal the interactions between different genders, generations, and statuses.

I have tried to include a snapshot of the different events and experiences from each of the different places the women have lived. As a result, coming to the United States was their most recent move. The discussion about coming to the United States elucidates the challenges and frustration of resettlement. This information provides insight on the refugee experience for many policy makers and organizations involved in refugee resettlement. Like other refugees and immigrants, a new life in the United States is accompanied by many obstacles such as language, money, transportation, jobs, school, kids, community, food, and weather.

The discussion on identities and what it means to be Karen highlight how the women perceive themselves and those around them. Each woman shares how she identifies herself and which identities are most important to her. In addition, the women explain what it means to be Karen.

All the women emphasize the importance and value of education. Based on their own experiences and the influence of those around them, the women value education because they believe that having education means that you will have a better life. These nine women have not only shared their experiences and stories with me, but they have

also taught me about life and the importance of staying young. I am inspired by their strength and their courage to do what they believe is right.

Chapter 4: Detailed life histories

This chapter presents two of the nine Karen women's life histories. Each life history follows the women's lived experiences in Burma, Thailand, and the United States. The experiences and stories included in this chapter contribute to explaining how the women negotiate their educational identities and how their lived experiences shape their understanding of what it means to be educated. The life histories of the nine women are divided into two chapters to achieve both depth and breadth. This chapter provides a detailed account of the women's experiences from their perspectives, capturing their speech patterns and voices. Moreover, I have integrated direct quotations from the interviews into the women's narratives.

1. Aye Mya Phyu

The first time I met Aye (pronounced A) Mya Phyu was when Pastor Bill at the First Baptist Church introduced her to me. She wore glasses and had a soft smile accompanied by the most contagious laugh. Aye Mya Phyu was introduced as one of the female leaders in the Karen community, someone who would be a good participant in my study.

My life in Burma

I was born in Burma, in the Irrawaddy division and I went to school there. Aye Mya Phyu is actually my Burmese name, but I have a Karen name too. It is Aye Paw. Aye Mya in Burmese means something like cold or cool and Phyu means white. My Karen name is actually a mix between Burmese and Karen. Aye stays in Burmese and Paw is Karen for flower. In our culture, we don't have last name, first name, like the

family name. Whatever the parents want, whatever they like, they will choose. I was born on a Sunday and in Burmese Aye is perfect for a Sunday, so that's how I got my name. We have an alphabet in Burmese and the *A*, *Ah* or *Oo* sounds are perfect for children born on Sunday. They choose the first part of the name to match the day of the week and the other parts of the name they choose whatever beautiful name they want. Sometimes, the names don't have a meaning, but sometimes they do. My parents named me.

I have never met my grandmas, only my grandpas. My grandma on my dad's side passed away before I was born so I never had the chance to meet her. My grandma on my mom's side, she passed away one year after I was born, so I don't remember. My grandpa on my dad's side, he is Chinese. He lived in Taiwan or China. When the country was becoming more communist, he ran to Burma and he got married there. He has never been back. My dad is Chinese and my mom is Karen. I don't remember what the place I was born was like, but when I was about 10 years old, I visited there and it was just like a village. They have a lot of coconut trees. Just like a village, not a city and not like a town, they have just a little path you can go through. No cars, no bike, everybody just walks. The villagers don't even have slippers, they walk barefoot. The village people are so poor and I think they are so pure. They are just honest.

My dad was a teacher. He went to my mom's village and taught elementary. At that time they didn't have a school, so it wasn't called school or elementary school, just like a home-based school. The people in the villages didn't have schools and they had never been to school before. I think that's why people in the city who became teachers

chose to go to the village to do their job even if they got paid just a little. My mom was the village leader's daughter. That's how my parents met.

My family

My dad's name is Bo Gyi and my mom's name is Too Rah Paw. In our country, we just call people by the whole name. We only had first name, last names when we applied with the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) to come here. They told us that it's better if we put first name, last name, so we just divided our name. If we have three parts to our name, then the middle becomes the middle name. If we have two parts, then one is first and the other is last. Like my dad's name, Bo will be the first name and Gyi will be the last name. If you call just one name, it doesn't make sense. You have to say it altogether to make sense.

My mom and dad were divorced when I was eight or nine years old. They were married young. My mom was 19 and my dad was 20. When he finished high school and teacher training, he went to the village to teach. My mom is a Christian and my dad is Buddhist, so that was one thing that was a problem, maybe they didn't trust each other. They didn't even live together. She stayed in the village and my dad, he went back and forth between the village and the city. They fought and then they got divorced. I don't really remember the influence my parents had on me while growing up because I grew up with my aunt and uncle. I grew up with my dad's sister.

I am the oldest in my family. I have two brothers and one sister. I grew up in the city with all of my brothers and sisters. They said that because my grandpa on my father's side is Chinese, he didn't want any of us to be with my mother's side of the

family. He said he will take care of everything, every grandchild. After they divorced, my mom went back to live with her father and my dad went to find a job in Rangoon. After that, my mom's brother went to my Chinese grandpa and said that he wanted to take care of his niece and nephew too. "Give me someone," he said. A year later, my grandpa came back and said he will give my uncle two children, me and my brother. They split us up. The two older children went with my uncle on my mom's side, the younger two stayed with my grandpa on my dad's side.

I'm the oldest and I have to take care of my younger siblings, so I have to do everything. When you are the oldest you have a lot of responsibilities. You have to try. If there is something that you want to happen, you have to put it in your mind and do it. As the oldest, you have to do more work than the younger ones. Being the oldest is like being a leader and it's like being a teacher. You have to teach, tell, and lead the younger ones. It's different from the other siblings; it's also different from being the only child. In their mind, the oldest know that they are the oldest and the younger ones depend on them.

How I learn

I learned by memorizing. The kids, they don't know how to read, so I think they just memorize. They listen and watch if they're interested. If they are not interested, then they don't watch and they don't listen so they don't get it. One of the first things I remembered learning was how to fold paper from my grandpa. He taught me how to fold a bird. I liked to make that one a lot and my friends, they knew that I could make it so they brought paper and I made it. My grandpa, he is Chinese so he could make a lot of

things. He taught me but now I don't remember it. At that time, I was maybe six or seven years old.

Sometimes you learn something but you don't use it and you forget. If you learned it before and you need it, you can use it. If you've never learned it before, you cannot use it. I think that we can learn everything. We can memorize and we can learn so that we can use it one day. I learned how to sew. I made a lot of dresses for dolls when I was 10 to 12 years old. We just played with the needle and thread and made dresses. We didn't have dolls too, so we made dolls by ourselves with cloth. When we came to the refugee camp, I was able to use what I learned from sewing to mend holes in other people's clothes. It was helpful. We didn't have a sewing machine so we had to sew by hand.

My childhood holidays

When I was a child, we celebrated New Year, but it was the Burmese New Year. My relatives were Chinese and they adopted the Burmese culture. When they had the Burmese New Year, I remember they had a water festival in a large group. It was just in front of our house. They had water and they just poured water. I played with my friend. It's the same as the water festival in Thailand. I grew up with my dad's side of the family so I didn't know the Christian life. I didn't know about the Christian holidays too. I knew about the Burmese New Year and the Chinese New Year.

During the Chinese New Year, my auntie made a red dress for me to wear. We had to wear red. My grandpa, he didn't like the black color. We couldn't wear black, not even a little black spot. Every year, we had to get a new dress for Chinese New Year.

They made a lot of food and we burned golden paper. We also had a lot of candy and a pig. My grandpa and his other relatives and friends came and they worshipped and prayed to their Chinese God, like ancestors. After that, we could eat. It was just once a year so we ate a lot of food there.

When I grow up I want to be

When I was younger, I wanted to be a doctor when I grew up. I look at the doctors and they are so smart. They look clean and they are in good shape. I just wanted to be a doctor. They also had higher education. Maybe in Burma, those who get into the doctor line are the best. When I was young, I told everybody I wanted to be a doctor and they said that I would have to get good scores. I said that I could do it. I said I will be a doctor, but it was just a dream. I can't be a doctor now. It's so hard. My memory is not good. My brain is, my brain is too loose right now, not fit.

The education there is different from here, in the United States. We have up to 10th grade for high school. After that, you have four years of college. If you want to be a doctor, then you have seven years and then you do the residency and you become a doctor. You can't choose what you want; it depends on your scores. Even if you wanted to be a doctor, if your score is too low, you cannot get in. Some people, their scores are good so they have to go to the doctor or engineering fields and they don't want to, but they have to. Some people, they are smart, but they don't want to be a doctor so on the test, maybe they purposely don't do well.

I liked math and I was good at math. Every time we take tests, I get 100 percent. I think that when I was a child, my brain was so good. Right after my teacher taught, I

would get the answer. When he writes down the question, I already have the answer. For math, I never got like 70-80 percent. I got 100 percent or 99 percent, always over 90 percent. I still like math, but I never continued learning it so I forgot most of it. I like to do something that is hard and challenging. I like to solve problems. I like to solve puzzles, something harder. I don't like easy.

As a child, I had to learn how to do my homework, help my uncle and aunt clean the house, wash clothes, and iron. They gave me a schedule. When I woke up, I knew what I had to do the whole day. We had a rule. We couldn't break the rules and if we did, we got hit. When we went to school, almost every day was the same. Only holidays like Saturday or Sunday would be different sometimes. We were used to that schedule so it was no problem for us, but sometimes kids are lazy. Sometimes I was lazy, I knew that they would beat me, but I was lazy, I just didn't want to do it.

I went to school up to 8th grade there and then I went to live with my uncle. I was in 9th grade and then we had the student uprising so I never got to go to school again. Sometimes people are surprised, they tell me that I am better at learning than my husband. My husband went to college and almost finished, only two more months. I didn't finish high school, but people say that my memory is good, better than my husband. Maybe it's a gift from God. I have a gift. I don't have education, I don't have a diploma, but God loves me.

Being Chinese and Karen

When I was a child, I grew up in a small town with my uncle and my aunt. I thought that I was Chinese. I was half Chinese so I didn't like to say that I was Karen. I

didn't like to say that because a lot of people there were Burmese, Chinese, or other ethnicities. They didn't like the Karen because they thought that Karen people were poor and not the same level as them. They thought that Karen people were against the law so they didn't want to be friends with Karen people. I thought to myself that I was Chinese. Some people called me Karen and I didn't like it. I grew up there and I didn't know what it meant to be Karen and what my people's situation was.

After the student uprising and I got married to a Karen man, I lived in the village. At that time, I knew this is the Karen life. I am Karen. Just like that, something happened. We don't make it happen, but it just happened. Through that situation, I knew myself. We never learn who we are, it just happens. We never learned and we never looked into it by ourselves, but something happens and we just realize.

The first time, I didn't like it. I didn't like living in the jungle. I missed my town so much. Everything in the town was okay, we weren't poor or rich, but we could stay there. In the jungle, it was so hard to live. Everything was dirty and the people there, they didn't have education. I couldn't accept it the first time, but later on, I had to be patient and I had to know them because some people, they just grew up there and their life is just like that. What is polite? What is rude? They don't know. They didn't have education for the manners and etiquette, but their hearts are pure.

At first, I told my husband that I didn't want to live here, "Your people are so rude and they don't know how to be polite." I learned from my husband, he is so quiet and he just does things quietly. He never gets mad. Later on, I could accept them.

People are just people; humans are just humans. Regardless if you are rich, regardless if you are poor, regardless if you are dirty or you're clean, it's just the same.

Married life

I lived with my uncle and my husband lived with his cousin. When we got married, they gave us a hut that they had by the river. There was a hut by the river where they would live when it's the dry season. We got married in August so the water level was low. When the raining season started in May, we had to build a new house. It's not hard. You just have to go to the jungle and get bamboo and you can do it by yourself. You don't need any permission from anyone to cut bamboo and build a house. You can just choose the place you want and build it there.

It's not too common that when you get married you both move out to live alone. Mostly, the husband moves in with the wife's family or the wife moves in with the husband's family. If they do move out, like we did, they just live nearby. It's not too far and the houses are bamboo so you can see right through them. After I got married I had to take care of the house and be a good wife.

I think in the Karen culture, maybe it's because of love, but the women have a little more power than their husbands so they keep the money. They make decisions of what to buy, what not to buy. Me and husband, most of the time, we discuss with each other. We discuss and we share, so it's not like others. I see a lot of women in the Karen culture, they are tough. They make decisions on everything, even when they have kids, they choose the names and the husbands just go along with it.

Some people when they choose their spouse, they think it is the right one, but something happens and the family breaks or is separated, just like my mom and my dad. They were so young, but at the time they loved each other. I think after they got married, maybe they loved themselves too much. They loved their feelings. In Karen, we say *eh law a tha dah wai*. If they get hurt, it is because of the other person. They don't want to forgive each other. You know, if you become a family, nobody is perfect in the world. You can make mistakes, but you can talk about that mistake and how you can fix it. Sometimes if you have a short temper or high temper, you have to stay away for just a little bit and later if you calm down, you can come back and talk. You don't need to talk at that time when you are angry. That doesn't work. Sometimes, that makes the problem bigger. Not everyone can control it. I know when I was younger, I couldn't control it. I think maybe it's because of your age too, but I saw some people older than me, they can't control it too. I think you learn from your experience. You go through a lot so that's a lesson for you. You have to learn from your experience. If you don't learn, then you just forget it and you never see the truth.

Living in the Karen land

We were against the Burmese government so we had to move to the Karen land. The Burmese called it the Karen black land because there were a lot of Karen people revolting in that area. They were fighting for democracy, they wanted their own land. After the uprising a lot of Burmese students went to the Karen land to help establish a democracy there. At that time, I never contacted my mom, my dad, or any of my relatives. If I went back, they would probably kill me and if they knew who was related

to me, they would probably kill them too. The Burmese didn't call it the white land because black means illegal. Right now in Burma, they still refer to it as the Karen black land. We call it the Karen state, we have a lot of Karen people still living there, but the power belongs to the Burmese leaders. They have the power and they control the Karen people.

Even if I didn't go to school, I would probably still be part of the student uprising because I was so interested in politics. My uncle didn't want me to be part of the student uprising so he took me back to the village because the village people grew up simple. They were not part of the student uprising. The uprising started in the city. The students didn't like the government and they wanted democracy, human rights. They didn't have that, so a lot of the students and teachers, the educated did that because of Aung Sang Su Kyi. If I were in the city, I would be part of that, but I was in the Karen land.

In the Karen land, even though I was young and wasn't a leader, I helped some of the women there. For widowed Karen women whose husbands died in the revolution, we took care of their children. I was in the Karen land for about ten years before I left to Thailand. We lived in the Karen land from 1989 to 1997.

Becoming an adult

I think we have to decide on something, by ourselves and with no one helping us. You have to think like adults. After I got married to my husband, he was a hut leader in the village where we lived. He had to solve people's problems. There was one boy who stole something and he didn't have parents so he came to live with us. I had one or two kids already. I looked at him and then he just looked like a kid with no parents and

nobody to teach him so he just went the wrong way. I told him that if he wants to become a good person, he would have to fix his behavior. I didn't know what it meant to be a Christian at that time, so I just told him to fix his behavior, don't steal anymore. Don't do that and people will see you fixing your behavior and they will trust you later. Your life will change. He listened to me. He stayed with us for about one week and someone came to call on him to live with them. I just told him that, I didn't know if he was going to be a good person or not. I think maybe after about ten years, before we left the village, he came to visit me and said that he got married and had kids. I was happy.

My children

I have four children, the three oldest are in college and my youngest is in high school. When I was pregnant, I knew that I was going to be a mom, but I don't know how to take care of a baby. I think that when you first hear the baby cry, you already know how to take care. You learn from yourself. You have love there, you know love. When you have your kids, you know more about your mom. I thought, oh when I was younger my mom took care of me just like this.

In the jungle, it wasn't too difficult because we had a nurse. When your kids got sick, even though we didn't have a hospital, we could buy the medicine from the nurse. Sometimes it was hard when the kids got sick because they couldn't tell, they couldn't talk yet, so we didn't know exactly what was wrong. We lived in the jungle and I got malaria when I was pregnant. I had to take a lot of medicine. I think my baby got it too. After she was born, she got malaria. It was so sad because I had to look at my child and I could not help her. Her whole body was shaking and then she got bruises and threw up.

I couldn't give her any medicine. I had to look at her and try to make her feel better. I had to put water on her and make her cooler. After that her body got hotter and I got scared. She had a runny nose and I didn't know if she was hungry or if she wanted to poop. I never had that experience before. When she pooped, I didn't like it at all, I called my husband to come look at his kid. "She's pooping so you can take care." My husband took care of everything.

Sometimes I had to ask the older people what to do. They would tell me that my kids need something. I could ask them and they would tell me. There were no parenting classes. When I had the second child, everything was okay. We knew everything. We had the second child one year and a half after the first. The ages are close to each other so I still remembered. I told my friends, if you have your child, just have it. Have all your children and then after that, stop.

I hope that my children will get a good education and they will get a good life. After they get married, then they can decide the right things for themselves and make their families happy. I hope that they will be able to do that. I don't really want to have very high hopes because sometimes when you have very high hopes and you don't get it, you will be upset. As long as their life is good, that's enough for me. I told my husband that I got married when I was 17, if your children got married at 17 would you like it? He said, "They're just kids." I said, "Oh, I was just a kid too when I got married." He said, "At that time, the situation was different. Here, they have a lot of opportunities to learn and get more education. They have a lot of opportunities before they get married or before they have kids, so they better try."

If you get married and you have kids, you can still try it, but you don't have much time. You have other responsibilities. It's like heavy duty. I told my kids that I got married when I was 17, I don't mind if they want to get married. They told me that they want to stay with me. If they get married, they will have to find a job and do everything by themselves. My kids understand me and we are just like friends. They tell me everything. What they want, what they do, or when they have boyfriends.

It's good for the parents to have a good relationship with their kids so that they can control their kids. Some parents don't have good relationships with their kids. They just think that they are the adults and the kids are just kids. They don't want to tell things to their kids. If you have good relationships with your kids, it's not hard to teach, to control, and they will listen to you. When the kids get mad and the parents yell at them, they feel that their parents don't love them. I think maybe for me, I grew up with others and I didn't get the love from my parents so I can't feel like that.

Maybe people that grew up with their parents and they get love, they don't think about what love means so they can't feel it. It's not like that for me. I can feel what love is so I know what the teenagers want. I went through a lot of experiences that help me teach them, tell them. If you grew up with others, it's different than if you grew up with your parents. You can compare the ones that grew up with their parents and the ones that grew up with others. Their lives are so different and their actions and thoughts are different too.

Camps in Thailand

Before we fled to Thailand, I already had all four children, but only three were with me. My oldest was still in Burma. My oldest daughter went to live with my husband's mom in Burma. At that time, I thought that since we lived in the village with no good education, if she went to live with my mother-in-law in the city, it would be better for her. I thought that we could go back to the city if we saved up a little bit of money, but that didn't happen. We had to run and leave her there. I wasn't worried about her since I knew she was safe in the city so we fled with my other three children.

We moved from place to place and I don't remember the first camp, but when we got to Thailand, they didn't call it a refugee camp, it was just a temporary camp. The Thai government said that we would return once the situation settled down. After five years, the camp wasn't temporary anymore. They had to build a better camp with a clinic, schools, and everything. It had to be a safe camp.

When we first got to the camp, they gave us three bamboo sticks and a plastic cover, a tarp. After running from the Burmese soldiers, we didn't have anything and they gave us three bamboo sticks to make a hut. At that time, the wind was so strong and it was raining. My little one could not sleep and water was coming in. We only brought some food and some clothing. My husband and I had to pull and hold the tarp. When I think back, it was sad. A lot of the little ones died there and a lot of the older people too. It was too crowded and they only had one stream, not a river. The water was no good, it was dirty and a lot of people got sick. There was no medical help. I think we had some nurses from our country and they helped take care of everyone, but nobody outside cared

to help. Even after all their work, so many people died. I think we stayed there for about four to five months and then they moved us to another place. It was a camp with bamboo sticks and plastic covers, but it was better than the first one.

When we got to the new camp, we applied for refugee status with the UNHCR. At that time, no one in the camps could resettle to another country. We were just called refugees and we had to stay near the border so that we could return once everything was settled in Burma. Some of the educated and the Burmese students, tried to find a way to live. If you were still alive, you could apply for asylum and get political refugee status. That's what they did because they knew they could not go back. The INS, UNHCR had a policy to allow political refugees to resettle. We tried applying for political refugee status, but we got rejected. They told us we were not political refugees because we could live in the camps, we were a border case. They told us we could live there, so we did, but my kids were growing up and there was no education for them. I found a way to appeal the decision so we appealed maybe two or three more times.

We went to live in Bangkok and I knew that it was illegal. We had to hide. My husband was working for a construction place and he got paid daily. When we saw the police, we hid. Life was so hard and after that we went back into the camp, but they didn't call. We still did not qualify for political refugee status. Even though they let us live in the camp, they didn't give us any food, nothing. We didn't get the status that's why. Those who got the status got cash, food, and they were taken care of. They got to apply for resettlement to another country. After all the political refugees left, then they let all the other refugees come. It took a long time. Once the refugees came, they let the

border cases come. They didn't let everyone who lived in the camp come yet, we had to fight for them. Everybody is human, they have human rights. If we can come, they can come too. After we came, they let the other people come too, if they wanted to.

I came from Tham Hin Camp. When I was there they had about 8000 people and when I left, they still had about 8000 people, so people were coming and going. In 1997, we came to Thailand, but we didn't get to stay in the camps. In 1999, we applied and got the border case status and they said that we could stay. I think in 2002 was when they changed their policy to allow border cases to come. We lived in Thailand for about two to three years illegally, without documents. We came to the United States in 2003.

Six months after we got the status, I called my oldest daughter in Burma. I needed her to come to the camp, but my mother-in-law did not want her to come. It took a long time and all my friends already came to the United States. I had to wait for her in the camp. It took about six months. At that time, there were carriers who you could pay to help you. We had to pay a lot of money. My daughter is safe here with me now. Some people were not so lucky. They paid a lot of money too, but they suffered from human trafficking. The carriers told them, "Oh, I will take you. I will take you to your mom. I will take you to your relative." But the people will never reach their families; they sell them. My daughter was safe because one of the carriers knew us. They knew my husband and took good care of her. It was scary. At that time, I had to pray, pray, pray, pray and then we finally got her.

Everybody said that it was easier if I waited for her in the camp. It was better than if I had already come here and then tried to call for her. The process was going to be

too long because sometimes the policies will change and I will have to wait. They told me that it won't be free and I will have to pay money too, so it's better to stay in the camp and wait for her. Somebody gave me that idea and we waited.

Preparing for America

We never experienced anything like this before, we didn't know what to bring. A lot of people who already came here called and wrote letters to let us know what we should bring. I thought, I'm going to the United States, that's not my country, so what do I have to bring? Is there any food that I can eat there? The first thing I thought was fish paste, chili, and what I was used to eating. I brought some chili paste, dried lemon grass, dried shrimp, and shrimp paste. I didn't think we would have any here so I brought some. We use a lot of MSG so we brought some too. We brought Karen clothing because it is important to us, our culture and tradition. When I got here, they had everything here already. I can find everything I need, so I'm not worried.

When I first arrived, they gave me a sandwich. I looked at the sandwich and then I thought, no, no, no, no, I can't eat that. I've never eaten that before and I didn't like the smell. At that time, I didn't like it, but right now it's good. My kids, when we arrived, they only wanted to eat our traditional food. Now, everything is okay. Food is okay, but just the culture piece is a little difficult to change. The old people said that if we come here we will have to learn to be American, but it's hard to change directly.

When we left the camp, it was both happy and sad. We were happy for our life, our kids' lives. It's like my daughter said, "we are coming to the big city." We saw a big house in the big city on T.V. in one of the interviews. She thought that if we came here,

we would get to live in that house. It's funny. We saw that and we thought, we will live in the city and our kids will get education and our life will be better. We knew that so we were so happy for us and our lives, but we were sad for our people. They cannot get the status that they needed. When I came, a lot of people didn't get to. I was sad for them, we told them that they will get to go too, step by step, but they will have to wait. You have to wait; you have the rest of your life to stay on the other side forever. One day you will get to, you have to be patient.

I learned a lot of things throughout my life. I can be patient. There were a lot of emotions there, but I had to control it because I am a Christian and I know the Bible. When I'm sad, I pray. I hope and I pray to God to show me the way, what to do. Everything that comes up, sometimes not so smoothly, but if you believe and trust in God and you have hope, everything will come even if it's small and slow. That's God saying that you have to wait, it's not your time. When the time comes, even if you don't want to go, you will go.

Our life in America

Church World Services sponsored us. There were a lot of white people, American people. They came and then they talked to us in English. We didn't understand. We just looked at them and they laughed and then we laughed. They brought lotion and shampoo and put it in our little bathroom. I can read a little, but I didn't know which one was lotion and which one was shampoo. I looked at it and then I thought, oh this one is shampoo so we took it to the bathroom and we took a bath. "There's no bubble, what's wrong?" We thought maybe American shampoo is like that.

Later, one of my friends came to visit and I showed her. I asked her, “Is this the American shampoo?” She told me that they called this a conditioner. Conditioner is after shampooing, you have to use it to make your hair soft.

We didn’t know a lot of things. They tried to teach us the big things. After we got here, I co-sponsored a big family. When they arrived, we found an apartment for them and we told them everything. Here is the rice. Here is the bathroom. Here is the stove. This is how you turn it on. Here is the rice cooker, everything. We showed them everything. The next day they called us. “We haven’t eaten anything,” they said. “Why?” I asked them. “You have rice. You have meat. Everything, I provided.” They said, “We cooked meat and then rice is not cooked.” They didn’t push the button so it just stayed in the cooker all night long. We had to bring rice and then we showed them again.

Going back to school

I went to school in Burma and they taught us English grammar, reading, writing, but not speaking. I knew a little bit, but we never spoke so I didn’t know how to speak. Our listening was not good either. We learned English there, but slowly. Here the Americans talk so quick and so fast, I couldn’t understand. I had to try to understand. It took about one year, but I had to watch TV and get used to listening. I listened to the word and learned. We learned in Burma, but it was not the American accent. It was a British accent. We tried to tell the Americans, but they didn’t understand because the sound was not right.

The most difficult thing after coming here was the language barrier. We didn't know what to do and the people, they tried to explain to us, but we didn't understand. It was so hard. It's because of the system. We lived in the jungle and suddenly we are in the city. It's just like the cartoon I watched, *The Jungle Book*. If we learned the system in our language it will be easier, but we have to learn it in a language we don't know. It takes time.

We arrived, I think, on September 4th. It was a good time to start school. My kids went to school one week after we arrived. My husband and I had to wait. We were on a wait-list and we had to take tests. We were excited. We have school here. We thought that we would never have school again. In the jungle, for older people or if they get married, people stop school and they will never have the chance to go back. If you keep going, then you can go until you get old. If you stop and then go, it's hard. Most people, they don't go back to school. We thought that over here we have school so we are just like college kids or something.

I was in the same class as my husband. If you go together, then it's like you have more confidence. We were shy and afraid to talk to other people. In our country, we just talk to the people we know. If we don't know them then we don't talk too much. Now, we had to talk to other people and it's not in our language. It's so hard and we were afraid and shy. It was a good thing that we went together, we were more confident. There weren't many students in our class. I think we were the second group of Karen in Minnesota. The first group already got jobs so they didn't go to school anymore. I don't

think I had any Karen students in my class. There were Somali, Spanish, Vietnamese or Lao. My husband and I were the only Karen students.

I remember my first teacher. I wonder if she's still there. She's a good teacher, a good ESL teacher. I think I was in the class for maybe two to three months and then we had to take a test on reading and writing. I went up one level, so my husband and I were not in the same class anymore. Later when I got up to level seven, they told me I could get into the GED program. I think it took about nine months and I was up to level seven. I didn't know what happened; I thought maybe it wasn't a good opportunity for me. At that time, my friends said they needed people at their company. They asked if I wanted to apply. I said, "Okay, let me try." I tried and then I got a job there at a laundry place in Minneapolis. After I got the job, I never went back to school. I think I went to school for about 10 months.

I thought that I would join the GED program, but then I got a job. I worked there for about three years. It was so hard because I got a job and I didn't have a car. I didn't have a driver's license. I knew I had to try, so I tried to drive a car, but then I got in one accident. Everything was just like a dream. I never thought I would have to drive and I have never done it before. It's a good thing we can learn. Our life is better now. We can mention that we lived in the jungle and the refugee camp and here, in the United States. It's a lot different; our kids can get an education.

Cultural liaison at work and in the community

When we first got here, we lived in Saint Paul for two years and then we bought a house in a suburban city. I am working at a school district. I am a cultural liaison there

and this will be my fifth year. At first I was not confident to work with the schools. I told my manager that I didn't know if I could work here. I was working at the laundry place and I was used to it and I liked it. My manager there loved me and I had a lot of friends who loved me there. I told my manager to give me some time to think about it. My manager now, she told me that if I work here at the school district, it is like me helping my people. They need it that's why they hired me. She said that it's just like you helping your community, helping your people. I went home and talked to my husband, my friends, and my manager at the laundry place. I told my manager at the laundry place that I got a new job. She encouraged me to go and get a better job. She said it was good for me. She said that if I go there and I don't like it, I can come back and she will hire me right away. She made a party for me on the last day. I called my manager here and told her I will work with her. She asked me when I could start and I told her just give me one week break. I had to take a vacation. After that, I started to work. She taught me everything. They have a system here and after one month, I got it all.

As a cultural liaison, I have a lot of work to do. My job is to help enroll new students if they move to our district into the school system. We have to apply for head start for three and four year olds. We also have to enroll students in preschool through ninth grade. I attend conferences and translate district letters into Karen. We have to work with the school nurse and school social worker. We have what we call Individual Education Program (IEP) for students with special needs. For one student, I think we have about four or five meetings with the parents in one year. There are a lot of IEP

letters that I have to interpret. Sometimes we do a home visit to the IEP students' homes or for new families.

We do a lot for our community there. For the families that come, they don't have to worry too much because we can help them. I feel like a social worker. They trust me because I am a leader in the community too. Everybody knows me. If I tell them, they will listen to me and a lot of kids listen to me. If their parents teach them, they won't listen, but they listen to me. Sometimes the parents call me and ask me to talk to their son or daughter. My people, they don't know how to adjust to the system. Sometimes they call me at night, sometimes in the early morning. Almost every day, every evening when I get home there would be about two or three people at my home with letters. I have to read the letters and fill out the paperwork, everything.

I am busy. I am a cultural leader for the community as well so sometimes I have a dance group that comes to practice at my house or at the church. We have Karen New Year and Martyr's Day, so we have to do cultural stuff, like a traditional dance. I don't know how to dance, but I'm a cultural leader, so they gave me a job and I have to call the people who can dance and organize. Sometimes one dance takes six months to learn. We have practice every week for one or two evenings for about two to three hours.

Karen culture and American culture

You cannot imagine when you lived in the jungle, you didn't know anything. No education, even your language, you could not learn. When you get here, you had to learn everything. It's so hard. I look at the older people, my uncle, my grandma, they get here and they are all upset. They don't know what to do and they can't change. A lot of kids

get here and they can copy people so easily and they can mix in with everything quickly. The older people, they can't do that, they can't change. "You can't wear the short skirt; it's not our culture," the old people say. The kids get stressed. The kids know they have to change, but it doesn't mean that they don't want to keep their culture. They want to keep that, but they want to go with the flow too. Older people get upset at the kids' behaviors. Our culture is so different from the one here. We respect the elders, even if they are just one day older than you, you respect that person. We never talk back to the older people.

In our culture, if you walk in front of older people, you have to lower your heads and you cross your arms. Here it's different, if you cross your arms, they think that you don't care. There are a lot of difficult cultural pieces that sometimes when we try to explain to the Americans, we don't know how to tell them that it's our culture. We can't tell them so they just think that our people are rude and disrespectful. We don't look at each other's eyes, because eye contact is so rude for us. It's so different from here, that's why when old people talk about this, they want to cry because they can't tell and explain to the American people that this is our culture. Right now, it is better. When we first came, it was so hard.

Childrearing

You can't change your culture, you have to represent it. The parents encourage and teach their children. If the parents can teach them, they will listen. You can keep your culture if you can teach them, then you don't need to hit or slap them. In our culture, we are used to slapping them and we are used to hitting with the stick to teach

them. If kids do something wrong, the parents will hit them or slap them. The kids know that so they won't want to do something wrong. That's how we teach them in our culture. We come here and we're not used to anything. The kids know that whatever I do, my parents cannot do anything to me. They know that and then they trust themselves a lot. If they are good, then the parents don't touch them. If they are bad, then the parents have to teach them. Our culture, we are used to it so we can't stop. It's hard to stop. By the time you realize, your hand is already up. You want to hit. Right now parents, they understand. They are just upset that it's the law.

You can hit your kids, but not hard, just to teach them. If you don't do anything, you don't hit, that's not good because the kids are kids. If you teach them, if you punish them then they will know. I think it's different from the American kids. It's okay because they were born here and the law that you can't hit kids was made before they were born and the parents know. The parents can teach kids by talking and they would understand easily. But our kids, they are used to being there, in Burma and Thailand, and the parents hit them, slap them. When they get here, it's so different. In the American way, the parents punish their kids too. What the kids like to do, the parents don't let them do, right? They are used to that, but our kids, they're not used to it. It's hard. We tried the American way, but that doesn't work for them. It's so difficult in our community, especially the moms.

Freedom?

Now we have a better life, but I feel that it is not free. We are controlled by something. It's maybe the system, maybe money. When we lived in the jungle in the

Karen land, we don't feel like that. You can work to make money, but if you don't want to work you can just stop. You don't need to worry about the bill; you don't need to worry about the future too. Here, I feel like I have to worry about the future, for tomorrow, for the end of the month. I feel that my person is not free. I feel that my body is not free. Everything is good, it's a good system. We can say that the standards are higher here, but I still feel like I am being controlled. I am not free.

You have to give something to get something, but I'm not sure if I want to go back to Burma or Thailand. For me, I might go back because we used to live in our country. We were used to everything there. For our kids, they won't go back. I think because they are used to here. For us, I think we can go back and we can live here, but the older people, they will go back. I think that humans, they choose the ways that they are used to. Some don't want to search or do new things. They don't want to get a headache. A lot of Karen people are Christians, so I don't think they like too much change.

Religion

I pray like my mom. I teach my kids that too. If I were born in the city and grew up like that, I probably wouldn't know anything. I probably won't feel anything. If you are sad, I wouldn't know how to help you. I think if you just grow up in the city, you just grow up a normal life and you don't see people who need help. When I go through a difficult time, I thank God. He showed me how to prepare myself and how to learn. You have to be patient and learn everything so that you can I say, my life is older than my age. You have more experience than your age.

My mom was a Christian and my dad was Buddhist. When they got married, I think he was baptized, but later he went back to Buddhism. When I grew up with my dad's side, I was a Buddhist. Before I got married, I had to get baptized. My husband is a Christian, that's how I know God chose me. At that time, I didn't know, but right now I know that God chose me because I had to marry a Christian man. I didn't know the Christian way and the Christian life. I only knew the simple part. You believe and every week, you go worship. You just read the Bible, but not everything makes sense, you just read the whole thing. Sometimes, it touches your heart, but sometimes it doesn't.

I got married and starting practicing the Christian life. It wasn't the perfect Christian life, but after I got in the camp and had to go through a lot of difficult times I realized this is the Christian life. You have to believe and you have to pray, you have to trust so that God will help you. After I realized, I think maybe in 2000, I became more of a Christian than before. Everything changed. Before, I think my heart was so hard. Someone will say something to me and I would talk back if I didn't like it. I would yell just like that. I didn't want to live under someone.

I helped a lot of people, but you know I didn't realize that it was the Christian way. It was just normal at that time. If people need help then we help. This is the Christian life, the Christian way, to help people, to encourage, to get married, to have mercy, to think kindness. You have to love everything because you got God. At that time, you got God and you know everything will change. I never talked back to people after that. I could control myself. Once I was able to control myself, everything seemed to slow down. I didn't worry much anymore. Before I worried a lot and I was afraid, but

after I have God inside me, I don't worry and I am at peace. It's like you live in the air, you don't worry about anything, just like that.

I think the change I felt was God teaching me, showing me to turn back to Him. I was a Christian because I married a Christian man. I'm not a real Christian, but God loves everybody. He wants you to get eternal life; you have to know his work. When you follow him, you will learn from all the difficult things. Little by little, He will touch your heart and then you will change.

The good thing here is that we, Karen, like to live in a group. We like to live with the community so we have a church and we can worship together. We have service and we can teach our children the Christian way. A lot of kids are coming to the service and they will listen to the scripture and the Bible. We hope that they will get it. We encourage the kids to come to church every week, every Sunday. I think that's why a lot of Karen kids are good.

Rights

Sometimes I think being a girl is dangerous. Dangerous, not safe, but it can be something good too. Girls are popular, more popular than boys. But some countries, some cultures being a girl means people look down on you because you're a girl. Other cultures and other places, I think maybe in Asia, the boys, girls or women, they don't have the same rights as the men. Sometimes that is not good, but if you are used to living there, you are used to it so you don't think about that. You don't think about if you have rights or if you don't have rights because you are used to that policy. You grew up like

that. You have to do housekeeping or taking care of everything. It's part of the culture so they don't question it.

I think some people, they know that they have rights, but they never talked, they never used that right. Maybe they thought that it will be wrong and they don't want others to get hurt, others like maybe the husband or another person. Mostly, the Karen people are Christians so they think a lot like that. They don't want to do something that will be a bad thing, have a bad consequence. They don't want that so sometimes if you keep quiet, nothing happens. If you do that, you think you're right, but you know, nothing happens because of the culture. We've been here not too long so older people might keep their cultures. They don't want to cause trouble, they don't want to learn new things. We have conflicts with that and a lot of women, they might be quiet. Some young women, they have education so they know their rights. I think maybe for them, it's useful here. They will think that they are safe here because of the women's rights and it can protect them. Sometimes they forget their culture and they don't want to respect their husbands or they don't want to respect other people, but not all the time. We can talk and then we will know what she needs. We can tell that she is respecting her culture or not respecting.

What it means to be educated

In our culture or our community, there are a lot of educated people. They are quiet and they don't talk about the things that we don't need other people to hear. But the not educated people, they will talk about everything. They don't care. Whatever they see

and whatever they hear, they will talk back and they will talk a lot. They might not know that what they talk about will hurt other people.

I see that the people, they don't have a lot of education, but they have a lot of knowledge, they are like the educated too. We don't know for sure who is educated and who is not. We can't tell exactly. You can see the face and the acting, but we can't tell for sure. I think if you look at the face of someone who is educated, he will have confidence, but the not educated people, you can look at his face and maybe he is shy and afraid. Not educated people might talk about something that is not appropriate, but this is just what we can see from the acting and faces, we don't know for sure. Some people don't look educated, but they have a lot of knowledge inside. Sometimes I think that we don't need a lot of education. We don't need to learn a lot. You just need to be simple and you just live simply.

We have a lot of educated people, they were educated in Burma or finished their school somewhere else and then they came here. They don't want to do anything here. They don't want to use their talent. They don't want to give it to the people too. We also have a lot of people that don't have education, but the heart, they just want to help people so they help. They do as much as they can do to help people. It's good for the people, but they are not educated.

An educated Karen woman

Here, I think maybe we can tell that it's not too different between an educated woman and an educated man. If a woman is educated and the man is not educated in the household, sometimes it causes some problems because in our culture, we have to respect

our husbands or the household. In our country, the man takes care of all the household, wife or kids, everything. He is the only one that works. The other ones stay home and clean the house or go to school. It's the culture that they are used to. They are used to there and if they come here, it might cause a problem. If they lived equally, it's okay. Most of the Karen people I see are like the Americans here too. The man or woman work together. I think maybe it was a long time ago and the older people are used to the life in Burma. It's Burmese culture that men have more power and women don't talk.

It's hard to tell sometimes our Karen people, we don't know which one is our culture from the Burmese culture because we have to flee and run from place to place. If you get to Thailand then you blend in with Thai culture and the kids grow up with Thai culture. If you grew up in Burma then the kids will grow up in Burmese culture. Everything is combined in the camp. Sometimes it's hard to tell which one is our culture really. Sometimes we need to do research. It's hard to tell because culture changes all the time, so which one is our culture? We say our culture, but some people might say that it's their culture and we copied it. The older people, say that it's our culture, they copied from us. I'm not sure which is which, I'll have to find out.

I am not an educated woman. I didn't finish my high school either. I'm still learning. You never finish learning. Sometimes, I think about people who want to be educated but they don't have the chance. They are just like me. I don't have the chance, but I'm learning from my experience. If you don't get that chance, you still have to learn, never give up. If you give up, you will never get it. Some people have good opportunities to learn so they can learn, but some of those who learn, don't use it. Some,

they use it so it's good, maybe 50-50. A lot of people they don't get the opportunity; they don't get the chance to learn. They are just learning from their experiences, I think maybe a lot of women or a lot of people are like that too. Whatever they learn, they can use so that is a good way to help the people and you can learn more and more. They know that they have to use it, whatever they have, the education, the experience; they have to use it for goodwill. They have to share and have an open mind and heart.

In my life and in my mind, the most important thing is respect each other. Even if you are bigger or even if you are smaller, if we respect each other, the things that I know maybe you don't know. Sometimes I don't know and then you know. It's something we can share and we can teach each other. Respect, I think is a big one. If someone doesn't respect you, there is nothing you can do. Just let them go, don't tell them, don't judge, just let them go.

People's characteristics are different, but I think that it depends on their background and how they grew up. Some people might have a lot of education, but their behavior is not too good or they do not respect others. For example, like in Burma, if the general's daughter is proud of herself, she might not want to respect other people. Even with the same education, she doesn't want to respect because of her background. Some people have a lot of education and they are so poor because they try hard and then they get good education. They can look simple, but their character is good because they have a lot of experience.

2. Sarlweh Kwee

I volunteered to help with the citizenship class and I met a friend at the church who told Sarlweh about my study and asked if she was willing to speak with me. My friend gave me Sarlweh's contact information and I called her. I was first introduced to Sarlweh as Ser Kwee. When I first saw her, she reminded me a little bit of my sister, maybe it was her smile and her willingness to open up to me.

Who I am

My first name is Sar and my middle name is Lweh. My last name is Kwee. I like it when people call me Ser Kwee, but some people just call me Ser, Ser. I don't like that because it's the same as the American man name, Sir, you know? That's why I put my first and middle name together when I applied for citizenship. I put Sarlweh. When we came here, they spelled our names for us. The UN or whoever worked there spelled it for us, so Sar became Ser. When I became a citizen, I changed that. Before we didn't have last names either. Before we came, they just asked us to pick one. My husband picked his father's last name. It depends on who interviews you, some people they just divide your name if you have like Sarlweh, they put one as first and the other as last. The one who interviewed us, they didn't do that. They asked us to pick a last name. So we picked Kwee, it was my husband's father's last name. I wish we never had last names, just straight names. Even when we lived in the refugee camps in Thailand, we had never heard of last names. Before we came here, we never had the opportunity to talk about last names. We thought, just pick one, it's no big deal. Having last names is different though. On my husband's side, his brothers don't have the same last names. We picked

my father-in-law's last name, but they spelled it different. They spell it K-U-I and we spell it K-W-E-E, but it's pronounced the same.

Sarlweh means the star color is always the same. My mom gave me that name. She named all of us, just all stars. My sister is night star, mine is hard to explain, like the star color that doesn't change. My parents have seven children total. There are five daughters and two sons. I am the second oldest. Everyone was born in Burma. None of my brothers and sisters are here in the United States, except one sister is here and one is in Thailand and the rest are still in Burma. They are not near the border or in the Karen land, they are just in Burma. That is why it is hard to go visit them.

I am 30 years old. I was born in a small village. It was far from the border. I lived there until I was 12 years old. My house had mango trees, it was like living under the mango trees. We had a big mango tree and the house was made out of bamboo trees and the roof was made out of leaves. In our backyard, we had a vegetable or herb garden and down the hill a little bit, we had a small river. That was pretty nice and we planted bananas, pineapple, papaya, betel nut, coconut, limes, oranges and other kinds of leaves. Some people close by, they had durian trees, but we didn't have one.

Growing up in Burma

When I was a child, I remember one day when it was darker, like evening, when the dog barks, barks, barks on the other side of the river, we had to prepare to run. That night the villagers yelled too. If they yelled that the Burmese were coming, then we had to run. My dad was not home and my mom took everybody to go to other people's house. They lived far, but not that far so we went to sleep over there. My mom forgot to

bring my little sister's clothes so she asked me and my sister to come home and grab it. We were so scared, "Why not you, mom?" I think I was maybe, seven or eight because I remembered to myself, why not mom? It wasn't good to just let us go. We were scared, but we went and survived. Nothing happened so I grabbed my little sister's clothes and came back. That was so scary.

I remember one day when we were eating at our farm hut, we heard gun shots, the big guns. We were so scared, we threw away all our rice and hid under the big log nearby. When we heard the second sound, we started running. We ran to my grandpa's house in the deep, deep jungle where no one lived there except him and my grandma. I was a kid so I wasn't scared, but I know my parents were scared.

My parents stayed home and farmed. They didn't like farming on flat land, they farmed on hills. They had rice farms and some vegetables. They farmed for themselves and sometimes it wasn't enough and we needed to borrow from other people. The next year we got a little more and paid them back. It depended on the weather and wild animals. If the weather was good, we got a lot of rice, if it was not good, we didn't get any. Right now, two of my siblings are still in school and one helps my mom and dad. The rest got married. My parents are still young, but my mom has no teeth. She lost her teeth very young, it's not good though. She looks like a grandma.

The very, very funny part of my family was that my parents respected guests very much. Even the guests that we didn't know, we haven't seen them before, they came over to our house. We raised chickens, but my parents didn't let us eat. They just fed the guests. I got so mad. I didn't like guests but my mom, my dad loved guests. When the

guests came to our house, we had to kill the chicken. I cooked for them and after that we had to all go down stairs to play and the guests ate. After they ate, my mom and dad called us. We came back and cleaned up. If there was something left over, we ate it. We had guests very often, I didn't know where they're from. We had to treat them just like something bigger than my parents.

In my experience, my parents, they never hugged me or hugged us. Not only me, but they never hugged or kissed us, or tell us "I love you" and all that kind of stuff. You never experienced that, but you know, when you are sick, they won't sleep. They can stay awake all night long and when you get high fever, they cry and you can tell that way. Otherwise, you will never experience them kiss you, or tell you "I love you." My mom, she told me one day that when she took us to stay with our grandparents, when she was getting back, "I just want to pick all your footprints with me." We know that they love us.

School in Burma

When we went to school we had to walk, and walk, and walk, and walk. I think we walked for more than one hour to the village. That's why we didn't live with my parents. We lived with my grandma and grandpa, my grandfather's brother. He lived in the village with a school, church, and football field. Every week we went there and on the weekends we came home. When we came home or went to school, if we saw durian farms, then we just ate the ones on the ground. We also didn't have umbrellas so we used a big leaf as an umbrella. We couldn't even afford flip flops. We just went everywhere barefoot. When we arrived at school, it was all muddy. For us, we didn't care, it was

fun. We didn't think about how poor we were, we just had fun. We cut a big leaf and chose the pretty and good one and we had fun in the rain.

At that time, in our village, we just had until fourth grade because they couldn't afford a teacher so it only went up to fourth grade. They had kindergarten, first grade, second, third, and fourth. I stayed in fourth grade for two years because I didn't pass. Our school was like a big hall and they just divided it. They didn't have rooms, so we could see each other. It was just like that.

I learned in school, from teachers forcing us to do so. Otherwise, for me, I didn't want to learn. The worse thing was that my dad beat us if we didn't do well in school. My test dropped, I went in and he asked me, "How was your test?" I said, "Oh, very good," but no, I failed. We were scared of my dad and mom hitting us. I didn't like school and I just missed my mom. I didn't want to separate from my mom. I had to live with my grandpa and grandma, so I didn't pay attention in school. I didn't like living with them. When I cried, the teachers didn't want anybody touching me because when I cried and I didn't want to stop. I could cry all day long, so naughty. One teacher told me, "When you were little, you were the worse one." Nobody could touch me, and I cried very easily too.

The first thing I learned how to do on my own, I think, was weaving my own clothes. My aunt taught me. I think I was 13 to 15 years old. I knew how to sew a flower on the pillow cases, we learned that one from school. At home, my chores in the house were to carry water and sweep. We had a ground floor, so I had to clean the floor.

I also cut the branches to cook. I fed the pigs and chickens and at night we put all the chickens in the cage.

When I was younger, I wanted to be a nurse when I grew up, but it was so scary so I didn't want to be one anymore. At that time, we got sick very often and there were no doctors and no hospitals, that's why I was just thinking that. My parents wanted at least one of their kids to become a nurse or doctor. For me, that was so interesting. I saw that I could help the soldiers when they got hurt from the war. I was thinking about that and I loved the soldiers.

Moving away from home

My mom said that out of all my siblings, I'm the one that was the most calm because when guests or people came to our house and ate all our rice, I did not complain. We were hungry after we came home. We had nothing left to eat so we needed to start over and cook again. At the bottom of the rice pot, they had the brown rice that was very hard and they didn't eat it. I just scratched and scratched and ate it alone, saying nothing. They said that I'm the one who was calm that's why they sent me to live with my aunt too. I didn't yell at them or talk back to them.

If I was the youngest one, I don't think I would have had the chance to come here, to come to America. At that time, we could not afford to go to school anymore so my mom was going to send my oldest sister to live with my uncle because my uncle lived in the Karen land. There, they had a high school, hospital, everything. I really wanted to go so I said to my mom, "I really want to go too!" I talked to my sister and told her I really wanted to go. At that time, my uncle arrived there and instead of sending my sister, my

mom asked me that if I wanted to go, I could go. I had the chance to come here. My older sister stayed and took care of our home because my mom had kids two years apart. My mom kept her instead of keeping me because I could not help much yet.

My uncle told me, “Oh, you know what if you go there, maybe you have to wash the dishes.” I thought oh maybe he has a lot of people living there. I thought, after they ate and went to work, I would wash the dishes. Okay, I just enjoyed it, but when I went there no one was there, only my cousin. Living with other people is not fun. I missed my parents so much. When I saw a spider, I prayed for them, “Oh, go tell my parents that I miss them so much,” and I put the spider by the water.

I got along with my siblings just like dogs and cats. Sometimes we got along, sometimes we didn't. My youngest sister, when I moved out, she was talking, maybe one or two years old. She asked about me every day. My mother said I was going to the bathroom and she was waiting, and waiting, and waiting for me. It was very hard to leave my youngest sister. When I left, she was taking a nap, but I cried, and cried, and cried too. My mom asked me to kiss her.

When I first separated from my parents, I missed them so much and I cried every day. I made up a song for them too. Now, I don't miss them that much because I'm used to it. When they get sick, I worry about them, but if nothing is wrong, they are not in my head. When they need help, they call me. Almost all my brothers and sisters, when they need help, they call me.

The school in my uncle's village was nice. Every morning, we went to the school field where they had a big flag and we sang our song, our Karen country song. The

school was nice, but some people, they could not afford it. Over there, most people were part of the military so they could not work. I think on Mondays and Fridays we wore uniforms. The teachers there were nice though. I think people who finished school there, they had education and they could speak English a little bit. The teachers were smart and I liked the school.

I lived with my uncle, aunt, and cousin for two years. After two years, we became refugees. The Burmese army attacked our village. My mother, father, brothers and sisters stayed in the village that is outside the Karen land. When we were attacked, all the other villages were combined to become one.

Life in Thailand

In the Karen land, me and my friend, we went to school together and at that time, I had to carry the water, a big gallon of water from the big river to take home. One day, I got so tired with carrying water and I heard some people talked about the Burmese coming. I just prayed, “God, please. This place, I don’t want to carry water anymore.” We just prayed, me and my friend, we prayed and then a couple of days later, my aunt told us that my uncle came home and said, “Okay, let’s take all the clothes.” Whatever we had, they packed, and packed, and packed and they put it somewhere. They took it to a small canoe with an engine attached to it. My uncle took it somewhere, maybe a safe place a little bit in the jungle somewhere and they hid it over there. On that day, we heard the guns and bombs and people yelling to each other, “Go! Go!” Some people, they took a car, truck, and some people just ran barefooted. I don’t

remember how we started running, maybe we got in a truck, a big truck with a lot of people. The truck drivers left us at one stop like a tree that Thai people planted.

The first place that they left us, we could still hear the guns and we heard that they were going to send us back. If we went back there, we knew that we all would die. At that time, the Karen soldier, they blocked the spot so maybe that's why they didn't send us back. That was very, very scary for me. Some people got on the truck when the Thai told us that they will send us back home. We didn't get on the truck. It was raining and the sky got so dark and there was lightening. It was raining so hard and they got out from the truck. Right after that, the Karen leader came and stopped the other villagers not to go on the trucks. We stayed there on the border and then they moved us to a safer spot.

There, we had a little plastic sheet to make a roof. We made a roof and tied it to four corners and we held it in place. When it rained, we had a small bag of clothes and we tried to keep that one dry. We sat at each corner and held the side down because the small tree that we tied it to could not take the wind. Some people who were poorer than us, they did not have clothes. One of the leaders went around the tents asking if anyone had extra clothes and I gave them one of my shirts. The next day, I went to the pond and I saw a little girl wearing my shirt. I was so happy.

Later on, we could not use the flashlight and we could not talk loud, just talk small, small. I don't know how many days we stayed there before they moved us. We called it Pommwa in Thailand. In Pommwa, they put all the groups there. It was all grass, like the jungle. You cut your own spot by cutting the bamboo and making your own hut. My uncle was not there, it was just my aunt and my cousin and me. I don't

know where my uncle went. I had no idea. We cut a little bit of bamboo and we built a house so we could sleep at night. That year, a lot of people were there too. We lived there and there was a lot of different kinds of trees and grass. We ate the leaves, vegetables, and the bamboo shoots.

The place was so nasty. They didn't have bathrooms so the people went everywhere. It was in Thailand, but it was a temporary place. We didn't have a spot like Tham Hin yet. They had other temporary spots that people who ran from different directions stayed at and ours was called Pommwa. Over there, we could not go to school, but luckily we had Pi Daffney Tumbaw there. She's a big teacher in the Karen land. She taught us there when we became refugees. She taught Sunday school. That was a blessing. She used cardboard boxes to teach us and I enjoyed it. We made a little spot and we had one teacher who taught us about singing, just for the kids. I enjoy singing the God songs because it was so fun. It was so, so beautiful there.

Becoming an adult

I think I knew that I was an adult when I had my period and when I needed a bra. When I became an adult, I was already in the camp. They had bras, but I could not afford it so I usually looked for cloth or old white shirts and went to people who could sew a bra. I went by myself to buy my own clothes.

Back then when I was still single because I went to school, I didn't have to work. My grandpa there, he gave me little money. He sold people's bread and he got a commission so I didn't have to worry about money. Whatever the UN gave us rice or beans, we could eat. I didn't really know about work and I didn't worry about money. I

just wore whatever I had and I never put on make-up either, just cared for my hair and shirt.

When somebody likes you and tells you, you don't pay attention to them if they've never been to school. At that time, I isolated myself from everybody. I knew that being with a boy was not good, so I've never been friends with one. I just had all my friends as girls. I had a friend who was a boy, but we didn't go out or go places together. For our culture, it's not good for a girl and a guy to go out together, but some people, they do though. I used to be a postman for my husband. You know, we were just friends, close friends. Sometimes we did homework together, sometimes we fought and when something needed to be done at school and I could not do it by myself, he helped. I was a postman for him too because he liked my classmate. He wrote a letter and asked me to send it to my classmate's house, those kinds of stuff. Later on, we just became really close and then we fell in love.

When I got married, I got married at church. I lived in Zone 3 and my sister-in-law, mother- and father-in-law prepared everything. I didn't have anybody on my side and my aunt went out at that time. My husband went out and worked, trying to cut bamboo and selling it to get money for the wedding. My mother-in-law gave away her earrings to get my wedding ring. We had biscuits and milk. I don't know much we spent, maybe five or six thousand baht, so here it's maybe two hundred dollars. We could not afford our own clothes, we just borrowed from other people.

I got married when I was 19 years old in ninth grade. My husband is two years older than me. He was my first boyfriend and now my husband. I didn't have boyfriends

before. I met him at school in the camp. My husband is the second youngest in his family. He's from Zone 1, but we went to the same school and we were in the same class from sixth grade until ninth grade. After I got married, I lived with my husband, so I moved to Zone 1. I didn't finish high school at that time.

I had a miscarriage before my daughter. At that time, I was in ninth grade and I got pregnant. I think a couple of months later, I just miscarried. After I had a miscarriage, I got married and had my wedding. When I was 20, I had my daughter. I had my son three years after my daughter. I delivered my children at the camp hospital. For my daughter, there was an American guy there. The delivery was very, very hard and it took a long time. It started at 11 p.m. at night until 1 p.m. the next day. My husband and my mother-in-law had to push very, very hard, but they're not strong enough. Here, they don't allow you to push. Over there, when it was a certain time, they had someone help push the stomach. That was the tradition.

After I got married and I got pregnant with my daughter, my mother-in-law started talking to my husband that I needed to start working. At that time, I got so sick but I applied and I took classes for teaching. Just a couple of months after I had my kid, I started teaching and I left my kid at home. Sometimes when she cried, my mother-in-law brought her to me to breastfeed and then she took her back. It's extra work though, washing, cooking, and taking care of them. I washed clothes at night when my daughter went to bed. I took all the clothes to the river and washed them. Sometimes we cooked with firewood so the clothes get all dirty. When we went to work, there are soot spots too.

I don't know how to take care of the kids when they were sick so my mother-in-law was the best at it. Because I worked, I didn't have to care much about the kids when they were sick. She took care of them by herself. My daughter coughed and coughed and my mother-in-law just sat in the swing, holding her all night because I needed to work so I just went to bed and slept.

Preparations for America

The UN asked if we had paperwork and if wanted to go to a third country. When we heard that, as young people, we didn't think about much, we just wanted to go. My husband's aunt already came, not as a refugee because they lived outside and they applied in Bangkok. They were already here so we just wanted to follow. Living in the camp was no fun. We lived under a plastic roof. It was small and not clean and my kids got sick and coughed. Before, I thought maybe my daughter got TB. I really wanted to come to the United States so I asked people to give her a TB shot or something. Maybe they gave it to her or not, I don't know.

We had to go through everything. We went to the city hospital and they checked everything. They weren't clear about my daughter's lungs so she had to cough for them. I asked my daughter to cough very hard to get mucus. People were coughing everywhere. I just heard people cough all the time. They needed to get their mucus too.

When we had the opportunity, we applied. We gave our names to the leaders and every single day, in the football field, they had a big sign there. It tells who will go next month or which day. They had a list of names so every single day I checked mine. I had checked so many times and I was so happy when I saw my name.

When we were coming, a lot of people were planning to come and a lot of people wanted to stay. Around my neighborhood, it was like half and half. Some, their families or their brothers and sisters stayed back home in Burma or they didn't have refugee status so they didn't want to separate with their family so they all stayed. At the time when we were coming, only a few people came. Later, we heard that they were going to close the camp and they were going to send people back to Burma so more people came.

For most people, they just talked about coming for their kids, for the future, for their grandkids, for their kids to have a better life, to get more education. If they wanted to work, they needed to sneak out of the camp. When you snuck back in, if the Thai officers caught you, they took everything that you earned. It wasn't safe. Over here, they heard that there is freedom here, that you can work freely. Some people that wanted to come here had some education, unlike most people who had never been to school. Those people didn't want to come because they heard that there was a kind of bird that would eat us. The American people, because of their history, they will treat us unfairly. They will let the big bird eat us or whatever. They talked about that, the old people, like men. But the educated people, they came first. I don't know who made the decision in our family, we all just wanted to come. We knew that we could not go back and we didn't have our land. We don't have a spot in Burma and in Thailand, it was too crowded. We wanted more space for us and more peace and have our own spot, our own house. I think everybody decided and agreed.

We had an orientation before we came. They trained us how to cook and that we had to go to school. They taught us a little bit. We had a short class, but it was not

enough, just a couple of hours. We had a football field and a building and that's where they taught us. We came directly to Minnesota with IOM. We carried the IOM bags so proudly. They said, you just hold your bag in case you get lost and people will know. When we got here, my husband's aunt came to pick us up. We also had World Relief sponsor us. After we arrived that night, the next day we went to World Relief and they gave us a rice cooker, blanket, coat, and jackets. By that time, I got so dizzy, I couldn't even stand up, only my husband managed. We were so blessed to get new blankets, pillows, rice cooker, and jackets.

When I heard about America, in my mind, I thought people just made it up. I really wanted to go and see what it was like. I was very excited and I wasn't nervous or scared. Right away, when I saw my name on the football field, "Ha ha!" I was very happy. I couldn't believe it, I thought, if I went there, maybe after five years, I could speak English or maybe my skin would look lighter. I was just dreaming about that and I thought maybe I won't see trees and grass or soil anymore. Maybe America was going to be all buildings, very, very big buildings like towers or whatever. I dreamt about that. It was so exciting for me and when I finally got here, I said, "Oh, it's the same earth." It's the same earth as the one we lived over there. We have ground and grass and trees and the same stuff.

Experiences in America

We have been living here for about seven years. I think I was 23 when we came and it was not fun because we've never ridden in a car before. I got very dizzy and I

couldn't even carry my five kilo backpack. My husband got so mad because I was dizzy and throwing up. It was very, very bad.

My husband's parents came first and two months later, we came. They didn't rent an apartment, they were waiting for us. They could not afford an apartment either. They stayed with my husband's uncle. When we came, we stayed in their house for one day. They already rented the apartment that day so we just lived in the apartment the next day. I didn't have a hard time making changes in America. It's a little bit hard when you get sick, but you have to go to school to get the benefits from the government. The kids got sick and we needed to stay home, but we could not miss school by two to three days. The job counselor or case worker forced us. That made it a little bit hard because back there, if your kids got sick, you could stay home. When they force you to go to school, it helps you to learn English, otherwise, you might not want to go that much. I guess it just depends on some people. For older people, even when they went to school, they couldn't learn, but for me it worked.

Right after we arrived here, we got food stamps and rent from the government so we had to go to school for a certain number of hours. I don't remember how many hours they required but we had to go even when our kids were sick. We had to go to get food stamps and rent. It's very hard for people who came here later because when their kids were sick, they could not skip school. They had to reschedule the hours to get help from the government. They got a lot more stress and some people wanted to go to school, but some people, they didn't. It depended on the people.

I liked the school here. I went to school maybe around two years, but just twice a week for two hours per night. I felt like I learned a lot though. Last year I tried to go to school again, but my mother- and father-in-law went on vacation back home and my husband worked the night shift. Nobody could stay home with the kids, so I had to quit and stay home. My kids, they don't want their daddy helping them with their homework, just only me. They said that daddy reads English, not right. My husband, he doesn't want to read either because the kids say, "Oh daddy, you read different. It's not like that." He's shy to read to the kids that's why I'm stuck right now. I'm just planning to go back and I planned to travel, but I'm stuck. I want to go to school and finish my high school years, get the GED.

I knew a little bit of English before coming here, but I never spoke it. I just learned how to read and write and nobody talked to me. It was very hard when I first came and I went to school the first day. One American guy passed by the school and asked me, "How are you?" In my ear, I thought maybe he asked me, "How old are you?" because he said, "How're you?" It sounded like how old are you? I answered that I'm 20-something at that time. A couple of years later when I could speak English a little bit, I realized that's what he meant at that time. Maybe he thought that lady is so weird, I was just asking her and she's telling me her age. Yeah, when they wave their hands to say "Hi" or whatever, I thought oh, why are they calling me? One day, me and my friend were walking and one family did a barbeque outside. They said hi to us and my friend thought they were calling us. When we got closer they said that they were just saying hi.

I'm so proud of myself because I'm driving now. Over there, I didn't even ride in the car when people drove. I've never ridden in a car, but here I'm driving. I'm so proud of myself and I have my own house. I work so I can pay my mortgage and I'm healthy so that's good. I can speak a little bit of English for myself. You know, I'm not very fluent, but I can use it so I'm very proud. I think my English depends on where I work too. I went to school, maybe two years? After that I worked and my husband worked too, but at his workplace, most people there are Karen so he's not improving his English. I'm the only one who works where I work and I have to speak English. My co-workers are not Americans either. They are not good at speaking English like me, but we speak broken English and it's better.

I work at a hospital and I'm a housekeeper there. My friend at the church is the one who helped me find that job. Before, I worked at a produce company. My husband worked there first. I worked with him for five weeks and then I got this job. The pay doubled and I am so happy. I will never forget my friend for helping me. Until now, there have only been just two Karen people working there, me and my husband's cousin. I like working there a lot. It's better than the company because in the company, they force you to work like a machine. You have to compare yourself to the machine. Where I work is not like that. They give you your own floor and you take care of your floor. If you need help, you call your supervisor and they send help too. When the other people finish, they have time and they come and help you. I love it. Some of them said, "Oh you can speak English a little bit, why are you working in housekeeping?" I don't care, I just love my job. I don't want to apply for interpreter. I

don't want to have to go places. I have a full-time job. I got a good paying job and I can afford my mortgage and my car. That's enough for me. I don't need anything else because I have everything already. I don't care if it's housekeeping or not, just that I have a job.

I think the hardest part for me in America is paying rent and managing all the bills. That was very hard and it was the worst. I was so surprised when I came here because I needed to have a bank account too, but in Burma and Thailand, only the rich people had bank accounts.

I feel like I'm free here. Back there, you know what? Women back there, they had to respect their mother-, father-in-law, husband and whatever. You didn't have the chance to speak out and talk out whatever you feel. It's very, very sad. Right here, I feel like I'm a queen. I don't care about anybody because even my mother-, father-in-law, they live with me. I don't live with them. I feel totally free because I'm in charge. It feels so nice, otherwise, you don't have any freedom. I work and I have a job and even my husband cannot say bad things to me. I have money, I can afford my life so I don't care what anybody says.

My experience right now is to take care of my family and mother- and father-in-law, to have a roof to live and help provide for my family, brothers and sisters as needed. I have energy, I can work and help them. I work, not like most of my friends, they just stay home and take care of their kids, clean the house. They have a hard time with the bills and that kind of stuff. It's very hard for me to watch sometimes, they get depressed. I feel like I'm okay in my life.

My children

I have two kids. My daughter is ten years old and my son is seven. She's still very young, but she's almost taller than me. She said, "Mom, I feel sorry for you." I said, "Why?" "You know, next year, I'm gonna be taller than you." "Good for you, you're in America, you know?"

Before, I never spoke Po Karen, but now my father-in-law and mother-in-law speak Po Karen. My husband speaks too, but he never speaks it to me. When I had my daughter, she spoke with grandma. She stayed home and I went to work, when I came home, she spoke Po Karen to me. Since then, I speak Po Karen. It was not hard to learn with the kids. I learn from my kids and I talk to my kids, not other people. I'm not used to it so I will talk with my kids at first, but later on, I talked to everybody.

My hopes for my children right now is that they do well at school and catch up to their grade level. My son is okay, but not my daughter yet. I just wish their lives become more meaningful than mine. I want them to have a better life with a better job when they grow up. What I meant was for them to not work as housekeeping like me. If you have good education and you are an educated person, your life has meaning. I want them to have a good education, at least become something.

Learning and schooling

The first time I went to school was in kindergarten in the village where I lived with my grandparents. It was kindergarten to fourth grade and I think there were about ten-something students. My favorite subject was algebra and I still like algebra but geometry for me was very hard. When I went to school there, they taught us in Burmese

because we could not learn in Karen. I started learning Karen from the bottom when I went to live with my aunt and uncle. At that time, I was in fifth grade. I didn't know how to read Karen either. I started with the Karen alphabet and I took a test, a basic one for our language. I didn't know Karen language so I stayed in fifth grade for two years. After I took the final test, we left.

In Burma, the teaching method was different because you just had to read, read, read. You had to remember everything that the teacher asked. It's just like in the camp and it was a lot of memorizing, not like kids in the United States where you just think and then do it. Here, I feel more at ease, you know? There, some kids didn't even want to go to school because they didn't want to get hit. They even got hit if they didn't do their homework either.

I never got in trouble, but some teachers that I didn't like, I went to the bathroom and sang and danced around. Some teachers were boring, I just wanted to sleep. They didn't pay much attention to you and they talked a lot. It was fun for me when we snuck out and danced and sang in the bathroom. Sometimes, we even had a picnic. When school ended, we celebrated and thanked out teachers who taught us during the year and we honored them, so it was very fun for me. At that time, there were no foreigners teaching, just people in the refugee camp. New people from Burma or other refugee camps taught us if they had higher education.

The school in Tham Hin was almost like here except over there you could hit the kids if they didn't do their homework. If the teacher asked you about the homework and you didn't know the answer, it meant you didn't do the homework. They could punish

you. When I was in sixth grade, I had a teacher who I didn't like much and he was very, very tough and scary. When he asked me a question, I was going to answer, but in my mind I was thinking, maybe I'm right, maybe I'm wrong. I wasn't sure so I just let him hit me. I didn't even want to answer it. That was so scary. Most of the teachers were just like that over there.

If I don't go school for one day and I don't catch up, I got so mad. I push my pencil, tick, tick, tick, in my book. I just want to learn what other people learned. When I sit in the classroom, I don't want to sit in the back. I want to sit up front. When I take a test, I want to be in the top four, no lower than that. Back there, if we got first place, we got a prize, but not in America. I really loved it over there because when you get first place, you sometimes get 400 baht, around 10 dollars here. Sometimes you get clothes, linen or something that you can make a shirt. It's just small, but it's a prize.

I started school in the camp in sixth grade. Tenth grade was the highest they offered in the camp. I finished tenth grade after I had my daughter. American people, they said that some refugees wanted to finish their high school so they opened it for us. They gave us experiences and opportunities to go back to school and finish. I think there were about 20 students in night school. Some people they felt weird, they didn't want to go back after they got married. They didn't want to do it but I made it and finished teacher training.

Sometimes it depends on the parents. They didn't have to take care of their kids, some people they made a small garden and they sold the food. Some people, they sold fish that they got from the Thai market and they sold it for more and made a little bit of

money. They sold it for 18 baht in Thailand and the people sold it for 20 so they got 2 baht. It's a very, very hard life that's why they didn't have time for their kids. When the schools have conferences, nobody went. Whenever you asked the parents to help the kids, they said, "Oh, we don't know. That's why we send them to school." They didn't have to teach them at home. I know because I taught there for two years.

When I came to the United States, the place that we went to school didn't give us the full hours we needed, so we looked for a different place. When I worked at the produce company, I still went to school. When I got the job at the hospital, I couldn't go because that school didn't offer evening classes. My teacher got so mad and she said, "Oh, you stay here, you still have opportunity to go." She got so mad, but I had my family and I needed to help my family.

Later, I went to an adult learning center for two nights a week. I was almost done and I passed the math and reading tests but I didn't pass the writing test. They asked us to write about a book or somebody or a movie that inspired us. Nobody passed because we didn't even know what inspired meant. We tried to ask the teacher and she said, "Oh, try your best." If we knew what inspired meant, we could try our best. How were we going to write about it if we didn't even know what the word meant? I wrote about *Titanic* because that's the movie that I liked the most. I just wrote about *Titanic* without any details. After we took the test, they thought, maybe next time we should have an interpreter to tell us what the words meant. It made me so mad because we didn't need an interpreter, we just needed the teacher to tell us what the word meant and we'll know. Since then, I never went back to school. I got a lot of credits already and I took extra

classes. I was almost done, but I got so mad at my teacher so I never went back. Maybe I will plan to go back after I'm okay. One lady that works with me, she always yells at me, "Sarlweh, you told me you gonna go to school, you gonna go to school, but I never see you over there." I said, "I will, I will."

Thoughts on identities and cultures

I went back to Thailand once with my friend who went to see her mother. I was able to sneak back into Burma and see my parents for two days. It was dangerous for me so I had to spend the rest of my vacation in Thailand. Some people if they are from Burma, when people ask them, they say they're from Thailand. I never say I'm from Thailand because I was born in Burma. I'm happy to say that I'm from Burma because I like Burma. It's pretty for me, like my hometown, my village. I don't think about people or Burmese. As a place, as a country, yes, I love it. I'm proud of it. I just like it. As a country, I still really like it.

When I first came to the United States, here I know I'm different from people. When I can speak English a little bit, I can help people communicate to their sponsors or to register for school, go to conferences. When I can help people with little things, it makes them feel important. I feel comfortable and I feel great that I can help them too.

For me, religion is very, very important. It is very good for my life, but I cannot follow it. I don't know how to explain. My religion says that you have to love people around you, your neighbors. Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't. It tells you to be patient, to not throw your temper very easily, to not get mad very easily, and to be kind. I

cannot do that all the time, you know? But my religion is very, very, very important to me because it teaches me how to be good.

To be Karen is to have my own language, my own culture, and my own clothes. I have my own history. I don't have my own land, but as Karen we used to and I want to go back there one day. I think if there is a Karen nation, people will go back, but not the kids though. I think kids like America. As a Karen woman, I need to be patient. Some women they fight a lot, but me, to keep my Karen name, I don't fight with anybody. I don't like fighting or complaining about other people.

I don't think there is much difference between being a Karen man and a Karen woman. I think, for my experience, for my mom and my mother-in-law, it is very hard to be a Karen woman. They have to do everything, housework, kids and stuff. Men, like my dad, go to the farm. My mom goes too, but when they come back, my dad just relaxes or takes a nap or whatever. My mom still has to cook, prepare wood, clean and watch kids. Whenever their husbands want to eat, Karen women have to cook and do everything for them. Being a Karen woman back home, or maybe here as an old culture, is not good.

I think the difference is in the generation. I don't know why it's different, maybe because I work and make money, but for me, I don't allow my husband to do that to me. Sometimes he wants me to cook for him when he comes home from work. I said, "How come? Because you work eight hours, me eight hours too. Why I need to feed you or cook for you as a slave, no. Cook whatever you want, eat whatever. Cook whatever you want to eat." Sometimes we do a favor for them or they do a favor for us. He cooks for

me sometimes if he comes home early and I cook for him when I am home early, only when I feel like it. Sometimes he wants me to be like his mom because she takes care of her husband very well. I told him, “No way. No way. Do you hear my name? It’s not the same name so no way. I can’t become her.” I see that a lot of women, because they don’t work, they still do whatever their husbands say and they cannot go out.

American culture is different for me because when you go to their house, you have to make an appointment or call to let them know that you’re going to be there, but for us you can go anytime. When we eat, whoever is coming, we call them to eat and feed them. They can eat whatever we have, I don’t think American people would feed you or offer. It depends, I think some American people they do feed you. At work, I don’t see that American people offer their food, but Asian people or whoever, I offer them to try my food if they want. When I see Karen people walk on the street, I really want to put them in my car and offer them a ride, but it’s not allowed. I don’t think they are going to be bad to me because I think I’m just doing a good thing. I don’t offer to other people, just Karen people if I see them. How do I know? If they have the bag or clothes or something that I can tell they are Karen.

I don’t think I dislike anything about being a Karen woman, especially here. If I’m American or if I was born here, maybe I’ll have a better job or have more education than this. Maybe I’m lazy and I don’t have big dreams because I always think of myself as very low. If I’m going to do something, I think to myself that my English is not good and then I stop. I want to go back to school, but if I go to school then I’ll miss my work and I’ll worry about my mortgage. At night, I need time with my kids to do homework.

They don't want their daddy with them because when my husband reads, my son laughs. My husband doesn't want to read in front of him either because his pronunciation is not good. He said, "I'm not gonna do homework. I'm not gonna help them with their homework, just you, you know why? They laugh at me so."

I was a refugee when I came, but I'm not a refugee anymore. I'm already a citizen. Now, the government doesn't feed me, I feed myself. I remember one day, I had an argument with one man. He was Burmese and it was in the elevator. One American guy asked me, "So what are you? Where are you from?" I said, "I'm Karen from Burma." The Burmese guy got so mad. "Why do you say you are Karen? You don't have land so you are, you supposed to say you are Burmese because you are from Burma." I said, "Yes, but I am still Karen. I'm not Burmese. I'm from Burma, even though I don't have my country, I'm still Karen." I'm so proud to be Karen. I don't know why. I don't even say I'm American and I don't say I'm Karen American. I thought that if I was born here then I could say I'm Karen American. When I went to Thailand, they asked me, "Where do you live over there?" I told them I'm from America, but I never said that I'm American. I thought it was only for people who were born here in America.

What it means to be educated

I can say that I have more education than other people. If I need something, I can do it myself and I can go by myself. I don't need to call or ask other people often so I feel a little bit comfortable with myself. I'm happy. If you're happy with yourself, you

don't have a lot of stress. Other people look at you and they respect you too. They don't talk to you with bad words because people with more education are respected, absolutely.

You can tell you're respected because when they talk to you, they talk politely.

People treat those who are educated better than those who are not. Back there in Thailand, when you have a little bit of money and when you go out on the street to a shop and see educated people, bigger people, powerful people, you offer them whatever they want to eat because you really want to pay for them. For normal people, you don't offer to pay for them. You treat the educated people well and with respect and in return, you feel very good. I don't know how to explain it. You feel nice, you feel like you can do something for them when they need, and you feel that you are important. There weren't many people who were educated in the camps, but they got a lot of respect. The educated people were nice.

Education makes your life better. You don't need to work too hard like other people if you have education. People treat you well and when you work, you get paid fair if you have education. Back there, in Thailand, most of the ones in high school were women, girls. I think some men, most of them worked. They went boat fishing. It was very popular and when they went there, they worked hard. They got a little money if they're lucky and nobody caught them. They could go out with girlfriends and friends. They had expenses so most people didn't want to go to school because they wanted to work and have more friends and have fun. For young men, they did that a lot. They went out and snuck out. If they're good, they listened to their parents and they went to school. That was only a few people.

Some educated people, they don't like it when you ask them something. When you ask, they ignore you or they just look at you. It depends on the person because some of them are nice. If you are an educated person, whatever you ask and when you talk, people listen to you, but if you are not, then they ignore you easily. I can tell someone is educated by their work or by the way they act, whatever they say, they don't speak bad words or whatever.

For me, an educated person, it doesn't matter if they go to school or not. They have something specific that they are very good at. People who go to school have good jobs, but in America it's hard to say which one is educated. In my experience, my supervisor is very educated. For my co-workers, maybe back home their jobs in the United States are considered very good jobs. You can tell people are educated by their experiences and I have a co-worker that when you asked something, she could answer you. When you didn't know something, she could tell you and you know that she is educated. She is an educated person and you can tell by her experience.

An educated person can speak English. They are leaders of our people and they work in the community. To be a leader is to work for and in our community, in an office or when people need help with paperwork or to look for a job, they can go there and get help. For me, I can tell who is an educated person by the way they dress and the way they look. An educated person, dresses to keep their body neat. They look nice and they dress in nice clothes. Here, some people dress nice too, but for my experience back home, if you are educated, your income is different, so you can dress better than other people. You can keep your hair and skin looking better. I can tell over there in Burma and

Thailand, but I cannot tell in America by the way people dress because it doesn't matter what your education is, you can dress however you want. In Burma, I didn't have a lot of exposure, just my small village so I could only tell from there. My teachers and the pastor were educated. In Thailand, I could tell by the way they looked or dressed. In America, I can't tell by the way they look, but I could tell by the work they do. Most people who have high education work at an office or somewhere like the hospital.

Back home, my teachers, they were respected by all the villagers and whenever we get food, like when my dad went hunting and got something, we always brought it for the teachers. We always fed them and most villages were like that. If we got something, we would give it to them and we would always remember them because they were very, very important to us. In Thailand, it's kind of like America. People who traveled and could travel from place to place were very educated. In America, you can travel everywhere, but you don't need much education. Out of all these places, if you are educated in Burma, you have more power because most people, they are not educated so if you are educated, you get respect from everybody and everybody knows you. They respect you and treat you well.

3. Summary

Aye Mya Phyu's and Sarlweh Kwee's life histories in this chapter followed their lived experiences in Burma, Thailand, and in the United States. In each sociocultural context, I have highlighted different aspects of their experiences that help explain how they negotiate their cultural, gender, and educational identities. Although all of the nine women's life histories are unique and have equally important contributions to this study, I

have selected these two life histories to retell in detail because they exhibit the most dynamic changes in how they understand and negotiate their identities. For instance, Aye Mya Phyu's religious, cultural, and ethnic identities, and Sarlweh's gender and educational identities illustrate the shift and contradictions in how many of the Karen women negotiate their identities.

Chapter 5: Condensed life histories

This chapter consists of seven of the participants' life histories. In the life histories, I have integrated my interpretive commentaries to highlight and explain their experiences. I organized each life history section into their life experiences and education. The life history interviews I have conducted for these seven women are more detailed than what I present in this chapter. For the purpose of this dissertation, I have selected to include only parts of the life histories that pertain to understanding how the women negotiate their educational identities.

1. Paw Wah Toe

One day after English language worship, Pastor Bill introduced Paw Wah Toe to me. She gave me her contact information and I called her to set up a time to meet. Like many of the other participants, the only time she could meet was after church. I met Paw Wah the following Sunday at the church library. Paw Wah is always so well-dressed with a pencil skirt and blouse made with cloth weaved in traditional Karen patterns.

Paw Wah means white flower in Karen. Toe is the family name her husband chose when they registered for resettlement. Paw Wah is 43 years old. She was born in the jungle, in a village near the Thai-Burma border. She was born on a Friday and her parents' pastor named her Friday at birth. She is the youngest of five children. When she was born, it was right before harvesting season and her family had no rice. Her mother had just delivered her so they saved the rice for her mother. Paw Wah's father and siblings had to eat bananas in place of rice. She understands that her family sacrificed a lot when she was born and it is something that she always remembers.

Paw Wah's family lived in a small village in the jungle. The village was governed by the KNU. The KNU provided knowledge to the village through the school and church. After fourth grade, Paw Wah was sent to a bigger village where she started middle school and finished high school there. As the youngest, Paw Wah's older siblings were around to help her parents with their farm, which meant that she could attend school. In the villages, there were only three career tracks for someone who is educated, either a pastor, doctor, or teacher. There were not many doctors and most of the training was nurse training. Paw Wah became a teacher in the village where she graduated high school. She met her husband in that village and they got married.

Paw Wah taught for 10 years in Burma before they fled to Thailand. They lived near the border so it did not take long for them to reach Thailand, but her husband did not accompany them. He stayed behind because he was a soldier. Paw Wah had two children at that time and they did not go directly to the refugee camps. One of her sisters lived in Thailand and she stayed with her sister. To survive, Paw Wah worked in the Thai farms and weaved baskets to sell. It was hard for her because she grew up going to school and did not have much experience doing physical labor.

Prior to fleeing to Thailand, Paw Wah was working with some Canadian friends on a new educational curriculum for their village. After working on Thai farms for one year, Paw Wah's Canadian friends found her and brought her to the refugee camps. She stayed in Tham Hin Camp where she helped the community, the women's group, the church, and taught at the schools. Eventually, her husband joined them in the camp. He applied for political refugee status and was approved. He changed her name from Friday

to Paw Wah when he registered them for resettlement. As political refugees, they were moved to Manee Loi Camp, which was a refugee camp only for political refugees. It was located in Kanchanaburi, a province near Bangkok.

At first, Paw Wah wanted to go to Canada, but the wait was too long. She met some friends in Manee Loi who were resettling to Minnesota, so she changed her destination to the United States. In 2000, Church World Services sponsored Paw Wah and her family. When they landed at the airport in Minnesota, they did not know where to go. Paw Wah was pregnant and she traveled with her husband, her two children and her mother. The English she knew did not prepare her to navigate through the airport. They carried their IOM bags and followed people. Everyone looked at them. She looked around waiting for someone to come help them. Eventually some of the airport staff were able to identify them with their IOM bags and escorted them down to the baggage claim area where Paw Wah's friend and sponsors were waiting.

Paw Wah has three children. Her youngest child was born in the United States shortly after they arrived. Paw Wah knows that how she disciplines her children is not as strong as how her parents disciplined her. It is because here she has to adjust to two cultures.

If I discipline as strong as what my parents did for me, it is going to upset the American culture. I have to do 50-50. I don't do anything stronger to my kids, just everything is soft. It's just like I said, if my teacher did not beat me, I may not learn. If my parents did not yell at me, I may not learn. Now I do nothing, just use soft voice [and] explain. I see the difference [between the time] when I

grew up and the kids now. [...] Sometimes, my voice is loud and they think I am yelling at them. Sometimes [when] I explain, they ask me to say it softly and don't yell [at them]. I told them that I was not yelling, but they say that I was yelling. It's very hard. (M. Yang, personal communication, July 1, 2012)

This passage highlights how different cultural understandings of the word “yell” affects communication. For instance, Paw Wah's children, who grew up in the United States, may define yelling as raising your voice whereas Paw Wah defined yelling as the context and words used.

1.1 Education. Paw Wah learned from her mother and her sister. She first started learning how to cook and clean. In school, Paw Wah learned from other students as well as her teachers. In kindergarten, her teacher asked her to memorize the lessons and when she did not get it, she was punished. He beat her and asked her to stand in the corner to rememorize the vocabulary.

Back home, if you don't get the lesson that the teacher asked you then they punish you. He punished me and then I learned that I need to do better. If you want to be successful in your life, you need to work hard and do better at school. On that day, I learned that I had to be careful with my lesson otherwise I would not get it. I learned that lesson until now. If someone asks you to do something, that is your responsibility to do it. If you don't do it, it's like you become trustless to other people and you will not be successful in your life. (M. Yang, personal communication, July 1, 2012)

Paw Wah's educational experience helped her adjust to life in the camps as well as life in the United States. After arriving to Minnesota, some friends told her that it was easier to be a nursing assistant because the training was an 11 week course, which was faster than going back to school to be a teacher. She took their advice and became a nursing assistant. Now, she is an interpreter and cultural liaison at Healtheast. Paw Wah explained, "I work at the clinic, I did not study about medical [procedures or medicine], I just hear what the doctor said and it helps me a lot and I can help other people too" (M. Yang, personal communication, August 19, 2012).

According to Paw Wah, an educated person has more knowledge in the community and in the family. Having higher education means more people trust you and you have more responsibilities. Like Aye Mya Phyu, Paw Wah stressed the importance of respecting others, especially as an educated person. She explains that, "no education means no school level, but because [of] their experience, [... it] makes them have a higher knowledge level" (M. Yang, personal communication, July 22, 2012). This statement underlines the importance of non-formal and informal education in producing knowledge that can compensate for formal education.

Paw Wah shared that in Burma, mostly men are the ones who have more opportunities to go forward. It was part of the Karen culture that men were more educated because after women married, they stayed home. That was the tradition, but it started to change in the refugee camps and especially after they arrived to the United States. Paw Wah described how the women she knew back in Burma all have fresh faces now because they are exposed to equal rights and they feel protected by the law. She

elaborated that this could potentially be problematic in households where the wife is more educated than the husband. Concomitantly, the educated wives are able to use their knowledge and manage the family situation.

It's a positive change, a good change for the women because [...], women have a lot of talent and [they can] use it. [...] Men also change, which means that they cannot be too powerful in [the] house. They cannot give too much direction to the wife and also they have [to be] more trusting to their wives because they see the wife are so good [with their] talents. [...] I see some of the family here, women are working, husbands stay home, but in Burma, most men are working, wife stay home. [...] But we still have some men who still [have] the same attitude as [in] Burma. (M. Yang, personal communication, July 22, 2012)

Paw Wah does not identify herself as an educated person. She explains that

I feel like I don't want to identify as [an] educated person. Why I say that right now? The thing that I am doing or exploring myself right now would be only my experience, not education because schooling level is for me, it's nothing. Even though I graduated from Burma high school, here it's like I'm stay[ing] in kindergarten. So for myself, I don't want, I don't want to refer [to] myself as an educated person. (M. Yang, personal communication, July 22, 2012)

2. Salina Po

I attended service at one of the local Mormon churches because I heard that some Karen attended that church. I met and spoke with one of the elders and he introduced me to Salina, a young, honest and energetic Karen woman who was helping him interpret

testimonies in English into Sgaw Karen. Salina agreed to help me with my project; however, we had to reschedule three times before we were able to meet.

Salina is 21 years old. She is the youngest of nine children. She was born in a village in Burma near the border. When she was born, many people were running away from the Burmese army. It was a hard time for her family because they had to ask for food from other people. Salina's name is a combination of the names of the four women who helped her mom deliver her. In honor of the women's help, her parents took one part of each woman's name and combined it to make her name. Salina explained that when she arrived to the United States, people told her Salina is not a Karen name. They told her it is a Spanish or English name. She replied, "Well, when we lived back there, we don't even know about American people, you know? We've never heard [of] Spanish or [Mexicans], you know? But I think that's really interesting and really cool though" (M. Yang, personal communication, August 26, 2013).

In 1997, Salina's family ran from the Burmese government and army. She was still young, but she remembered there were many helicopters, just like flags in the sky. It appeared that the Thai and Burmese people worked together because they moved people in large trucks. Salina's sister recalled that the Thai people told the Karen they were going to move the people to a safe place, but they lied. Her sister explained that a Karen leader came and stopped the Karen from getting onto the trucks because he knew they were going to send the people back to Burma.

Shortly after Salina and her family settled in the refugee camps, her father died. Her father was forced to be a porter for the Burmese army. He got really sick and he

passed away. Salina's mother raised her and all of her siblings by herself. When Salina was nine, she started helping her mother cook and clean the house. They had a small business making brooms. Salina helped her mother gather tall grass to make the brooms. Besides helping her mom, Salina helped babysit her nieces and nephews.

When Salina's family resettled in 2007, they were supposed to stay in Indiana; however, her sister that lived in Minnesota told them Minnesota had better services. Her sister drove to Indiana to pick them up and took them Minnesota immediately. Salina's sisters who resettled to Indiana eventually moved to Minnesota to reunite with family.

2.1 Education. Salina started school in Tham Hin Camp. Her favorite subjects were geography and history. She was not good at math and her teachers were impatient, which made it hard for her to learn. Salina compared the schools in the camp to the schools in the United States. She described that the schools in the camp required the students to read and memorize whereas the schools in the United States focused on teaching the students to understand the main ideas.

Back there, we just have to memorize all the pages. If we went back to school [...] and didn't remember everything, our teacher just hit us to bad. They hit us. [...] It's just so embarrassing and sometimes they gave, like, punishments besides hitting us. We had to jump like frogs in the hall in front of the other classes and offices, other people looked at us. It was embarrassing for me. The teachers had rubber bands to shoot at us on the lips and ears. They made us pick up the garbage, clean the bathroom, and eat the bitter leaves. My other friends, they were not very happy about it and some of them cried a lot when the teacher

punished them. I remember one of my friends, the teacher called her a dog. It made her feel so bad and she had like a heart attack. It's just bad. (M. Yang, personal communication, August 27, 2013)

Salina explained that the teachers did what they did because they were teaching the students like how parents teach their children. The teachers wanted the students to have a good life, be good kids and good people. Salina understands this concern, but she believes that it was too much because the students were too little and young.

Salina wanted to be a teacher when she grew up because she wanted to change the way teachers were teaching. The teachers did not try to understand the students. As a teacher, Salina would try to understand the students and not just punish them because they did not get their homework done.

I know my problem, the reason I don't read my assignment, you know, we don't have, we don't have money to buy candle. That's why we cannot read in the dark. Without light, we cannot read it. So yeah, sometimes we don't have money to buy candle back there. [...] And just because we are poor and some people they are rich and they have light like that, but us, we are poor, we don't have money to buy candle. [...] When I go back to school, I always hope that the teacher [would] ask me so that I can answer them, but they just don't ask me. [...] The reason why I want to be a teacher is because I just want to be like an example for other teacher, you know? (M. Yang, personal communication, August 27, 2013)

She explained that her family was poor and they could not afford candles. This meant that she could not study after dark. Life in the camp required her to help out her

family right after she got home from school and she did not get to do her homework until late. The students whose parents could afford candles were able to do their homework even after dark. In her explanation, Salina described how not all refugees had the same socioeconomic status or had the same opportunities. Moreover, the different location and environment of each camp meant that resources were not evenly distributed among the camps. Tham Hin Camp, according to Salina, was the worst camp because they did not have the opportunities that the other camps had.

After arriving to Minnesota, Salina started school in ninth grade. At first, she picked up English fast, but for two years, she did not speak very much English. She had a lot of Karen friends who spoke Karen with her at school. In 2013, Salina graduated from GAP High School (Guadalupe Alternative Programs). She explained that she attended GAP not because she is a dropout or a bad student, but because she was over age.

Why is education important? Well, if you have education, the thing is, like you can have it with you anywhere, you know? Wherever you go, education is always in your mind. That's really important. I think that's how education is important. If you have education, no one can steal [it away from] you. You know, like when you have a lot of money, people can steal your money, but when you have education, people cannot steal your, your education unless you want to share [it] with them or give [it] to them, you know? [...] Education for me, is like a web bank that you can use. You can use [it] to protect yourself. (M. Yang, personal communication, August 27, 2013)

Salina lends credence to her education because it has helped her become stronger, more independent, and more confident with herself. She sees her education as a tool to make her more knowledgeable so that she could help her people. Salina explains that being “educated” means that the person must learn how to balance between being “educated” and using their education.

No matter how much you, you have education, [...] everything has to be balanced, even though you have a good education, but you don't even know how to use your education, share [it] with other people, no one is gonna like you or know you, you know? I think it has to do both way[s]. You have to, it has to be balanced. [...] I know some people, they are like really rich and they have like good education, but the way they behave, they behave, the way they act, people don't like them and that makes them, that makes [their] education go down, you know? Even though they have like education, because the way they act, the way they behave it doesn't make people comfortable. (M. Yang, personal communication, August 27, 2013)

Salina is proud to be Karen and she feels a strong connection with the Karen who are suffering in Burma and in the camps in Thailand. She wants to be educated so that she could return and help them.

I am Karen. I am not Burmese. I am a Karen woman and I'm an adult. [...]
When I think of being Karen, I think back to our flag. White means to be pure, to be pure with everything, like in your heart and with your thoughts. Red is to be brave, it means to step up and be brave. Blue is to be honest, to have honor. I think that shows what it means to be Karen. [...] I think to be Karen, you have to

be like the meaning of the flag and to be friendly. (M. Yang, personal communication, August 27, 2013)

Salina is currently attending Saint Paul College and she wants to transfer to the University of Minnesota because she wants to major in global studies. The interdisciplinary aspect and focus of global studies align with Salina's goal of being educated to prepare her to work in the international field.

3. Kapoh Say Aung

After my interview with Salina, she asked her friend Kapoh to see if she was willing to help me with my research. Kapoh agreed and Salina gave her contact information to me. I met Kapoh at her brother's house. She is a small, confident, and mature young woman. Kapoh informs me that she and Salina are kind of related. Kapoh informs me that as Karen, everyone is sort of related because Karen legends say that all the Karen people originate from two great grandparents.

Kapoh Say means spider money. Aung is her grandfather's first name. Her father chose his father's first name to be their last name when they registered to resettle. Since her last name is Aung, many people have asked her if she is related to Aung Sung Suu Kyi. Kapoh explained that a last name is just a name, there is no significance to it. Kapoh clarified that unlike in the Hmong culture where those with the same last name cannot marry, in Karen culture it does not matter because a last name is one you just made up.

Kapoh is 21 years old. She is the youngest of seven children. Being the youngest has greatly affected her opportunities, responsibilities, and experiences. As the youngest,

her older siblings spoil her sometimes; however, being the youngest means that she is responsible for her parents. All of her siblings are married and have their own families.

If I am the oldest, I get married early and then I have to leave my parents and I might not have a chance to take care of my parents. [...] Think about how hard it is to raise seven kids and we were very, very poor in Thailand. [...] You know, usually Karen people say that you can raise 10 kids, but only two parents. Some children cannot even take care [of] their parents. Some people might leave their parents and then exit their house. I was thinking, it's okay, my parents raised seven of [us], I can take care of my parents, there're only two [of them]. (M. Yang, personal communication, October 18, 2013)

Kapoh was born in a village in Burma. In 1997, the Burmese army attacked their village and they had to flee. She was young and her father carried her as they fled. Her father told her that there were some KNU soldiers who followed and directed them where to go. When her family reached Thailand, they settled in a temporary refugee camp near the border. Although they were in Thailand, it was still unsafe because the Burmese military could still attack them. In 1999, her father decided to move to Tham Hin Camp, which was further away from the border. At first, her father wanted to stay near the border because he was waiting for the situation to improve so that he could return. In Burma, he had a big farm where he grew betel nut and raised cattle to sell.

Kapoh's family lived in the camps in Thailand for nine years before resettling to the United States in 2006. All of Kapoh's siblings were married in Thailand, except for one of her older brothers. He asked her father if they could resettle for a chance to get a

better education. Kapoh's father refused, but later he changed his mind. Her father knew that his son was right, "if I moved to the United States, you guys will get better education" (M. Yang, personal communication, October 18, 2013).

When she was 14, her family moved to the United States. Adjusting to life in the U.S. was hard because of the language and finances. She knew that she had to work to help her family since her parents could not work anymore. After her brother got married, Kapoh had to take over and support her parents. She learned how to balance school and work. Kapoh works as an assistant manager at a local grocery store and has earned her own money since she was 18.

Kapoh elucidates that in the Karen culture, they do not show affection or say thank you. Even though Kapoh and her parents do not talk to each other a lot or show love to each other, they know they love each other because she knows when her parents are sad and they know when she is sad. Kapoh explained that she learned how to express her gratitude from her friend. One day, Kapoh's friend took her and her father to K-mart. Kapoh's father bought a backpack for her and she never said thank you because she was not used to it. Kapoh's friend looked at her and asked her why she never said thank you. Kapoh said thank you in English and her friend told her to say it in Karen. Since then, Kapoh has always said thank you to anyone who gives her anything, even if they are her family. Kapoh explained that in Karen culture, they know from their hearts, that's why they never say it out loud.

In U.S. culture, it does not matter what color you dye your hair or how you wear your clothes, but in Karen culture showing too much skin and coloring your hair is

considered bad. When children are influenced too much by U.S. popular culture, the older Karen parents interpret that as bad because they think that the children do not want to preserve their culture. Kapoh explains

when I moved to the United States, I remember the first few years, some people in the summertime, they wear shorts. Like in Karen culture, you don't want to show any of your skin to anyone. Then, I remember when [I wore] shorts, my parents always tell me to go change. [...] In American culture, it doesn't matter what you wear. My parents would always tell me, [don't] dye my hair because [dying] your hair show[s] that you are influenced [by] American culture. In Karen culture, [it] doesn't show that you [are] being [a] good kid. One day, I talked to my mother, even though I dye[d] my hair, it doesn't mean that I cannot be a good kid, good person. It's just [that] I want to dye my hair like other peers. Later on, I think they [didn't] complain anymore. In Karen culture, if you [dye your hair] then you look like you're not [a] good kid anymore because other people will [spread] rumor[s]. Look at that kid, they dye[d] their hair, see now they are [influenced by] American culture already. (M. Yang, personal communication, October 18, 2013)

For Kapoh, she wore shorts in the summer time and she colored her hair when she turned 18. Her parents always complained and told her to change clothes or stop dying her hair. Her parents were concerned about her actions and behaviors because they directly affected her parents' reputations as Karen parents.

Kapoh defines what it means to be Karen. She explains that

to show that you are Karen, you love freedom and you love peace. [...] Our old grandparents show that they are very, very kind. They will help each other no matter who you are, even if you don't know them. Because they were so friendly, that's why the Burmese people took away their land. They farmed and they can live together. Everyone didn't want problems, that's why they told me they had to be friendly no matter who that person was even if they are enemies. (M. Yang, personal communication, October 18, 2013)

To be Karen is to be peaceful and compliant. According to Kapoh, Karen women have the responsibility to take care of the family. Most importantly, to be a Karen woman means to you have to be polite with your clothing and always remember that you are Karen. Even if you are very educated, you still listen to your parents, your husband, and your older brother.

3.1 Education. Kapoh started school in the refugee camps. When she attended school, Kapoh lived with her oldest sister or her oldest brother. Both of Kapoh's older siblings taught at the school in the camp. Since they worked, Kapoh had to help out in the house and babysit her nieces and nephews. In the camp, the students received report cards every three months and her sister or her brother signed her report cards. They had high expectations for her, especially her brother. Her sister would sign the report card if Kapoh was in the top five in her class of about 30 students. Kapoh's brother would only sign her report card if she is the top number one in her class. Kapoh's brother highly values education, which has a direct impact on how she understands and values education. Kapoh had no problem being one of the top students in her class. She knew what was

expected of her and she worked hard for her grades. Aside from getting good grades in school, Kapoh also had to have a good behavior and not get in trouble.

When she was young, Kapoh admired her sister-in-law, who was a nurse practitioner at the camp hospital. Kapoh has always wanted to be a nurse practitioner or a doctor. She never thought about having to leave the camp, so her plans when she was young consisted of being educated in the camp and working at the camp hospital.

After her family arrived to Minnesota, Kapoh's sister enrolled her at Arlington Senior High School. She was not used to the school schedule. She did not know enough English, and she did not know how to navigate through the school. These changes made her hate school. It was not until she met a teacher who mentored and helped her that she started to like school again. Kapoh explained that:

When I grew up, even though my parents didn't teach me much, they taught me that I have to respect older people. Some people at my high school don't have any respect. When I first went to high school, I was surprised when the teacher was talking, the students talked over them, which in my culture [is] very, very rude. You can never do that in my high school in the camp. (M. Yang, personal communication, October 18, 2013)

After high school, Kapoh was planning to attend Saint Cloud State University; however, her older brother got married and the responsibility of taking care of her parents was passed onto her, as the youngest child. Even if she was married, it would still be her responsibility to take care of her parents.

At first when I came to the United States, my dream [was] to get better education, become a doctor and then go back to the camp or the forest to help them, but later on, everyone [got] married and then I had to take care [of] my parents. So I [thought] to myself, I might not have money to go to graduate [school] for my doctors, but I can do nursing first and then later on when I graduate from nursing, if I get a job and save money, I might [be] able to go to [medical school]. (M. Yang, personal communication, October 18, 2013)

Her new family responsibilities meant that she could not go far for school and she had to change her educational goal from being a doctor to a nurse because it required less formal education and money. Kapoh negotiated her educational goals to accommodate her family responsibilities. Kapoh's explanation of an educated person reflects what it means to be an educated Karen person.

[An] educated person, in my personal thinking, I think they have to know that [even] if older people or younger people, [it] doesn't matter, they still have to value them the way they are. [...] Like, if you see someone homeless, you go to say that person doesn't want to go to school. Why [do you] need [to] discriminate [against] that person? I think that if you [are an] educated person, you [are] not gonna say [that] because you don't know their history, so don't discriminate [against] someone based on what you see and [...] don't judge a person before you know them. I think [an] educated person would never do that and then they will respect older people, [which is] very, very important. I think in my culture, [it] doesn't matter [if] that person, doesn't have any education, [if] they [are]

older than you, you have to respect them. [...] If you walk in front of older people, you always have to bow your head. (M. Yang, personal communication, November 3, 2013)

4. Giri Kasuh

I approached Giri after one of the English service sessions at the First Baptist Church. It was shortly after the hurricane in the Philippines and she sang “Blessings” by Laura Story as a dedication to the victims and families of the hurricane. I remember Pastor Bill introduced her to me the first time I attended worship. He told me that she attended the University of Minnesota and that she would be a good participant for my study. I reintroduced myself to Giri and we set up a time to meet at a café near the University of Minnesota.

Giri is 21 years old. She is the oldest of five children. She is not sure where she was born exactly because the names of villages in Karen differ from names in Thai and English. Since her parents were born in Burma, she identifies with them. Giri came to the United States with her family in 1997 when she was five years old. They first arrived to Buffalo, New York, but the support system was not very good at that time. They were one of the first Karen families there and not a lot of the social workers were able to help them. A Karen friend in Minnesota contacted her father and they moved to Minnesota.

Giri’s mother wanted her first born to be a girl because she wanted a daughter to be able to help her with household work. Giri’s mother also believed that girls are not as stubborn and are more obedient than boys. Being the oldest in her family made Giri more responsible and it has also helped her build trust with her parents. As she started

college, Giri knew that she became independent when she moved away from home and worked to support herself. Giri has three part-time jobs at the University of Minnesota where she works as a peer mentor for first year students, a program assistant for freshmen taking an online course, and she works at the front desk in one of the dormitories.

Giri lived on campus for the first two years and that meant that she was completely immersed in college life. She felt disconnected with her family, Karen friends, and church. At the same time, she was able to develop strong bonds with her college friends. After her younger brother started to attend the University of Minnesota, Giri moved back home. Moving back home meant that Giri was able to balance her work, school, and family responsibilities better. She is now able to participate more in community and church events as well as strengthen her bond with her family and Karen friends.

During a New Year event at church, someone asked Giri and her friends what their ethnicity was and she said she was Burmese. All of her friends corrected her that she is not Burmese, she is Karen. Since then, Giri has identified herself as only Karen. She explained that to be Karen

it means go to church every week, stay for Karen service just because you need to show your face so that people see you're there. People assume things if they don't see you at church. People assume that I'm pregnant or that I'm hiding something. Last year when I was busy with school and work, I couldn't attend church every week because I didn't come home as often. My friend said she heard I was pregnant. When you disappear from church, they assume you're

hiding something. Rumors spread. (M. Yang, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

To be Karen also means you help people. Giri explains that for many of the Karen events or celebrations in the home, they invite pastors and other leaders to come pray before eating. The value and influence of religion shapes the way Giri understand what it means to be Karen. Giri asserts that one of the rites of passages to being an adult in the Christian Karen culture is Baptism.

Giri associated listening with respect. To listen to your parents, to listen to what they have to say means to show respect to them and their wisdom and experiences. Respect means to understand their parents and why they do what they do. When kids respect parents, parents do not have to discipline kids. Respectful kids and good kids derive from good parenting. Giri explained that she thinks “it depends on the kids. I know, some kids are very rebellious and they don’t want to listen to their parents at all and I’m like, what are you talking about? They’re your parents, at least try to have respect for them, but they don’t” (M. Yang, personal communication, December 6, 2013).

Although she was born in Burma, Giri chose not to learn about the situation there because she is not interested in the politics. People have asked her about the Karen situation, but is it not something that is important to her because she is not planning to go back there. Giri just became a U.S. citizen this year, but before she was a citizen, she always considered herself an American. She does not identify herself as a Karen American because she was not born here, but she is a Karen and an American.

4.1 Education. Giri learns by watching first, then having some teach her, and then doing it while the person is there. She learns from hands-on activities. One of the first things she learned how to do was play the piano. Her father is a musician so he taught her how to play. Giri's mother told her that she attended preschool in the refugee camp, but she does not remember it. Giri was young when her family resettled so most of her memories were of her experiences in the United States.

Giri was able to pick up English quickly; however, she was afraid to use it. She was shy throughout her grade school years and it was not until she went to college that she "came out of her shell". Coming out of her shell meant that Giri became more confident in how she socialized with others, not necessarily in the classroom. Giri explained that when she applied to college, her parents

didn't really know how to help [be]cause it's something that's a whole different level and all they could do was like be supportive and give money when I actually needed it, like pay off school tuition. They didn't lead me, but they were there backing me up. (M. Yang, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

Giri's first choice was Bethel University, but when she and her father visited the campus, Giri did not feel like she fit in. She felt out of place. When she was accepted to the University of Minnesota, she decided to go there. It was much cheaper and she enjoyed meeting all the new and different people from various backgrounds, especially the international students. Giri explained that education is important because it is necessary to get a good job; it gives you status. Giri adds that for many of the Karen people,

they go to Bible school in the camps, but those aren't considered. When they come to America, that's not considered actual formal education because they don't have like a certificate or whatever, but it's still considered to Karen people. They're still considered educated people just because they went to Bible school, you know? That's like their college for them and they get trained in like the Bible and Sunday school stuff. [...] Through that, they can become pastors. [...] My aunts and uncles, the ones after my mom, a lot of them went to Bible school and so here, people call them *theramu*, it means like teacher. [...] My mom, she's never been educated, she didn't go to Bible school, but because she is involved with the church and has like that leadership role in the women's prayer, she gets a higher status and people call her *theramu* too. (M. Yang, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

Giri explains that there are different kinds of "educated" people. Some "educated" people are the authoritative religious leaders or they have been educated in making things with their hands, which does not require a degree. Giri describes that an educated person is expected to

be respectful to people, to be understanding, to not be judgmental, but then a lot of them [the educated people] are still judgmental, to be encouraging [be]cause there are a lot of young people who don't have like motivations and goals. [To be an educated Karen women] means that we've been through high school and we're starting college. A lot of, like my mom expects me to give back to the community,

like right now or like after I'm done. [...] It also means that we know English, like [fluently]. (M. Yang, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

Giri does not see herself as someone who might be perceived as a “model minority” because she does not get straight As and was not at the top of her class. Her understandings of the model minority stereotype for Asians only applies to the success stories of students who attend prestigious schools. She does not find the model minority stereotype problematic because none of her friends see her as a model minority.

5. Caceelia Moe

I met Caceelia through Giri. After I interviewed Giri, she asked some of her friends to see if they were willing to participate in my study. A couple of her friends were away at school and could not participate, but Caceelia was kind enough to make time to meet with me. Caceelia also attends the University of Minnesota, which made it easier for us to meet on campus if necessary.

Caceelia's name comes from Cecilia, the saint patroness of music. Moe is her father's middle name and it means the sky. Caceelia is 22 years old. She was born in a Thai hospital outside of the refugee camp. After she was born, her family moved to a temporary refugee camp, which no longer exists after numerous attacks by the Burmese army. One of her earliest memories was running barefooted in the river as they tried to get away from the Burmese military.

Caceelia is the oldest of six children. All of her siblings were born in the refugee camp except the last one who was born in the United States. As the oldest child, Caceelia

has always been responsible for all of her younger siblings. Concomitantly, her younger siblings have to respect her as the oldest and they look up to her as a role model.

Caceelia was aware of being Karen in Thailand because she did not carry a Thai identification card even though she was born in a Thai hospital. The Thai identification card is symbolic because it means you have freedom and are not restricted like the refugees. It means you are free to travel and work; it means you belong. Not having an identification card makes “belonging” in Thailand much harder than in the United States.

After Caceelia’s parents received political refugee status, they were moved to Manee Loi Camp, which also no longer exists. Caceelia’s family came to the United States in 1998. They left the camp on her tenth birthday. Her parents decided to resettle because they wanted to reunite with her grandparents who were already in Minnesota. In the United States, people confused Caceelia with her younger sister who looks nothing like her. When her sister got motion sickness and threw up on the school bus, the bus driver thought it was Caceelia. The bus driver told her to sit in the front and she said no. He came to the back of the bus and opened her window. She got upset that people moved away from her because they were disgusted. She told her sister to sit in the front of the bus and remained where she was because “I just didn’t want to be treated different” (M. Yang, personal communication, January 7, 2014).

Caceelia met her husband at church and knew him four years before they got married. She got married when she was 17 years old, just a couple of weeks before she turned 18. Caceelia has a four year old daughter who attends preschool. It was hard raising a baby because she was new at it, but everyone around her helped. Caceelia got a

job after she had her daughter and started college. She works at a nursing home and she also works with AmericaReads as a mentor and a tutor.

Caceelia identifies herself as a refugee because “I’m still a Karen person” (M. Yang, personal communication, January 9, 2014). Even though she has a home in Minnesota and her family is here, she still does not feel completely at home. Caceelia’s statement suggested that Karen people, regardless of where they are in the world, will always be bound to the Karen land in Burma. The Karen land is what they truly consider to be home and because of this, Caceelia still feels out of place as a Karen. However, since she was born in Thailand, she considers Thailand home even though the camps where she lived no longer exist. She could only visit the cities where she has been.

Caceelia’s description of what it means to be Karen implied that there are at least two components to being Karen.

It means that I can speak Karen and I’m born from at least one parent that is Karen or can even be both. Being able to speak the language is really important, but it can also follow the cultural tradition and stuff like having pride in your culture, clothing, in your traditions and giving an effort to learn like traditional dances and stuff. (M. Yang, personal communication, January 9, 2014)

The first component is to be able to fit in and communicate with other Karen. In addition, they have to showcase how they embrace and value the Karen culture and traditions. One important value in the Karen culture is respecting the elders. Caceelia described how showing respect means to listen and not respond quickly. These descriptions refer to

being a Karen by practice. The other description is to be Karen by birth, to have at least one Karen parent.

5.1 Education. Caceelia started school when she was four years old. Her favorite subject was math because the numbers were the same in every language. In the camp, the teachers taught in Karen. Caceelia recalled that

if you got to class tardy, they would hit you with a ruler. To avoid that, I would ditch school and climb on the mango tree. There was one tree in the whole prairie or field and I would just hide there and wait until my friends came home from school and then I would get down and come home with them to look like I went to school. We also got in trouble if we didn't know things, like we had to know the multiplication table up to 12 and I was in kindergarten. That's how I knew math. I think I learned by seeing and performing. (M. Yang, personal communication, January 7, 2014)

Caceelia added that she remembered learning the Karen alphabet by imitating, seeing and hearing the sounds. Learning English was not as intuitive as learning Karen. English was a completely new language and she only understood "yes", "no", and "hi". Caceelia explained that it took about one year for her to overcome the language barrier; however, learning English with other students who did not speak English helped her because everyone learned together.

Caceelia was married and pregnant before she completed high school so she attended AGAPE, which stands for Adolescent Girls And Parenting Education. AGAPE had an onsite daycare where she was able to bring her child to school. If she had to miss

class to go breastfeed her daughter, Caceelia's teachers would save notes for her so that she could catch up. Caceelia appreciated the environment at that school because she was not judged and everyone has the same story, being a teen mom. Not being judged helped build her confidence.

Caceelia is resourceful. She knows where and how to find opportunities for herself and this is what helped her to be where she is. She shows appreciation for her high school counselor who helped send her scholarship application.

There was this one scholarship I was applying for and the deadline was that day. When I looked at the form, all I had to do was submit like an essay that I wrote in any class and it was postmarked for that day. She [my counselor] had to run to the post office before it was 4 p.m., before like the post office closed and then I actually got the scholarship. (M. Yang, personal communication, January 9, 2014)

Caceelia's parents still expected her to go to college after high school. She did not have trouble applying because her counselors helped. The hard part for Caceelia was deciding which school to attend, in which she decided on the University of Minnesota. She had always wanted to attend the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities because the campus felt like a small town. Caceelia is majoring in sociology and she is not exactly sure what she wants to do yet. She understands the value of education because her parents and grandparents have always stressed the importance of it. She elucidates that education is something that other people cannot take away from you once you have it.

My grandpa, he'll preach to the whole community about how valuable education is and how we need to prove the oppressors wrong and like Karen people can be

educated. They say we're going to drop out before high school, but there are so many of us who are in college and proving them wrong. [The oppressors are] the Burmese military, they're trying to make us extinct. Every time my grandpa preaches or gives a speech, he would mention that education is important and we came to America for education. He doesn't want us to forget why we're here. (M. Yang, personal communication, January 7, 2014)

Education also appears to be a tool to increase the status of the educated and defy the enemy. Some of the benefits of going to school was because it meant students were exposed to more opportunities so they could get a better job. Caceelia defined a better job as a job that pays well compared to the labor.

In the past, males in the Karen culture were seen as more educated than females, but as more Karen women are being educated, this perception is shifting. Caceelia defines an educated person as one who acts appropriately, is a role model, calm, and someone who "can give back by teaching what they know and share their experiences" (M. Yang, personal communication, January 9, 2014). She adds that an educated person is one with a degree, but a person can also be educated if they are smart even if they do not have a degree.

Caceelia agreed that the model minority stereotype shapes who she is because it makes her work harder. She persists in overcoming obstacles and she can be open and accept the opportunities. She sees the model minority stereotype as a good thing, that if she can do it, so can you. Concomitantly, she expanded her explanation to include

reasons why others might not be able to do what she does, for instance if they are sick or they do not know where to find help.

6. Salween Paw

Aye Mya Phyu introduced both Salween Paw and Thenawthey Klo as potential participants because of their educational background and personal experiences. I met them at church and asked for their contact information. Salween offered to ask her father if I could interview him since he has a very interesting life history. I told her that for the purpose of my project, I am interviewing women only and that I hope to be able to include men in another project. Salween and Thenawthey requested that I interview them at the same time, which I happily obliged. Although some of their experiences overlap, they each have unique experiences that allowed me to discern and draft two separate stories.

Salween Paw means flower of the Salween River. She is 41 years old and she was born in a village that is on the delta of the river, along the Thai-Burma border.

Salween is the middle child with one older sister and one younger brother. Her grandfather was a Karen leader and her father was a soldier. Salween explained that “a soldier doesn’t mean you want to kill people, it is to protect your people” (M. Yang, personal communication, October 20, 2013).

Shortly after her brother was born, her parents were divorced. Her father had to go to the front lines and protect the people so he could not raise her and her sister. Salween’s younger brother went with her mother, but later on he came back to live with them. Salween had to stay with her grandparents and eventually with her aunt and uncle.

She explained that it is different to live with people who are not your parents because you have to learn how to do everything. Since her cousins were young and small, she had to cook, clean, carry water, plant, and do laundry. Salween added that although she had to do a lot to help out, her aunt and uncle loved her and she would not be able to survive without them.

After Salween graduated from high school, she knew that she could not stay with her aunt and uncle any longer. She knew she had to find her own way. Before she got married, Salween was a midwife, a nurse.

People call[ed] me like a nurse, *theramu*. It means kinda like a teacher or a nurse. They call[ed] me *theramu*. I'm already a *theramu*, but I feel like a child, you know? [...] When I get home, I'm like a child. I feel like I'm under my uncle and auntie's supervision. [...] *Theramu* [is] whoever teach[es] you, whoever help[s] you. [...] We don't call each other doctor, we call *theramu*. (M. Yang, personal communication, December 15, 2013)

Salween clarified that the Karen do not call doctors and teachers by their names, they call them *theramu* or they use *theramu* as a title before the name.

Salween shared that the path for the educated woman was to train, work, and then get married. That was the only way. After Salween met and got to know her husband-to-be for two years, she asked him if he was going to marry her. She told him that if he was going to marry her then they should get married, but if he was not going to marry her then he should go. He said he will marry her and they got married. Salween explained that

life is very hard, you know, if you don't do that. Here and over there is different, the cultures. If you are still alone, you know like single life, people point at you all the time, You have to be good all the time, your character, everything, [the way] you act, you cannot go out at night. If you go with a guy, [...] they point at you for every single thing. When you [are] single, they're gonna tell you, [talk about you] if you go to the movie with a boy. We had to care. I didn't want a bad name, you know? The life there was very hard, so different from here. [You do] whatever you want, they don't care about anything here. Our culture there, the culture is very strict. You have to be good when you're single. You have to have a nice name. [...] If you went out with a lot of boys, the family that was gonna marry you, they won't want to marry you anymore. It is because you are seen as a bad girl with a bad name and a bad generation. They tell you to be good all the time. I could not wait that long. People [were] gonna point at me all the time, you know? (M. Yang, personal communication, December 15, 2013)

Salween elaborated that when you are married, it does not matter if you go watch movies with other males because the people know you are married. They trust you.

When their village was attacked, Salween and Thenawthery took their children and ran away with the other villagers. At that time, Salween had one daughter and Thenawthery had one son and was pregnant with her daughter. They were separated from their husbands, who stayed behind because they were soldiers. On their way to Thailand, many of the Karen died from a diarrheal disease. There was no medicine and the disease was contagious. Salween made burnt rice and drank the burnt rice water to

have constipation instead. She gave the burnt rice water to her daughter and to everyone else to drink so that they would not have diarrhea.

In Burmese, we call[ed] it *ka lau mu*. You know, *ka lau mu* is [a] very, very fast disease. If you got that disease, you will die. You will die very fast. [...] You have to treat with antibiotics, not the flu, not the virus, the very, very bad diarrhea. [...] How are you gonna get antibiotic there? All the people [were] gonna die and because of the, you know, the enemies kill you or the diarrhea kill[s] you. (M. Yang, personal communication, December 15, 2013)

As they navigated through the jungle, Salween's nurse training helped her care for her sick daughter and her nephew. Furthermore, she was able to provide medical assistance to the villagers.

When they finally arrive to Thailand, they lived in the refugee camp for one year before they moved to Bangkok to apply for political refugee status. By this time, both Salween's and Thenawthey's husbands had joined them in the camp. Salween's grandfather was a leader in Burma and her father was a politician which put their lives in danger. Salween and her family moved to Bangkok and lived in hiding until they were approved for political refugee status and were relocated to Manee Loi Camp.

Salween and her family came to the United States in 2000. In the United States, the first place they lived was in the church basement. As some of the first Karen refugees to Minnesota, they had to learn how to do everything so that they could be role models and help other Karen. Both Salween and Thenawthey were able to help many Karen

find jobs. They were hard workers and they set a good example so their manager hired the friends they referred.

6.1 Education. In the Karen state, if you can reach your arm directly over your head and touch the opposite ear, you can go to school. If you cannot touch, you cannot go to school. That was how they determined if the children were age appropriate. There are three kindergarten levels, A, B, and C. All the students start with C and they move up to B and then A before going on to first grade. Salween explained that this meant that second grade in the Karen land was equivalent to fifth grade in the United States. Salween described how if students did not pass all 7 subjects (Karen, Burmese, math 1, math 2, geography, science, and world history) with 40 marks or higher than the student fails for the whole year and has to repeat that grade. The school that Salween attended also had an eighth subject, which was the Bible.

Salween was good at everything in school. She was always at the top of her class. As a child, Salween wanted to be nurse. After she graduated high school, she took nurse training. She also took teacher training and soldier training, even though she did not plan to be either. Salween elaborated that if you wanted to become someone, you had to try hard. In the refugee camp, Salween took teacher training again and taught for one year.

She explained that education is important because people look down on you if you do not have education. In her experience, Salween thinks that education is valued the same in all the places she has lived. Salween adds that

if you have education, you have a lot of face. Your face is saved. [...] An educated person is smart and they are equal to people, help people to understand

what they do or what they have to do. An educated person has to understand people. You are educated so you have to understand so you can help deal with people. For me, an educated person has to be very smart, not be like me. Some people they say they are, but they are not. They don't know how to deal with people. Some people are bad, some people are good. Educated people have to talk nicely even though people are bad, you have to use their way. You have to use their way so you can get their heart. You know what I mean? The most important thing, even though bad or good, you have to take their heart so you can get into their mind. (M. Yang, personal communication, December 15, 2014).

Salween clarified that an educated person does not mean that they have a lot of years of education because it also depends on the person's sense, their common sense and experiences. In Karen, knowledge is *tathinya* which means common sense.

7. Thenawthery Klo

Thenawthery is the name of the lower river in the Karen land. Klo means river. Thenawthery is 37 years old. She was born in Burma in the Kersawwah Village, which means white elephant. Thenawthery is the youngest of seven children. Her mother passed away when she was young so she grew up with her oldest sister and brother-in-law. Thenawthery did not live with her father because he got remarried. Her oldest sister and brother-in-law loved her and she was lucky to grow up with them, but she still had a lot of responsibilities. Thenawthery helped wash, clean, cook, and babysit her nieces and nephews. She had to learn how to be good at doing household chores to help her family. They were poor, but her sister and brother-in-law always tried to get her what she wanted.

Growing up, Thenawthery's siblings baked bread and she helped them by selling. She was not shy and they needed money so it was easy for her to sell food.

Thenawthery met her husband at school. When she was married, Thenawthery was already pregnant. This meant that only adults were invited to the wedding. In Karen culture, if the bride is pregnant before she got married, parents are scared that if their children attend the wedding, the children will be pregnant before they get married as well. After they got married, Thenawthery and her husband wanted to move out. She did not want to live with or near her sister because she wanted to be independent and take control of her own life without her sister's influence. She loves her sister and brother-in-law, but she wanted to be able to survive by herself, she wanted to grow up. Thenawthery and her husband were poor and young. Her husband was a soldier so they received some rice, but Thenawthery had to find ways to make money. She is a good cook and she made pho to sell. That was how she survived.

When the villagers knew that the Burmese army was going to attack the village, everyone fled. One week after they fled, the Burmese army burned their village. Thenawthery fled with her sister-in-law, Salween and their children. Thenawthery and Salween laughed as they recalled their experience running to Thailand. Thenawthery was three months pregnant with her daughter. She always wore high heels so when they ran in the jungle, she continued to wear high heels. She wore a sarong even though Salween told her to wear pants because it was easier. Later on, Thenawthery told me that she did not wear pants because it made her feel embarrassed. In Karen culture, it was uncommon

for women to wear pants at that time. Thenawthery carried her son and many pots and pans which made loud noises as they meandered their way through the jungle.

In the refugee camps, it was dirty and they were treated poorly by the Thai officers. They stayed in the camps for one year before Thenawthery and her family moved to Bangkok to apply for political refugee status. Thenawthery and her family knew that they could not return to Burma. When they got political refugee status, they were placed in a different camp. The new camp had better living conditions compared to the first camp. Thenawthery and her family resettled to the Minnesota in 2000 and they first lived in the church basement until they could find an apartment.

It was hard trying to adjust to a new life. They had to learn how to do everything from turning on hot and cold water and operating home appliances to learning English and driving a car. They also had to learn how to adjust to American culture. Thenawthery explained that they had to reassess how they address each other. In Karen culture, they do not call each other by names, especially in public. They call each other by familial relationships to show respect. A surprising cultural shock was public displays of affection. Thenawthery recalled the first time she witnessed two people kissing on the bus. She covered her mouth and giggled because she was surprised and embarrassed to see it. She was not embarrassed for the people, she was embarrassed for herself for witnessing it.

One act that was extremely offensive was when an American called and motioned Thenawthery to “come here”. In Karen culture, when they call someone, they wave their fingers to “come here” with their palms facing down. When someone called

Thenawthery by waving their index finger with their palm facing up, it made Thenawthery so angry. That is how you call a dog in Karen culture. The Karen never call people like that, unless they want to instigate a fight. Calling someone with that hand motion is very mean and rude. It implies that the person you are calling is equivalent to an animal.

Thenawthery volunteers her time helping the Karen community filling out forms for citizenship, green card applications, and setting up appointments. She adds that although her English is not good, she tries her best to help. Both Thenawthery and Salween deferred to Salween's father as a role model who exemplifies what it looks like to be a good leader who gives back to the community. Thenawthery shared that when her father-in-law started working in Minnesota, he got \$50 a month and he saved that to help the Karen people. He did not use the money on himself because he wanted to help his people.

7.1 Education. Ever since she was young, Thenawthery wanted to be famous. She wanted to be a singer. She wanted people to hear her voice. She was not good at school, but she tried her best. Her school was made out of bamboo. Everything was made out of bamboo, the building and all of the furniture. The bamboo broke easily when it was dry and kids were naughty so they had to repair it again and again.

Thenawthery could not graduate because she got married when she was 17. She explained that

you know if you, if you get married, you cannot go back to school in our country.

[It's] not like that here. I was just 17 and if I was here, I could still go. Over

there, if you are a woman, not single anymore, you cannot go to school. That's why this country is good for everybody to have education. Over there, the teacher, they beat you if you did something wrong. (M. Yang, personal communication, December 15, 2013)

In the refugee camps, Thenawthey expressed that it was frustrating to not be able to find work outside of the camps. Instead, Thenawthey took teacher training and taught at the elementary school. After they resettled to the Minnesota, Thenawthey took English language classes for four months and then she found a job chopping vegetables at a restaurant. Later, she found another job as a nutrition aid at a nursing home. She has been working there with the elderly and interpreting on the side.

8. Summary

Each of the life histories highlight different aspects of Karen culture, gender roles and expectations, and educational experiences. Figure 3: Participant profiles is a synthesis of the background of each participant, including the two life histories from the previous chapter, highlighting the marital status, birth place, birth order, and education pre- and post-resettlement. I have selected to outline these experiences and background because they shape how the women negotiate their educational identities as discussed in chapter six.

NAME	AGE	MARITAL STATUS	BIRTH PLACE	BIRTH ORDER	ED. PRIOR TO RESETTLEMENT	YR MOVED TO U.S.	ED. AFTER RESETTLEMENT
Aye Mya Phyu	39	Married, 4 children	Burma (city)	Oldest of 4	Grade 9 in Burma	2003	10 months – English language
Paw Wah Toe	43	Married, 3 children	Burma (KNU village)	Youngest of 5	Graduated high school in Burma, teacher training	2000	11 weeks – Nursing assistant training
Salina Po	21	Single, no children	Burma (village)	Youngest of 9	Middle school in camp	2007	In college
Kapoh Say Aung	21	Single, no children	Burma (village)	Youngest of 7	Middle school in camp	2006	In college
Sarlweh Kwee	30	Married, 2 children	Burma (village)	2 nd oldest of 7	Graduated high school in camp, teacher training	2006	2 years – English language
Giri Kasuh	21	Single, no children	Burma (near border)	Oldest of 5	Preschool in camp	1997	In college
Caceelia Moe	22	Married, 1 child	Thailand (outside camp)	Oldest of 6	Elementary school in camp	1998	In college
Salween Paw	41	Married, 4 children	Burma (near border)	Middle of 3	Graduated high school in Burma, nurse training	2000	No data
Thenawthey Klo	37	Married, 2 children	Burma (KNU village)	Youngest of 7	Grade 9 in Burma	2000	3 months – English language

Figure 3: Participant profiles

As illustrated in Figure 3, the background and education of the women in this study reflect a wide range of experiences. Although there were only nine participants in this study, I have achieved maximum variation from the different experiences and backgrounds. Marital status, as I discuss in the next chapter, determines the level of education that the women can obtain in different sociocultural contexts. Birth place

influences the exposure to various cultures and shapes how the women identify themselves as Karen. Many of the women lend credence to birth order as one of the main reasons that shape the way they see the world and that it makes them more responsible. It is important to comprehend what the different educational experiences before and after resettlement are because the women's formal educational experiences are the points of negotiation when reconstructing what it means to be educated in the United States.

Chapter 6: Data Analysis

I love my people. I love my Karen lady. I love you above all others. I admire you above all others. I wish for Karen freedom. My Karen people have been oppressed and raped. I don't wish for that. For our part, we'll do our best to lift ourselves up. Our people, Our Karen. As the saying goes, "Only when we are united, we are strong." Victory is close, so never give up.

I am Karen. My blood is Karen. I am not ashamed to be Karen. Don't discriminate against me for being Karen. I won't deny that I am true Karen. I love my people. I love my Karen lady. I love you above all others. I admire you above all others. I wish for Karen freedom. My Karen people have been oppressed and raped. I don't wish for that. For our part, we'll do our best to lift ourselves up. Our people, Our Karen. As the saying goes, "Only when we are united, we are strong." ~ Translation of Karen song lyrics from *Nickel City Smiler*, A documentary directed by Scott T. Murchie and Brent M. Williams, 2011

Using the interviews, field notes, and literature, this chapter describes how Karen women negotiate their educational identities from a cultural and gender perspective.

Furthermore, I illuminate how the women's experiences shape their understanding of what it means to be educated. Lastly, I describe how the women understand the model minority stereotype and how the development of their educational identities in the United States have been shaped by the construct.

In responding to the two guiding research questions, I have constructed a diagram to illustrate the negotiation process and how the women make sense of what it means to be educated. I incorporate the different themes from the data to accentuate the impact of the sociocultural context as it applies to the diagram. Figure 4: Educational Identities illustrates 1) how educational identities are negotiated and 2) what it means to be educated. It is important to understand that Figure 4 was constructed with a cultural and gendered lens. The cultural and gendered lens is the filter in which the women make sense of their sociocultural experiences. For example, if I asked you to explain how you

understand what it means to be educated, your response would have already been filtered through your cultural and gendered lens. Negotiating cultural and gendered identities happen in a sociocultural context. Furthermore, cultural and gender identities are constantly being renegotiated to respond to the changing sociocultural contexts.

This study is centered on understanding how the Karen women negotiate their cultural, gender, and educational identities. Moreover, negotiation refers to both active and passive negotiation. Active negotiation is when the Karen women are fully aware of their options and the consequences and they choose to present themselves in a certain manner depending on the sociocultural context. Active negotiation illustrates how the women exhibit agency even if it defies cultural norms. Passive negotiation, in this study, refers to when the women are not fully aware of their options and they “go with the flow”. Passive negotiation does not mean that the women do not have agency in their decisions, instead it implies that the options present within the status quo prevailed over the women’s own choices. It is important to understand that neither active nor passive negotiation is more desirable or favored over the other. Both active and passive negotiations are equally important in the different sociocultural contexts. Furthermore, negotiation implies that there are choices and that decisions are made. The following sections explain how the women use active and passive negotiations as I elaborate on how the Karen women construct their educational identities and understand what it means to be educated.

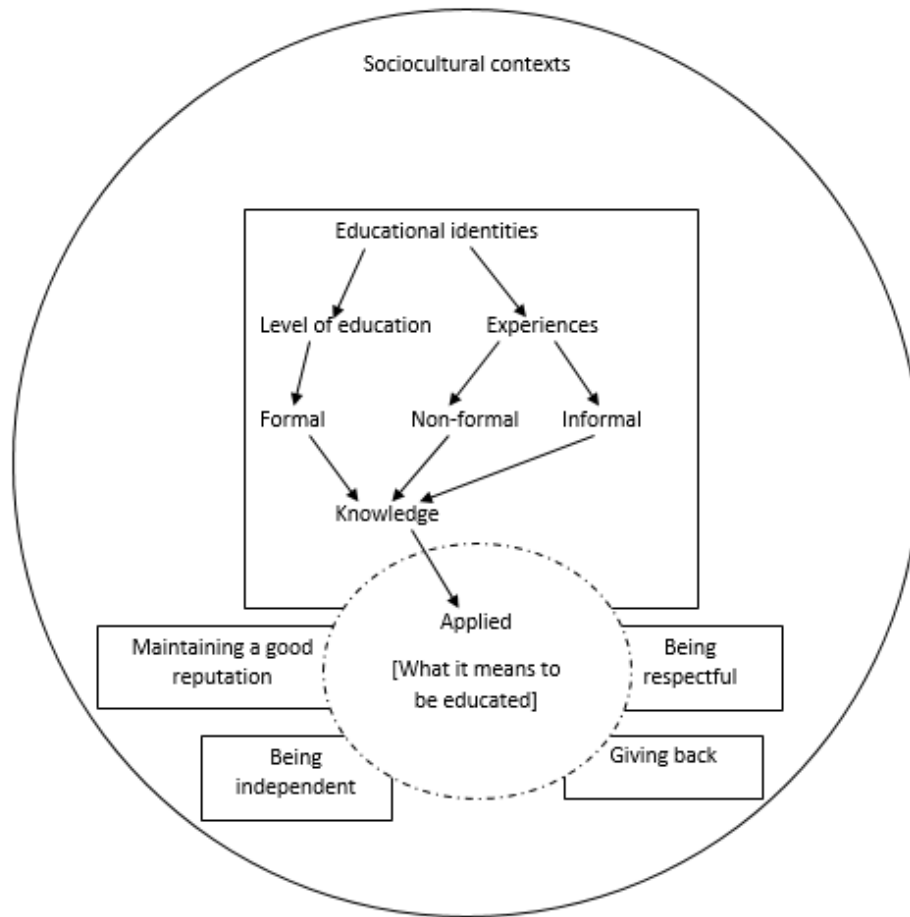


Figure 4: Educational Identities

To understand Figure 4, I must explain how the Karen women negotiate their cultural and gender identities. I refer to the lens as cultural instead of ethnic or racial because how the women negotiate and perform their Karen identities varied depending on the different sociocultural contexts. In other words, even though the women have their own constructs of what it means to be Karen, the cultural negotiation occurs when the women have to balance between being Karen and fitting into the mainstream culture. Gender negotiation occurs when there is a disconnection between expectations and performance which is elaborated in the sections below.

1. Cultural and gender identities

1.1 Negotiating Karen cultural identity. What it means to be Karen has been defined as either by practice and/or by birth. Only one of the women expressed that to be Karen is also to be born as one, with at least one Karen parent. Perhaps the rest of the women did not mention having to be born a Karen because it was already implied. All of the participants explained that to be Karen means they value and exemplify the cultural aspects that are associated with being Karen. The cultural aspects that define a Karen are symbols, characteristics, and values. The symbols include the drum, flag, horn, clothes, and language. The characteristics ascribed to being Karen are: shy, compliant, peaceful, innocent, pure, and honest. All of the women mentioned how important it is to value the elders and how showing respect to the elders was a defining factor in being Karen. These descriptions correspond with Nick Cheesman's (2002) discussion on how Karen identity is constructed in Burma.

Using historical texts from missionaries and texts in Sgaw Karen, Cheesman (2002) describes how the Karen identity emerged from a constructed Karen ethno-history. Karen ethno-history depicts the Karen as oppressed, uneducated, and virtuous (Cheesman, 2002). One of the main characteristics used to explain why other ethnic groups were able to mistreat the Karen was because they were peace-loving (Cheesman, 2002; Rajah, 2002). Being peace-loving meant that the Karen would rather avoid conflict than fight, although they were capable of fighting if they needed to. In Karen ethno-history, the story of a lost "golden book" implies that the Karen were educated. The reason why the Karen were uneducated was because they lost the "golden book" and because they were

oppressed by the other ethnic groups (Cheesman, 2002). The third way in which the ethno-history portrayed the Karen was that they were virtuous. Cheesman (2002) explains that as the Karen were converting to Christianity, the missionaries needed to present the Karen as different from the other ethnic groups. As a result, the missionaries suggested that “Karen culture had defining characteristics that paralleled Christian ethics and doctrine, making them all the more worthy of both salvation and European attention” (Cheesman, 2002, p. 214). The Karen were described as chaste, honest, loyal, and placid (Cheesman, 2002).

As discussed in chapter two, the development of a Karen ethno-history has united the various Karen ethnic groups to create Karen ethno-nationalism. Karen ethno-nationalism stresses pride and unity among the different Karen ethnic groups. This concept of Karen ethno-nationalism was solidified by establishing shared common symbols, such as the Karen flag, drum, clothes, and the Karen national anthem, which is referred to as “our country song”. In descriptions of Karen public events in Thailand (Rangkla, 2014) and visible in the documentary *Nickel city Smiler: from the jungle to the streets*, which follows the experiences of one Karen family who resettled to Buffalo, New York (Murchie & Williams, 2011), these symbols promoted by the KNU are also prominently displayed on the stages. Likewise, the same ethno-nationalistic sentiments depicted in the literature is reflected in the interviews and field notes. When I attended the Karen New Year celebration, the background was decorated with the Karen flag and the Karen drum. The speakers at the event spoke of Karen pride, diversity within the Karen culture, and a unified Karen nation. The speeches were presented in three

languages, Po Karen, Sgaw Karen, and English. The speech in English was condensed and not as detailed in terms of promoting Karen ethno-nationalism compared to the speeches in the Karen languages. I was able to understand the main points of the speeches in the Karen languages because one of the women in this study helped interpret and summarize those speeches for me.

All of the women in this study exhibit Karen ethno-nationalist views. When they negotiate their cultural identity, they are negotiating between embracing their Karen identity, as prescribed by Karen ethno-history and ethno-nationalism, and how they fit into the different sociocultural environments. For Aye Mya Phyu, she explains that there are many things in common among Karen, Burmese, and Thai cultures. She talks about how it is hard to discern which is actually which because they have lived with and around each other for so long that they all claim certain traditions were originally theirs. None of the other women expressed Karen culture the way Aye Mya Phyu did. Instead the other women reiterated the rhetoric that was present in the Karen ethno-history as characteristics of being Karen. Aye Mya Phyu's experience living in the city in Burma provided her with a different view of Burmese culture compared to many of the other participants who have never participated in Burmese culture as a Burmese.

In the villages in Burma, outside of the Karen land, the Karen could not sing their country song or learn Karen language in schools. Moreover, the Burmese military attacks drove the Karen out of their villages and homes. These acts of oppression strengthened the Karen ethno-nationalist identity because they were not allowed to be

Karen. Negotiating their Karen identity in Burma meant uniting as an ethnicity and a nation.

Based on the life histories, the emphasis on negotiating the Karen identity shifted to negotiating the Karen identity as refugees in Thailand. The chance to participate in Thai culture was limited because the refugees were confined to the camps. For the women who were able to leave the camps, like Salween, they had to pretend to be Thai by dressing and acting like a Thai in the city. The context in which they had to pretend to be Thai does not imply that they are less Karen. Instead, the women probably felt more Karen because they could not be Karen. This statement suggests that the women were more aware of their cultural and ethnic identities because they had to be more conscious not to show it.

As Kapoh explained, it is easier to be Karen in the United States because they do not feel restricted. They feel that they can openly embrace their cultural identity. The freedom to express how they identify themselves as Karen in the United States suggests that they have to negotiate their cultural identity more often. For instance, they had to reassess how they address each other, how they discipline their children, and how they dress. All of the women in this study defined the Karen identity and culture in opposition to mainstream U.S. American culture. I will elaborate more on this concept in chapter seven.

1.2 Negotiating gender identity. This section refers to how the Karen women balance between cultural expectations of being a woman and their performance. Ideas of freedom, self-empowerment and agency are all important in how the women gain

confidence in what they do and how they negotiate their gender identity. The different places where they lived affected their sense of freedom. In Burma, the women had paths set by cultural norms that they must follow. This path directed the women to get some education, get married, and support their husband and children. Most of the women who did not continue school became farmers. That was the way of life there. Although the Burmese government restricted the teaching of Karen language in schools outside of the Karen land, most of the women in this study did not express that language was a hindrance to their perceived rights and freedom. As Paw Wah and Sarlweh explained, women's role in Burma was contained in the house. Women did not get the chance to voice their opinions. Moreover, the woman's place in the home meant that they were perceived as unable to contribute to society; thus, justifying why they do not need to be as educated as the men. Paw Wah and Aye Mya Phyu explained that because the women were not exposed to Western notions of women's rights, they were content with what they had. In this context, the Karen women's life histories in the previous chapters demonstrate how the women exhibit passive negotiations. For instance, after Salween completed her education and training, she felt that she had to get married because it was the next step for women at that time in that sociocultural context.

In Thailand, the women had limited opportunities; however, the exposure to different organizations that worked in the camps helped them realize that their voices mattered. Furthermore, the restrictions placed on refugees helped the women recognize that they were denied certain rights, not necessarily as women, but as refugees. They were not free because they were treated differently than the Thai citizens. In the refugee

camps, the women were more aware of self-empowerment, agency, and active negotiations; however, due to their status as Karen refugees, the negotiations in the camps were more passive—their choices were limited and camp rules prevented them from outside employment.

In the United States, all of the women, except one felt that they are free. In comparison to the places where they have lived, perhaps they are free. To be free meant that they had a livelihood, they had a voice, they were protected from the enemies in Burma, and they had opportunities for growth. For Aye Mya Phyu, she felt that she was not completely free because she still feels controlled by the system and by money. She compares it to life in Burma where making money and paying bills did not control how they lived. She understands the trade-off and the different options that she has in the United States.

The perceptions of self-empowerment and agency were strengthened when the women knew they had rights as women. They knew they could speak up and be protected by the law. In Burma, Aye Mya Phyu explained how she gave advice to a young boy who lost his way. She expressed how people have a choice in the things they do and what happens to them. The good and bad in life is based on the choices that people make. She talks about marriage in the same way and this reflects her sense of agency. At the same time, the sociocultural context deems that she follow Karen gender expectations.

In the refugee camps, the women feel that they have lost this sense of agency because they could not do anything about being refugees. They are more aware of

empowerment and agency, but it is harder for them to perform and embody these concepts because they were restricted. In addition, the life in the camps forced the women to maintain gender expectations even though it allowed them to continue school after they got married. The opportunity to continue school meant that more women in the refugee camps were becoming educated compared to the men. This trend continued as the refugees resettled.

In the United States, the women feel protected by the government and they know they can speak up. Sarlweh is not shy about embodying and enforcing her rights. Her empowerment illustrates how she negotiates her gender identity as a working Karen woman in the United States. As evident in her life history, she still abides by certain cultural expectations such as being a patient Karen woman. The other women also expressed this same sentiment, which suggests that they can do anything. Concomitantly, some of the women shared that even though women know about their rights, they would rather avoid conflict, exemplifying their reluctance to speak up.

In church and community events, I noticed that women were participating as much as the men were. Sometimes women participate more than men as Giri points out with the church youth choir. I attended the Wednesday night worship at the First Baptist Church where the attendees were Karen, except for two other non-Karen church members. A young Karen man and woman led the prayers. The group was small with about 45 participants and equal representation with respect to gender and age.

2. Educational Identity

With an understanding of how Karen women negotiate their cultural and gender identities, this section describes how they negotiate their educational identities. Figure 4: Educational Identities maps out two main components that the women consider when negotiating their educational identities: level of education and experiences.

2.1 Level of education. Level of education refers to formal schooling. The level of education that the women were able to complete was due to various sociocultural circumstances. There were limited opportunities to attend or continue school in the rural villages in Burma. There was not much incentive for teachers to teach in the villages because the pay was little. Having to move to another village to continue school was common for the participants from smaller villages. The lack of educational opportunities affected the level of education that the women could obtain. In addition, educational opportunities were determined by several factors. This section highlights two of the most prominent factors: birth order and marital status.

Different birth order gave the women different opportunities and responsibilities. Almost all of the women identified their birth order as one of the reasons why they received the level of education they have. The studies on birth order as it pertains to educational attainment examines various relationships such as family size, socioeconomic status, age of parents, cultures, and other family resources (Booth & Kee, 2009).

Paw Wah was the youngest in her family and this meant that her older siblings were around to help her parents with the farm. Paw Wah had the opportunity to focus on school and eventually become a teacher. Kapoh is also the youngest in her family, but

since her older siblings are married, she is the one responsible for taking care of her parents. Living in the United States allowed her to work and go to school, but her decisions about her educational goals had to be modified to balance her family responsibilities. Sarlweh was the second oldest and because of that, she had the opportunity to continue school. Going to school changed her life because the village where she attended school was attacked and she had to leave Burma. These are some of the examples that illustrate how birth order affected the opportunities that determined the level of education that the women could obtain.

The nine participants in this study can be divided into two groups, the “older group” who mostly grew up in Burma versus the “younger group” who mostly grew up in the camps in Thailand and in the United States. Birth order for the “older group” and the “younger group” appear to have different implications. For instance, birth order for the “older group” suggested that it either helped or hindered the level of education they received. Birth order for the “younger group” seems to emphasize the expectation of being role models for younger siblings or for younger Karen in the community. As examples, Caceelia and Giri are both the oldest in their families and as college students, they are role models for their younger siblings and other Karen youth.

The amount of education the women received also had a direct impact on whether they were married. In Burma, women who were married did not continue school. In Thailand, the situation allowed married women to take night classes in order finish school. In the United States, even if they were married and had children, they could still complete their high school education. Aye Mya Phyu and her husband were able to go back to

school after they arrived to the United States. For them, this was a rare opportunity because the environment they lived in before did not provide them with the chance to continue their education after marriage. Thenawthey did not have the opportunity to go back to school after she got married just like Aye Mya Phyu. Moreover, Thenawthey was pregnant which completely removed education as an option for her in Burma. The women who were married in Burma before finishing high school could not negotiate their level of education and return to school. This lack of choice to be formally educated exemplifies passive negotiation.

In the camps, Sarlweh was married and had a child, but she was able to finish high school. The camp environment permitted organizations to establish night schools for married couples, which exposed them to the idea of adult education and encouraged married women to go back to school. Although living in the camps restricted movement and work options, married women were given the opportunity to continue school. This example demonstrates active negotiations. It is active because Sarlweh knew what her options were and she took the initiative to complete her high school and receive teacher training.

In the United States, Caceelia was married and had a child before she completed high school. Living in a different sociocultural environment allowed her to attend school during the day and bring her child with her. This support made it possible for her to continue her education as a college student. Caceelia's experience exemplifies active negotiation because she was aware of her options and she made her own decisions. These different examples demonstrate how different sociocultural contexts hindered or

allowed married women to attend school. Moreover, these examples illustrate how negotiations changed in each context.

2.2 Experiences. Experiences refers to the experiences that contribute to non-formal and informal ways of learning. There are numerous examples in the life histories that illustrate how the women's experiences, through non-formal and informal education, have contributed to their knowledge base. In this section, I have identified three categories of experiences that represent how the women are educated outside of formal schooling. The three categories are: living with others, religion, and work.

Living with others is different than living with your parents. It makes you more responsible because you are expected to contribute and are held accountable for it. Thenawthery's examples of having to learn how to do everything when she lived with her sister helped her when she got married because she was able to utilize those skills. Aye Mya Phyu, Salween and Sarlweh expressed that living with others is different than living with your parents. This does not mean that they were unloved or mistreated. In fact, the people they lived with loved them very much and taught them how to be responsible and respectable. Growing up with relatives shaped the way they see the world and how they interpret their experiences. For instance, Sarlweh learned how to weave Karen clothes from her aunt, which represents how cultural knowledge is passed down through informal ways of learning.

Living with others required the women to make both active and passive negotiations. For Aye Mya Phyu, when she was living with her aunt and uncle, she knew that she had a set schedule with chores to do; however, she shared that sometimes she

chose not to complete the chores even though she knew she would be disciplined. An example of passive negotiation was when Salween's aunt thought that her husband-to-be was her boyfriend. Salween did not have a boyfriend at that time, but she could not object and tell her aunt the truth because the cultural norms at that time required the children to comply and be obedient. Salween went along with her aunt's assumptions.

Bible school is an invaluable learning experience. As Giri explained, the men and women who took Bible school classes in the camps are respected as *theramu* or teachers, even after they resettled. Although Bible school is not recognized as a level of education in the formal schooling system, this non-formal learning experience for older Karen adults is considered to be comparable to college level education for them. Being knowledgeable in culture and religion is equally as important as level of education when negotiating educational identities. The emphasis on lived experiences and cultural knowledge is one of the reasons why Karen elders are so highly respected, even if their level of education is not considered to be high after they moved to the United States.

Work can be categorized under level of education because the level of education they received helps determine what kind of work they did; however, I chose to place work under experiences because the work experience itself has different meanings in different contexts. For example, in the United States, the work the women do is not necessarily reflective of their level of education. It is their experiences and ability to perform the tasks that allow them to do their work. In addition, the women's work experiences includes non-formal and informal learning as they are trained and taught how to do the job. Salween's and Paw Wah's experiences of working as interpreters in the

medical field continues to teach them about medicine and medical procedures as they interact with doctors and patients. The knowledge obtained from their work experiences allows the women to help others by sharing what they know.

2.3 Negotiating educational identities. Educational identities are determined by the level of education and experiences that the women have. How the women negotiate their educational identities vary depending on sociocultural context. Paw Wah explained that in her family she is considered educated because of her level of education as well as her knowledge and experiences from her work. Moreover, in Burma and in the camps, her level of education was regarded as educated because it was the highest attainable level in that context. In the United States, however, Paw Wah compares her level of education to that of a kindergartener. Her comparison alludes to how insufficient she feels her level of education is in a different sociocultural context.

When the women convey that they do not consider themselves to be “educated”, it is because they feel that their level of education is inadequate in the United States. Concomitantly, they present themselves as individuals who exhibit their own definitions of an educated person through their experiences and behavior. Perhaps this contradiction is a sign of humility; however, it is clear that they are negotiating between their level of education and their experiences in Burma, Thailand and the U.S. Different sociocultural contexts require the individuals to reconsider their educational identities. For instance in the United States, within the Karen community, Aye Mya Phyu is respected as a leader and an educated person because of her work experiences, involvement in the Karen community, and how she continues her education by taking Bible classes. Aye Mya

Phyu does not consider herself to be educated because she did not finish high school; however her experiences are vast and she is open to sharing them to help others.

For the younger Karen women who are in college, their negotiation emphasizes their role in the community and family. As young adults, Giri, Kapoh, Caceelia, and Salina do not have the same kind of influence that the older women have regarding their cultural knowledge and experiences. Nevertheless, the young women have the level of education and schooling background to help establish them as role models. The knowledge they have from formal schooling may be able to outweigh any perceived lack of experiences in work, culture or religion.

The goals of formal, non-formal, and informal ways of learning are all different methods in which people acquire, produce, and share knowledge. In other words, educational identities are negotiations of different processes that lead to knowledge acquisition and (re/co)production. Understanding how formal, non-formal, and informal education construct educational identities is essential because it emphasizes the importance of how life history contributes a holistic explanation of their experiences. All of the women expressed that having knowledge does not mean that you are educated if you do not share and use it. This concept of applying knowledge addresses my second research question of understanding how Karen women construct what it means to be educated.

3. What it means to be educated

What it means to be educated is to embody and exhibit the knowledge you have and be able to apply it appropriately in the sociocultural context. In terms of the level of

education, what it means to be educated in Burma is to finish high school and receive training to work as a nurse, teacher, or pastor. What it means to be educated in the camps in Thailand is to finish high school and find work. The type of work the women have helps determine their “educated” status. This definition also applies in the United States; however, the option of going to college is available for the young women who want to increase their “educated” status.

Through their lived experiences and negotiating their educational identities, the Karen women have shared several characteristics of an educated person. I have chosen to highlight four characteristics that were stressed as the most important based on the women’s responses. An educated person should be respectful, maintain a good reputation, give back, and be independent. In explaining each of these categories, I will include what it looks like to be educated in different sociocultural contexts and how the women negotiate their educational identities in these contexts.

3.1 Being respectful. The most important characteristic of an educated person is that they must respect others regardless of status, age, or whether that person respects them. With this requirement, the women suggest that because the person is educated, people already respect them. The emphasis is on the educated person to respect others. I grouped concepts of understanding and status under this category.

An educated person is understanding. They are open-minded because they are exposed to different ways of thinking and life. They understand the sociocultural context and how to respond appropriately. The way they interact with people demonstrates that they are understanding because they are calm, quiet, and mindful. Aye Mya Phyu and

Giri explain how important it is to be nonjudgmental and show respect to everyone, even if they are “bigger” or “smaller”.

The idea of “big” versus “small” appears to be directly linked to perceptions of status. The women’s life histories point out some examples of how statuses are determined and how people can increase their status. For instance, being schooled, having money, having a respectable job, being related to a leader, being an elder, and being married all increase your status. Social mobility is difficult in Burma and Thailand if you do not have connections to someone who already has a high status. When you are a “nobody”, then you do not count. If you want to be a “somebody”, then the easiest route is through education. This is why education is so highly encouraged and respected in the sociocultural contexts in Burma and Thailand. This statement does not undermine the emphasis on education in the United States, in fact because access to education is easier, it is expected that young Karen children are educated. In essence, an educated person should try to achieve for a higher status, but still remain humble and be respectful to everyone, especially the elders. The Karen community publically recognizes the elders during the Karen New Year. The Karen elders are escorted out by young women and men and they all line up in front of the stage. The young women and men stand in front of the elders and present them with gifts on behalf of the community to show appreciation and respect.

Aye Mya Phyu explains that in the Karen culture, showing respect means to cross your arms, avoid eye contact and lower your head when talking to elders. Kapoh adds that when students sit down, cross their arms and look down, that means that they are

showing high respect for the teacher. Students who exhibit this body language in schools are recognized as honor students. Salween and Thenawthey assert that when children greet adults, they have to lower their heads to show respect. Furthermore, they explain that when Karen call each other, they refer to them by their relationships rather than their names. This is how they show respect to each other. Thenawthey points out how important it is to know that using your hand to motion people to “come here” with your palm facing up is extremely disrespectful in the Karen culture. Caceelia elaborates that another way to show respect is by listening. To show that you are listening, it means that you are not quick to respond. The pause before responding demonstrates that you listened and have considered what was said before formulating your thoughts.

3.2 Maintaining a good reputation. An educated person must have a good reputation by being a good person and doing good deeds. Some of the stories that the women shared about reputation hints at “saving face”. One important part of saving face is that your reputation affects the reputation of those around you. This is why it is important to have and maintain a good reputation. For example, when Salween talked about how getting married meant that people would stop pointing fingers at her, she knew about the impact of the rumors that may damage her and her family’s reputation even if she did not do anything wrong.

Saving face is crucial to how the Karen present themselves as good. What does it look like to be good in the Karen culture? What does it look like to be bad in the Karen culture? Several of the women talk about moral education and childrearing as ways of teaching Karen children to be good. Why the Karen discipline students in schools and

why parents discipline children are for the same reasons. The purpose of disciplining is to teach the children to be obedient and good. The children have to follow rules and show that they are responsible for doing their homework. Teachers serve as parental roles for students, which helps explain why there is such high respect and regard for them. Both parents and teachers are responsible for creating good children.

Paw Wah expressed how being punished shaped the way she learned. It made her work harder. She was thankful that the punishment worked for her because it made her more responsible. As for Salina, she voiced how much she disliked the punishments and the effects it had on the students. She understands the purpose of the punishments, but she was frustrated with the lack of understanding the teachers had for the students. Other women like Caceelia and Thenawthey skipped school to avoid getting punished. Kapoh was able to avoid being punished by not getting caught.

Aye Mya Phyu first brought up childrearing when I asked her about challenges that the Karen are facing in the United States. Parents are frustrated for not being able to discipline their children the way they were used to. By enforcing children's rights in the United States, the authority and power of the Karen parental figure feels that it has been jeopardized. Karen children are taught respect by their parents. Paw Wah shares that when she was a child, she and her siblings had to show respect by asking for permission from their parents before doing something. Intrinsically, respect is also linked to obedience to parents and older siblings. Additionally, it appears that parents and their parenting are reflected in the outcomes of their children. Good, obedient children equals good reputation for parents.

Learning to be a good person is important because it means that you have to be a good example. The women talk about how religion is what helps them be good people. They explained that without their religion, they would be bad people or they would “go the wrong way”. For Aye Mya Phyu, religion helps her control her feelings and emotions. She lends credence to Christianity to help her feel and sympathize with others, as well as help her be more patient and calm. For Salween, she expressed how she would not be a good person if not for Christianity. To have and maintain a respectable reputation, the women have to show that they are good and Christianity is one of the factors that help them retain this goodness.

3.3 Giving back. It is useless to be educated and knowledgeable if you do not give back to the community. There is a strong emphasis on helping others, especially other Karen. This connection with the Karen is strong and they give back to the community for the benefit of everyone. Salween and Thenawthey serve as role models and help other Karen women find jobs when they first arrive to Minnesota. Moreover, they volunteer their time to help provide social services to the Karen community. Salina’s desire to return to Thailand and Burma to help the Karen there is why she is interested in majoring in global studies. For the women who are already giving back, they continue to do so. For the young women who are in school, they are choosing their paths so that they will be able to give back to the community.

An educated person is one who knows what their family obligations are. Families support the women when they are in school. This is one of the major reasons why the women who are educated give back to their families. Giving back is a way to show

respect and appreciation as well as demonstrate what they learned. Paw Wah's family has supported her when she was in school in Burma. Her family had to sacrifice a lot when she was born and now she helps them by being an advocate and providing them with advice. Sarlweh was the child from her family who got the opportunity to continue school. Now that she is living in the United States, she continues to support her family in Burma.

3.4 Being independent. An educated person is independent. They are financially self-sufficient and they demonstrate that they have knowledge of the language. Being financially stable and independent is the most common response to explaining why education is important. All of the women talk about how education exposes you to more opportunities and it increases your chances of having a higher paying job.

As the women stressed, knowing the English language was vital in becoming independent in the United States. An educated person must be able to communicate with others. In Burma and in the refugee camps, they had to learn Burmese, Karen, and English. Unlike Hmong refugees in Thailand, refugees from Burma were not taught how to speak Thai. Not knowing how to speak Thai was problematic for several of the women since they had to prepare for their own departures and could not communicate with the Thai.

What it means to be independent depends on the sociocultural context as well as life experiences. For instance, Sarlweh's idea of being independent means that she is completely self-sufficient. She does what she wants to do and she is in charge of her life because she works and makes her own money. She takes into consideration what her

husband and in-laws have to say, but she is still the one who makes the decisions for herself. This means that if she does not agree with gender expectations in the “old” Karen culture, she will object to it. Sarlweh was separated from her parents when she was young and had to learn how to accommodate to others as well as to her comfort. For Kapoh, her perception of being independent is like Sarlweh’s in terms of being financially self-sufficient. Concomitantly, being independent for Kapoh means that she still has to listen to what her father and brothers have to say. Kapoh grew up heavily influenced by her older siblings, especially her oldest brother. Her life experience helps explain that when she chooses to listen to her father and brother, she is showing respect to them. Kapoh’s choice to listen to her family does not make her any less independent. In both of these examples, Sarlweh and Kapoh demonstrate active negotiation as they exemplify the different ways of being independent.

4. Understanding the model minority stereotype

When I asked the women about how the “model minority” stereotype may or may not have affected the way they identify themselves or understand their educational experiences, all of the women explained that it does not affect them. Aye Mya Phyu explains that:

It’s hard to tell. I think they [the Karen] will become [model minorities] because I see a lot of people, you know, they can start by themselves and they try hard and they don’t ask a lot of questions too. In our culture, they don’t talk a lot and they don’t ask questions so, yeah. I think yeah, [but] we can’t tell. (M. Yang, personal communication, June 13, 2012)

Paw Wah clarifies that the Karen, due to their history, can be a “model minority”. In her explanation, the “model minority” she is talking about has to learn how to do things by themselves because they are denied equal rights. She stresses perseverance and hard work as traits of the “model minority” that the Karen exhibit as part of Karen culture. Salina shares the same sentiment as Paw Wah in that they both explain that the Karen learn how to do things by themselves because they do not receive help. They identify the Karen with the “good” aspects of the model minority stereotype, the part that aligns with ideals of the American Dream. As for Giri, she does not identify herself or thinks others might identify her as a “model minority”. Her understanding is that the stereotype applies only to the super successful stories. Caceelia explains that they are told to believe everyone is equal and they try not to let it affect the way they identify themselves. The women do not see a problem with the model minority stereotype because they say it does not apply to them. Although the participants do not see themselves as “model minorities”, it does not mean that mainstream U.S. society does not see them as “model minorities”.

As it pertains to the Karen culture, Stone (2011) explains that the Karen refugees who resettled to Worthington, Minnesota demonstrate characteristics that help make their adaptation and integration experiences easier. The “generosity, work ethic and compassion” that the Karen people displayed helped them to be more successful in the Worthington community (Stone, 2011). Additionally, the characteristics of being Karen promoted by their ethno-history and reiterated by the women in this study describe the Karen as shy, compliant, peaceful, innocent, pure, and honest. When enacted, these characteristics can easily be misinterpreted as evidence that the Karen fit the model

minority stereotype. It is important to be aware of and understand the Karen culture as it is without trying to fit the Karen experience into the model minority stereotype.

My educational experience with the model minority stereotype correspond with some of the responses I received from the Karen women. My past experiences help me understand why some of the women interpret their educational experiences and the model minority stereotype the way they do. In the future, as they continue to have different experiences that expose them to alternative ways of thinking, they might understand and interpret the model minority stereotype differently than they do now.

How many Asian students, specifically Karen students have been told they are the “model minorities” or that they exhibit the model minority stereotype and how many of them, like me, embraced it without knowing the implications? How many educators knowingly or unknowingly treat their students in a certain way as a result of the model minority stereotype? Lee (2009) stresses the dangers in lumping Asians as homogenous and “other”; however, the model minority stereotype does this. Moreover Lee (2009) asserts that “[i]n addition to silencing the diverse experiences and concerns of Asian Americans, the model minority stereotype implicitly denies Asian Americans experience with racism” (p. 16). Based on the participant interviews, this statement applies to the experiences of the Karen women in this study. Only one woman reported to be treated unfairly because she considered the experience to be culturally offensive. All of the other women reported that they have not experienced racism.

5. Summary

Figure 4: Educational Identities used a cultural and gendered lens to interpret how Karen women negotiate their educational identities. Through the lens, the diagram

situates educational identities within the sociocultural context. Negotiating educational identities is finding a balance between level of education and experiences. Level of education refers to formal education whereas experiences refers to non-formal and informal ways of learning. Formal, non-formal, and informal education lead to knowledge. What it means to be educated is how this knowledge is applied and what it looks like in the sociocultural context.

What is important about these findings is not only the characteristics that are associated with being educated. Rather, the most important finding is how the Karen women have explained these characteristics as it applies to the Karen community and from their life histories. In many cultures, an educated person is one who respects others and is respected. This notion is not unique to the Karen, but what respect looks like in the Karen culture may be different compared to other cultures, particularly mainstream U.S. culture. The cultural production of the educated person varies depending on sociocultural context. Educational identities and understanding what it means to be educated are constantly being renegotiated as the sociocultural context changes.

As the Karen women adjust to living in the United States, their experiences are shaped by social constructs that pertain to U.S. society such as the model minority stereotype. Although the women did not consider the stereotype to be a negative factor in constructing and negotiating their educational identities, it is important to understand that the stereotype might have negative effects on their experiences without them realizing.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

If you are a Christian and you're not good, they blame God. If you are children and you're not good, they blame your parents. If you are a student and you're not good, they blame your teacher. ~ Karen proverb (M. Yang, personal communication, April 9, 2015)

Using life history, the purpose of this study is to understand how Karen women in Minnesota negotiate their educational identities from their lived experiences in different sociocultural contexts. The two guiding research questions ask how the women negotiate their educational identities and how their lived experiences shape their understanding of what it means to be educated. I interviewed nine Karen women who resettled to the United States as refugees. This chapter explains how I arrived at the findings presented in chapter six as well as explore the tensions between how Karen culture and mainstream U.S. culture produce the educated person as the women emphasized in their life histories. Moreover, I elucidate how being an educated woman also has certain negative implications in the Karen culture. The remaining sections of this chapter includes a discussion on the significance and implications of the study, limitations, and recommendations for future studies.

1. Discussion

How I arrived at the findings and themes was through the interviews, which were confirmed and supported by the field notes from my observations and participant observations. Furthermore, I cross analyzed the life histories for any commonalities and differences. In the previous chapter, I incorporate relevant literature to help explain some of the themes, such as how the development of Karen identity is derived from a common Karen ethno-history.

The women's definition of an educated person highlight two main components that they used to negotiate their educational identities, which are level of education and experiences. In sociocultural contexts where their level of education is "adequate", the emphasis on experience is not as highly prioritized compared to contexts where they feel that their level of education is inadequate. The women negotiate their educational identities to demonstrate how they exhibit the Karen cultural production of the educated person in different sociocultural contexts.

1.1 Differences in cultural productions of the educated person. The life histories describe what it means to be educated through the cultural and gendered lens of a Karen woman. As the women shared in their interviews and life histories, the characteristics and behaviors of an educated person described in chapter six contradicts how those in mainstream U.S. culture construct the educated person. The Karen women defined Karen identity and culture in opposition to mainstream U.S. culture to illustrate how different Karen culture is. This section highlights the women's emphasis on the tensions, not to posit the cultural collisions as a dichotomy, but as how the women explained what it means to be an educated Karen in the United States.

What it means to be educated in the Karen culture resembles the *una buena educación* concept that Villenas (1996) explores in her dissertation. The emphasis on the role of parents in teaching informal and moral education to produce good children in *una buena educación* is the same sentiment that the Karen women expressed in how Karen parents feel about not being able to discipline their children the way they used to. Karen parents feel that they are the ones to impart "a good education" by teaching their children

about moral education and obedience. In her study, Villenas (1996) explains that “a knowledgeable child is one educated in morality, respect, work and religious values, with different types of education ascribed for boys and girls” (p. 13). Villenas (1996) adds that these definitions of the “educated” child transform based on the Latina women’s experiences and interactions with other women and educators.

Karen culture accentuates that an educated person is respectful, has a good reputation, gives back to the community, and is independent. However, what is most important to understand is how these notions of an “educated” person are manifested and what they look like. In Karen culture, an educated person shows respects by crossing their arms, especially when sitting, lowering their heads and avoiding eye contact. They show respect through listening which means they are not quick to respond. As the Karen women explained, these acts contradict how mainstream U.S. culture displays respect, which encourages uncrossing your arms and maintaining eye contact. In addition, sometimes in mainstream U.S. culture not being able to respond quickly might imply that you do not know the answer or may not have been listening. The differences in how Karen and mainstream U.S. culture show respect stresses the importance of this study in revealing how non-verbal behaviors are interpreted and how they may be misunderstood.

To be good and maintain a good reputation implies that Karen parents are the primary moral education teachers to their children. This means that Karen parents should be able to discipline and mold their children to embody what it means to be good according to how they perceive their culture. Good children are obedient and their “goodness” and reputation is projected onto their parents. Moral education for many of

these Karen women is closely tied to Christianity. The values and teachings of Christianity impart moral education and demonstrate what it means to be good. Parents in mainstream U.S. culture also teach moral education to their children; however, the methods of discipline are different. Karen parents are used to administering corporal punishment as a teaching method. Villenas (1996) insinuates that the Latina women's voices and stories "resist the dominant community's attempts to define their families and childrearing practices as problems" (p. iii). Like the Latina women, the Karen women's voices exemplify sentiments of resistance as well as understand the need to modify their ways of teaching to be considered acceptable in mainstream U.S. culture.

Although the Karen population in Minnesota is growing, the community still maintains close ties to each other. According to Karen ethno-history, all of the Karen originate from two great grandparents, which means all Karen are part of one family. This belief is also why the Karen are able to form strong bonds with other Karen they have never met and why they refer to each other by relationships. Most importantly, when the Karen help other Karen, they are just helping their family. Giving back to the community and family is how they are able to advance the Karen people. It is also how they show appreciation and respect for the support they have received. As Christians, the women in this study interpreted their acts of giving back as a way they perform their religion. The focus on giving back and unity among the Karen illustrates that an educated person is not only educated for themselves, but they are educated for the community.

When I was in Kigoma, Tanzania doing research for my Master's capstone, I met a local Tanzanian man who told me, "Americans are nice, but they're only nice when it is convenient for them." I was caught off-guard and I felt troubled by this statement. Afterwards, I mentioned it to several classmates. My classmates responded with the sentiment that of course Americans are nice when it's convenient for them, so is everyone else. I felt just as troubled by their response as I was by the statement about Americans. I share this with you to highlight that perhaps the idea of giving back in mainstream U.S. society is at their own convenience. The emphasis placed on giving back and what giving back means as an educated person in the Karen culture alludes to giving back even when it is inconvenient. This does not mean that one method is better than the other. Rather, this explanation helps us understand how giving back may be interpreted differently in different cultures.

An educated Karen who is independent demonstrates that they are financially self-sufficient and they can speak English. These two concepts are the same in mainstream U.S. culture; however, being independent in Karen culture also means that the women take into consideration what the elders have to say. As the women elucidate, first and foremost, an educated Karen must be Karen. They must embrace their Karen heritage and embody Karen characteristics and behaviors. I used Sarlweh's and Kapoh's examples of how even in the Karen culture, there are different interpretations of what being independent looks like. The different interpretations of what it means to be independent in the Karen culture is important to keep in mind as non-Karen try to understand how the Karen culture produces the educated person.

Mainstream U.S. culture associates being independent with autonomy, especially in forms of empowerment and agency. However, the life histories in this study reveal empowerment and agency in relation to gender and intergenerational relationships. Gender and intergenerational relationships in the Karen culture are depicted as potentially problematic as the sociocultural contexts and expectations change. I elaborate on these concepts in the next section when I discuss what the women share about the potential negative impacts of being educated.

An educated person in mainstream U.S. culture is one who has completed at least a college level education from a quality institution. There is a strong emphasis on formal, systematic education and even the criteria used to determine “quality” are systematic and measurable. As Karen women living in the United States, the women in this study understand the role of formal education in constructing the educated person in mainstream U.S. culture. This comparison between how the Karen culture and mainstream U.S. culture produces the educated person is not meant to value or prioritize one definition over the other. Rather, this comparison highlights the differences as depicted by the Karen women and informs how the Karen culture produces what is meaningful and valuable in being educated.

1.2 Negative impacts of being educated. Although the women stress the importance of education and the positive impacts of education throughout their life histories, they also mention that being educated women might have negative impacts on gender and intergenerational relationships. The purpose of this study was not to examine the impact of gender and intergenerational relationships; however, the life histories have

evoked how resettling in the United States and having more educated women have challenged many traditional cultural norms. Paw Wah explains how it is important that women's rights are protected by the government and that it is a positive change because it means that the Karen men have to change as well. She illuminates that gender relationships in Burma gave men more power. Now in the United States, some of these men are jealous that they cannot exercise their power anymore. Paw Wah clarifies that jealousy leads to drinking because when they drink, the men feel more powerful than the women. This behavior is a problem in the community. McCleary (2013) presents similar findings in her study comparing alcohol use among the Karen in the camps in Thailand and in Minnesota. Although there are several reasons why the Karen drink alcohol, one of the reasons was because the "[m]en drink because they are men" (McCleary, 2013, p. 106). The educated Karen women understand that it is because of their opportunities to move forward that is causing this jealousy for some of the men. Their education and knowledge help them manage and balance the changing gender relationships. The women in this study explain how other Karen women use their educational identities to actively negotiate their gender relationships at home.

Intergenerational relationships in the Karen culture address the tension between preserving the culture and adjusting to life in America. As Aye Mya Phyu explained in her life history, the older Karen are having trouble adjusting to U.S. society whereas the young Karen can adjust quickly. The changes in intergenerational relationships as the Karen are adjusting to life in America is exacerbated as the Karen youth are being formally educated. The Karen youth's ability to adapt coupled with the education they

receive in the U.S. could potentially change the way intergenerational relationships are structured and interpreted. Being educated also has negative impacts as the Karen women mentioned; however, I have only introduced two of the most prominent concerns. These are important relationships to consider for future research.

2. Significance and implications

The significance of the findings in this study is that they provide insight about the Karen women's experiences in various sociocultural settings. From these experiences, we can discern the impact of policies in the refugee camps and after resettlement, educational opportunities and understand how identities are negotiated in each context. Additionally, we are able to recognize how constructs of the educated person transform from place to place. There are both theoretical and practical implications from the findings in this study.

How the Karen women negotiate their cultural, gender, and educational identities in various sociocultural settings embodies Robert Lifton's (1993) the protean self. Lifton (1993) explains that "[t]he protean self seeks to be both fluid and grounded, however tenuous that combination. [...] Proteanism, then, is a balancing act between responsive shapeshifting, on the one hand, and efforts to consolidate and cohere, on the other" (p. 9). The differences in how the women construct their educational identities and understand what it means to be educated demonstrates the various ways in which they are protean. How the women exhibit proteanism through their behaviors and how they negotiate their identities supports Ngo's (2010) argument about unresolved and contradictory identities. The women's protean selves are reflected in how they actively or passively negotiate

their identities in the different sociocultural contexts. For instance, when Caceelia explained that an educated person acts appropriately, she is referring to “responsive shapeshifting” and “efforts to consolidate and cohere” to define what “appropriate” means in that context. The ability for an educated person to shift their mindset and behaviors to fit in and be “appropriate” in the sociocultural context suggests that an educated person is protean.

Furthermore, the Karen women’s construction of the educated person is heavily influenced by Karen ethno-nationalistic sentiments. As referenced in chapter two, Rajah (2002) describes how the emergence of Karen ethno-nationalism resembles that of an “imagined community”. The strong correlations between how the Karen women define what it means to be Karen and how Karen ethno-nationalism promotes “Karenness” supports Rajah’s claim. Anderson (2006) defines that a nation is:

an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion. (p. 6, emphasis in original)

As evident in the life histories, developing a resilient Karen ethnic identity meant that the women felt connected to other Karen worldwide; thus, demonstrating how an “imagined community” operates beyond borders. In negotiating educational identities among the Karen women, “giving back” is one of the ways in which the women can exhibit what it means to be educated. Therefore, pledging loyalty and “giving back” to this “imagined

community” is part of what it means to be educated. Anderson (2006) elucidates that it is important to understand that “[c]ommunities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (p. 6).

Additionally, this study contributes to the literature about educational identities as it pertains to refugee and immigrant women. Although, not all of the women in this study have attended formal schooling in the United States, their different educational experiences help explain how the educated person is constructed in different sociocultural contexts. The literature review in chapter two explicates how educational identities have been studied. Levinson, Foley, and Holland (1996) discuss how cultural productions of the educated person shapes student identities and that context determines how the educated person is defined. Nonetheless, studies on the cultural production of the educated person have not focused on life histories and how these constructions change over time based on lived experiences. From the life histories of the Karen women who have been educated in Burma, Thailand, and the United States, we are able to discern the changes in how they construct the educated person in each sociocultural context. Another contribution to the literature on educational identities is the focus on the negotiation process. In addition, Figure 4: Educational Identities elucidates what the Karen women consider when they negotiate their educational identities and what it looks like to be an educated person in the Karen culture. This negotiation process bridges the gap between the meaningfulness of education and identity development.

In December 2014, the *Star Tribune* reported on the tension between African-American students and Karen students. The misunderstandings between the two cultures

caused fights and proved to be a safety issue for the students. African-American and Karen student leaders have come together to create a student group to learn about each other and understand their differences. Likewise, the African-American and Karen community leaders in the Frogtown area are reaching out to each other and to other stakeholders to try and dissolve the racial tensions (Koumpilova, 2014). As evidenced by these more recent events, the growing Karen community in the Twin Cities highlights how important it is to learn about the Karen experiences. The life histories themselves are a valuable and practical contribution to understanding Karen culture and experiences.

By learning more about the experiences of Karen women, we are able to help “build bridges between cultures” (Dsilva and Whyte, 1997). Although this study focused on Karen women’s experiences, the cultural and gender aspects can be applied to a larger context to help inform and appease misunderstandings between other ethnic and racial groups and the Karen. Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of learning about the experiences of refugees and their cultures to increase intercultural competency. The research design and findings in this study have practical implications for working with other lesser-known refugee groups such as the Bhutanese or Tibetans. The Asian & Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund (APIASF) (2014) published a report on refugees from Burma and Bhutan stressing the value of learning about refugee communities, where they resettled, and how to address the multiple challenges the refugees experience as they adjust to life in the United States. Although the report uses the term refugees from Burma instead of Karen, the key informants in the report are ethnic Karen. The experiences of refugees from Burma are different than those from

Bhutan; however, the *APIASF* (2014) report illustrates several shared concerns among the different refugee groups and ethnicities, such as intergenerational tensions, socioeconomic barriers, and the need to extend the social support for new arrivals.

3. Limitations

As with all studies, there are limitations and one of the major limitations in this study was language. All of the participants speak English. This meant that I could not interview the participants who did not speak English. I chose not to use an interpreter because I wanted the women to be able to express themselves instead of through someone else. Moreover, the women in this study were their own cultural liaisons as well as each other's cultural liaisons. I was able to do this by confirming cultural interpretations with the other women in the study. Language was a limitation, but it was not a barrier to understanding and establishing trust.

The gender relations I am able to discern from this study do not include men's experiences and perspectives, which is another limitation. I chose to work only with Karen women because I did not know how I would be received in the community as a female Asian researcher holding one-on-one interviews with Karen men. After speaking with the Karen women, I realized that as an introduction to the Karen community, my decision to work only with women was a wise one. As Esther McCarty (2009) explains, "[i]n Karen culture, women do not approach men to speak with them unless it involved business or familial issues" (p.6).

All of the women in this study are Christians. Almost all of them belong to the same church and they know each other. I understand that I am missing the insight of

non-Christian Karen women; however, as evident in the life histories, each of the women have different experiences and they have different interpretations of their experiences. Belonging to the same church group should not undermine their contributions to the Karen community and culture in Minnesota.

Network sampling may be considered a limitation because of the specific network of women that I had access to; nevertheless, this is a life history study. As a life history study, this means it cannot be generalized, but it can serve as a point of comparison to help understand and interpret the experiences of other Karen women. The older Karen women who I interviewed are cultural leaders. They are exposed to and aware of the issues in the community, which is reflected in how some of their stories extend beyond their personal experiences. Since this is an inductive, exploratory study, it cannot be generalized to other Karen women, but it provides insight about the “fabric of the social group” (Fetterman, 2010).

4. Recommendations for future research

From the time I started conducting my research in 2012 to now, there have been seven theses and dissertations published about the Karen in the United States.⁷ The studies focused on the Karen refugee resettlement experiences (Chaitut, 2014; Lytle, 2015), resettlement policies, (Ireland, 2012), an analysis of the Sgaw Karen language (Fischer, 2013; Olson, 2014), how displacement affects alcohol consumption (McCleary, 2013), and how Karen youth develop ethnic identity and adjust to social networking

⁷ Using ProQuest, I was able to find seven online publications of theses and dissertations that focused on the Karen. Two of these publications were from studies conducted by students at the University of Minnesota, Lytle (2015) and McCleary (2013).

(Lewis, 2013). The growing number of studies accentuate the value and necessity to learn more about the Karen people and culture. However, none of these studies have used life history or focus on educational identities.

Life history is interdisciplinary. There are several possibilities for future research based on the life histories I have presented. Studies that analyze gender and intergenerational relationships in the Karen community and the transformation of Karen identity and names are just two of the examples. Future research as it pertains to the findings in this study can utilize the educational identities diagram to see if it applies to a larger context or a different population, especially with lesser-known refugee or immigrant communities.

An important practical recommendation for future studies with the Karen is to conduct the interviews in the Karen languages. Communicating in the Karen languages will help build rapport, allow researchers to interact with non-English speaking Karen, and understand cultural and linguistic nuances.

5. Final reflections

Our understandings of what it means to be educated and how we negotiate our educational identities expand beyond personal and educational experiences. How people in different cultures construct the educated person affects the way they treat and perceive each other. Most importantly, cultural understandings and interpretations of how an educated person behaves varies. This variation means that within the same sociocultural context, behaving like an educated person from one cultural construct may not translate as “educated” when viewed from a different cultural perspective. This calls for a

constant and critical analysis of how we negotiate our educational identities and how we understand what it means to be educated.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview protocol

These questions will not necessarily be asked in the order it is presented. The interview sessions will follow the life courses of the participants as they reminisce of their lived experiences. The sections about identity, education and the model minority will be integrated in the interviews when the conversations are related to those topics. For example, some of the questions about education might be asked while talking about the participant's childhood while the other education questions are asked when talking about adulthood.

Background:

1. What is your full name? What does your name mean?
2. Who named you? What is the story behind your name?
3. How old are you?
4. Where were you born (please describe the place/space)? What was the environment/community like where you were raised?
5. Do you remember any stories that were told about your birth that you would like to share?
6. What are your parents' names?
7. Do you have any siblings and how many? What is your birth order? How has your birth order change your worldview?
8. Are you/have you been married? When and to whom?
9. Do you have any children? How many and what are their names? How has having children changed your life?
10. Describe (your home) where you lived in Burma. Who did you live with?
11. What events led you to seek refuge in Thailand? When did you first begin to feel unsafe?
12. How old were you when you fled to Thailand? Who did you travel with?
13. Please describe what your journey from Burma to Thailand was like. How long did it take to travel, what were the conditions?
14. What was the most memorable experience about the journey (from Burma to Thailand)?
15. What did you do and where did you go when you first got to Thailand?
16. What camp(s) did you live in Thailand?
17. What did you do to pass time in the camp? What work did you do in the camp?
18. When did you decide to resettle and why?
19. When did you arrive in the United States? How old were you?
20. How did you decide what you needed to bring to the United States and what to leave behind?
21. Please describe what your journey from the camps to the United States was like. Who did you travel with?
22. When you arrived in the United States, where did you first live? If not in MN, when and why did you move to the Twin Cities?

23. Describe a funny event or experience that occurred after arriving to the U.S.?
24. What was most challenging after moving to the U.S.?
25. Where in the Twin Cities are you living right now? Who are you living with?
26. Where are you working/ going to school?

Childhood:

1. What was your earliest memory? How old were you?
2. Where did you play and who did you play with? What games did you play?
3. When you were a child, how did you learn?
4. What was the first thing you remembered learning?
5. Describe an important incident or event in your childhood that has shaped who you are (then and now).
6. Did you get along with your siblings? Describe your relationships with them.
7. What are your siblings doing now? Are they married? Where are they living?
8. Describe your relationships with your parents.
9. How influential were your parents in your life?
10. How did you spend your holidays when you were a child? Which holidays, where and with whom?
11. What did you want to be when you grew up and why?
12. What did you think you needed to do to be or do what you wanted?
13. What were you good at doing as a child?
14. What were your responsibilities?
15. Did you go to school? Did you want to go to school? Where, when, how?
16. How did you know you were not a “child” anymore?

Adolescence:

1. For many children, adolescence is a difficult and complex stage in growing up. It is usually the time when you’re phasing out of childhood and into adulthood. Please describe an event or experience that made you realize you were an adolescent.
2. From the time you realized you were an adolescent to the time you realized you were an adult, how long was it? At that stage, what seemed most important to you?
3. How have your aspirations changed from childhood?
4. How have your responsibilities changed since you were a child? What chores did you have?
5. What responsibilities did you have that you think other adolescents did not?
6. What were you able to do that you couldn’t as a child?
7. What was the most difficult decision you made as an adolescent? Why and how?
8. How did your youth differ from other girls and boys?
9. When and where did you start to work? Please describe what your work consisted of, what the conditions were and who you worked with.

Adulthood:

1. How and when did you know that you are an adult?
2. What are the rites of passages to becoming an adult in the Karen culture?
3. What new responsibilities did you have as an adult?
4. What types of decisions did you have to make as an adult?
5. Can you describe a situation where you had to make an important decision?
6. (If married) How did you meet your husband? Please describe your marriage ceremony.
7. When and where did you have your first child? Second child, etc.?
8. Describe what happened during your pregnancies. What was it like to be pregnant where you were?
9. How has having children changed your life?
10. Describe your relationship with your children. Are they married? Do you have grandchildren? Describe your relationship with your grandchildren.
11. What are your hopes and dreams for your children? Why?
12. How did your adulthood differ from your peers (men/women)?
13. What was something some did for you or you did for someone that was important/valuable? Why and how? (an important/valuable gift)
14. What are your experiences with U.S. migration?
15. Have your feelings about Burma and the situation back there changed since moving to the U.S.?

Identity:

1. Do you remember the first time you started distinguishing yourself from others? Please describe what happened.
2. What types or distinctions did you make? What were some of your first identities?
3. Describe yourself using five words. Explain why each of the words represents you.
4. In your own words, what is an identity?
5. What events or experiences shaped how you perceive and identify yourself?
6. How has your religion changed the way you behave or identify yourself and others around you?
7. What does it mean to be Karen?
8. How is being a Karen woman different from being a woman from another ethnicity/culture?
9. How is mainstream American culture different from Karen culture? Where do you see yourself fit in?
10. What do you like most or least about being a Karen woman?
11. In the previous places you've been/lived, which identities were most important for you and why?
12. Do you identify yourself as a refugee? Why or why not?
13. Do you consider yourself a Burmese? Why or why not? Do you consider yourself American? What do you think is an American?

14. What is your national identity? What do you wish is your national identity and why?

Education:

1. When was the first time you went to school (formal and/or non-formal)?
2. Where did you go to school? Who taught and who was in charge? How many students were in your class/school (boys and girls)?
3. What was your favorite subject and why?
4. What was the language of instruction? What was the content? How did the language and content affect the way you learned?
5. Describe what a typical schedule was like at school (include all the various schools you've attended)?
6. When was the first time you got in trouble at school? What happened?
7. Describe some of the funniest or memorable experiences you had at school.
8. How has education changed your life?
9. How do people around you value education and how does it affect the way you value education? Has your view on education changed since you were a child (or since you started school)?
10. What makes education important?
11. Describe an educated person. What roles or responsibilities does an educated person have?
12. What does it mean to be educated? What does it mean to be an educated Karen woman?

Model minority:

1. Are you familiar with the model minority concept? (If not, then I will explain what the model minority stereotype is. If so, then have them describe it to me)
2. Did a similar concept exist in the places where you lived (Burma, Thailand, and the United States)?
3. Do you think this concept relates to you and how you understand yourself (and your education)? How does it influence the way you identify yourself?
4. Knowing that others might categorize you as a model minority if you "succeed" or "do well", how influential do you think this stereotype is in constructing your identities? Why or why not?

Appendix B

Observation protocol

Setting:

1. Date
2. Time
3. Amount of time observed
4. Location
5. Describe the place/space
6. Resources used and/or available (material/social capital)
7. Notes

People:

1. I attended this event alone or with others (name, relationship)?
2. Describe the people present (age group, gender, ethnicity, number of people)
3. Who is leading/in charge of the event?
4. Describe people's actions/attitudes (toward other people, the event/activities)
5. Notes

Purpose:

1. Why are people there?
2. According to the people present, how important is this event?
3. What are the goals/objectives/outcomes?
4. Notes

Activity/event:

1. What is the occasion?
2. What is happening (describe what people are doing, timeline of activities)?
3. Notes

Additional notes

(Comments/conversations related to identity, education, culture, gender, religion, ethnicity, & economic concerns)

Post-observation

1. What did I learn *about* the people I interacted with?
2. What did I learn *from* the people I interacted with?
3. What did I observe (i.e. Karen culture, religion, and identity) that I would like to learn more about?