



Intersection of Gender and Culture: An Analysis of Ethnic Minority Women's Psychological Violence Experiences

Aye Myat Myat Win

Former Research Fellow (Virtual Summer Program), Center for Research, Policy and Innovation, Burmese American Community Institute, Indianapolis, United States

ayemyatmyatwin23@gmail.com

Abstract. Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) has been a common issue existing in society, and psychological violence is one common form of IPV. The violence is particularly prominent in ethnic minority women because of their patriarchal culture and marital social norms. Nevertheless, analysis of psychological violence is scarce in the extant literature, specifically among ethnic minority women. Furthermore, intersectional theory is rarely applied in analysis of women's IPV lived experiences. This knowledge is also lacking in Myanmar, a country with various ethnic groups and patriarchal gender structure. As such, this study analyzes ethnic women's experiences of psychological violence from their husbands or ex-husbands in Kachin State, Myanmar using the intersectional framework. In-depth interview data from 12 ethnic women with psychological violence experiences was analyzed. Results showed ethnic women's psychological violence experiences were the intersection of gender, social class, culture, and husband's alcohol and drug usage. The study highlights the vital role of culture in women's violence experiences in an ethnic context. It contributes to both intersectional theory and IPV literature from the perspective of ethnic women's psychological violence experiences. Consequently, addressing harmful sociocultural norms is imperative, and multi-sectoral collaboration, including engagement with cultural and religious leaders is essential for effective elimination of ethnic minority women's violence experiences.

Keywords: Ethnic Minority Women, Intimate Partner Violence, Psychological Violence, Culture.

1 Introduction

Scholars has been doing research on violence against women since the 1970s (Carlson et al., 2000), and intimate partner violence (IPV) is the most common type of violence against women (Whiting et al., 2019). According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2024), IPV is defined as “behaviour by an intimate partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours”. Although it can occur in any geographical area, culture and economic status (McCleary-Sills et al., 2016; Odero et al., 2014), it is higher in developing countries (Muluneh et al., 2020). Despite its occurrence in both men and women, women are disproportionately affected by the violence (Odero et al., 2014) 1 in 4 women experience one type of IPV throughout

© The Author(s) 2025

A. R. Cangara and S. Muhammad (eds.), *Proceedings of the Asia Pacific Sociological Association Conference (APSA 2024)*, Atlantis Highlights in Social Sciences, Education and Humanities 35,
https://doi.org/10.2991/978-94-6463-680-2_8

their lives (United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Globally, one-year prevalence rate in married women is around 15%-17% (Odero et al., 2014). The prevalence is influenced by the socio-cultural norms of the area in which the violence occurs (Whiting et al., 2019).

IPV causes physical and mental health outcomes in women survivors. Physically, it involves injuries, sexual and reproductive health problems, and sexually transmitted infections. Mentally, the consequences range from anxiety, fear, alcohol and drugs dependency to depression, impaired daily routine and even suicide (Agbaje et al., 2021; Bannister & Moyi, 2019; Yang et al., 2021). Consequently, it negatively affects family, community and society at large. Elimination of violence against women is included in Goal No. 5: Gender Equality of 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) (United Nations, 2015).

According to the European Institute of Gender Equality State, psychological violence refers to “any act or behaviour which causes psychological harm to the partner or former partner. Psychological violence can take the form of, among others, coercion, defamation, a verbal insult or harassment” (The European Institute for Gender Equality, 2017, p. 45). A variety of behaviors under two main categories are involved in psychological violence: (1) emotional abuse and (2) controlling behaviors. Insulting, humiliating, scaring, intimidating and threatening under emotional abuse and isolation, monitoring, ignoring, controlling and jealousy under controlling behaviors are included in psychological violence (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2014, p. 17).

Psychological violence is the most common form of IPV (Dokkedahl et al., 2022; Lohman et al., 2013; Pathak et al., 2019). Substance use, antisocial behaviors, deviant peers, low self-esteem, exposure to parental psychological violence and parent to child psychological violence are risk factors associated with psychological violence (Lohman et al., 2013). In addition, it is closely linked with mental health problems such as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety and depression. As a result, serious attention should be paid to psychological violence as physical and sexual violence (Dokkedahl et al., 2022).

Based on the extant literature, this is the first study that analyzes psychological violence experiences among ethnic minority women in general and also in Myanmar. Existing studies emphasize narrative of women on the process of escaping from their abusive relationships (Brosi & Rolling, 2010; Dziewa & Glowacz, 2021), all aspects of IPV such as women’s and perpetrators’ perspectives, help-seeking and barriers for leaving (Brown, 2018) and IPV persistence and desistance (Giordano et al., 2015) by overlooking psychological violence analysis, particularly in ethnic women survivors. As such, this study fills the gaps in the existing IPV knowledge by focusing on one of the IPV vulnerable groups, ethnic women survivors.

1.1 Study Context

Myanmar, a nation in Southeast Asian region is composed of various ethnic groups with diverse traditional cultures. Even though Myanmar ratified CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) in 1997 (Minoletti, 2016), women still face increased IPV risk (Ministry of Health and Sports and ICF, 2017). Patriarchal sociocultural norms are prominent in the country, especially in

ethnic minorities (Buchanan, 2022). As such, domestic violence exists as a hidden problem (Yee, 2017). Past study suggested to conduct IPV research, particularly in ethnic minority women (The Gender Equality Network, 2014). However, study focusing on psychological violence analysis has been lacking in Myanmar and also in Kachin State, one of the ethnic minority areas. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the narrative of women's psychological violence experiences in Kachin state.

1.2 Analytical Framework

The study utilizes intersectional approach in analyzing women's psychological violence. Intersectionality is a feminist theory that argues social divisions such as gender, race, class, age, sexuality do not operate separately. Instead, they build on each other and work together (Bilge & Collins, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989). Hence, social events can fully be understood by mutual shaping of multiple factors. Therefore, intersectionality is utilized as a tool to analyze mutually constructed power relations (Bilge & Collins, 2016). Women's IPV experiences are different that need to be understood from cultural, structural and situational perspective (De Coster and Heimer, 2021). As a result, this study analyzes women's psychological violence experiences from intersectional framework.

Since social events are influenced by diverse factors, by employing intersectional lens, this study answers the research questions: Which intersecting factors are embedded in psychological violence experiences of ethnic women in Kachin State, Myanmar?

2 Method

Qualitative method was employed with in-depth interviews of women who were recruited by purposive sampling with the support of social workers in the area. Women between 18 to 64 years old with psychological violence experiences from their husbands or ex-husbands were recruitment criteria. The interviews were conducted through Zoom online platform with semi-structured interview guide. As a measure to prevent or minimize potential risks and discomfort, the interviews were done in a safe private room and a social worker was ready near the interview area to be able to provide support services if needed.

Informed consent was taken from each participant before the interviews by providing information on the study, strict confidentiality of identity and the ability to withdraw from the study at any time. The study received ethical approval from human research ethics committee of the former university of the author. Moreover, interviews were conducted according to gender-based guiding principles and the WHO ethical and safety guidelines (World Health Organization, 2001, 2007). A thematic analysis was utilized to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3 Results

Total 12 women survivors involved in the study, and they are between 24 to 54 years old. One third of the participants receive middle school education and are daily wage

laborer. The majority are Baptist and most of the participants' monthly income range from 100,000 to 300,000 Myanmar kyats.

Findings showed that women's psychological violence experiences are the intersection of gender, social class, culture, and husband's alcohol and drug usage.

3.1 Gender and Culture

Women's psychological violence were obviously embedded in patriarchal and traditional gender role beliefs. A participant expressed how she is expected to be dutiful in housework and its linkage to the violence.

"When we have conflict and he cannot be violent to me, he throws plates. Sometimes, he told me "Your cooking is not delicious," and throws plate. One day, when there is no rice left in the afternoon, "you don't cook rice," he is hostile like this. Since he cannot do me physically, he throws rice pot and plates." (Participant C, 33 years old)

Traditional gender role belief is clearly related to women's psychological violence experiences. The participants are not allowed to work outside by their husbands as stated by the following two excerpts.

"When I planned to go outside and work, he told me "Don't do. You, woman, takes care of children and stays at home. No need to earn. I am here and I will earn" like that. "It is not good for woman to go trip for work. You will get married with another man." he usually tells like that. "Stay at home, no need to work, stay at home while taking care of children" he told me like this." (Participant D, 24 years old)

"Right now, even my current daily wage job, I work without letting him know. For me, it is better if I have more money. I can spend it for children. I perceive like this, and I go for the job without letting him know. When he calls me while I am at work, I don't pick up. I worry that he will know it. We have a lot of conflicts. Since I don't want to have conflict with him, I don't pick up his phone call. When I come back home in the evening, "Oh...I didn't hear your phone call," etc. I lie this this....." (Participant F, 27 years old)

In addition, Kachin culture of son preference to maintain the generation combined with husband's alcohol drinking can also be seen in a participant's violence narrative.

"It is also due to child case and insertion of contraceptive implant. He wants son since he is old enough. He wants to maintain his ancestry. It is always in his mind. He wants his generation. But, it cannot. Although having children, they are not son. So, he drinks more alcohol and is hostile me...like that..." (Participant E, 28 years old)

Moreover, Christian religious belief is also embedded in the participant's violence experiences.

“His mindset is like this. “It is because you don’t pray,” he told me since we are Christians. He does crystals trading, it can have profits or loss as it is trading. When he loses, he told me “What are you doing at home? Do you pray to support me?” He even insults me until religious belief. “You don’t pray. Your husband is earning money for family’s livelihood. Even though you are wife, you don’t support.” We have like this, we should pray and support husband from behind. “Without your religious belief, how can our family improve?” he blames me.” (Participant F, 27 years old)

3.2 Gender and Social Class

Financial constraint and difficulty to handle the income and expenditure is also associated with women’s psychological violence experiences. Women are blamed for not managing income well.

“When he becomes angry....he calls by name and yells. But, he doesn’t insult me seriously....But, when he is angry, he is blaming me like “It is because you are useless.....because of you”...like that. It is like “You are not good enough in managing children’s tasks.” Since we were civil servant previously, we had government salary. So, in case we spent extra money or donate money for social affairs,...it is like “You cannot manage finance well...” he tells me like that. It is like I cannot spend with the amount we have. In fact, there is no balance between income and expense...It is like...he tells me...” (Participant A, 35 years old)

“He doesn’t like my laundry work. His salary is not enough for expenditure, so I work. And for me, the only job I can do is washing clothes. For him, it is like it affects his dignity. What he wants to say is there is no one who earns by washing clothes in his family’s side, only my family has.” (Participant H, 34 years old)

3.3 Gender and Husband’s Alcohol and Drug Usage

A participant’s narrative showed how she experienced psychological violence from her husband’s alcohol drinking.

“When he got drunk “He yells me.....you are useless....you cannot do anything..you cannot do business..” He told me like this and yelled me. Since I had young child, I could not work well. I did housework by holding baby. Sometimes, when I got angry, I told him “I will find money by leaving this child. You take care of baby. It is so annoying daily. I will earn and leave baby.” He told me “When you go, don’t come back.” It was when children were young.” (Participant G, 50 years old)

Participants experienced severe psychological violence such as threatening with knife from their husband’s drug usage.

“When he uses drug and becomes dizzy, we have conflict. He told me “If you don’t want to stay with me, leave,” while threatening with knife...like that..... But, he doesn’t do. I told him, “I can’t leave. This is my house” and stay at home.” (Participant D, 24 years old)

Furthermore, husband’s drug use also causes financial precarity in the family which leads women to take the breadwinner role.

“He uses drug and chases me with knife. I have to run and hide in other people’s houses. He takes things from home and sells to use drug. At that time, I told him not to take and earns for home. He doesn’t like and accept it. My mother-in-law is not on my side, but her son’s side. She is also afraid of his son and stays away from him. I only have to work for my home.” (Participant I, 48 years old)

4 Discussion

The findings obviously show that women’s psychological violence experiences are due to patriarchal culture and traditional gender role belief in Kachin society. Living in a society where women are expected to be good housewives after marriage pose risk in experiencing psychological abuse by their husbands. It results from extreme patriarchal gender structure with subservient role of women and asymmetrical power relations in Kachin’s family (Lawn, 2023). Another sociocultural norm of son preference to maintain the generation is also evident in women’s violence narrative. It also aligns with a saying “If a hen crows, no dawn comes, but only if a cock crows, then the dawn comes” (Smith, 2006), showing women’s low status in economic, social, political and cultural affairs. As such, experiencing psychological abuse by their husbands is also linked with inability to deliver son. In addition, religious belief also has great impact on women’s violence experiences. Women are expected to stay at home and pray for their husbands’ success in earning and business. These findings about the profound effect of sociocultural norms on the violence is consistent with previous studies in Chinese and Jamaican contexts which revealed the strong influence of cultural values and norms, and religious belief on women’s violence experiences (Brown, 2018; Chiu, 2017; Niu & Laidler, 2015).

Social class is found to have an influence on psychological violence experiences in women which aligns with prior studies that show the association between financial precarity and women’s violence experiences (Chiu, 2017; Logie et al., 2017). Furthermore, husband’s alcohol and drug use strongly link with psychological abuse in women. This finding is consistent with a past study that reveals the strong association between husband’s alcohol and drug usage and psychological violence (Coker et al., 2000).

Based on the imperative findings, a number of recommendations emerge from the study. Firstly, profound effect of patriarchal culture and religious belief is evident in ethnic society. Therefore, effective tackling of deep-rooted patriarchal sociocultural norms is vital that can be done through awareness raising sessions. The sessions should also target not only men and women but also cultural and religious leaders since cultural and religious leaders play an important role in ethnic community. Secondly, women’s

empowerment should be emphasized by offering vocational trainings and establishing channels that provide employment opportunities. Enhancing family financial situation will greatly help to reduce the violence risk in women. However, women's financial empowerment support should be simultaneously provided with addressing harmful gender norms to prevent the backlash effect in patriarchal society. Finally, effective multi-sectoral collaboration from UN agencies, non-government organizations, community and religious leaders is essential for IPV prevention and response.

Although the study's strength on analyzing women's psychological violence experiences by interviewing with women survivors, there are some limitations. The number of participants in the study is small due to the hard-to-reach nature of target population and recruitment from three townships of Kachin State. Therefore, future studies should be done with larger sample size and should expand the study area. Moreover, the study should be expanded to other ethnic areas of Myanmar to explore the impact of their unique sociocultural norms on psychological violence.

5 Conclusion

The study underscores the intersection of gender, social class, culture, and husband's alcohol and drug usage in women's psychological violence experiences. Culture is found to have a significant role in psychological violence experienced by ethnic women. Although extant studies focus on different aspects of psychological violence, analysis of women's psychological violence narrative is limited. Hence, to the best of author's knowledge, this is the first study that analyzes ethnic women's psychological violence experiences. Consequently, the study contributes not only to the intersectionality theory but also to the existing IPV literature by highlighting a specific and common form of IPV, psychological violence.

References

1. Agbaje, O. S., Arua, C.K., Umeifekwem, J. E., Umoke, P. C. I., gbokwe, C. C., Iwuagwu, T. E., Iweama, C. N., Ozoemena, E. L., Obande-Ogbuinya, E. N.: Workplace gender-based violence and associated factors among university women in Enugu, South-East Nigeria: an institutional-based cross-sectional study. *BMC Womens Health* 21(1), 124 (2021).
2. Bannister, M., Moyi, E.: Domestic gender-based violence and the potential offered by empowerment initiatives: The case of Makhokho, Western Kenya. *Women's Studies International Forum* 77 (2019).
3. Bilge, S., Collins, P. H.: *Intersectionality*. Cambridge, UK: Polity (2016).
4. Braun, V., Clarke, V.: Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2), 77-101 (2006).
5. Brosi, M. W., Rolling, E. S.: A narrative journey for intimate partner violence: From victim to survivor. *The American Journal of Family Therapy* 38(3), 237-250 (2010).
6. Brown, S. M.: *Intimate partner violence: A narrative analysis of the Jamaican women experience* (2018).
7. Buchanan, C.: *Preventing Gender-Based Violence in Myanmar. Constitution Assessment for Women's Equality Series No. 3.* (2022).

8. Carlson, B. E., Worden, A. P., Van Ryn, M., Bachman, R.: Violence against women: Synthesis of research for practitioners. Final Report, grant no. NIJ (2000).
9. Chiu, T. Y.: Marriage migration as a multifaceted system: The intersectionality of intimate partner violence in cross-border marriages. *Violence Against Women* 23(11), 1293-1313 (2017).
10. Coker, A. L., Smith, P. H., McKeown, R. E., King, M. J.: Frequency and correlates of intimate partner violence by type: physical, sexual, and psychological battering American journal of public health 90(4), 553 (2000).
11. Crenshaw, K.: Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *u. Chi. Legal f* 139 (1989).
12. De Coster, S., Heimer, K.: Unifying theory and research on intimate partner violence: A feminist perspective. *Feminist Criminology* 16(3), 286-303 (2021).
13. Dokkedahl, S. B., Kirubakaran, R., Bech-Hansen, D., Kristensen, T. R., Elklit, A.: The psychological subtype of intimate partner violence and its effect on mental health: a systematic review with meta-analyses. *Systematic reviews* 11(1), 163 (2022).
14. Dziwiewa, A., Glowacz, F.: Getting out from intimate partner violence: Dynamics and processes. A qualitative analysis of female and male victims' narratives. *Journal of family violence*, 1-14 (2021).
15. Giordano, P. C., Johnson, W. L., Manning, W. D., Longmore, M. A., Minter, M. D.: Intimate partner violence in young adulthood: Narratives of persistence and desistance. *Criminology* 53(3), 330-365 (2015).
16. Lawn, D.S.: Impact of socio-cultural norms on Kachin women. *Kachinland Research Centre* (2023).
17. Logie, C. H., Daniel, C., Ahmed, U., Lash, R.: 'Life under the tent is not safe, especially for young women': understanding intersectional violence among internally displaced youth in Leogane, Haiti. *Global Health Action* 10(sup2), 1270816 (2017).
18. Lohman, B. J., Nepl, T. K., Senia, J. M., Schofield, T. J.: Understanding adolescent and family influences on intimate partner psychological violence during emerging adulthood and adulthood. *Journal of youth and adolescence* 42, 500-517 (2013).
19. McCleary-Sills, J., Namy, S., Nyoni, J., Rweyemamu, D., Salvatory, A., Steven, E.: Stigma, shame and women's limited agency in help-seeking for intimate partner violence. *Global Public Health* 11(1-2), 224-235 (2016).
20. Ministry of Health and Sports (MoHS) and ICF. Myanmar Demographic and Health Survey 2015-16. Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, and Rockville, Maryland USA (2017).
21. Minoletti, P.: Gender (in) equality in the governance of Myanmar: Past, present, and potential strategies for change. Yangon, The Asia Foundation (2016).
22. Muluneh, M. D., Stulz, V., Francis, L., Agho, K.: Gender Based Violence against Women in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Cross-Sectional Studies. *Int J Environ Res Public Health* 17(3), (2020).
23. Niu, X., Laidler, K. A. J.: Understanding domestic violence against Muslim women in China. *Feminist Criminology* 10(1), 92-112 (2015).
24. Odero, M., Hatcher, A. M., Bryant, C., Onono, M., Romito, P., Bukusi, E. A., Turan, J. M.: Responses to and resources for intimate partner violence: qualitative findings from women, men, and service providers in rural Kenya. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 29(5), 783-805 (2014).
25. Pathak, N., Dhairyawan, R., Tariq, S. The experience of intimate partner violence among older women: A narrative review. *Maturitas* 121, 63-75 (2019).
26. Smith, R.: A Hen is Crowing: A gender impact study of two UNDP Myanmar community development programs. UNDP, (2006).
27. The European Institute for Gender Equality.: Glossary of definitions of rape, femicide and intimate partner violence. (2017).

28. The Gender Equality Network.: Behind the Silence, Violence Against Women and their Resilience Myanmar. Yangon, Myanmar (2014).
29. The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.: Intimate Partner Violence. Disability and Health Information for Women with Disabilities (2020).
30. United Nations General Assembly.: Transforming our world: The 2020 Agenda for Sustainable Development. (2015).
31. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.: Guidelines for Producing Statistics on Violence against Women – Statistical Surveys. (2014).
32. Whiting, J. B., Olufuwote, R. D., Cravens-Pickens, J. D., Banford Witting, A.: Online blaming and intimate partner violence: A content analysis of social media comments. (2019).
33. World Health Organization.: Putting women first: ethical and safety recommendations for research on domestic violence against women. (2001).
34. World Health Organization.: WHO ethical and safety recommendations for researching, documenting and monitoring sexual violence in emergencies. (2007).
35. World Health Organization, Violence against women. (2024), <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>, last accessed 2024/05/03.
36. Yang, M., Beybutyan, A., Ríos, R. P., Soria-Verde, M. Á.: Public Attitudes towards Intimate Partner Violence against Women and Influential Factors in China and Spain. *Anuario de Psicología Jurídica* 31(1), 101-108 (2021).
37. Yee, K. M.: Protection of Women in Domestic Violence in Myanmar: differences between Civil and Criminal Proceedings. MERAL Portal (2017).

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

