Displacement Effects on Gender Roles, and Family Structure: Muslim Meskhetians in the USA

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Abstract In 2005, the United States government granted refugee status to Muslim Meskhetians from post-Soviet Russia. This group, originating from Georgia, has been subject to external rule and multiple forced displacements throughout the twentieth century. Spawning a mass migration of over 16,000 refugees, Muslim Meskhetians now reside in approximately thirty-three continental states. Guided by previous studies on cultural adaptation and identity maintenance, this article seeks to examine the impact of displacement on family structure and gender roles, in order to illustrate how displacement has reshaped power relations, family decision-making, and gender relationships among Muslim Meskhetians families in the United States. Based upon qualitative in-depth interviews with refugees in Illinois and Pennsylvania, this article finds that Muslim Meskhetians are engaged in a struggle for cultural maintenance and cultural adaptation, carefully negotiating traditional values of patriarchal religious conservatism with contemporary American liberalism, leading to the construction of a new hybrid identity.

Keywords Muslim Meskhetians, Ahiska Turks, Refugees, Resettlement, Family Relationship, Displacement

1. Introduction

According to a recent UNHCR report, at the end of 2012, 45.2 million[1] citizens around the world were forced out of their place of living and; 11.1 million of them obtained the status of refugee.[2] Previous studies have documented how displacement affects the refugees’ household structure and size, and can significantly change family patterns and gender roles (Coben & Deng 1998)[3]. As family resource theorists claim, factors such as education, income, and age, often reshape marital power relations after resettlement among immigrants—with educational and occupational changes transforming power relations within the family (Blood & Wolfe 1960; Chyong-Fang Ko 2012)[4]. Other scholars generally support the idea that partners who bring more income, education, status, or social capital to their marriage, tend to exert greater control in terms of decision-making, and have less responsibility for household labor tasks (Chen, Yi, & Lu 2000; Cromwell, Corrales, & Torsillo 1973; Fox, 1973; Hsu 2008; Kandel & Lesser 1972; Katz & Peres 1988, pp252)[5]. Feminist scholars have pointed out that forced migration alters refugees’ identity, gender, and culture (Camino & Krulfeld 1994)[6]. In the particular context of the United States, expanded opportunities for women often spawn a renegotiation of economic and social power within the family (Lim 1997; Ferree1979; Glenn 1987; Kibria 1990; Kibria 1994)[7]. Thus, families emerge as primary institutions of change and as the sites where the country of origin’s culture and history are reshaped by the host country’s cultural and societal norms, especially when it relates to the renegotiation of labor, space, and social mobility (Glick &Van Hook 2002; Gratton at al. 2007)[8].

My research focuses on the process of refugee resettlement and adaptation centres within the family among Muslim Meskhetians in the United States. Muslim Meskhetians, who originate from the district of Meskhetia in the Caucasus Mountains, are a historically tightly knit ethnic group. Meskhetia, located within the Republic of Georgia, is a historically turbulent area where world powers have collided for centuries—from the Ottoman Empire to the Russian Empire or the USSR (Trier & Khanzhin 2007)[9]. In the 1940s, during the Stalinist purges, the Muslim population of Meskhetia was deported from Soviet Georgia and resettled into Central Asia. In the more recent past (1989), many Meskhetians relocated to Russia following the Fergana Valley conflict in Uzbekistan. In 2005, the Muslim Meskhetian community living in Russia moved to the United States as refugees. Research has shown extensive variation in how these groups adapted to their new host environment. Koriouchkina and Swerdlow (2007)[10]; Kacimi (2008)[11]; Morozov (2010)[12]; Koriouchkina (2011)[13]; Bilge (2012)[14]; Bal and Arzubiaga (2013)[15] have studied the resettlement of Muslim Meskhetians in the United States, focusing on the cultural mechanisms of identity for Muslim Meskhetians in America and the
processes of their social and civic integration. However, none of these studies have focused on how the social and cultural environment of the United States is reshaping Muslim Meskhetians’ conceptions of gender, lifestyle, or family structures. I seek to contribute to this body of literature by examining the impact of displacement on family structure and gender roles, through a detailed analysis of Muslim Meskhetians families in the United States.

2. Historical Background of the Muslim Meskhetians.

Muslim Meskhetians have been known throughout history by a plethora of names. They have been recorded as “Georgians” [those born in the pre-1917 Russian-Empire Caucasian province, or the post-revolution Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia], “Muslim Georgians” [a small religious minority in the predominantly Christian Soviet Georgia], “Muslim Meskhetian Turks” [in reference to the region of Meskhetia within Georgia and their genealogical links to the Ottomans], “Meskhs” [emphasizing solely on the geographical district], “Turks” [this time emphasizing on their place of origin for over four decades. The psychological wounds of displacement remain deep and their social lives have also been shaken by new conflicts with the local Central Asian populations.

In 1989, at the time of major crises within the Soviet Union, the Uzbeks rebelled against the deported minorities due to acute disputes and militant conflicts, and officially asked the Muslim Meskhetians to leave the Fergana Valley. As a result, some Muslim Meskhetians were left without homes (Aydingun, 2002) [21], while others moved to Azerbaijan or Russia to settle in the Krasnodar region, bordering the soon-to-be-independent Georgia. Waiting for the right circumstances, the individuals deported to the Krasnodar region maintained hopes that they would eventually return to Georgian Meskhetia (Ossipov, 2002) [22]. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation refused to issue Russian passports to the Muslim Meskhetians. This community became a group of illegal immigrants on the territory of Russia. Repatriation to Georgia was not an option at that point, neither pragmatically nor legislatively. One of the salvation maneuvers was proposed by the United States that offered refugee status to all the Muslim Meskhetians living in Krasnodar, Russia. From 2005 onwards, Muslim Meskhetians started to relocate to thirty-three American states (Koriouchkina and Swerdlow, 2007) [23].

According to Aydingun et al., (2006) [24]: “Meskhetian Turks were being resettled widely across the United States. As of mid-June 2006, approximately 9,000 Meskhetian Turks have been resettled in 33 states and the District of Columbia, with Pennsylvania (785 individuals) and Georgia (623) host to the largest numbers. Other sizable populations...
are found in Washington (590), Illinois (508), Kentucky (499), Arizona (497), Idaho (471), Texas (417), Virginia (417), New York (394), and Colorado (365)” (p. 26). The communities formed by the Muslim Meskhetians in Pennsylvania and Illinois became the focus of this study.

3. Theoretical Perspectives on Refugees’ Families and Identities

In terms of ethnic identification and networks of belonging and commitment, Muslim Meskhetians seem engaged in the construction of an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983)[25]—they have carefully preserved their native language (an Anatolian dialect of Turkish), their volatile history, their traditions and their religion. As such, I expected the community to recognize their origins (currently Republic of Georgia) and to report their home as “Meskhetia.” This geographical identity marker oftentimes referred to as “place identity” (Cuba & Hummon 1993a; Cuba & Hummon 1993b)[26], or “psychological attachment to place and identity” (Twigger 1994-96)[27], or “place attachment and place identity” (Giuliani 2003; Hernández et al. 2007)[28], which may be mobile or stable, showcasing the place affiliation and stages of transition as refugees.

Earlier studies (Trier et al 2007) [29]of Muslim Meskhetians illustrate that they share certain features such as a social unit in each of the countries they have lived in since deportation: they form strong intra-ethnic links, display a firm religious attachment to the Muslim culture, and practice solidly-defined gender roles within their traditional extended families. From the family-system viewpoint, Muslim Meskhetians live in closed systems 1, with a strong collectivistic spirit permeating their daily activities. This perspective stipulates that the family functions as an organism or a system, where any impact on individuals is reflected upon the livelihood of the whole unit and vice versa (Minuchin 1974; Satir 1988)[30]. The closed model of Muslim Meskhetian culture describes familial arrangements that prevent individual growth, while the rules within the family are strict, clear, and offer limited information exchange. Most researches on Muslim Meskhetians have described their families as closed and unchangeable—the patriarchal family structure remained prominent in various geographical locations of displacement. Furthermore, researchers found evidence of a strong conservative hierarchical social structure, which may have not allowed women to challenge gender inequality at home (Trier et al. 2011)[31]. I argue that in the wake of multiple displacements, Muslim Meskhetians have made a concerted effort to maintain social order and existing cultural norms within their communities.

I suggest a new way of looking at the refugees’ adaptation to their host country. I argue that the Islam-based stability and patriarchal strength discussed by Tier et al (2007; 2011)[32] have been actively re-worked and re-formed into novel models of family structure and roles during resettlement in the United States. Since the displacement of Muslim Meskhetians to the United States, the family has served as the center of adaptational change. The host society influences how refugees process their own intra-group relationships through the everyday processes of living, learning about the new environment, and adapting to challenges. Therefore, the roles, relations, and responsibilities are in this case more likely to be subject to renegotiation and transformation. In this study, I claim that the displacement of the Muslim Meskhetians has reshaped power relations, family decision-making, identity, and gender role among family members within the new social environment—against a larger backdrop of concerted counter-efforts to maintain cultural norms and Meskhetian social order. I make the hypothesis that any achieved changes (such as Meskhetian women living in the U.S. being more active outside the home, more engaged in social activities and more involved in the education of their children than prior to their arrival in the United States) are to be met with active attempts to reconcile these changes with a continued commitment to conservative, patriarchal values and cultural maintenance.

4. Methodology

For the purpose of my research, I followed the general advice of refugee and migration scholars advocating an in-depth examination of the resettlement experience. I employed qualitative methods to capture how participants of this study assimilate, acculturate, integrate and adapt, in hopes of generating more reliable and multifaceted data (Kim at al. 2001)[33]. Based on recommendations for selecting the sample size in qualitative research (Creswell, 1998)[34], I conducted thirty qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews and participant observation with members of Muslim Meskhetian communities in Pennsylvania and Illinois. In order to gain entry into each community, I initiated contact with community leaders of local Muslim Meskhetian groups living in Illinois and Pennsylvania, and then collected further data via snowball sampling. Data was collected over two periods: March through April 2012 in Pennsylvania; and February 2014 in Illinois.

Participants appeared to be quite comfortable while sharing information about their family structure, relationships, and gender roles, but talking about ethnic identity was more emotional. Participant narratives may have been influenced by the identity of the researcher. I am from their homeland; they had numerous questions about Georgia, the Georgian government, why the government had

1 In contrast, the open system typically includes members forming a more cohesive, inter-related, active, and mutually sensitive group where information flows more liberally within and outside the system.
not repatriated Meskhetians back to Georgia, etc. Muslim Meskhetians have frequently been the subject of studies with researchers often wanting to discuss their pain and oppression while living in Krasnodar Kray, so they may approach researchers with a slight wariness.

My interviews were conducted in Russian, audio-recorded, and later transcribed on the campuses of Rutgers University in New Brunswick, NJ, and the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. The interview protocol included open-ended questions assessing family structure and familial relationships, potential gender role divisions and Muslim Meskhetian identity construction. The protocol and consent forms were available in Russian and participants signed the consent form before interviewing. The project had passed through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Rutgers University prior to the initiation of the fieldwork.

All participants in this study were relocated to the United States from the Russian Federation in 2005. The group of interviewees was composed of 14 women and 16 men, ages ranging between 20 and 62 (See Table 1). The distribution by age groups was as follows: 9 of interviewees were between 20-29 years old, 9 aged 30-45 and 12 over 46. Two-thirds of my respondents now live in Pennsylvania and one-third in Illinois. As indicated below, 24 were married at the time of the interview. The predominant majority of participants (19) graduated from high school, while 6 had some vocational or professional training and 3 were college graduates.

After the initial data collection, I read and coded the interview transcripts carefully to identify the major themes, as well as the unique aspects of the interview content. The same coding was later applied to my second round of data collection. Analytically, the data fell into three themes, each having several subthemes. My focus on families encompassed, for instance, the data on family financial distribution, resettlement lifestyle, and marriage decisions. The gender-role lens allowed me to study the social functions of women, their educational goals, and their decision-making processes. In terms of identity, I based my study on the preservation of a “homeland feeling of belonging”, linguistic and religious identification, and identity construction.

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5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. Family Relationships: Distribution of Finances in Family

According to the collected data, Muslim Meskhetian refugees appeared focused on two objectives: economic earnings and family self-sufficiency. They envisioned themselves not as single independent individuals, but as organic elements of a family unit or a kin-based collective, in which almost every member is officially employed in the American labor market. Most men find jobs with moving and trucking companies, younger men in particular often taking two-weeks to a month-long work trips. Other young men have reported that their earnings came from occupations in restaurants. The young women in my sample were either college students or working in bakeries and grocery stores. The older generation, usually speaking little English, often sought opportunities within the Russian-speaking enclaves in Pennsylvania or Illinois. All of the respondents were motivated to find employment or to build their education for an eventual career, whether they were young or old, male or female. With all adults from our sample engaged in economic activities outside of the home, the expectation of men as household breadwinners and women relegated to domestic labor, strong in traditional Muslim families, is challenged. With few exceptions, Muslim Meskhetian women living in the U.S. are eager to join the labor force. They are encouraged to earn, not for personal gain, but for the betterment of their families.

Muslim Meskhetian family members’ salaries are often a topic of open discussion and the information is shared within the family. The older married parents typically manage and route the financial fluxes, collecting the earnings of every member as contributions to the common pot, and invited the kin to propose and discuss how to distribute expenses. As it was usual when they were living in the Russian Federation, Parents make the final decision and possess the right to veto where to invest or how much to save every month.

“Money is gathered together, and then we jointly decide where and how much to pay, for example, for a
The older members of the family were advising where, when, and how to spend the collective earnings. This method of pooled earning has allowed this refugee community to strengthen solidarity and accumulate a safety net. It has also contributed to ensure collective prosperity. The parents reported they felt less autocratic and controlling because both they and their offspring were working, while the older members of the family were advising where, when, and how to spend the collective earnings.

“Whenever we receive our salary, only a small part is kept for ourselves and the rest is given to the mother. For example, if I receive 700–800 USD per month, I keep 200 USD for myself… for the car and gas expenses; the rest I give to my family. […] When money is collected together, it is easier to save for big things than compared to doing it alone.” (26-year-old unmarried male)

Some families save up a portion of earnings by placing some away into piggy banks; others open private banking accounts, sometimes only for the patriarch or other times for every individual family member. In any case, payments for living expenses (utilities, rent, furniture, car, etc.) are shared and the head of the family usually makes the decision of who pays for what.

“Each of us has a bank account, but there is also one general family account. Only our parents take money out of the family account. When we receive our salaries we all deposit money there because it is better distributed for everyone in this way.” (22-year-old unmarried female)

In a different scenario, following the demands of the American financial institutions, families have had to reconfigure collectivism into individualism. The laws apparently stipulated that every refugee had to open an individual account, have a social security number and work out a credit history to secure housing, receive governmental support and pay bills. Following suit, individual bank accounts trumped family collectivism, serving as an example of how the host country’s standards penetrate the psyche and customs of immigrant families. Thus in this case, a struggle of cultural maintenance and cultural adaptation is shown through the maintenance of collective budgets for Muslim Meskhetian, which challenges new identities and reaffirm old ones.

5.2. Family Relationships: Family Resettlement Lifestyle

Typical Muslim Meskhetian families are fairly large; their extended models include at least three generations who often share the living space together. Upon arrival into the United States, traditional large family units were divided by the immigration authorities into nuclear families and spatially separated. The host organizations provided them with housing but could not guarantee that all the extended-family members would live together in the same house, city or even state. Under-aged children were accommodated together with their parents; however those over 18 or the elderly were hosted in other locations. Such separations had traumatic effects on the resettled communities, as the interviewees have indicated. Thus, structural incentives worked to break down Muslim Meskhetian cultural norms, but the group was effective in working around these issues by being actively engaged in cultural maintenance.

“You know, the concept of family bears different meanings to us and to the Americans. In the United States, the older folks and children over 18 live separately. Our hosts had separated my children and sent them to another town. I was in shock, but we could not share these feelings with the officials and explain why such a move may not be a positive experience. Thank God, after two months we reunited and ever since have lived together. We moved here because most of our people live in this town.” (59-year-old married male)

The Muslim Meskhetians preserved the three-generational model, even with the external pressures from immigration officials; grandparents eventually returned to live with their adult children and grandchildren. The interviewees shared that the youngest boy of a household may remain with his parents, while in contrast; the older male siblings move out to start a new life after marriage and having at least two offspring. Only at this point, the older brother, his wife and two kids may seek separate housing and the entire extended family provides financial assistance. The female siblings are expected to marry and move out, often receiving dowries. This traditional norm has been kept even after the resettlement to the United States. “We live better like this, together we can overcome difficulties. We make better decisions and think it is good for everyone.” (55-year-old married male)

Home ownership was identified as an important family goal. Houses with land are the most prized. If land is available for purchase with the house, the families prefer to work the land with vegetable gardens and planting fruit trees. The land is then perceived as an opportunity for additional income, since it will allow running produce stands at farmer’s markets or on their properties.

“We went to Arizona to attend a wedding. It was very nice there; houses are cheap, much cheaper than in Philadelphia […] Buying is of course preferred in the white district, in a good neighborhood.” (19-year-old unmarried male)

Muslim Meskhetians were originally settled in over 33 states in the United States, but have elected to move closer to one another and over time have come to form community
settlements where possible. “We try to settle close to each other, the former or current neighbors, relatives or acquaintances.” (55-year-old married male) The moves depend on the kinship networks built in particular states or the living conditions and property value in specific areas. What remains evident here is that while resettlement structural incentives actively worked against their traditional ways of living, by encouraging American norms of a smaller nuclear family and individualized policies, Muslim Meskhetians have resisted these norms by creating close-knit communities and preserving values. This result is a testimony of the struggle between cultural adaptation and cultural maintenance in the face of displacement.

5.3. Family Relationships: Marriage Decisions

Decision-making process about marriage in the Muslim Meskhetian families is one of their long-standing traditions. According to the participants we met, Muslim Meskhetians marry earlier than the average Americans, with women marrying on average at age 22 and men at age 24 (older generations often married between ages 15-17 for women and 17-19 for men). Attitudes regarding marriage, age, and arrangements are progressively shifting:

“They were a good family and the boy worked with my father. I knew the family very well. They started to ask for me as soon as I was 14 and by age 16, I was already married [in Krasnodar]. I will never do the same to my child. She has to study first. Why should she hurry?” (32-year-old married female).

Muslim Meskhetians practice arranged, homogeneous marriages and in the process of selecting a suitable spouse for their sons or daughters, the parents evaluate the families’ (Meskhetian) roots, cultural practices, and stability. Mothers often play a critical role in the arrangement process, initiating conversations with a potential family about marriage prospects. The participants indicated that the process has been modernized throughout the years in some ways. When Meskhetians were living in Uzbekistan (1945-1989) and Krasnodar (1989-2005), arranged marriages were commonplace, with the bride and groom meeting for the first time on their wedding day. Things have changed since their arrival in the United States, as participants indicated that they now play a role in the arrangement process, which is still very much guided by parents. “If our parents don’t agree with who we have chosen to marry they still often have the final say in approving the union.” (27-year-old married male).

And yet, while arranged marriages increasingly invite eligible young people to participate in the selection process, young men and women still find value in the arrangement process guided by parents, with some attributing successful marriages to the authority of the parents: “Arranged marriages are a tradition [still in the United States and] the rate of divorce rate is almost of zero with us because our parents know what we want and what is best for us” (27-year-old married male).

Nowadays, if families are in contact regarding a possible marriage, the young man’s family (approving of the match) would then send an “elchi” (ambassador) to give notice of their interest to the young woman’s family. If the latter agrees, the young people could meet each other with a third party present, often at the young woman’s home. The couple will usually talk for a few hours and finally declare their mutual decision to the awaiting families. Before the wedding, the couple does not have anymore contact. Following the wedding ceremony, it remains customary for the bride to move in with the groom’s family. Outside of parental arrangement, social gatherings (with guest-lists often exclusively including Muslim Meskhetians) serve as sites for discussing potential marriages. Through testing the waters, young people are free to influence the decision to pursue a relationship or not: “We got engaged by the old rules, but after a few meetings, we realized that we were not meant to be together, for each other. So we went our separate ways.” (25-year-old unmarried male).

A common sentiment among participants was that arranged marriages are more successful, in reference to the American divorce rate, which is higher than in Krasnodar or in Uzbekistan. Nonetheless, arranged marriages themselves are also transforming, giving more agency to eligible bachelors and bachelorettes since the resettlement in the United States. Involving the woman and man to be married in the decision-making process is viewed as decidedly important in reducing instances of parental blame for abuse or violence within a marriage. “It’s our fault. If we hadn’t arranged the marriage and she would have selected him on her own, she wouldn’t blame us if the marriage was unsuccessful or violent.” (53-year-old married female).

Conclusions such as these are quoted as strong arguments for allowing young people to choose their partners by themselves. The marital age for Meskhetian women living in the United States has also risen. One of the reasons is that parents now support their daughters in seeking college degrees or technical training prior to marriage. Consequently, Muslim Meskhetian women are more independent and outspoken than the older generations of Meskhetians that lived in Uzbekistan and Krasnodar.

The advent of the Internet and social network platforms has also influenced Muslim Meskhetian marriages in the United States. Young people in the community (still mostly men) use these media to share photos and show their parents pictures of potential mates. Parents are also utilizing social media—such as texting, Skype, and Odnoklassniki (Russian social media platform)—to connect with potential families. The initial contact between two young people is commonly occurring online. Regardless, parents still have the final say and can influence a marriage.

An additional factor, contributing to the refusal of parental involvement from the Meskhetian women living in the United States, is that nearly all Muslim Meskhetian families have achieved some level of financial stability in America. This aspect of marriage, although traditionally prized in
Muslim Meskhetian culture, is now linked to the women’s increased independence.

“When a family is financially secure, the young women often become headstrong and opinionated and it is not easy to influence them to make the decision we want to hear.” (54 year-old married male)

Furthermore, the younger generation of educated Muslim Meskhetian women living in the United States is more likely to exercise rights afforded to them as American citizens, including equal rights for women. “Women have realized that they too have the same rights as men when it comes to their autonomy and decision-making here in America.” (27 year-old unmarried female) Moreover, the highly educated Muslim Meskhetian women are more likely to ascribe to Western notions of individualism in terms of decision-making about their marriages.

“My sister got married and she had no idea to whom. […] Our father arranged the marriage without her knowing and soon she married a man she barely knew. This doesn’t happen much anymore. I am 30 years old and received marriage proposals a few times but I refused, because it isn’t important to me whether my family approves of my partner.” (30 year-old unmarried female)

A struggle of cultural maintenance and resilience continues, as the older generations try to preserve influence that they are slowly losing in the United States. As illustrated above, Muslim Meskhetian parents living in the United States remain an integral part of the marital arrangement process, but no longer arrange marriages without the consent or input of their children. This more collaborative process, reflecting the influence of a more liberalized Western culture, is one infused with the influences of technology, social media, and shifting conceptions of gender and education.

A closer examination of the shifting role of women in post-resettlement Muslim Meskhetian culture reveals another straddling of traditional values and changing attitudes in the face of American culture.

5.4. Gender Roles: Social Function of Women

Throughout Muslim Meskhetian history, men have been traditionally expected to be breadwinners and financially support their family members by working outside of the home. (Trier, at al 2007) On the other hand, the women’s role in the Muslim Meskhetian families was domestic - cleaning, washing, cooking, serving the husband, and raising children - in addition to assisting in agricultural work on their land. In Krasnodar Krai, within the Russian Federation, most Muslim Meskhetians did not have the Russian citizenship granting them permission to work. Thus, the only way to make ends meet was for the whole family to work in agricultural fields. Women worked besides men, “sometimes harder than men” (45 year-old married male). “Women’s work had no value, nobody could see it. They had no money of their own.

Children and women, we worked together” (30 year-old unmarried female).

After moving to America, most Muslim Meskhetian women have obtained employment, have their own salaries and contribute to the family budget. They possess driver’s licenses and independently run errands and manage family responsibilities. Most Muslim Meskhetian families have two cars in order for the wife to travel independently, and older siblings have their own, too. A male participant explained the changing role of women being able to drive and its effect on his family:

“In the beginning we had just one car. We drove to work very early; her work started at 5am, mine - at 7 a.m. First I would drive her, it was very far, and then I had time until my work started but it was senseless to return home […]. Now we are independent, she drives to her job herself and in the second half of the day whoever is free can pick up the children” (46 year-old married male).

While gender roles are shifting, with Muslim Meskhetian women growing more independent, male participants frequently cautioned that “it does not mean women are the head of the family,” (60 year-old married male), asserting that men still occupy a position of dominance within the home. While many women agreed that the long-standing Georgian notion that “a woman’s place is in the home or kitchen” is outmoded, it was identified that they [women] still remain those primarily expected to take on domestic duties. Thus, it becomes clear that attitudes surrounding gender roles are shifting, with women being more encouraged to seek employment outside of the home and play a more active role in family decision-making. Still, the participants’ attitudes demonstrate that the expansion of women’s education and employment participation is not a direct indication of their increased power within the home, or of power sharing between men and women. To the contrary, many women remain committed to traditional definitions of their role within the home as primarily domestic, meaning that women who do find employment, must also complete all of the domestic work because they perceive it to be “their job.”

“Woman’s work is done by a woman, a man’s work – by a man. But it isn’t so that men are laying and women are working. The man leaves the house very early and returns back very late so that he has no strength to do any work, women are working less hours” (53 year-old married male).

“I have to do woman’s work. I leave for work early in the morning at 5 a.m. and come back at 4 p.m. and cook dinner for the family… When everyone comes from work I have everything ready, then I wash dishes and so on…” (43 year-old married female).

Muslim Meskhetians living in the United States find themselves at a crossroads, still highly valuing traditional
gender roles and expectations, but shifting as younger generations further their education and adopt more liberal American behavior. As illustrated through the participants’ interviews, attitudes are changing; Muslim Meskhetian women are more likely to feel entitled to the rights of education and influence over family decision-making. Yet, they remain committed to traditional values of domestic labor being “woman’s work” and reported a sense of pride in being able to complete the household chores.

5.5. Gender Roles: Educational Goals

To get education in Russian federation for Muslim Meskhetin women was difficult, first of all Meskhetians had problem with citizenship, and as Muslim Meskhetian men argued according to the religious tradition "our women have to care on family" (59-year-old married male).

This changed in the USA. Numerous Muslim Meskhetians resettled in the United States perceive education as a way to access economic and social stability and pursue it as such:

“We want to study to have a stable income, to support the family. In America without a stable work place life is very difficult” (20 year-old married female).

“It is good for her to study at the college because she can find a job as a nurse.” (55 year-old married female)

The young and educated Muslim Meskhetians are more likely to be multilingual, having learned English in secondary school, a skill which will often lead to finding employment. In addition, when children need help for their studies at school, women appear to be more helpful and involved in the process. The hope is that educated children will help support their aging parents. Men are still perceived as responsible for the financial stability of the family and usually select the educational field for their children that will provide them security. Yet, sentiments are shifting, as parents are more likely to support their child’s desire to pursue the field of study that matches their personal interest.

According to our participants, women are more likely to pursue their education and perform better, while men are often quickly entering the labor force, sometimes as a mean of supporting their wife or daughter’s educational goals:

“Boys don’t want to study, they are focused on easy ways of earning money, and they become truck drivers, and travel a lot by car,” (27-year-old married female)

“Someone needs to pay the study fees, so boys are working to pay their wife’s study fees.” (56-year-old married male).

College-educated Muslim Meskhetian women are more likely to seek similarly educated men, demand more independence, and see marriage (and divorce) as options that they are free to pursue, regardless of disapproving elders: “My daughter finished university; she is 24 and does not like anyone, still looking.” (57-year-old married male).

Education is often a platform for shifting ideas of gender equity, roles, and responsibilities across generational divides. Participants who had gone through the American education system were more likely to profess individualistic values. These were often younger generations of Muslim Meskhetian women whose exposure to American culture through education allowed them access to careers and economic stability that lent itself to a reimagining of their own agency. A closer examination of familial decision-making underscores this shift in women’s power.

5.6. Gender Roles: Decision-Making Processes

Muslim Meskhetian women participants often reported that access to education and the influence of American values had afforded them greater access to family decision-making:

“We have the opportunity to reflect and participate in family decision-making. Before, in Russia, if a man said no that meant no, but in America men and women have equal say.” (30-year-old unmarried female)

“We women have our eyes open, you know what I mean? We can go to school, drive a car, make decisions for ourselves, and marry whom we want. Women can choose what they want to do here in America. We are relieved; we opened our eyes and saw that we also have rights.” (30-year-old unmarried female)

Yet, male participants, regardless of their age, routinely perceived that they remain “heads of households,” maintaining a patriarchal position of power through the generations. Their claims referred to the “tradition” of Muslim families by which the man is recognized as the head of the family, as ordered by the teachings of Islam. Women participants, on the other hand, frequently shared that they often put on a performance of subservience in front of family members, in order to ensure that their husbands remain perceived as those in charge, noting that behind closed doors, they played a more egalitarian role in familial decision-making.

“The head of the family is a man, father of course. My father told me to settle down, marry someone. I did not want and refused but in the end, everything happened as he wanted”. (28-year-old married male)

“My husband and I often argue when we are alone and sometimes I do things my way, but in presence of others I am silent and listen, even if he is wrong. That is how it should be.” (27-year-old married female)

“From outside, a man is the head of the family, but in real life everything is decided together. Women have agency, but not in a presence of others. She cannot express her opinion. This way, she shows respect for her husband. This is the Muslim Meskhetian family.” (27-year-old married male)

While patriarchal codes of gender remain steadfast in Muslim Meskhetian culture post-resettlement, the
participants’ interviews illustrate an overall shift in the women’s perception of their own agency since their arrival to the United States and their confrontation with legal and cultural values of women’s rights and equality. The public commitment to patriarchal traditions indicates that women are engaged in cultural maintenance. However, privately, within their homes and families, their own sense of consciousness is shifting, with women taking on more actively decision-making roles. Again, this balancing act of cultural maintenance and cultural adaptation are a demonstration of the ways through which Muslim Meskhetian families are slowly changing.

6. Conclusion

Muslim Meskhetian refugees living in the United States have altered their cultural and social practices after being confronted to the American cultural, legal, and social values, resulting in the transformation of gender expectations, and family structure. While Muslim Meskhetian families still remain committed to most of the traditional values related to collectivism, patriarchy, and Islam, attitudes and practices are changing because of the influence of American liberalism, religious freedom, and individualism. Many Muslim Meskhetian families have found unique ways to blend the cultural values of their past with their present in the United States.

The results of my research show that displacement not only impacts individual identities but, within the context of the family-system theory, also affects the overall family structure. Muslim Meskhetian men are still publicly recognized as “heads of households,” even if they too believe in the decision-making power of their wives behind closed doors and support their daughters seeking education. As resource and feminist theorists (Blood & Wolfe 1960; Camino & Krulfeld 1994)[35] have argued, the movement away from a patriarchal order to more egalitarian relationships between genders is shaped by expanded opportunities for women, characterized by educational and occupational advancement. This collaborative process, reflecting the influence of a more liberalized Western culture, induces a reimagining of the traditional practices of marriage and power sharing within the family. And while these multiple shifts are taking place, a steadfast commitment to traditional values remains in many areas of social life - from sons living with their parents well after marrying, to the practice of arranged marriages by the parents - albeit with an increasing influence from the younger generation. Elders within this community remain respected, revered and cared for, a sharp contrast from their American counterparts who often decide to place aging elders in nursing homes. Women still primarily perform domestic labour, although more are actively encouraged to pursue their education or find employment. Money is still considered a family resource, not an individual one, although American institutions have required the opening of personal accounts among family members to track individual credit histories and payment of taxes. This particular example demonstrates how refugees family patterns are shaped by structural forces within the host society (Glick & Van Hook, 2002; Gratton at al 2007) [36].

Two primary mechanisms, the American educational system and free-market capitalism (Glik & Van Hook, 2002; Gratton at al 2007), have facilitated this change, reinforcing the argument made by feminist and migration scholars that forced migration alters refugees’ identity, gender roles, culture (Camino & Krulfeld 1994)[37] education and income (Blood & Wolfe, 1960)[38]. Through the field research, it became very clear that these mechanisms are transforming gender roles and family dynamics, allowing women greater financial stability and social mobility. We can anticipate these changes to grow.

Muslim Meskhetian refugees have expanded there once closed-system family structure to allow for a more open-system of family governance. Moreover, the upward social and economic mobility of Meskhetian women illustrates the influence of American culture on Muslim Meskhetian refugees, resulting in increased gender equality within the family. Historically marginalized, displaced and renamed, Muslim Meskhetian refugees in the United States continue to blend past and present, history and future, as they reconstruct gender roles, family structure and ethnicity.

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