Splice
The Journal of Undergraduate Scholarship at SDSU College of Arts and Letters
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Splice: The Journal of Undergraduate Scholarship at SDSU College of Arts and Letters is published by the journals division of San Diego State University Press, San Diego, CA 92182. Other SDSU Press journal titles include Poetry International and pacificREVIEW: A West Coast Arts Review Annual.

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Splice, The Journal of Undergraduate Scholarship at SDSU College of Arts and Letters, is an anthology of peer-reviewed publications produced by undergraduate students in the Splice Collective. The journal's goals are to promote research and creativity while providing a space for CAL students to build academic publishing skills.

FIRST EDITION

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-938537-22-6

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Overworked and Undernourished: Diet Habits of College Students Reveal Concerning Patterns in Young Adults Across America

REBECCA FOX
Department of Sociology

The eating habits of students in university is a defining aspect of college student life. Students’ diets are frequently joked about in film and other media, but research shows that those jokes might be much closer to reality than people may think. College students are in a unique phase of life where many are experiencing true freedom away from their parents and homes for the first time. However, their diets tend to reflect concerns about both their physical and mental health. College-aged students are in an extremely formative time in their lives, and habits they create at this age will often stick with them long after they earn their degrees.

To learn more about college students’ relationships to their dietary habits and what drives their food choices, I worked in a small group to interview fourteen current undergraduate students about their eating habits. After we performed our interviews, we transcribed the interviews and compiled them together to compare them. With the combined data from all fourteen subjects we interviewed, we then went on to perform our own literature reviews and report our own findings and conclusions. My group and I identified a few common themes throughout the interviews. Among them, we found that a lack of time and schedule constraints, stress levels, and the students’ social environments play major factors into why college students have such unique eating habits. The findings suggest that there is serious cause for concern about America’s college students, and that many are struggling with their dietary health.
Introduction

The National Library of Medicine’s research shows that around 80% of adolescents who struggle with obesity will also be obese as adults (Simmons, et al. 2015); with many American adults facing obesity and/or malnutrition, it is vital to research what is causing college students to be more susceptible to poor eating habits.

Adults who struggle with poor nutrition habits are more likely to be at risk for heart disease and strokes, Type 2 diabetes, and a general decrease in one’s quality of life (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2022).

There is a plethora of existing and ongoing research on dietary habits of children and adults in the United States, but I find that the group my team and I studied, specifically, college students aged eighteen to twenty-four, are often overlooked. My group and I conducted a qualitative study by interviewing current college students in San Diego to gauge their eating habits and what factors may be contributing to their past and current habits. In addition to the interviews, I performed an observation on San Diego State University’s campus to visualize student eating habits and what food and drink products were available and commonly consumed. Young adults in college are learning how to navigate academic, social, and professional environments, and their diet habits are a huge part of becoming successful as adults. To transition to adulthood in good health is vital to one’s success and happiness. Society must commit more to uncovering the truth about why university students experience self-reported struggles with their eating habits. It is necessary that universities intervene in these struggles and steer college students towards healthier lifestyles.

Literature Review

The three major themes we found in our research was a connection between students’ diet habits and their levels of stress, schedule constraints, and social atmosphere. These patterns had a large impact on what respondents chose to eat on a day-to-day basis.

The first theme I explored when researching the current literature on the topic was how students’ levels of stress impact their food choices daily. A study done for the Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics also theorized that college students’ stress levels do have an impact on their diet choices. The group performed an online survey given to students at Western Texas University. The survey assessed students’ Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) as well as their eating habits. According to the study’s findings, “high PSS was negatively correlated with fruit and vegetable intake, and positively correlated with snack intake, skipping breakfast, and dinner” (Ibiyemi, Andrews, and Oldewage-Theron 2022). These findings are similar to the findings in our study that students with busy schedules and high stress levels consume a less balanced, healthy diet which includes less nutrient intake, and
either too many or too few daily calories for their body. This study also found a significantly increased snack intake when students experience higher levels of stress, which I also found to be true throughout our study. Snacking was a common habit associated with the lives of busy college students, often quoted as being selected due to comfort and convenience—not health.

Another key concept that I found in the analysis of the interviews is how schedule and time constraints that are unique to college students affect their diet habits. This reflects findings from an academic article I found written by Deborah A. Harris. In her article, she focuses on the unique identity that college students live under, and how that can affect their eating habits (Harris 2017). This article supports the research that the extremely busy and packed schedules that college students live under have an impact on their dietary habits. She analyzed her subjects' food reflection papers where students described “dietary failures” in their eating habits. Dietary failures were described by participants as diet choices they regretted and/or were not proud of. Harris’ major finding was that the students were frequently able to justify their dietary failures by making excuses for them. All the excuses for what the students knew were poor food choices relied heavily on their identities as university students. Harris (2017) found that many of the stereotypes that are related to that identity specifically proved to be true. Students reported being too busy, being unable to afford healthy options, and the need to stress/comfort–eat during exams. As was consistent with the fourteen students my team and I interviewed, the students in Harris’ study shared a strong desire to eat healthier and more nutritiously. The main obstacle they found standing in their way was simply being a college student and having to manage all that entails – especially their extremely busy schedules. The students in this study were aware of their self-described dietary failures, and many were not proud of their eating habits. The issue does not seem to be a lack of education on nutritious eating, but rather an inability to successfully commit to a consistent, healthy diet due to the nature of being a student.

To help analyze the concept I found to be common, which was how the social atmosphere that students live in affect their diet habits, I found a qualitative study on the effects of COVID-19 on the diets of college students: The Food Choices of US University Students During COVID-19. The study used focus groups and open-ended interview questions to collect data on how COVID impacted students’ food choices (Powell, et al. 2021). A key pattern found in my study was that many students described a shift in their diet during periods of social change, especially during and after the pandemic. Numerous students reported feeling a lack of choice in their meals and an increased caloric intake when the pandemic hit. A lot of the students found themselves heavily snacking out of boredom and choosing convenience of a snack over the nutritional benefits of it, which appeared to continue into their college eating habits. While some students reported enjoying connecting with their families’ home-cooked cultural dishes, the lack of structure and massive routine changes were a stressor for these students’ diets. The discoveries made in this study correlate with my findings regarding the impact of
students’ social atmosphere; it seems that students experiencing unique stressors, new situations, or boredom in the social atmosphere around them often find themselves eating in ways they would deem atypical. This appeared to not only happen during the pandemic, but also in everyday students’ lives when social pressures and stressors are impacting them.

Research Methods

To research on the topic of college students’ diets, my group and I used qualitative methods to explore college students’ experiences and the meanings they attached to their eating habits through observations and a series of interviews.

I first performed an observational study in the Student Union on campus at San Diego State University. This is a common area where students purchase and eat food throughout the day. The dining locations available that I observed included The Habit (burger restaurant), Starbucks, Chipotle, Shake Smart (health/wellness food and protein shakes), and an Aztec Market (convenience shop selling snacks, beverages, and small prepackaged meals). I did not interact with any students during this observation; I watched and took note of what food/drink items and restaurants were most popular, and what students were selected to eat. I also took note of where students chose to eat, how fast they ate, and their habits while eating and purchasing food – for example, I noted if students were on their laptops working while eating, socializing with peers, listening to music, etc.

To begin the interviews, my group and I recruited fourteen college students – specifically, undergraduate students between the ages of eighteen to twenty-four. We required that participants must have begun college immediately following graduation from high school. Participants were recruited due to their age and qualification as undergraduate students at an accredited university and then were requested to engage in an interview about their diet habits. Upon arrival, subjects were presented with a consent form and were asked to review it with the researcher. The consent form had clear, explicit language regarding what the project entails and how the subject’s information will be used, as well as information regarding their privacy guarantee. Participants were asked demographic questions but were assured that any identifying information would remain anonymous via an alias.

Each interview lasted approximately one hour, and we performed the interviews in a private, comfortable place on campus at San Diego State University. We used a list of written questions which all included probes to ask the respondent. To ensure the comfort of respondents, my group and I did not want to highlight any social, cultural, or financial differences between the subjects and ourselves (Warren and Karner 2005), so we were careful to limit commentary on the subject’s responses. We also frequently used welcoming and encouraging body language and neutral wording to build rapport. Interviews were recorded, with verbal consent from the participant, and transcribed. Out of the fourteen participants my group and I interviewed,
I personally analyzed ten interviews for the study. From the ten transcripts I analyzed, the ages of participants ranged from twenty to twenty-two years. Five participants were male while the other five participants were female. Three participants identified as Hispanic, two identified as Latino, two identified as white, one identified as White and Hispanic, one identified as Black, Chinese, and White, and one identified as Filipino and Italian. Participants were also asked to self-describe their social class; two described themselves as lower class/low income, two described being lower-middle class, five identified as middle class, and one identified as upper-middle class. Out of the ten transcripts I analyzed, only two participants had reported any dietary restrictions, one of which was an allergy and one of which was a self-implemented avoidance.

Findings

The first major theme I noticed while analyzing the data collected from the ten respondents was the impact of stress levels on college students’ diet habits. A consistent theme discussed by the respondents regarding coping with stress involves comfort eating. “Comfort eating” is described in this study as eating out of boredom or due to an emotional state, especially as a response to stressors. While comfort eating by itself is not necessarily a negative thing, many of the respondents who mentioned this term described it in a “guilty” manner. They described a negative connotation associated with the idea of eating due to causes other than hunger, and the respondents did not describe feeling proud of this habit. “Alex”, a twenty–two–year–old male respondent, described his comfort eating as “if I’m feeling down, depressed, or heartbroken, I’ll probably go home and eat some comfort food like ice cream, or something like a California burrito.” Twenty–year–old university student “Bella” described her previous experience with eating due to outside stressors from her freshman year at her university:

I was in a long distance relationship and [...] it wasn’t working and then we broke up and I was still like kind of not really finding my friend group and I was struggling in that way and I think I told myself, oh, because you’re going through it because you have to deal with this, ‘You can eat, it’s okay, like don’t feel bad about it. Eat whatever you want, do whatever you want.’ Like you deserve it, it’s self-care, but in reality, that’s not self-care. That’s just, you know, overindulging.

Though respondents had different food related responses to stress, the root cause of their eating discrepancies all boiled down to a major stress factor causing it. For example, respondent “Amber” described: “When I’m overwhelmed like I’m studying, then I’ll be like, oh, like I’m gonna go eat something instead of studying. I feel like stress might also be a thing that makes me overeat”, regarding how stress impacts her food choices. Another respondent, twenty–one–year–old student “Ben” experienced the opposite effect– “I’ve been pretty stressed out lately with life and school in general and
I think that definitely has had an effect on me skipping meals and stuff. I just think in general, you know, stress can just make it hard to eat.” While these two respondents had different reactions to the stress they were experiencing, it certainly caused a change in their food choices through that time.

The time and schedule constraints college students live under also had an extremely prominent impact on students’ diet habits. Students’ busy schedules, which were described as filled with work, classes, homework, and their social lives, were frequently to blame for times when unhealthy food options were selected. Many of the respondents reported struggling to balance their busy schedules and allowing time to focus on creating healthy diet habits. “Andrew”, twenty–one, described his concerning morning habit which included minimal nutrition: “I still rarely eat breakfast because of time constraints with work and school.” This was a popular sentiment across all respondents: breakfast was the meal mentioned most frequently skipped due to a lack of time for preparation and eating. Many respondents are not eating a full meal until lunchtime. “Jennifer”, twenty, described the effect her schedule had on her eating habits: “Since I do go to school and I work sometimes, it’s the time that makes it hard for me to eat every single meal, but weekends is when I most definitely eat all my meals.” This was a common pattern; school and work were large contributors to students’ diet choices, especially during the weekdays. Students described feeling the most constrained in their schedules during the week, suggesting that school and work commitments are of some responsibility for students’ food choices. Bella describes feeling “like I’m always out and about. That’s what affects my eating schedule the most, and I don’t ever stay on campus all day because I have to be in other places, so that’s a big contribution to why my habits are all over the place.” These major time constraints were described frequently in the transcripts and students clearly noted time constraints during the busy week affecting their diets. The university students interviewed are clearly struggling to juggle a healthy lifestyle including plenty of nutrients with their hectic schedules.

College students’ social lives and the social atmosphere around them also has a significant impact on their eating habits. Three respondents specifically noted the impact that COVID–19 had on their diets. “Ethan”, a twenty–year–old student described that “during COVID times, it was just the snacking. Just snacking all the way through it and it was not good food.” The social environment changed drastically and abruptly during the pandemic, and it clearly had an impact on the eating. Specifically, the snacking habits of the respondents.

Many respondents also indicated that their social circles play a large role in their eating habits. Our respondent, Bella, feels that food is a significant social aspect of her life:

I always think eating out is such a social thing. Like you get to sit down, usually with other people and even if it’s fast food, like I’ll go to In-N-Out with a friend or something, but even going with a friend, you could just sit in
the car and talk or when you go inside, you’ll talk. So, I like the social aspect of eating now as well.

Bella and quite a few others reported they tend to eat out more when it is a social situation rather than just eating out alone. While not all “eating out” is inherently unhealthy, one respondent, “Henry,” feels that due to his status as a college student, the social eating options veer towards the unhealthy side of options available:

I think that largely when you’re in college, going out with your friends, going out with a partner; it’s a lot about just spending time together, and it’s about the experience. We don’t necessarily say, ‘Hey, let’s try this new plant-based shop around the corner.’ It’s like, ‘hey, let’s go get some pizza, and then we’ll head back home and watch a movie or something.’ Or, you know, ‘I heard about this good burger spot in the next town over, let’s go over there and check that out.’ I definitely think hanging out with friends and hanging out with my partner can be less healthy. Just because that’s not necessarily just the priority that you think of when you’re hanging out.

Social influences also had an impact on students’ relationships with food, not just their physical eating habits. Bella describes how the people around her at a specific point in her life caused a negative perception of eating to her:

[My friends would] be like, ‘Yeah, I couldn’t eat anything today. Like, you know, I only ate this today’ and I just remember feeling like, oh my gosh, I must be like a pig or something for eating this much when my friends can’t even eat more than this amount a day. I think that took a toll on my perception of what’s good eating and bad eating.

She describes this experience as a lasting influence in her life, and she still struggles with her relationship to food strongly due to the social forces influencing around her. The social world college students experience around them every day is clearly having an impact on their diet choices and is playing a significant factor in the nutrition, or lack thereof, in their diets as well as their self-perception of their eating habits.

**Conclusion**

Overall, throughout the research, it became apparent to me that college students are facing a challenging reality when it comes to their diet habits. While TV shows and movies might poke fun at university students living off ramen and beer throughout their programs, the jokes become less amusing when you consider the reasons behind their poor diet habits and the future health issues that may arise. High stress levels, extremely tight schedules, and the social atmosphere that surrounds students played major roles in their food choices. Past research on this topic, specifically those discussed in my literature review, confirms my findings that college students are indeed struggling with their diet habits. These studies are repeatedly showing that
College students do have poor dietary habits that stem mainly from stress, social pressure, and time constraints. These issues all affect students’ mental and physical well-being. The future negative health implications are deeply concerning. While the study was limited in a few ways, specifically by a small sample size and inability to 100% prove the reliability and honesty of my subjects’ interviews, in comparison to past research on this unique demographic, the findings were confirmed that the issue of college students’ diet habits is broad-reaching and absolutely no joking matter. Our future politicians, scientists, doctors, lawyers, social workers, and the general adult public is struggling to balance this unique time in their lives and form healthy habits, which can have detrimental future health effects.

Consuming nutritious food is becoming a chore and, from the data collected, seems to be relatively inaccessible to many students on a consistent basis. Students who are currently attending university are the leaders of tomorrow; the implications of them being unable to take proper care of themselves and their personal health due to causes outside of their control should cause concern for society. An article from Erin Spain claims “A shocking 95 percent of college students fail to eat the recommended amount of fruit and vegetables (five or more servings a day), and more than 60 percent report not getting enough physical activity” (Spain 2014); these numbers are deeply concerning for the future. Poor lifestyle choices can lead to increased risks of illness and disease later in adulthood. Though college students might feel invincible now, these poor eating habits will likely catch up to them and can cause great harm, and even shorten lives. Advocating for the health of the public is a necessary task, and researchers need to focus on this demographic, as they are clearly experiencing challenges with their eating habits. Helping the future generation achieve a healthier lifestyle will ultimately benefit all of society and keep all our loved ones healthy and happy for longer.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Matthew Rowe for his support, academic encouragement, and expert advising throughout this process. This paper describes an assignment completed for Professor Matthew Rowe’s SOC 408 course in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Sociology major. I would also like to thank the staff and students of the Sociology Department at San Diego State University for supporting all of my academic endeavors and allowing me access to wonderful collaboration opportunities and resources. Finally, I would like to extend thanks to my family for their endless support and encouragement throughout my academic journey.

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Gender-Based Violence Against Female Students in Amhara Region of Ethiopia

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Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a pressing global concern, reflecting violations of human rights. Diving into the intricate landscape of GBV in Ethiopia’s Amhara region, there is an emphasis on the plight of female students facing unprecedented levels of violence within academic settings. Despite strides in legislative frameworks at the federal level in Addis Ababa, GBV prevalence in the Amhara region remains a serious problem. Drawing on comparative politics and gender studies, this research scrutinizes the legislative void and social impediments hindering effective protection against GBV. The study provides an overview of GBV, considering historical contexts, policy frameworks, and sociocultural factors contributing to its prevalence. It elucidates the multifaceted nature of GBV by examining two case studies from the Amhara region: Debre Markos and Bahir Dar. Data from these studies reveal alarmingly high rates of GBV among female students within school communities and their surrounding environments. The findings underscore the urgency to implement robust legislative measures, especially at the regional level, to safeguard female students from pervasive GBV. Social norms deeply rooted in traditional gender roles, compounded by poverty and limited educational access, perpetuate GBV in Ethiopian society. While legislative provisions exist, their effective implementation remains a challenge. Addressing societal norms and providing comprehensive educational resources are crucial strategies in combating GBV. Initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrate the importance of policy implementation and a survivor-centered framework to ensure meaningful progress in eradicating GBV. I advocate for a holistic approach that addresses societal norms, poverty, and educational disparities to foster a safer environment for female students and women across Ethiopian communities. I argue that female Ethiopian students in the Amhara region face GBV in academic institutions at an unprecedented level and the federal government has not implemented effective legislation to combat this issue.
Keywords: Gender-based violence (GBV), gender mainstreaming, gender politics, Addis Ababa, Bahir Dar, Debre Markos, Amhara Ethiopia, school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV), Ministry of Education (MoE)

Introduction

Violence against a person based on sex or gender that causes psychological, physical, or sexual harm either directly or indirectly is referred to as gender-based violence (GBV), one of the most pervasive human rights violations worldwide. Gender mainstreaming has been widely accepted across the world as a technique toward achieving gender equality. It entails incorporating a gendered lens in the development, planning, implementation, monitoring, and assessment of policies, regulatory frameworks, and expenditure programs in order to promote gender equality and combat prejudice (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2019). Women’s rights and gender politics are critical to comprehending the processes of social and political change in contemporary Africa, and this essay takes seriously the relationship of GBV, education, and gender equality in Ethiopia.

Through a focused study on the Amhara region of Ethiopia, I draw on research from the fields of gender and comparative politics. I argue that female Ethiopian students in the Amhara region face GBV in their academic institutions at an unprecedented level and that the government has not implemented effective legislation to combat this issue. In this paper, I primarily analyze scholarly research on GBV in the towns of Debre Markos and Bahir Dar, both located in the Amhara regional state of Ethiopia. This is supplemented by other studies on Ethiopia in relation to GBV and education. I will also examine the legislative protocols from the nation’s capital, Addis Ababa. This involves an assessment of relevant legislation and policies aimed at reducing or responding to GBV.

The Amhara region is a subnational province within Ethiopia’s republic, so this study contributes to the typical political science studies that focus on the national level. Additionally, this study contributes to the scholarly literature by focusing on an important developing nation in its own right, Ethiopia, and the region of Amhara, which are understudied in the overall literature on GBV policies. Further, this paper adds to the GBV, gender equality, and human rights literature by highlighting school-related GBV and its relation to the human right to education. I conclude with policy recommendations that may interest policymakers, development practitioners, scholars, and women’s rights activists in Ethiopia.

Historical Background on GBV as a Political Issue in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, GBV is a widespread issue, with numerous women and girls experiencing violence and discrimination on a daily basis. According to
Chernet and Cherie (2020), the prevalence of physical and sexual violence against women in Ethiopia is one of the highest in the world. Many women and girls are subject to harmful traditional practices, such as female genital mutilation and early marriage, which can have long-term physical and psychological consequences. Furthermore, women and girls often encounter discrimination in education, employment, and other areas of life that can limit their opportunities and prevent them from living safe and fulfilling lives. It is crucial for the government and other stakeholders to take action to address GBV in Ethiopia and ensure that all women and girls have the opportunity to live free from violence and discrimination.

This study focuses on the Amhara region in Ethiopia. GBV is a pervasive issue in the Amhara region of Ethiopia, as reported by USAID (2019), with a prevalence rate of 33.3%. This rate is higher than the national average of 28.7%, indicating that the Amhara region is particularly vulnerable to GBV. While GBV is underreported worldwide and certainly is underreported in a relatively conservative society like the Amhara region of Ethiopia, the USAID (2019) analysis found that the most common forms of GBV in the Amhara region are physical violence (20.3%), psychological violence (19.2%), and sexual violence (14.2%). These forms of violence are often perpetrated by intimate partners, family members, and other members of the community. The analysis also found that the majority of GBV victims are women and girls, with women and girls making up 80.3% of all victims. Why is the Amhara region facing a comparatively higher level of GBV? This study seeks to answer this question.

Another contribution of this study is my focus on school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) policies. SRGBV describes “physical, sexual and psychological acts of violence in and around schools, underpinned by unequal access to resources and power, and inequitable norms and stereotypes” (Parkes et al., 2017a, 7). For example, in Ethiopia, university students have reported SRGBV. Such violence has been confirmed by male students and academic staff members, who acknowledged knowing about GBV, such as grade rigging in exchange for sex with female students (Kaufman et al., 2019). There is a need to raise awareness about SRGBV worldwide, perhaps most importantly in developing nations like Ethiopia where women’s movements at times have been silenced by socially conservative, anti-feminist authorities.

Further, education is a human right, and yet too few discuss it in relation to SRGBV. The study by Yodit Zenebe Mekuria (2009) provides insights into Ethiopia’s efforts to achieve universal primary education despite daunting development challenges. The research critically evaluates the political, economic, and legal/policy reforms undertaken by the Ethiopian government to realize the right to primary education. Despite advancements in gender parity and overall enrollment rates, disparities persist, contributing to unequal access for children in Ethiopia. The study identifies harmful traditional practices (including forms of GBV), poverty, and hidden education costs, such as uniforms and stationery, as major obstacles to the right to primary education. It also reveals considerable challenges within primary
educational institutions, including a shortage of necessary school facilities and access to potable drinking water, sanitation facilities, and libraries. SRGBV is a newer area of research that adds to this scholarly literature on unequal access to education, particularly affecting vulnerable groups like girls and women.

The history of SRGBV policies in Ethiopia is an elaborate one, with a variety of initiatives and strategies implemented over the years. In the early 2000s, the government of Ethiopia began to recognize the need to address GBV in its policies and programs, and in 2003, the Ministry of Education (MoE) issued a directive to all schools to develop and implement a policy on GBV. This mandate was followed in 2004 by the formation of the National Gender-Based Violence Task Force, which was charged with devising a national plan to combat GBV. In 2006, the MoE issued a modified guideline, which included a number of SRGBV measures, such as the formation of a GBV review panel in each academic institution, the construction of a GBV policy, and the provision of GBV training for teachers and school administrators. In addition, the MoE also issued a number of other directives and guidelines, such as the National Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Response Strategy (2008), the National Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Response Action Plan (2009), and the National Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Response Guidelines (2010) (Parkes et al., 2017). Throughout the 21st century, Ethiopia has put in place a legislative and policy framework as well as clear institutions in place to mainstream gender in multi-level governance. This framework provides an excellent foundation for SRGBV prevention as it acknowledges violence as a result of uneven access to resources and power, as well as unequal social norms and attitudes. While these initiatives have been instrumental in raising awareness of GBV in Ethiopia, more needs to be done to reduce the prevalence of such violence in the country, especially in the Amhara region where rates are particularly high.

The Case Study of Amhara region in Ethiopia and SRGBV

Ethiopian women are significantly disadvantaged and underprivileged since tradition promotes male dominance in societal structure, leaving them disproportionately victimized by GBV. Amhara is a northern regional province in Ethiopia. Within the Amhara region, Debre Markos is located 186 miles northwest of the nation’s capital of Addis Ababa and 165 miles from Bahir Dar, the Amhara capital. A regional study by Desalegne (2019) analyzed data at two regional high schools in Debre Markos (a rural area) primarily from female students from several Ethiopian ethnic groups and between ages 15–20. Participants were questioned about their experiences of GBV during their lives. Notably, 58.3% of the female students reported that they experienced some form of GBV (Desalegne 2019). From that population, 67.1% had experienced SRGBV that occurred off of school premises, 19.5% had faced harassment by classmates, and 13.4% admitted to experiencing violence perpetrated by educators and other employees within their secondary academic institutions (Desalegne, 2019). As previously noted, GBV is an
underreported crime, and so it is possible that the actual percentages who experienced it in these two schools were higher. Regardless, the data displays an alarmingly high rate of young women who reported such GBV.

Another study by Belay et al. (2021) takes place in the Amhara capital city, Bahir Dar, where one might expect a more urban area to be more progressive on women’s rights than a rural area, but the young women in this Bahir Dar study highlight how pervasive GBV is even in the region’s capital city. Belay et al. (2021) find that 71.1% of the 788 female students (ages 15–24) in Bahir Dar have experienced gender-based violence, defined in the study as sexual, physical, and emotional violence; among the study participants who experienced this violence, 49.1% reported sexual violence, 57.5% physical violence, and 41.6% emotional violence. Two-thirds or 514 of the 788 respondents experienced sexual harassment, while 132 had experienced rape. In contrast, the national average of experiencing gender-based violence, according to USAID (2019), is 28.7% of women. In terms of factors related to education, low school performance and a lack of sexual and reproductive health conversation experience significantly increased the risk of gender-based violence, while peer pressure increased the risk of sexual violence (Belay et al., 2021).

This suggests that GBV is a widespread issue in the Amhara region’s capital and that it is not limited to married couples. The outcomes of the Belay et al. study highlight the importance of greater GBV knowledge and prevention in Bahir Dar, Amhara. It is critical to educate the community about the hazards of GBV and to aid survivors. It is also critical to hold offenders responsible for their crimes and to shield the community from further suffering.

Students’ access to training is severely constrained in locations where high rates of GBV, especially SRGBV, persist. When girls or young women resist traditional gender norms that limit their freedoms, they may be more likely targeted for violence by anti-feminist male students. Female students regardless of their acceptance of traditional gender norms face threats of violence, such as male classmates or even educators who force or otherwise encourage them to engage in sexual activities at a young age. Whether or not coercion is utilized, the cultural norm of men exerting their control over women’s bodies is perpetuated. The educational environment has a substantial impact on female students’ academic achievement. The schools in the above studies do not provide female students with a safe environment suitable to learn and excel. In order for these female students’ lives to change, there must be laws enforced at the regional level to protect these girls from SRGBV and GBV in general.

Social Norms at a Crossroads with Policy Implementation in a Politically Charged Ethiopia

Discussion
The Amhara region faces a comparatively higher level of GBV in Ethiopia for a variety of reasons. A variety of characteristics that contribute to the
prevalence of GBV in the Amhara area were discovered by a USAID (2019) study. These include a lack of awareness about GBV, a lack of access to services for victims, and a lack of legal protection for victims. Additionally, the analysis found that traditional gender roles and norms, poverty, and a lack of education are all contributing factors to the prevalence of GBV in the region.

From these findings, policy stakeholders working on GBV could improve government responsiveness in the Amhara region. In order to address the issue of GBV in the Amhara region, USAID (2019) recommends a number of strategies. These include increasing awareness about GBV, providing access to services for victims, and strengthening legal protection for victims. Additionally, the analysis recommends that traditional gender roles and norms should be challenged, poverty should be addressed, and access to education should be improved.

The prevalence of socially conservative gender norms, poverty, and lack of access to higher education contribute to the abundance of gender-based violence in Ethiopia. Detailing the frequency and causes of GBV in Ethiopia, Beyene et al. (2021) in their study find that GBV is more prevalent among: rural women, women with less education, and those with the lowest salaries. As per the findings of this study, societal norms have a significant effect on the presence of GBV in Ethiopia. Social norms are a society’s common ideas and ideals that affect its members’ conduct. Traditional gender roles and responsibilities are strongly embedded in Ethiopian society, and these socially conservative standards frequently contribute to the acceptance of GBV as a normal part of life. The study’s authors discovered, for example, that women who had suffered from GBV were more prone to have a spouse who was the primary decision-maker in the family. This shows that traditional gender roles in which males have control and authority over women are contributing to the looming presence of GBV. Women who live in poverty are more likely to experience GBV because they are more economically reliant on their husbands and have less access to services that can assist them to leave violent situations. Consequently, women with limited access to education are more likely to be uninformed of their rights and to be unable to access programs that may assist them in escaping GBV. It is evident that addressing these underlying issues is required to minimize the prevalence of GBV in Ethiopia. This might include activities to promote gender equality, alleviate poverty, and improve educational access.

Policy implementation is essential in order to ensure that GBV is addressed in a comprehensive and effective manner. It is necessary to take into account the various factors that contribute to GBV, such as gender inequality, poverty, and lack of access to education (Parkes et al., 2017a & b; O’Brien et al., 2016). Policy implementation is of the utmost importance in terms of providing a framework for addressing GBV. While enshrining legislation against GBV protects women, the implementation of the laws is crucial in order to transform the prevalence of GBV and ultimately the societal norms around gender violence. As per the Environmental and Social Management Framework for Additional Financing for Ethiopia COVID-19
Emergency Response Project (2021), recent implementation during the Covid-19 epidemic demonstrates that official educational and communication resources will be prepared and circulated to healthcare practitioners and other personnel in health institutions, including quarantine locations, in order to safeguard vulnerable members of society (Parkes et al., 2017a). Furthermore, warnings will be disseminated to law enforcement personnel, and a network for information sharing will be developed to assist victims of sexual harassment and GBV. A standard reporting method, encompassing referral and feedback, and a complaint channel, as well as anonymity and an integrative survivor-centered framework, will be developed and appropriately implemented. If this policy is properly implemented, this will help vulnerable individuals susceptible to GBV. However, this policy does not adequately challenge rigid gender norms that create fertile ground for GBV in academic institutions and in everyday life.

**Summary of Policy Recommendations for Ethiopia**

1. **Comprehensive Policy Framework**: Develop a comprehensive policy framework that explicitly addresses the multifaceted nature of GBV, taking into account contributing factors, such as gender inequality, poverty, and lack of access to education. Ensure that this framework is adaptable and responsive to changing societal dynamics across the regions of Ethiopia, especially in Amhara, where GBV rates are alarmingly high.

2. **Legislation Implementation**: Prioritize the effective implementation of legislation against GBV. While enacting laws is crucial, emphasis should be placed on translating these legal provisions into tangible actions to transform societal norms around gender violence. This involves training law enforcement agencies and judicial personnel to enforce anti-GBV laws effectively.

3. **Educational Resources and Communication**: Develop and disseminate official educational and communication resources targeted at healthcare practitioners, personnel in health institutions, and personnel in schools. These resources should raise awareness about GBV, its consequences, and available support services. Educational initiatives should extend to schools and communities to foster a culture of respect and gender equality. In particular for rural areas, creating educational outreach through radio programs “in local languages” is important to inform families as well as youth to counter rigid gender norms and raise awareness about sexual and reproductive health (FDRE MOH, 2021, 95). As previously noted, low education rates increase the risk of GBV. Thus, it is critical to improve access to universal primary education. For this, Mekuria (2009) recommends a holistic approach, emphasizing the need to address underlying factors, such as harmful traditional practices, limited income hindering children’s attendance, and child labor. A key recommendation is for the Ethiopian government to collaborate with NGOs and international development agencies like UNESCO, UNICEF, and OXFAM GB to address these challenges and provide incentives for parents to send their children to school (Mekuria, 2009). Such a collaborative effort could create a more inclusive and accessible
primary education system in Ethiopia, aligning with the principles of the right to education as a fundamental human right.

4. Reporting Mechanism for GBV: Develop and implement a standardized reporting method that includes components, such as referral and feedback. Establish a clear and accessible complaint channel for individuals to report incidents of GBV. Ensure that reporting mechanisms are survivor-centered, respecting anonymity and providing support throughout the reporting process.

5. Survivor-Centered Support Services: Implement an integrative survivor-centered framework that prioritizes the well-being of survivors of GBV. This includes accessible and confidential support services, counseling, legal assistance, and medical care. Ensure that survivors have a central role in decision-making regarding their own recovery and justice-seeking processes.


Adopting these policy recommendations creates an opportunity to create a more resilient and supportive environment that actively addresses and prevents GBV in various sectors of society.

Conclusion

Female Ethiopian students in the Amhara province endure unprecedented levels of GBV, including SRGBV at their academic institutions, and the national government in Addis Ababa, the country’s capital, has not established sufficient legislation to address this problem. Many Ethiopian women and girls face abuse and discrimination on a daily basis. This is especially true in Amhara, where GBV is rampant. While the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia has enacted federal legislation on GBV, two studies in the Amhara region, one in the capital city of Bahir Dar and one in the more rural town of Debre Markos, discovered shockingly high rates of sexual and gender-based assault among female pupils. I find that GBV is prevalent in Ethiopia, and especially high in the Amhara region, primarily due to socially conservative gender norms, poverty, and a lack of access to education and knowledge. In order to successfully address this problem from a societal standpoint, there must be an emphasis on educating the public on GBV, challenging rigid gender norms, and implementing improved policies on GBV while providing resources for the victims/survivors.

My research on this issue highlights the need to ensure equal access to education. Many donor countries and governments talk about the importance of educating women in developing countries, but too few discuss the SRGBV that limits girls and women’s achievements and human right to education. The critical role of education in empowering women, shielding children from exploitative and hazardous labor, preventing sexual exploitation, safeguarding the environment, and managing population
growth is universally acknowledged. It is widely accepted that education serves as a foundational element for the development of societies.

Efforts to promote education for women in developing countries often focus on increasing enrollment numbers, but insufficient attention is given to the complex issue of SRGBV. My research emphasizes that SRGBV acts as a multifaceted barrier, not only impeding girls’ access to education due to safety concerns but also perpetuating harmful gender norms. For instance, the fear of GBV may lead to the premature discontinuation of education for girls when they reach puberty, as parents may perceive their safety as compromised; some parents out of fear may then perpetuate the harmful traditional practice of child marriage, ending their daughters' schooling.

Addressing SRGBV is crucial not only for ensuring equal educational opportunities but also for fostering an environment that respects the human rights of girls and women. By confronting the underlying factors, particularly patriarchal gender norms, that contribute to SRGBV, harmful traditional practices, and gender-based discrimination, a more inclusive educational system can be established. This entails not only acknowledging the importance of women’s education but actively dismantling barriers that hinder their access and perpetuate gender disparities.

Recognizing the link between education, gender equality, and broader societal development is vital. Therefore, discussions around women’s education must extend beyond enrollment numbers and encompass strategies to eliminate SRGBV, ensuring that the right to education is safeguarded for all, irrespective of gender. In doing so, we can truly advance the holistic development of Ethiopian society.

Acknowledgements

This work would not have been possible without the assistance and support of Professor Cheryl O’Brien Ph.D., Department of Political Science at San Diego State University. Thank you to my parents, Azeb Gebrewolde and Yohanes Melaku, who are of Ethiopian descent and immigrated to the United States. They are my inspiration and have instilled in me the importance of remembering and celebrating my roots.

Works Cited


Are “Certified Sustainable Palm Oil” Eco-Labels and Schemes Preventing Rainforest Degradation and Injustice in Indonesia?

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This paper aims to evaluate whether the two largest sustainable palm oil schemes in Indonesia, the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) and Indonesia Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO), effectively hold certified members to the deforestation and social standards they advertise to consumers. Several perspectives are considered, including palm oil certification stakeholders, palm oil farmers and industry workers, Indigenous Indonesians, the environmental justice position, the consumer perspective, a humanitarian standpoint, and the response of the international community to create an overview of the palm oil industry. Using GIS data from accredited biologists, documentation of infractions from a variety of humanitarian advocacy organizations, and international reports and agreements, this paper makes the case that Indonesian ecosystems and Indigenous populations are immediately and disproportionately affected by deceptive certifiability of poorly managed plantations.

Today, the majority of consumers are complicit in the high toll of ecological and social injustice caused by unsustainable palm oil cultivation as it has become a pervasive ingredient in a large percentage of processed foods and goods globally. With a rise in the detrimental practice of greenwashing, the regulating agencies of the palm oil industry must be more closely examined, as palm oil is a cheap commodity that has historically been associated with high environmental and social costs. Examining the shortcomings of RSPO’s and ISPO’s sustainability claims, and thus calling the validity of RSPO eco-labeling into question, is critical to holding these agencies accountable—or demanding comprehensive industry reform.

Keywords: palm oil, Certified Sustainable Palm Oil (CSPO), The Round Table on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), Indonesia Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO), global climate change, swidden, sustainability, greenwashing
Introduction

Global climate change is at the forefront of an international call to action to protect our planet’s most valuable carbon sinks and the ecosystems they support, especially rainforests. One expansive threat to equatorial rainforests is the incredibly lucrative, but immensely detrimental, palm oil industry. Within the last four decades, the conversion of what was largely pristine rainforest to palm oil monocropping operations has more than quadrupled from 4 million hectares in 1980 to an estimated 19 million hectares by 2018 (Ritchie, 2021).

This accelerated deforestation and subsequent loss in biodiversity is driven by the rapid increase in global demand for this increasingly pervasive commodity. Developed nations, including the U.S., are tethered to this cheap cash crop, with nearly 68% of all processed foods and 27% of processed goods containing a palm oil derivative (Ritchie, 2021). However, society is becoming increasingly conscious of the product’s high ecological and human costs. For this reason, many well-meaning consumers are seeking more ethical environmentally friendly products that are vetted by reputable sources.

Certification Schemes and Industry Stakeholders

RSPO

The Roundtable Certification on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), founded in 2004, has nearly 3,000 participating members including certified growers in regions of South America, Africa, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). These members voluntarily adhere to the established environmental and social criteria aimed at minimizing the negative impacts of palm oil production. To be recognized by the RSPO, oil palm plantations cannot occupy federally protected reserves, procure land that was recently undrained peatland and wetlands, or operate where a rare or endangered species currently resides. Accredited third-party Certification Bodies conduct annual audits to ensure continuous RSPO standard compliance, and each RSPO standard is re-evaluated every five years (RSPO, 2022). Plantations must also pass greenhouse emission criteria, including upholding the Renewable Energy Directive supply chain tracking, or “RSPO-RED,” and the European directive “EU-RED” criterion, which encourages the use of renewable energy sources (RSPO, 2022).

The RSPO collective is regarded for its high sustainability standards and its widely recognizable Certified Sustainable Palm Oil (CSPO) label. Currently endorsed by organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the Rainforest Alliance, the CSPO certification is supposed to help consumers distinguish between products that protect virgin rainforests from destructive oil palm plantations from those that actively contribute to its loss (WWF, n.d.; Fiolhais, 2022). In this paper, I investigate the accountability of CSPO criteria endorsed by the RSPO and the subsequent organization, ISPO,
regarding how people and ecosystems are presently affected by these certification management schemes in Indonesia.

**ISPO**

Indonesia Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO) is another regulatory organization offering certification, specifically overseeing Indonesian palm oil production. Established in 2009, ISPO is composed of at least 800 certified growers who produce roughly 40% of palm oil globally (Indonesian Palm Oil Association, n.d.). With 56 criterion standards, adherence to ISPO guidelines is compulsory by the Indonesian government (Nnoko-Mewanu, 2019). The nation’s palm oil producers are alleged to participate in all UNSDGs (United Nations Sustainability Goals). Notably, in 2015, RSPO and ISPO issued a joint study specifying the distinctions between both scheme models, as well as mutually affirming the absence of affiliation with one another (Nnoko-Mewanu, 2019). Unlike the RSPO, the ISPO certification does not incorporate a labeling scheme advertising oil palm products meeting ISPO criteria (Indonesian Palm Oil Association, n.d.). The fundamentally different business models of RSPO and ISPO highlight how some agencies prioritize misleading sales tactics over honest representation. However, as I will demonstrate, there are accountability issues with both certification schemes.

Cornucopian business ideology, defined as the tendency to rely on technological “fixes” or on a free market economy to alleviate environmental problems caused by finite resource constraints, is often synonymous with justifying palm oil cultivation (Arney, 2014). Accordingly, proponents of this ideology point to palm oil’s versatility as a valuable commodity. Palm oil is an excellent preservative, a healthier alternative to trans fats, and has up to twenty times more acreage efficiency compared to other oils like rapeseed and soybean (Ritchie, 2021). In fact, out of 300 million hectares devoted to producing various oil crops globally, palm oil is estimated to only account for 6% of total land use (roughly 19 million hectares in 2018), yet generates 36% of global oil production (Ritchie, 2021). It is believed that with increased mechanization, the introduction of “better fertilizers,” and genetic modification technology creating “improved dwarf palms” (which stay shorter for longer periods of time and are easier to harvest), there is significant potential to increase yields without expanding plantations into virgin forest (DW Planet, 2022). Such improvements also make palm oil an increasingly alluring alternative to fossil fuels, with nearly 5% of produced oil palm currently dedicated to biofuel generation (Ritchie, 2021).

**IPOA**

The Indonesia Palm Oil Association (IPOA), established in 1981 to unify small palm oil stakeholders, puts a lot of effort into distilling what it terms “myths” about the RSPO, ISPO, and other sustainable oil palm organizations that issue similar certifications in Indonesia (Indonesia Palm Oil Association, 2020). The IPOA and its supporters express the need for palm oil as a primary source of income for millions of Indonesians and the nation’s Indigenous
communities, who have reportedly been lifted out of poverty through plantation employment (Indonesian Palm Oil Association, n.d.).

By 2017, 73% of businesses that incorporate palm oil into their supply chain had pursued policies that align with “no-deforestation” initiatives (EIA, 2018). Organizations like RSPO and ISPO are assumed to be adequately equipped to protect carbon sinks and comply with EU greenhouse emission regulations vastly better than plantations with no “watchdog.” As the “largest palm oil certification scheme in the world,” the IPOA expresses that it is imperative more consumers support Indonesian CSPO participants, who perpetuate an intolerance for the exploitation of habitat, federal preserves, and peatlands and wetlands (Indonesian Palm Oil Association, n.d.). Industry leaders with a cornucopian mindset heavily endorse what they term “sustainably” sourced palm oil as an essential resource that empowers Indonesian farmers and reduces overall deforestation, often while neglecting to divulge the destructive aspects of the enterprise.

**Humanitarian Perspective**

From a humanitarian perspective, such as from the point of view of Human Rights Watch, historically, regardless of CSPO classification, most palm oil production mechanisms have been neither empowering nor sustainable. Since the grim beginnings of the industry, colonialism has been deeply rooted in oil palm monocropping in Indonesia. Initially introduced from West and Central Africa by the Dutch in 1848 (Baudoin et al., 2017, p.1), the imperialist empire exerted unrestrained command of Indonesia, forcing mass oil palm cultivation in what was considered “empty lands.” By 1911, oil palm was a mainstay commodity, with the Dutch benefitting handsomely from its export (Baudoin et al., 2017, p.1).

There are parallels between the exploitative Dutch and contemporary oil palm tycoons. The palm oil industry is a billion-dollar enterprise, with a menial fraction of profits delegated to farmers and recirculated back into communities (RAN, 2016, pp.9–10). Although estimates vary, the consensus is that there are roughly 16 million palm harvesters employed in Indonesia, most of whom are non-contracted day laborers, who are extorted for negligible wages (Sandra et al., 2021). Oil palm harvesting is extremely strenuous and tedious work, as the act of cutting and lifting oil palm bunches—which typically weigh up to 55 pounds—increases workers’ risk for musculoskeletal disorders (RAN, 2016, p.14). The practice of outsourcing third-party labor has decreased company accountability and facilitated numerous worker abuses, including an absence of wage protections, high chemical exposure, and well-documented instances of child labor (Neme, 2021).

ISPO is alleged to have the “worst human rights safeguards of all oil certification schemes” (EIA, 2018). With a tolerance for child labor and virtually no wage protections, fair prices for small shareholders, protections for women, or accessible grievance mechanisms, ISPO scored the lowest on a comparative palm oil certification standards study conducted by the Forest People Program (McInnes, 2017). Critical differences between RSPO and ISPO
regarding worker protections include RSPO’s established grievance mechanism, supply chain transparency requirement (Mclnnes, 2017), and its standards to adhere to local Indonesian law into its certified member criteria (Nnoko-Mewanu, 2019). However, there are doubts as to whether RSPO members’ activities are being monitored and upheld by RSPO.

It has been confirmed through an extensive study by the Rainforest Action Network (RAN) that as recently as 2015 prominent RSPO members, most notably PepsiCo, have previously violated the most basic RSPO worker and human rights safeguards through dubious supply chain workarounds (RAN, 2016, p.3). PepsiCo stated in their 2015 supplier policy that their palm oil suppliers must “Adhere to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights... prohibit forced, compulsory or child labor, follow ethical recruitment practices, respect freedom of association, [and] recognize the rights of all workers including temporary, migrant, and contract workers,” but their loophole was to omit their “joint venture partner,” Indofood, from these standards (RAN, 2016, p.3).

Indofood is the biggest food company in Indonesia and is notorious for its human rights infractions in the ineffectively regulated oil palm industry. The former partnership between PepsiCo and Indofood reflects how the suppliers of major palm oil supply chains have been able to be a member of RSPO while violating basic RSPO standards. According to RAN’s findings, this fundamental lapse in oversight has permitted exploitation by primarily hiring workers under a “temporary” or “casual” status. This enables plantations to pay workers on a stringent weight-based quota, pay “casual” status workers less, forgo providing basic safety equipment for harvesting or pesticide spraying, and deny employment security or social benefits (RAN, 2016, pp.13-16). Many casual workers are barred from the opportunity to be promoted to “permanent” status employees, even if they have been harvested at a plantation for decades (RAN, 2016, p.14). Additionally, “kernet” workers, typically children who often drop out of school around or before 13—or younger—are commonly hired by harvesters to help pick up loose palm kernels and haul oil palm bunches to assist in meeting daily quotas (Neme, 2021). These kernet workers are especially susceptible to exploitation as they are paid directly by harvesters and have no “direct” employment affiliation with plantations (RAN, 2016, p.18).

Many oil palm plantations force workers to regularly apply fertilizers and chemicals with inadequate or no personal protection equipment. Spreading fertilizer without protective gear has been reported to have caused “severe skin irritation and eye infections” among plantation workers (RAN, 2016, p.15). Whereas the application of the herbicide Paraquat—which has been banned in many Western nations—puts workers who come into continuous direct contact with the potent chemical at extremely high risk of severe rashes; lung scarring; heart, liver, or kidney failure; and fatal poisoning according to the CDC (CDC, n.d.). Such instances of human rights violations weaken trust in RSPO’s and ISPO’s claims that they advocate for day laborers and oil palm farmers who are integral to the industry.
Indigenous Indonesian Perspective

Oil palm conglomerates are notorious for appropriating individual and community land, with ruthless abuses documented to have occurred under RSPO and ISPO monitoring. One instance includes a complaint filed against RSPO in 2018 by Transformation for Justice (TuK) Indonesia, stating, “Tuk Indonesia alleged that RSPO has failed to address complaints by residents of Kerunang and Entapang villages in West Kalimantan, whose land was taken by the palm oil giant Sime Darby” (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2018, p.1). The allegation proclaimed RSPO’s breach of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD’s) guidelines. It is reported that Sime Darby, an RSPO member, has obtained HGU cultivation permits to sustain operations on a subdivision plantation known as “Mitra Austral Sejahtera” (MAS). This subdivision produces oil palm on land that “overlaps with indigenous areas, without informing the indigenous people. According to this HGU [cultivation permit], the company has the right to cultivate the area until 2030” (ASEAN, 2016). Therefore, Sime Darby can violate Indigenous Indonesians’ right to free prior and informed consent while retaining membership. Such flagrant apathy violates the due diligence clause in the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights requiring legitimate operations to “identify, prevent, mitigate and account for their impacts on human rights, and have processes to remEDIATE any adverse human rights impacts they cause or to which their operations contribute” (Nnoko-Mewanu, 2019, p.39). RSPO is not the only complicit CSPO scheme to allow its members to breach basic human rights principles.

It is reported that ISPO, in practice, also does little to advocate for or mitigate similar abuses. According to Human Rights Watch, “NGOs have criticized the ISPO for its narrow focus on national law, inadequate environmental protections, neglect of human rights, weak monitoring and oversight, lack of a grievance mechanism, and poor enforcement” (Nnoko-Mewanu, 2019, p.38). The invalidation of “customary land” (territory that is legally “owned” and passed down in Indigenous communities) makes it difficult for Indigenous Indonesians to protect themselves from oil palm conglomerate abuses. Findings from Human Rights Watch confirm that ISPO operations have also “not followed domestic laws and international human rights standards that safeguard the rights of Indigenous people and their customary rights, especially as they relate to forests” (Nnoko-Mewanu, 2019, p.39). Currently, the lack of a land dispute mechanism in Indonesia makes it easier to suppress Indigenous voices, especially those of Indigenous women, protesting the fragmentation and degradation of ancestral land, excessive pollution, and decreased availability of locally obtained viable resources. For example, resources that women rely on to minimize gender-based income disparities and inequality include: reliable and local safe-to-consume fish, clean water for domestic usage and drinking, and materials for supplemental income basketweaving and other occupational crafting (Nnoko-Mewanu, 2019).
In addition to the initial egregious and unlawful procurement of land, the lack of environmental considerations depicts how the palm oil industry has further exacerbated the vulnerability of the estimated 50–70 million Indigenous Indonesians who rely on the forest. The environmental repercussions of unsustainable monocropping are severe and directly devastate entire Indigenous communities, which make up nearly a quarter of Indonesia’s entire population, even when its members have little to no stake in oil palm (Nnoko-Mewanu, 2019). It is imperative to consider how indiscriminate forest clearing not only threatens Indigenous Indonesians’ livelihoods, food security, and water sources but also compromises the preservation and transmission of the “intrinsic relationships” with nature that are critical to Indigenous Indonesian heritage and cultural identity (Nnoko-Mewanu, 2019).

**Environmental Justice Perspective**

From an environmental perspective, sustainability and palm oil have historically been two independent concepts. The entire process of conventional oil palm cultivation requires intensive land clearing, heavy fertilizer and pesticide application, and eventual depletion of soil nutrients. Fertilizers and pesticides are inherently harmful to aquatic ecosystems and Indonesians because they contaminate waterways and aquifers, lowering water quality and threatening the potability of water for people and wildlife alike (Nnoko-Mewanu, 2019). Additionally, palm oil mill effluent, a greenhouse gas-releasing wastewater byproduct—commonly known as “secondary sludge”—is another problematic industry output. Secondary sludge is hazardous to terrestrial and aquatic systems when processed and disposed of improperly because of its eutrophying and acidifying properties (Afriyanti et al., 2016). Subsistence, unintended changes in land topography, and increased flood risk due to the removal of soil-stabilizing tree roots and plant life are also side effects of oil palm cultivation (Afriyanti et al., 2016). However, the most conspicuous and notorious input of the palm oil industry is land clearing, most often through the process termed “swidden,” or “slash and burn” deforestation (Gatti et al., 2019, p.49).

Not only does practicing swidden eliminate an invaluable carbon sink, but it also re-releases sequestered carbon that has been stored in old-growth trees and peatlands, exacerbating global climate change. Millions of acres of forest are cleared using this detrimental technique annually in Indonesia, which has had major health implications, primarily respiratory issues as a likely result of emitted particulate matter from fires, on Indonesians as well as border air-sharing Malaysians (Gatti et al. 2019, p.49). This slash-and-burn process is usually repeated by every 25–30 years once the nutrients in the plantation soil are depleted (Fitzherbert et al. 2008). Most oil palm plantations, including CSPO, move on to another patch of forest, often illegally, to maintain maximum productivity further contributing to deforestation (Gatti et al. 2020, p.2).
To compile human health effects and its contribution to climate change, deforestation for oil palm is one of the leading causes of habitat degradation and fragmentation. This is due to the prolonged discouragement of diversity where monocropping occurs, as cultivated plantations are structurally less complex than natural forests. Plantations possessing trees that are homogenous in species and age structure with sparse undergrowth vegetation and lower canopies typically experience exacerbated environmental challenges, known as “edge effects.” This increases the trees’ vulnerability to desiccation, fire, invasive pests, and susceptibility to human disturbances (Fitzherbert et al., 2008). A study led by Cazzolla Gatti found a direct correlation between endemic species decline and the emergence of palm oil cultivation, including allegedly certified plantations. The analysis used remotely sensed time-series satellite imaging from sources such as WWF and the Global Forest Watch to obtain species distribution. Layered with data on RSPO-compliant palm oil plantation expansion between 1984 and 2020 from Lansat, a collaborative program overseen by NASA and the United States Geological Survey (USGS), which concluded that deforestation has historically affected endangered species in regions that produce palm oil considered to be CSPO (Gatti et al., 2020, p.2).

Gatti and Velichevskaya’s findings refute the legitimacy of RSPO based on their failure to adhere to critical species protections considering, as of 2019, an estimated 40% of the area of RSPO-compliant operations had experienced intentional habitat degradation before conversion to oil palm plantations. Further, “of the current 51 RSPO certified supply bases on this island [Sumatra, Indonesia], 9 are located in Sumatran elephant 1985 habitat, 11 in Sumatran tiger 1990 habitat, and 3 are located in Sumatran rhinoceros 1991 habitat” (Gatti et al., 2020, p.2).

Moreover, at least 75% of current RSPO members operating in Borneo and Sumatra officiated deforestation violating the 1990s Endangered Large Mammal Species Protection Act, with 23 of 27 current CSPO associations in Kalimantan existing in what was, up until 1999, critical orangutan habitat (Gatti et al., 2020, p.2). This research also revealed that three out of the aforementioned 27 suppliers of RSPO-certified plantations were “still fully covered by tropical forests... before being quickly logged, transformed into oil palm plantations, and then certified as ‘sustainable,’” as recently as 2003, 2005, and 2008 (Gatti et al., 2020, p.2). If it is permissible for organized CSPO operations to encroach on the habitat of endangered species as recently as 2008, it is evident that Indonesia’s biodiversity will continue to be threatened under the expansive industry, possibly through palm-driven deforestation that will eventually also be considered “sustainable.”

This data invokes an alarming revelation that, although there was an overall downward trend of deforestation beginning in 2007, the highest percentage of forest tree loss between 2001 and 2016 remained in CSPO areas (Gatti et al., 2019, p.49). The admissibility of misleading claims promoting CSPO as a product free of deforestation can be attributed to simple workarounds used within the palm oil industry, with the RSPO as a prime example. The specific standards created in 2006 by RSPO for their CSPO that
forbids operating on land that is habitat to endangered species do not take into account the habitat’s original or pre-palm oil denizens. As Gatti has reported, the certified RSPO plantations that were evaluated usually “contained little remaining forest at the start of the studies, after 2000” (Gatti et al., 2020, p.2). Gatti also notes, “It seems trivial that there are no reasons to evaluate the sustainability in terms of forest conservation of an already heavily damaged area. In particular, if studies do not account for recent land changes, concession certification would appear beneficial for the environment” (Gatti et al., 2020, p.2). In other words, while the majority of legitimate RSPO member plantations appear to adhere to forest protection criteria on paper, in practice there is an inaccurate representation of any substantial environmental safeguards that exist if plantations are considered to produce CSPO.

Palm oil is becoming a preferred renewable-energy alternative for conventional gasoline in efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (Afriyanti et al., 2016). Interestingly, a study conducted by the Royal Academy of Engineering on EU biofuels concluded that when factoring in the pestilent consequences of immense forest conversion, “the greenhouse gas emissions from palm oil were higher than using a petrol car,” when palm oil is sourced as a biofuel (Ritchie, 2021). This phenomenon is a result of converting forests and peatland, which are highly productive “sinks” that have the capacity to absorb and store tremendous levels of atmospheric carbon, into less efficient oil palm mono-crop plantations (Fitzherbert et al., 2008).

**Global Consumer Perspective**

Palm oil has been at the forefront of public scrutiny as a wave of environmentalism sweeps developed nations. Consumers are becoming increasingly susceptible to the phenomenon now termed “greenwashing,” referring to the tendency to exaggerate sustainability claims in an attempt to increase revenue. A study conducted by the largest privately owned American global food conglomerate, Cargill Inc., alleged that “55% of people globally are more likely to purchase a packaged food item that is labeled with a sustainability claim” (Casey, 2022). Companies are eager to fulfill the demand for new and improved so-called eco-friendly products, and their response usually involves deliberately downplaying parts of the supply chain that are harmful (Gibbens, 2022). Obvious greenwashing has been shown to negatively affect the purchasing power of informed consumers seeking legitimate environmentally conscious goods; however, the inadequacies of the CSPO industry thus far have been comparatively more discreet (Hameed et al., 2021).

Empty CSPO affirmations are lamentable as they often are publicly perceived to be overseen by some form of legal authority when there is often little to no substantial evidence of adequate monitoring of the CSPO industry. This in part is because RSPO is a voluntary non-governmental multi-stakeholder collective that was designed to “fill the gap that public actors have failed to effectively govern,” and thus is largely a self-regulating entity
(Brandi, 2021). NGOs often consider ISPO as “a greenwashing instrument,” and doubt the scheme is “anything more than an attempt to permit the oil palm industry in Indonesia to continue business as usual practices while being seen to apply some kind of sustainability criteria” (Brandi, 2021). Conversely, ISPO participation is mandatory for palm oil operations in Indonesia and is overseen by the Indonesian government, but it is evident that such a system is falling short of its own standards based on the numerous examples of ecological and humanitarian abuses outlined in this paper.

The CSPO label scheme is alluring to businesses looking to act under the guise of being ethical and eco-friendly because they are able to maintain profitability without necessarily verifying if historical or present RSPO and ISPO ground operations are compliant with advertised standards (Gatti et al., 2019). The findings from PepsiCo’s 2015 joint venture partner scandal reflect the permissibility of falsely portraying ethical sourcing in their supply chain while publicly retaining RSPO status. Similarly, “numerous stakeholders view ISPO as a smokescreen to convince buyers that environmental problems are being addressed” which ultimately dissuades public initiatives from addressing climate change and environmental injustice as it promotes status quo operations (Brandi, 2021). Minimizing the perceived effects of environmental destruction hinders increased demand for real forest safeguards by promoting, instead of deterring, support for the supply chain that fuels deforestation.

Presently, weak or absent oversight on certification schemes, whether commercial or inadequate governmental policy, has resulted in a low incentive for businesses to directly combat CSPO abuses if it increases the cost of palm oil production. In the instance of PepsiCo’s 2021 supplier standards reform, it is evident public pressure was the primary motivation driving the push for accountability within the conglomerates’ supply chain (RAN, 2016). Change implemented through vigilance against greenwashed campaigns, conscious consumption, and informed purchasing power has the potential to give consumers agency to demand industry reform. As I have outlined in this paper, goods containing CSPO are unlikely to be ethically sourced as RSPO and ISPO mechanisms have failed to safeguard the ecosystems and people they claim to protect.

It is argued that boycotting palm oil entirely is not a viable solution on its own as palm oil is considered a “land-sparing” crop with remarkably higher per-acre yield potential compared to other vegetable oils (Ritchie, 2021). It has been noted that a reduction in the supply of oil palm would adversely shift demand to less land-efficient sources since vegetable oils are often a highly elastic, interchangeable ingredient in processed foods and goods (Fitzhernbert et al., 2008). However, it is critical not to oversimplify the comparison based solely on acreage alone, as “it assumes the environmental impact of devoting one hectare of land for sunflower seeds in Europe is the same as cutting down tropical rainforests to grow [oil] palm” (Ritchie, 2021).

Although productivity is an important factor, this assumption lacks consideration for rainforests and peatlands’ higher capacity for atmospheric carbon storage to mitigate climate change, and the potential to support more
densely biodiverse ecosystems often composed of many unique species that are endemic (only found) in these distinct regions (Ritchie, 2021). It is integral that there is a global shift away from palm oil sourced from regions like Indonesia that support critical forest ecosystems and vulnerable populations. Along with the pervasiveness of palm oil in food and goods, consumers and federal policymakers should be wary of emerging CSPO industries, such as the increased use of palm oil in biofuel. The continuous push for unsustainable fuel sourcing through deforestation is problematic, as it is understood that “By using palm oil, EU countries are not only increasing emissions, they're passing the responsibility and accountability of these emissions on to other countries” (Ritchie, 2021). Therefore, the perception that palm oil-derived fuel is the “more eco-friendly” option compared to conventional petroleum and other biofuels based solely on the crops’ higher land productivity per acreage alone distorts the broader ecological and social implications of palm oil operations. The world’s largest palm oil importers—China, India, and the EU—must re-examine the environmental shortcomings of using palm oil as a biofuel, even if it is CSPO (Ritchie, 2021).

**International Governmental and UN Response to ISPO and RSPO Failures**

The Indonesian government has called on the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to help upgrade ISPO regulatory standards. In response, the UNDP collaborated with the Indonesian government to establish the Indonesia Sustainable Palm Oil Platform, with the Bahasa acronym FoKSBI, in 2014 (United Nations Development Programme, n.d.). In 2016, the FoKSBI forum launched a National Action Plan; this evolved into the approved National Action Plan for Sustainable Palm Oil in 2019, connecting smaller regional palm oil stakeholders with the ISPO agency. Although FoKSBI has enabled dialogue between smaller palm oil shareholders and policymakers, there are questions about whether FoKSBI has improved the problems associated with CSPO in Indonesia. For instance, the National Action Plan for Sustainable Palm Oil divides the palm oil production regions into six distinct districts that are expected to devise a unique Regional Action Plan somewhat independently (United Nations Development Programme, n.d.). The lack of a centralized policy and dispersed accountability within Indonesia is likely to exacerbate ISPO’s inability to ensure each producer is working towards reaching the nation’s environmental targets, and adhering to the specified ISPO criterion.

In 2016 the Indonesian government, through the Coordinating Ministry on Economic Affairs, put a moratorium on CSPO, forcing ISPO to obtain the input of multiple stakeholders including the government, businesses, farmers, and “civil society,” when drafting standards. However, it seems such action “has not resulted in significant changes nor solved environmental and social problems; civil society has also made clear how the Government’s moratorium on new licenses in forests has not sufficiently prevented
deforestation as it is a non-legislative tool with no legal consequences if not implemented” (EIA, 2018).

In response to these CSPO failures, more than 50 nations, including Indonesia and the U.S., have signed the New York Declaration on Forest Loss Pledge (NYDP, n.d.). The NYDP is a framework that adheres to the UN Sustainable Development Goals and acts by “consolidating various initiatives and objectives that drive forest protection, restoration, and sustainable use” (NYDF, 2022). The voluntary multi-stakeholder agreement also includes sub-national governments, companies, Indigenous peoples, and local communities who seek to collectively protect and restore rainforests (NYDF, 2022). Multiple participating countries have their own commitments to source only CSPO, such as the UK and Norway; however, because of the current limitations on RSPO and ISPO accountability, such efforts may be futile. The RSPO has alleged that it is actively working to improve standards to adhere to this agreement, while ISPO has been internationally “criticised for inadequate environmental protection, neglect of human rights, weak law enforcement and poor governance” (EIA, 2018). Presently, the lack of the Indonesian government’s direct and reliable oversight of the ISPO makes clear the need to seek alternatives to habitual palm oil or implement systemic changes to the industry - including the behaviors and standards of the importing nations, many of which are participating in a variety of international sustainability agreements, such as the NYDP and UNSDGs.

**Conclusion**

Evidence shows that palm oil production and consumption cannot presently be considered sustainable. As Gatti et al. note, “the ‘sustainability’ of palm oil is just an illusion that could facilitate, with certification, the expansion of oil palm plantations all over the tropical world and its global trade” (Gatti et al., 2020, p.4). With an industry that is so ingrained in the manufacturing of processed goods, careful considerations must be deliberated when considering society’s future relationship with palm oil and how we choose to regulate its cultivation.

With the rise of greenwashing and an absence of reliable government culpability and policy reform, companies that import palm oil to fulfill international demand must acknowledge the ethical shortcomings of CSPO schemes. CSPO certification labels convolute the entire story of the palm oil industry, which is one that has incited climate change through deforestation, the eradication of endangered species, and human suffering. The pervasive issue of unsustainable oil palm sourcing requires a demand for CSPO labels and certifications to reflect these schemes’ deficiencies accurately, with a subsequent mandate for systemic industry transformation and accountability led by Indonesia and complicit importers worldwide. However, even if there is widespread comprehension of the concerns I have raised, the question remains whether, until real policy reform transpires, the public will collectively use informed purchasing power to advocate for environmental justice and accountability for the forests and people in Indonesia.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Splice’s editorial team for the opportunity to publish this paper as an undergraduate. I am extremely passionate about this topic, and I am grateful to have worked with Dr. Elisa Sobo and editors Shaeley Hicks and Lucy Breitwieser to increase the quality of this paper (while significantly improving as a writer!). I also appreciate the meticulous effort of editorial team members who work behind the scenes to help undergraduates realize their vision during the publishing process. It is evident that the Splice team is dedicated to ensuring this journal is the best it can be, and I am thrilled to be a part of it!

I would also like to thank my academic advisor, James Murren, for inspiring and graciously helping me expand on a paper originally written for his Politics & The Environment course. Professor Murren has been integral to my growth as a student and was the first to introduce me to concepts I have since integrated into my career focus, such as conservation policy and environmental justice. I am extremely appreciative to have been one of his students and to have had his support on this project!

Lastly, I am grateful for the support of the SDSU community including professors who are devoted to teaching Sustainability and related disciplines, my CAL success advisors Paola Martinez and Michelle Lenoue, as well as peers who have helped me navigate campus after transferring, and the continuous support of friends and family cheering me on at SDSU!

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Leaving Fear on the Fire Escape

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Leaving Fear on the Fire Escape follows a young woman named Caroline through varying stages of her life. The story begins when she is nine, progresses to when she is seventeen, and concludes at her twenty-fifth birthday party. As she grows older, Caroline witnesses her fear take on different forms and shoulders the risks associated with each evolution. A deeply confessional narrator, Caroline documents her struggle to finally overcome her anxiety once and for all.

Keywords: dogs, soccer, fear, alive, birthday party

When I was a kid, I thought I knew what it meant to be afraid. I’m twenty-five now, so I know what to actually be afraid of, like global warming, the infinite unknown vastness of space and Hinge dates that may or may not be serial killers. Back then, quicksand, monsters from other dimensions, and anvils falling from the sky seemed the most likely causes of my impending doom. But I wasn’t really afraid of things from my Saturday morning cartoons. The first time fear genuinely introduced himself was in the form of a dog.

—

I’m nine. It’s the first time I’m on the big girl’s soccer team, the one I tried out for last July. It’s my first year on the big girls’ soccer team, the one I tried out for last July. My dad says I need to practice more on my own if I’m ever going to make it off the B team. “Never settle,” he said, “when the A team is where it’s all at. Never, ever settle for less than what you want, Caroline.”

I didn’t know it then, but I would soon ask him if he’d ever settled for less than what he wanted. But I was nine, and I didn’t know how to ask questions I already knew the answer to.

I roll out my size four ball, even though I’ll start playing with a size five any day now. My goal for today is to juggle for four touches, which is what I tell my dad. But the real goal is to keep it up in the air forever, flying as if I
could defy gravity with sheer force of will. I’d be so good that the girls on the other team would think I practiced dark magic, or that I cut off some guy’s hand and cast an intricate spell to be so incredibly, impossibly good. But the coaches would never find me practicing witchcraft. Magic would pale in comparison to my desire to work. To be great. To never settle.

So I’m on the front lawn, juggling. The grass is so long and thick that it tickles me all the way up my bare calves. Once, I offered to mow it myself, but Dad said I was too young to use the lawnmower and he was scared I’d tear my feet to shreds. I consider sneaking out to do it in the middle of the night, but I know Mom is a light sleeper and she would catch me. Short grass is definitely not worth being grounded for a year.

As I juggle, the ball bounces clunkily off all the wrong parts of my feet. It rolls lamely away, again and again, taunting me from the overgrown grass. But I refuse to back down. I refuse to settle, so over and over I pick up the ball and prepare to start again.

After a particularly humbling attempt, the ball rolls beyond the prickly grass and into the roughly paved road. I jog after it, scooping it up as it catches on a scraggly curb. As I pick up my head, I find myself looking directly into the beady, fixed glare of the neighbor’s dog. He’s very large, and the top of his shaggy white head must have reached about the same height as my nine-year-old shoulders. I notice he has no leash. He is looking at me, and I am looking at him.

I turn my back to the beast and march back to my yard. I prepare to start juggling once again, but I can feel his soulless eyes drilling holes into the back of my head. *Never back down; never settle.* I keep juggling.

*Tap, tap, tap.* From my peripheral vision he blinks. *Tap.*

He stands abruptly. *Tap, tap.*

And he is running at me full speed. The ball sits abandoned in the overlong grass. It is watching. God is watching. The other neighbors who hear my blood-curdling screams are watching. And before I know it, I am running.

His evil paws never touch me. But when I finally slam my front door, my voice is hoarse from letting out shriek after ear-piercing shriek. I put my back against the wall and press it there, so the fear cannot surprise me from behind. I sink slowly onto the floor.

This is when the tears come. They are rampant and vile and pathetic, and don’t stop for another three hours. My mother assumes a bear from the nearby forest preserve somehow made its way to our street. From the way I am crying, she thinks I have nearly escaped death. I can’t even tell her it was the neighbor’s stupid dog, because I can’t stop crying, and after five minutes
of trying to console me, she silently places a glass of water at my feet and goes back to flipping through her magazine.

When I remember what it felt like to be slumped in a pile of terror that day, the first emotion I feel is longing. I long to feel a fear so foolish, yet so concrete. From that day on, what was once my anxiety of dogs was now my terror. I dread big ones, small ones, loud ones, ones that sit in the corner and do nothing. As I got older, I pretended to grow out of it, because everyone knows it’s dumb for someone smart, successful, and stoic to be so deeply afraid of something that’s everywhere. But I rationalize it. Even though it’s not likely, it’s still very possible for a dog to maul me. Or kill me. Or kill me, but very, very slowly. I say it to others, and I say it to myself: it’s something that can hurt me, so it makes sense to be afraid.

—

Now, I’m seventeen, and it’s August. The 10th of August, to be exact. I’ve been with my girlfriend, Melody, for three years now. And we have decided, together, that we are breaking up on August 17th precisely. Because that is the day both of our flights leave to take us to college.

Different colleges. Different colleges mean that we can be together, but shouldn’t. Different colleges mean new and fresh beginnings that we need and lives that we must grow into on our own. Different colleges, each of which will receive one half of what was once a passionate love story.

And now, on August 10th, we are exactly seven days away from That Day. We are in Melody’s living room, and I’m doing the one thing I know how to do when I am afraid: cry. “Caro, it doesn’t have to be sad!” Melody says, wiping a tear from my cheek.

“How is it not sad?” I ask.

She huffs, and her eyebrows crinkle the way they always do when she’s thinking. “Sometimes things are wonderful because they have to end.” She pauses, her eyes fixed on a spot on the wall right above my head. “We were lucky to have experienced the love we did. And now we get to carry that love with us. Isn’t that so beautiful? So...divine?”

She’s right, which makes me cry harder. She’s always been right.

“It’s still sad,” is all I can think to say. There’s a concerning amount of snot dribbling its way down my chin.

She chuckles softly, and gently buries her fingertips in my hair. “Caroline,” she whispers, “I love you very, very much. But I also respect you. A lot of the time, I wish to emulate you.” Her voice cracks a bit, then steadies. “And I guess, most importantly, I have learned so, so much from you. Stuff I never would have learned by myself.”
I’m listening, but only barely. Mostly, I’m studying the way the dim light casts shadows off the curves of her facial features. Her deep-set eyes, her strong brow bone, her soft jawline.

The way her mouth relaxes, and how her eyes never seem to settle on one part of my face. The mole on the side of her throat, and the other one on her collarbone that sometimes peeks out from under the neckline of her shirt. It’s showing now, just above the scoop of what I know is her favorite sweater. I’m memorizing what her face looks like when she is looking at me. I’m memorizing how it feels to be next to her. To be with her.

Melody interrupts the heavy silence I have created. “Do you want to know my favorite thing about you?” she asks, leaning forward.

Through tears, I nod. Even though she is obviously about to say something positive about me, I am still mind-numbingly afraid.

She smiles. “You are the most alive person I have ever met, Caro. You are absolutely bursting at the seams with life.”

My tears stop. I wipe my mouth.

“That—” I start, but I don’t know what to say after. What is there even to say after someone tells you the most important thing you will ever hear about yourself for the rest of your life?

So I don’t say anything. I kiss her instead. And she kisses me back, even though it must be disgusting given how much fluid has been leaking out of my face for the past half hour. But at this moment, it doesn’t matter. I use my warm, naive, alive human body to show her what I can’t say with just words. Thank you for seeing me as I am.

And then I’m seventeen, August 17th comes, and we break up. It’s delicate, it’s human, but of course, it’s heartbreaking. I move to college and lie awake in my dorm room, muffling sobs with the palm of my hand. I turn eighteen, and the fear does not go away. Eighteen and I do not know where to put all of it. One night, I Sharpie the word “ALIVE” onto my hip, all capital letters. I consider taking the sewing needle from my closet and tattooing it permanently into my skin, but the image of Melody laughing at the foolishness of it all stops me. She’d think that me even considering tattooing myself like this would only prove her damn point. Bursting at the seams with life.

But without the ink in my hip, I have no concrete solution to my fear. Concrete issues, most of the time at least, have concrete answers. An angry dog could kill me, so I avoid dogs altogether. Easy! But people I love could leave me for one reason or another, and I cannot quit loving them in the first place. The problem is like a stubborn patch of mosquito bites after a long hike
in the woods, big and bulbous and so stubbornly there. What can I change to accommodate my fear? It keeps nagging at me—the one itch I cannot for the life of me scratch.

And then, one day I understand. It’s a Tuesday afternoon, I’m in line at the grocery store, my cart is full of oranges that were on sale, and I understand.

Nothing.

I can do absolutely nothing.

**Alivealivealivealivealive.**

—

I’m twenty-five, and I’m still afraid. Obviously. What isn’t there to be afraid of? I’m no professional soccer player. I actually quit soccer altogether after breaking my foot, because unsurprisingly, I was scared of further injury. I got other tattoos, but by a trained artist this time. My tattoos are in places I can easily cover up, and they’re small, because obviously I’m also afraid of needles and blood and infection and pain and decisions I could possibly regret later in my insignificant little life. I’m even afraid of new things, like incorrectly filing my taxes completely by mistake and having the IRS hunt me down to take me to jail. That’s a fun one.

And I’m still afraid of dogs, just the smallest little bit. I honestly think everyone should be afraid of that hellhound of a chihuahua who lives with that old lady on the first floor. And I’m positive getting bit by that thing would give me rabies. You know, ninety-nine percent of all rabies cases come from the bite of an infected dog. The doctors wouldn’t be able to save me, because everyone knows the second you start showing symptoms for rabies, it’s already too late. I’d start foaming at the mouth before I could even begin dictating my will. Anyway.

I’m twenty-five, and I’m getting ready for a party. Nothing excessive—just a small gathering of friends—but marvelous in its own right. While contemplating in front of my open wardrobe, I run my hands along the fabrics hung neatly on their hangers. When my hand brushes on something silky, I feel the night whisper something soft and sweet into my ear. So I let a little of my self-control drift out the cracked window into the cool air.

I curl my hair, spend two hours getting the blending of my purple eyeshadow just right, and wear that cream-colored silk gown that makes me think I might be a bit overdressed. I’ve already gone too far—screw it. I put on a pearl necklace and thick, red lipstick that makes my teeth look sickly yellow in comparison. I top off the look with a pair of glittery faux-diamond earrings my mother gave me. She said they were expensive enough that I
wouldn't be receiving any more gifts for the next few birthdays, or Christmases, or milestones of any kind, but I don’t care. They shimmer as I examine myself in the full-length mirror hanging on the back of my bedroom door. I look cheap. I look gaudy. I look bright and flashy and absolutely glowing. Tonight, I am baptized in the moonlight filtering through my bedroom window. Tonight, I am born anew.

I lied before. I’m not twenty-five, I’m actually twenty-four. Today, at exactly 10:37 p.m., I turn twenty-five. It’s 7 p.m. now, and my doorbell is ringing. I blink and have let at least a dozen friends from all walks of my life into my home. First, it’s the interns from my copy editing job at the local news station, then the most regular members of my sci-fi book club, then the cashier I always made small talk with at the supermarket because, hell, why not? As I flit from group to group, I examine the neatness of my apartment, as one does when they are caught up in the anxieties of hosting their own very adult birthday party. I eventually conclude that it is tidy in all the ways that count and lived-in in all the ways that don’t. Not that neatness even matters after someone has cracked open the first wine bottle. Soon, everyone has a glass of red clasped loosely in their hand.

My carefully done lips leave a curved imprint on the rim of my cup every time I take a sip. I’m the only one who wore such an offensive shade of red, so one could tell that the glass was mine just by looking at it. It sits there plainly on the table in front of me, casting a small shadow onto the worn woodwork. While one of my favorite interns tells a long anecdote about the raccoon in his basement, I’m compelled to do something I have never done with so many people potentially watching. I pick up my phone and attempt to discreetly take a picture. An attempt that proves to have not been very discreet, as the flash I forgot to turn off explodes in a jarring burst of light.

Marcelo, the intern in question, stops his story right at the part where he’s about to pull out the broom. “Hey Caro,” he says, “if you’re going to take a picture, you might as well get me in it. I am gonna be the face of the New York Times someday, so better start gathering proof that you knew me before I was famous.” He raises an eyebrow and flits his eyelashes, grinning stupidly.

Before I can stop myself, I laugh. I turn my phone camera up to face him and take my second flash photograph of the night.

A voice on my right chirps, “Ooh, wait, I want to get in it too!” and my friend Sierra, who I met at hot yoga, crouches next to Marcelo’s chair.

So I take another. And now everyone wants in, so I flip the camera to selfie mode and take one bright, bold, flash photograph of our smiling faces, half drunk and half overflowing with joy.
That stubborn flash goes off constantly for the rest of the night. Some photos I sheepishly ask to take using the growing courage pumping in my veins. Some pictures I don't, like when Antonia—we're both regulars at the coffee shop down the road—insists on becoming my personal paparazzi. Every time the flash goes off, something sticky andhorribly innate tugs at me. 

*Take your phone back and delete it. Delete them all.* But I find it a little too easy to push the thoughts away. The instinct passes through me, like a summer breeze gently tousling the branches of a tree.

At about 9 p.m., someone elbows their wine glass off the corner of the dining room table, and it shatters in slow motion onto my vintage, one-of-a-kind carpet. Immediately, I feel the tears welling in the corners of my eyes, because the one thing my body knows how to do is cry. But before a single tear can drop onto the red-stained carpet, Marcelo appears over my shoulder. He's typing furiously on his cell phone.

“Aaaaand,” he says, using a pointer finger to flick through his search results, “Google says that white vinegar should do the trick.”

And soon, five of us are on our hands and knees scrubbing furiously at my beloved carpet. Once we've done all that we can do, Antonia grabs each corner and folds it neatly into her arms.

“Don’t you worry 'bout a thing, Caro,” she calls over her shoulder, heading towards the closet with my washer and dryer. “Don’t you worry 'bout a thing.”

At 10:37 p.m., the group crowds around my kitchen counter to sing “Happy Birthday.” Of course, this would normally be my worst nightmare, because what are you supposed to do when a room full of people are singing to you while also making direct eye contact, uncoordinatedly clapping on the offbeats, and waiting for your undoubtedly rapturous reaction? But halfway through the song, I realize I do feel oddly and warmly rapturous. I realize that this would have been my worst nightmare if it had been any other birthday than this one, any other friends, and with any other version of my life.

Antonia’s long acrylics click on my phone case as she takes photo after photo, not even stopping when I drunkenly shove a palm onto the camera lens, smiling. The song ends, I blow out my candles and wish for the same thing I do every year.

I would tell you what my wish is, but I can’t. Everyone knows that saying your wish out loud means it’ll never come true. And my wish just started becoming reality, so of course, now would be a *really* bad time to spoil twenty-five years of wishing.

Although, what I *can* tell you is that my apartment is singing. Everything is perfect because everything is mine. Hell, everything is mine because I made it mine. My job, my friends, my home, my city. My life.
But as I’m looking around the room, I feel the happy buzz of alcohol draining to a dull drumming of my pulse against my temple. And while I’m not looking, the seething doubt I’ve been pushing away all night hits me all at once. How long could I truly stay in this moment? How long until everything I’ve worked for comes crumbling down around me? Mom knows I’m delusional. God, I know how this doubt works; it starts as a drizzle and becomes a storm, but I can’t stop. This happiness, this momentary joy, could be just that—momentary. How could I be so stupid? So vulnerable? Shouldn’t I know that anyone could betray me, send me back down that pathetic spiral until I’m nothing more than that scared little girl who just needed someone to—

No. I need some fresh air.

While everyone cuts their slices of birthday cake—red velvet with cream cheese frosting courtesy of my neighbor, Jayla—I step outside onto the fire escape of my sixth-story apartment, sitting carefully on the questionably constructed steps. I breathe deeply. The cold air shocks my senses, stealing the heat from my flushed cheeks and hitching it on the nearest gust of winter. For good measure, I breathe deeply again. I focus on how I can see the ghostly smoke of my breath leaking steadily from between my lips with every controlled exhale. In one ear, I can hear the laughter I have just left behind, and in the other, I can hear the muffled bustle of the half-asleep city sprawled out below me. Once my thoughts have slowed, I think of the dozens of blurry and overexposed photos sitting in my camera roll. But as the icy air bites at the tips of my fingers, I decide that that is a problem for my first full day as a twenty-five-year-old.

Instead, I look up at the navy night sky. You can’t see the stars downtown, but I pretend I can anyway. I pick out the imaginary constellations, collecting them. I think about Melody, even though you’re not supposed to be hung up on your girlfriend from when you were seventeen, especially when you know she lives in a city thousands of miles from where you’re currently sitting. I check if I’m still afraid which, as one would expect, I am. I feel woozy, I feel insignificant. I feel alive. And honestly, I feel freezing. I feel and feel and feel. I turn twenty-five sitting on my fire escape and feeling everything my little heart can possibly take.

I hear the window open behind me, and I turn.

Jayla’s face appears in the crevice of light leaking from inside the apartment. “Yo, Caro,” she says, “I baked this cake just for you, girl. Are you really not going to eat it? Not even a little bit?”

I smile at her. “Of course, I’ve been dying for a piece.”
“Well, good,” she says. “Come and eat the damn thing before Marcelo beats you to it. I told him three times to save you some, but I see his hungry ass eyeing it. Like, dude, I’m flattered you like it so much, but please.” She tucks a dreadlock behind her ear. “Also, I miss you, so come back inside for me.”

Somehow, I smile even more. “I missed you too,” I say, taking her offered hand to help me back into my apartment.

The room stinks of wine and foolishness. I look around, taking my last photo of the night with just my memory. The lights are dim, there’s soft music playing from someone’s portable speaker, and everyone I care about is here and caught in some conversation or another. Jayla playfully swats Marcelo’s sticky fingers away from her cake. Sierra’s teaching my book club members the Eagle Pose. The hum of my apartment talks to the city right outside the front door, and the city talks back.

I close the window behind me with a soft click. I decide to leave my fear sitting on the fire escape, under the invisible watch of the stars. I can always come back for it later.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my fall 2023 classmates in ECL 280: Introduction to Creative Writing, for taking the time to not only read my narrative but provide conscious and thoughtful feedback for its drastic improvement. I would also like to extend special thanks to Professor Emily Buchanan, for not only her professional criticism but for her encouragement to submit my short story to Splice.
Archaeological seriation is a method used during the early stages of site analysis to quantify how artifacts and features change over time, which guides further historical research. This paper performs a seriation analysis of stylistic changes in contractor sidewalk stamps using University Heights Historical Society volunteer William Ellig’s GIS database of contractor stamps in the University Heights neighborhood of San Diego (Ellig 2024). Three hundred eighty-six stamps were analyzed for stylistic changes in 13 categories, including shifts in contractor diversity, stamp shape, date configuration, and an increase in stamp standardization which reflect changes to construction laws in the City of San Diego and the State of California at the turn of the 20th century. Moreover, these changes may provide insight into the lives of individual concrete masons. The preservation of historical stamps inside of new sidewalk construction offers a timeline of cultural values that shifted from rapid development to prioritizing accessibility in the built environment. Sidewalk contractor stamps are an opportunity to interact with history in daily life, and they allow historians and archaeologists to better understand and engage with the cultural landscape.

Introduction

Often, nostalgia colors recollections of the past through a sepia-toned lens that tends to distance current San Diego residents from history’s influence on their everyday lives, even when it is right beneath their feet. In the San Diegan neighborhood, University Heights, William Ellig, a volunteer with the University Heights Historical Society, recognized that contractor stamps on the sidewalks we use every day are an opportunity to actively engage with San Diego history (Harms 2016). As an act of preservation, William Ellig created and published an interactive GIS map of more than 450 contractor stamps in the University Heights neighborhood (Ellig 2024).
In the field of archeology, seriation is a method used during the early stages of site analysis to quantify how artifact and feature attributes change over time (O’Brien and Lyman 1999:61-137). This primary analysis often creates more questions than it answers which helps guide further historical research. This paper performs a seriation analysis of William Ellig’s contractor stamp photographs, assessing stamp stylistic changes to begin to understand contractor culture in San Diego’s construction industry. This seriation analysis is a starting point toward understanding how and why stylistic changes in contractor stamps occurred over time. It also proposes a preliminary set of methods that might be applied to other San Diego neighborhoods to compile a database capable of dating stamps orphaned in time through the assessment of their stylistic attributes.

**A Brief History of University Heights**

While San Diego has been Kumeyaay land since time immemorial, the University Heights Historical Society shares on their website that in 1885, the University Heights area was owned by a syndicate with plans to build an extension of the University of Southern California (University Heights Historical Society 2024). Instead, the area became home to the State Normal School in 1899, which later became San Diego State University (University Heights Historical Society 2024).

Early development activity in University Heights is documented by an increase in approved City ordinances for street work in 1905 (Authority of the Common Council 1906:538, 540). From that point, the neighborhood continued to gain popularity due to projects like the Panama Exposition in 1912 (now known as Balboa Park) and the arrival of the trolley streetcar and trolley barn in 1913 (University Heights Historical Society 2024). Today it is home to more than 10,000 people and a lively business district (CityData.com 2024).

**A Brief History of Contractor Stamps**

In the City of San Diego, specifications for contractor stamps were legally prescribed in June 1902 by Ordinance number 1140 (Authority of the Common Council 1906:52–54). In 1924, the California Highway Commission required contractors to stamp their concrete projects for accountability and historical documentation (California Highway Commission 1924:7). At a time with rapid pace of development and a lack of rigid city-level permitting, sidewalk stamps allowed inferior construction to be tied back to the contractor, who then would be required to make repairs (California Highway Commission 1924:7).

By at least 1905, sidewalk stamps were discussed in technical publications as a standard tool for concrete masons (Atlas Portland Cement Company 1905:91; Stockbridge 1913:338). In the March 1914 edition of the national publication *The Cement Era*, Mr. George T. Schmidt of Chicago was credited with creating a custom-made stamp that included the month, day, and year (The Cement Era Publishing Company 1914:74). Custom-made contractor
stamps were frequently advertised in national and regional publications for sale by a variety of merchants (The Cement Era Publishing Company 1914:71; Lowe 1917:1). Whether purchased from a merchant or made in-house by the sidewalk contractor, a variety of shapes and forms were used to brand the concrete we use today.

Methods and Data

San Diego has an abundance of sidewalk contractor stamps that are frequently under threat of destruction from construction activity and the elements. William Ellig’s efforts to preserve this unique aspect of San Diego’s history resulted in the creation of an interactive GIS map of stamps from the University Heights neighborhood (Ellig 2024). Each entry on William Ellig’s map is color-coded by decade, and each data point opens a dialog box with the stamp’s date, the contractor’s name, and a photo (Ellig 2024).

William Ellig graciously provided me with an Excel sheet of the raw data from his GIS project that contained 467 entries with links to a photo of each stamp, date information, and the contractor names in a list view (Ellig 2024). Using this information, I made a Google Sheets table and color-coded each entry by decade to match his GIS map legend. One contractor stamp in the assemblage shows a date of 1909, but it was included in the 1910 analysis to avoid exclusion or having a category with a single entry.

Excluded Data

There were 67 stamps in the database that were damaged, illegible, or had no dates. Data was logged from these images, but they are not included in this analysis because they lacked sufficient information to categorize them. Several entries from William Ellig’s database were missing photos and were excluded from my analysis. In total, three hundred and eighty-six stamps were analyzed. The categorizations I developed are broadly applicable to most complete stamps in the University Heights sample and may be applied to other San Diego neighborhoods in the same periods.

Contractor Stamp Attribute Typology

I used an adaptive approach to analyze William Ellig’s photos and my assessment concluded with 24 attribute categories, which I condensed into 13 categories for analysis. Table 1 below lists an explanation of variable attributes and connects to Figure 1 for photographic examples.
Table 1 Explanation of stamp attributes. Table corresponds with image examples in Figure 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Fig. 1</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;=2 Lines</td>
<td>B, C, F</td>
<td>Text and dates are contained to a single line or two lines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;=3 Lines</td>
<td>A, D</td>
<td>Text and dates are configured in three lines or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rounded stamp</td>
<td>A, D</td>
<td>Text creates a rounded shape of the overall stamp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dash between date</td>
<td>B, C, F</td>
<td>The parts of the date are separated by a single line dash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other object between date</td>
<td>E, F</td>
<td>The parts of the date are separated by something other than a dash ie; period, arrow, or other marking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing between date</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>The parts of the date are not separated by only a space.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or two digit year</td>
<td>A, B, D, F</td>
<td>The year is represented by a single or double digit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four digit year, no month</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>The year is represented by four digits, but no month or day is present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day included</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>The date includes the day, any year configuration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standardized logo</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>The stamp is one single piece, uniform, not composed of individual characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City name and/or business address</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>The city name or contractor’s business information is included</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Across multiple blocks</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Expands across multiple concrete blocks separated by expansion joints</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1 Image examples of stamp attributes. Figure corresponds with Table 1. (Photo Credit: William Ellig via the University Heights Historical Society.)
Results

To account for variations in total sample size between years and to achieve a more accurate picture of stylistic changes over time, I calculated the relative frequency of each attribute and used that for comparison in charts and graphs. Some charts will show the total number of stamps with a relative frequency line to illustrate this pattern. The actual counts can be found in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>&lt;=2 Lines</th>
<th>&gt;=3 Lines</th>
<th>rounded stamp</th>
<th>dash between date</th>
<th>Other object between date</th>
<th>nothing between date</th>
<th>One or two digit year</th>
<th>four digit year</th>
<th>day included</th>
<th>standardized logo stamp</th>
<th>City name and/or address</th>
<th>across multiple blocks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>312</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Table of attributes and findings

Sidewalk stamps peaked in the 1920s in the University Heights neighborhood and never rebounded despite obvious improvements and changes to city sidewalks in later periods (see Figure 2). This time also saw the most variability in the number of unique contractors, stamp shapes, and date configurations.

Contractor Variability

There was a loss of contractor diversity as standardized stamps became more prevalent. In the 1910s, there were 29 unique contractors who stamped 104 sections of sidewalks in University Heights. This number increased in the 1920s with 239 recorded stamps made by 51 different contractors. The quantity and variety of unique contractors and stamp styles declined in the 1930s, as multi-lined standardized stamps from the City of San Diego became the norm (see Figure 2).
Stamp Date Configuration

The 1920s saw the most variation in contractor stamp date configuration. Most stamps in the assemblage relied on a dash as a date delimiter, but in the 1920s more contractors used empty space or a dot than at any other time; the contractor named “Downs” frequently used an arrow. The 1920s decade was also the peak during which contractors included the day in their date configurations, though the practice did not last beyond the 1940s. The first half of the 20th century saw more single- and double-digit dates than the second half, where four-digit years became the norm, signifying a shift towards standardization (see Figure 3).

Standardization and Stamp Shape

The prevalence of rounded stamps increased in the 1920s, declined in the 30s, and then rebounded in the 40s (see Table 3). During the 1920s, some non-standardized stamps were rounded, which was a conscious choice of the mason who pressed individual letters into the cement in an intentional arch (see Figure 1: E). The rounded trend began to merge with standardized stamps that had a circular outer border in the 1960s, and this continues to be the norm today (see Table 3; Figure 1: D).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>N=386</th>
<th>Rounded stamp n=</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>x=5%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16.34</td>
<td>XXX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>22.59</td>
<td>xxxx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>35.71</td>
<td>xxxxxx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>xxxxxx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 Battleship curve seriation showing the frequency of rounded stamps by year
The changes in shape may have a relationship to stamp text formatting changes over time as stamps become standardized. The frequency of one and two-line stamps in the first half of the century gave way to stamps with three or more lines of information (see Figure 4). The round shape and multiple lines are the result of standardized stamps that act as a set brand.

![Figure 4 Bar chart showing the frequency of line configurations and their increase in complexity as standardization of stamps increased over time](image)

**Discussion**

**Contractor Variability**

The variety of contractors and the amount of sidewalk stamps peaked in the 1920s and declined in the 1930s. There are at least two possible reasons for this decrease: either there were no more sidewalks left to build or it was in response to a change in San Diego City management. Both causes likely contributed to the slowdown, but regulatory changes during the period were important drivers of shifts in the stamp styles.

The 1889 City Charter placed streets and sidewalks under the control of the Common Council, where bids were submitted with a fee and approved under the agreement that work would adhere to the rules outlined in 1902 Ordinance Number 1104 (City of San Diego 1889:20; City of San Diego 1902). In the 1931 City Charter, roads were under the control of the Division of Streets, which may have kept work in-house and was not required to use a contractor stamp (City of San Diego 1931:47). This regulatory change would account for the continued decline in unique subcontractors, with the most recent documented stamps being solely from the City of San Diego.

**Stamp Date Configuration**

Ordinances for projects outside of city limits may have affected work in University Heights. The 1920s spike in contractor stamps that include the day may be due to a 1924 requirement from the California Highway Commission that workers stamp highway concrete with the contractor’s name and the date at the end of each day instead of at the end of the project (California Highway
Commission 1924:7). As four-digit dates became more commonplace in recent years, the day and even the month were more frequently omitted on stamps.

Most of the stamps in the assemblage had the month and year separated by a dash, but a few dates were stamped with a period or had no mark at all. An exception to this trend is stamps with the name “Downs,” which have an arrow between the day and year (see Figure 5). This is also found on one stamp by contractors “Hose & Lockwood,” (see Figure 1:E) so it is unclear if this was a byproduct of the way the stamp was made or a stylistic choice.

![Figure 5 Contractor stamp with an arrow used as a date delineator. (Photo Credit: William Ellig via the University Heights Historical Society.)](image)

The arrow could be the trademark of a particular mason. The Society for Historical Archaeology’s Glass Bottle Group traced a mold maker’s specialized “R” on glass bottle logos from the East Coast to the West Coast as he worked for different bottle manufacturers, perhaps the arrow has a similar story (Lockhart et al. 2015:43).

**Standardization and Stamp Shape**

Variations in non-standardized stamps may provide insight into masonry culture, from craftsmanship to literacy standards and the rigorousness or lack of inspection protocols by the City of San Diego. Based on my review of the changes in frequency over time, I posit that purchasing a standardized stamp might allow a company to hire migrant workers while still maintaining the company brand.
Originally, stamps were a technology that reflected a standardization and branding effort by contractors independent of their workers’ skill level, language ability, or country of origin. There was a surge in Mexican labor for construction projects around 1916, and the use -and abuse- of Mexican labor by San Diegans has a long history in the borderland region (Cardoso 1976; 403). Deeper research into sidewalk contractors’ use of migrant journeymen may be one next step of investigation. One stamp that inspires these questions can be seen in Figure 6, where a contractor opted to stamp the day and year and then put the month over a dash between them. Was this a simple mistake or does this reflect how much of the Spanish-speaking world writes the date from the smallest increment of time to the largest?

Cultural Shifts Toward Accessibility
At the turn of the 20th century, concrete was a new construction medium in the United States that allowed for major infrastructure development projects including highways and bridges (Slaton 2003:17-19). Today, terms like “concrete jungle” indicate a disdain for development, but it was not always this way. A poem was included on the cover of every issue of *The Cement Era*, a contemporary trade magazine, such as the one seen in Figure 7 (The Cement Era Publishing Company 1914:35). The poem illustrated in Figure 7 speaks to the sentiments at the time.
Contractor stamps may help pinpoint the moment when San Diego culture turned from waxing poetic about cement as a sign of forward-looking progress and development to seeing development as an obstacle. One possible marker of that turning point is in the 1970s when accessibility entered the public conversation and became more regulated because of major shifts in national and state laws. An article in the 1977 issue of Aging magazine discusses the removal of 600 curbs to create a wheelchair-accessible route through San Diego (Faris 1977:26). This shift in cultural values offers avenues for future research to assess if the stamps dated 1970 and beyond are related to accessibility improvements.

Historical contractor stamps are facing destruction as the city continues to evolve and grow. Documentation and photography of this chapter in San Diego’s history are more important than ever. Moreover, several stamps have been preserved with new concrete around them thanks to the work of William Ellig and the University Heights Historical Society. In Figure 8, the presence of raked lines in the new concrete indicates a slope that required additional traction. Further research should be done to assess if preserved stamps are in areas where accessibility modifications were made.
Conclusion

While the seriation analysis in this paper is merely a starting point for research on historical contractor stamps, it shows the potential for these features to tell a story of urban development and cultural shifts over time. The peak in contractor diversity and stamp variation in the 1920s can be attributed to changes in regulatory practices and agencies in the City of San Diego. Variations in stamp formatting from the 1910s to the 2000s may offer insights into contractor practices, masonry culture, and potential connections to migrant labor history. As stamps became standardized single units, they became more complex with multiple lines of text but also decreased in prevalence around the neighborhood.

Changes to contractor stamps reveal shifts in human interaction with the built landscape as sidewalk construction was less focused on celebration of concrete as a medium and more concerned with accessibility considerations in the 1970s. Further research may look at contractor stamp changes by year and apply this typology to other neighborhoods in San Diego and beyond.

Preservation efforts by organizations like the University Heights Historical Society are critically important as they protect opportunities to actively engage with history on a daily basis to better connect with the cultural landscape.
Acknowledgements

Thanks to my advisor Dr. Nicole Mathwich for her guidance, encouragement, and support on this project and so many others. Thanks to William Ellig and the University Heights Historical Society for the use of the contractor stamp database and their continued efforts to preserve these historical features.

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The Cement Era Publishing Company (Publisher)

Lowe, Geo D. (Editor)

University Heights Historical Society
Violence Against Women in El Salvador: How Social Norms and Weak State Capacity Create a Vacuum for Violence

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Violence against women (VAW) has remained a complex societal challenge for El Salvador, a prominent country located in the heart of Central America. This paper explores the politics of VAW in El Salvador, expanding on the cultural, socioeconomic, and historical implications of the ongoing VAW in the region. By conducting a comprehensive analysis of El Salvador as a case study on VAW, current and historical legislative efforts of the government, and the impact of culturally enforced gender roles, I present a paper that investigates the impact of VAW on all levels of society. This paper aims to raise awareness of the manifestations and impacts of VAW on Salvadoran society. It explores solutions aimed at societal change and the empowerment of populations vulnerable to violence.

Keywords: El Salvador, Gender-Based Violence, Femicide, Machismo, Hypermasculinity, State Capacity, Social Norms

Introduction

A weak state capacity has been shown in academic literature to present a problem in obstructing peace and security within a nation-state. State capacity refers to “a political hierarchy that contains tax collectors to gather revenue, a police force, and military to help provide security, and a judiciary to administer legal justice” (Dincecco et al.). A weak state capacity is characterized by the state’s inability to provide security, collect taxes, gather revenue, and administer justice. El Salvador is a country that represents a weakened state capacity and high levels of violence. Over two thousand people were killed in 2019 and one thousand in 2021 and 2022, respectively (Reuters). In part, drug wars between the gang cartels and government actors fuel the violence. Amidst the insecurity in the region, women and girls are especially targeted as victims of violence, with data in 2017 showing that sixty-seven percent of Salvadoran
women experience violence (NACLA). I argue that it is too simplistic to explain the high rates of violence against women as being a result of a weak state capacity. Weak state capacity does create conditions that could potentially limit the government’s responsiveness to security concerns, although El Salvador’s government has responded greatly (and some could argue successfully) to gang warfare’s violence. The government’s responsiveness decreased overall violence as seen in the falling homicide rates, which were down seventy percent in 2023 as a result of the mass incarceration of individuals involved in gang warfare (Reuters). Contrastingly, El Salvador’s government has intentionally failed to prioritize women’s physical security, as “gender-based violence and gendered vulnerabilities have become a form of collateral damage” during the crackdown on gang warfare (Zulver et al.). Thus, my argument is two-fold.

First, I argue that violent hyper-masculinity permeates gang and local culture, meaning violence against women (VAW) not only occurs at alarming rates, but the severity of these instances has been increasing throughout society. By the severity of VAW, I refer to the extreme forms of violence against women’s bodies, in which they are sexually assaulted or murdered when extortion payments are not made to gangs in the region or they are forced to become intimate partners of gang members (Zulver et al.). In addition, the increasing severity is reflected in a term coined in Latin America: ‘femicide’. Femicides refer to a deadly crime perpetrated against a woman or girl, where gender is an identifying characteristic for the intent of murder (Marcuello-Servós et al.). Secondly, I argue that El Salvador fails to adequately address VAW as a result of the patriarchal nature of the society and government. The patriarchal gender hierarchy places women and girls at the bottom of concern for safety in the region, even if the state rhetorically denounces VAW. The state’s responsiveness to VAW reflects a response guided by patriarchal values that have historically failed to provide security for women.

The research within this paper addresses crucial public policy issues because VAW not only violates women’s human rights; rather, VAW also provides a warning sign of danger, including war. As well as raising awareness about VAW in El Salvador, this research should concern policymakers in the Americas, including the United States, given that Salvadoran women often migrate due to the violence they face in their region. According to immigration statistics in 2016, over sixty-five thousand women attempted to seek asylum in the United States after fleeing El Salvador due to violence (Nugent). Furthermore, the work in this paper contributes to the scholarly literature in the fields of political science, peace and security studies, and sociology. This paper works to connect theory to practice, illuminating how patriarchal norms within a society contribute to and condone violence that harms women, children, men, and societies. This paper should be of interest to policymakers and activists as I propose ways to combat and ameliorate violence.

In the upcoming sections, I first provide an account of the background and relevant terminology to Latin America and this research project. Then I
will begin my comprehensive case study of El Salvador and present the relationship between hypermasculinity and VAW, expanding on how the state as a patriarchal institution fails to respond to said violence. I conclude with policy recommendations to support a transformative societal shift in the norms and policies dedicated to eliminating violence against Salvadoran women.

Background and Terminology

For years, Salvadoran women have endured the harrowing effects of VAW, which culminates in the alarming fact that El Salvador has one of the highest femicide rates in the world (Rizk). The rampant violence women face often manifests in sexual, physical, or economic harm. VAW is a systemic issue intricately connected to the weak state capacity and relentless tumultuous gang warfare cultivated by toxic hyper-masculine (machismo) beliefs in the region. Hyper-masculinity has been identified as “the inflation of stereotypic masculine attitudes and behaviors” represented through “callous attitudes toward women, and the belief that violence is manly and danger is exciting” (Corprew et al. 106). In this paper, I will use the term VAW, a form of gender-based violence, so I can specifically analyze the violence that targets women’s bodies in El Salvador.

Similar to hyper-masculinity, the term ‘machismo’ materialized as a characterization of a cultural phenomenon occurring in Latin American society. In Latin America, the term machismo is commonly used to refer to “a set of expectations for males in [Latin American] culture where they exert dominance and superiority over women” (Ceballos 1). The existence of machismo within the male-dominated society of El Salvador has constructed a territory of tremendous gender inequality, forcing women into positions of minimal influence over the institutions and systems of power. Regrettably, traditional patriarchal government structures (i.e., placing men above women in a gender hierarchy) have “ignored the interests of women”, thereby perpetuating a cycle of VAW that reinforces the entrenched machismo ideology (Pardilla 38).

Originating in Juarez, Mexico by Congresswoman and scholar Marcela Lagarde, the term ‘femicide’ emerged as a way to distinguish homicides perpetrated with gender as the focus of violence. Through the relentless efforts of Congresswoman Lagarde, Mexican authorities began investigations into femicides, and the term further popularized. As Mexicans’ use of ‘femicide’ increased, the term began to spread throughout Latin America, inspiring other feminist movements in South and Central America.

Gender-related killings (femicide/feminicide) are the most brutal and extreme manifestation of violence against women and girls. Defined as an intentional killing with a gender-related motivation, femicide may be driven by stereotyped gender roles, discrimination towards women and girls, unequal power relations between women and men, or harmful social norms. (UN Women 2023)
The conditions in which femicides occur vary, and they can be perpetuated by intimate partners, gang members, and others. Femicides can include sexual assaults resulting in death, “honor” homicides that aim to restore respect to the family of a disgraced woman by cultural standards, cultural preference to males ending with the killing or neglect of female infants, or deaths resulting from the neglect of government officials to address prenatal women’s health (Russel). The advancing hostilities perpetuated by gang warfare in the region assist in exacerbating the VAW, including domestic violence and femicide (Pardilla 38). In this context, women and young girls fall victims to horrendous acts of femicide, strategically utilized by gangs to consolidate economic and political leverage in society.

The female body becomes a billboard for messages. Female bodies are found naked, dismembered, and disfigured in the streets to display messages with the purpose of instilling fear in women, thereby, establishing control over their bodies and beings. (Almendarez 2021)

The result of these femicides is a fear that deeply resonates within Salvadoran women, who “bear” the scars of such violence”, contributing to El Salvador’s status of possessing one of the highest global homicide rates (Pardilla 44).

The Borgen Project, an organization aimed at eradicating poverty in underdeveloped nations, explains the severity of the situation with the alarming statistic: “one woman dies every twenty-four hours based solely on their gender” (Borgen Project.org). VAW in El Salvador is deeply rooted in the intertwined dynamics of cultural norms and is only worsened by the violent gangs entangled in warfare against each other and the state. El Salvador has a weak state capacity, which limits its ability to provide security and prevent corruption. Hampered by a weak state capacity in addition to patriarchal government structures that lack political will on women’s rights, the government fails to address and counter violence against women, who stand as opportune victims of daily violence.

**The Influence of Machismo Culture on Violence Against Women**

The manifestation of hyper-masculine culture is commonly identified as machismo in Latin American cultures; this form of violent masculinity encompasses traits, such as authoritative control, objectification of women, and depriving women of fundamental rights (Madrigal et al.). The instances of VAW and femicides can be directly connected to male dominance within the overall structure of machismo culture. Contrary to a common misconception that solely links gender-based violence to gang violence in the region, it is necessary to acknowledge that VAW permeates all societal structures, spans various settings, and transcends from domestic spaces into public affairs (Ramisetty et al. 480). The violence perpetrated against women has an intricate network of contributors (including gang members, government officials, spouses, families, judicial institutions, and others) that
create an entrenched machismo culture that subjugates Salvadoran women to an environment characterized by violence. These further decreases women’s outreach to police and the courts for assistance, as women often mistrust government officials who regularly fail to enforce laws or protect women’s rights. The machismo ideology exacerbates regional conflicts, as macho attributes of physical coercion, control, and violence benefit the gangs.

The dominant gender norms in El Salvador play an essential role in the recruitment of young men into gangs, foster a sense of entitlement to women’s bodies, and fuel an environment of toxic hyper-masculinity. Potential for societal transformation lies in the realignment of said gender norms and such change can be achieved through the inclusion of women and feminist men in initiatives aimed at addressing VAW. At the same time, efforts should bolster the state’s capacity to meaningfully implement progressive legislation toward eliminating VAW and uplifting vulnerable communities. By implementing an all-encompassing strategic plan aimed at mitigating prolonged conflict within the region and by increasing women’s safety, the state can move toward sustainable peace.

Women of lower socioeconomic status in El Salvador are disproportionately affected by VAW and are unlikely to receive justice through the courts, furthering the precariousness of their standing within society. The impunity of VAW in the courts and the lack of government responsiveness to women’s needs contribute to low rates of reports to police; only six percent of violent incidents were reported to authorities in 2017 (Nugent). While the justice system in El Salvador persistently ignores the outcries of women and contributes to an environment of fear in reporting VAW, women– especially poor women– are also persecuted for “violating some of the toughest anti-abortion laws in the world” given the patriarchal state that aims to control rather than protect women (Walsh et al. 2016). This persecution of women while simultaneously ignoring their cries for justice underscores the state’s lack of political will to secure the physical safety of women. Despite the ability for rigid judicial crackdowns, as seen with the over-persecution of impoverished women for offenses regarding abortions, there is a noticeable lack of crackdowns on VAW perpetrators and a lack of protections (e.g., adequate healthcare) for pregnant and non-pregnant women. This showcases the patriarchal gender hierarchy in that the state devalues women’s lives and bodily autonomy.

The judicial system in El Salvador does little to shield women from the daily violence they face, and it also persecutes women suspected of having abortions (e.g., miscarriages that may be prosecuted as an abortion). The vacancy of viable economic opportunities for women of lower socioeconomic backgrounds relegates them as dependent upon males for survival in a patriarchal society. Lacking alternative opportunities for women preserves the cycle of VAW, making it nearly impossible for women to safely remove themselves from domestic violence or other forms of the daily violence they encounter.
Legal-Judicial Infrastructure of El Salvador

While VAW has impacted the female population in El Salvador, the government has demonstrated an awareness of the need to address the “disproportionate violence women experience, especially in homicide rates” (Walsh et al. 2016). In 2011, legislative measures were enacted to address VAW judicially, implementing a fifty-year sentence for males convicted of “femicide”; this marks a substantial twenty-year increase above the standard penalty for homicide. However, the classification of only seven out of two hundred and seventy cases as ‘femicides’ in a year, with only three obtaining convictions, undermines the intent of the legislation and highlights a gap between the legislative intent and application (Edgardo).

It must be acknowledged that initiatives addressing VAW were compelled by civil society “advocates on the national and international level working in coordination with a few key allies within the state,” highlighting the long-standing political resistance to meaningfully addressing women’s issues without the pressure of civil society (Walsh et al. 2016). Political figures and bureaucrats actively seek to undermine the implementation of laws to maintain the established patriarchal status quo. The entrenchment of machismo culture among political elites assists in the continuation of gender norms affecting the application of laws, as evidenced by the ineffective 2011 femicide law. Progressive laws are perceived as a challenge to the long-standing patriarchal culture that is seen by social conservatives to be integral to the functioning of El Salvador’s society. The deliberate choice of political elites to prevent the full implementation of the law has been seen within all levels of government, reflecting the hesitancy to address VAW as women’s rights policy change threatens the patriarchal status quo.

The controversial topic of abortion presents another challenge to women’s rights in El Salvador. A total abortion ban has been enforced in the region for the past twenty-five years and has been reaffirmed by the current President Bukele and Congress, indicating a mixing of VAW and machismo politics. The unwavering stance on abortion, with no exceptions even in instances of sexual assault or maternal health risk, leaves women susceptible to persecution in cases of miscarriages (Oberman 13). The ban, in conjunction with the highest rate of teen pregnancy in Latin America, creates a cycle of violence that entraps women, placing economic strain and societal pressure upon them (Oberman 136). About thirty-two percent of all births can be attributed to teen pregnancy, and this alarming rate has been partly explained by El Salvador’s police figures claiming, “two-thirds of rape victims are under fifteen years old” (Lakhani et al.). It is important to analyze “femicide and rape, as they function as tools to control women’s bodies” where “in some instances, [they] may result in pregnancies” (Guaman). The ban’s explicit exclusion of abortion in pregnancies resulting from sexual assault forces women to carry a pregnancy resulting from VAW to term, further
highlighting the state’s lack of concern for women’s right to a life free of violence.

For women of lower socioeconomic status, the lack of access to necessary medical services and care attracts women to seek relief from illegal and unsafe abortion practices. These women also become targets of relentless persecution following miscarriages or stillbirths, being seen as abortion in the eyes of the judicial system. In conflict settings, such as El Salvador, the availability of obstetric care diminishes, increasing the difficulty of women being able to access essential services related to maternal health. The overall patriarchal nature of the government, as expressed by President Bukele, fails to afford women the right to determine their own medical decisions; this coupled with public support for the abortion ban reflects the male-dominated, machismo-influenced society. These factors create a despairing framework for women’s reproductive rights within the region, and they reflect the backdrop of VAW and women’s lack of physical security, including in reproduction.

Valerie M. Hudson et al. ‘s findings in Chapter Four of Sex and World Peace shed light on the vital role women have in determining a state’s level of peacefulness. Their findings reveal a statistically significant relationship between the physical security of women and the peacefulness of a state and its level of peacefulness regarding the international community (Hudson et al.). Hudson et al. states that while the treatment of women is deeply embedded in a region’s culture, it is amenable to change, as seen by the advancement of women’s voting rights globally. By expanding beyond gender stereotypes and acknowledging the connection between women’s security and peace, policymakers can leverage the Hudson et al. findings as a potential political initiative for advancing women’s rights. In other words, there is an opportunity for President Bukele and the government to address the ongoing issue of VAW through the perspective of broader conflict prevention, highlighting that the impact would expand beyond women and would improve the overall peace and stability of the nation.

**Challenges in El Salvador’s State Capacity to Address Violence Against Women**

The chasm between the legislative intent and implementation of VAW laws is not simply a result of the weak state capacity of the El Salvadoran government. President Bukele has currently undertaken an extensive crackdown on gang violence while continuing to sideline the persistent issue of VAW. As expounded on earlier, the legislative efforts, such as the femicide law, appear to be progressive, but the reality is “gender and structural inequalities” prevent cases of VAW from receiving significant attention within the justice system (Walsh et al. 2016). The government has demonstrated a capacity to address certain challenges, as evidenced by the successful reduction of homicide rates from 105 per 100,000 people in 2015 to eight per 100,000 in 2022; the significantly lower homicide rate can be attributed to the ongoing targeted efforts against gang violence by Bukele
(Zielonka). One might assume that the government’s crackdown on gangs would limit its capacity to deal with VAW. However, cracking down on VAW would not cost more than the militarized crackdown on gangs. The persistent cultural perception that VAW is a “women’s” issue relegates it as less deserving of resources in comparison to other public policy issues. In short, it is not the presence of weak state capacity that prevents the government from cracking down on VAW.

The deep-rooted machismo culture permeates all facets of Salvadoran society, encompassing the government officials and elites, manifesting in patriarchal policy decision making. The beliefs regarding women transcend into decision-making processes, where VAW is not prioritized. The state has displayed a capacity to handle societal challenges, such as gang violence. Yet, the hesitancy to address VAW stems from the resistance of political elites who have been influenced by a hyper-masculine culture, causing them to resist the implementation of laws that adequately address VAW. The societal narrative surrounding VAW as a “woman’s” issue allows government officials in a patriarchal state to not address VAW within the male-dominated construction of El Salvadoran society.

The Importance of Integrating Women’s Perspectives

Grassroots women’s organizations hold considerable influence in not only advancing women’s rights but also advocating for causes related to land, the environment, and indigenous rights throughout Latin America (Gatehouse 25). Indigenous women’s involvement in grassroots activism is rooted in the need to address machismo culture and heightened by the inequalities they face based on gender and their impoverishment. The outright patriarchal and anti-feminist position of government leadership makes grassroots efforts led by women a crucial avenue of activism, utilizing a “bottom-up” approach to achieve the amplification of women’s voices and issues (Hudson et al. 157).

To achieve meaningful change in El Salvador, an essential step is the inclusion of substantive representation of women. While El Salvador is often touted as an example of a successful post-civil war peace process in 1992, Kara Ellerby challenges this view through a gender-conscious lens. Although women were present at the peace negotiations, their inclusion did not guarantee substantive representation, as the women refrained from advocating women’s issues, fearing the labeling of ‘extremist’ by their male counterparts (Ellerby 2). The lack of meaningful engagement by women during the peace negotiations is deemed as a lost “window of opportunity”, Ellerby explains, as the transitional phase of peace negotiations offered a unique chance to advocate for women’s issues. Regrettably, the reluctance to address women’s issues during this important period has allowed for the strengthening of hyper-masculine gender roles within El Salvador, and also further align with gang culture.

The lack of substantive representation for women during the 1992 peace negotiations has allowed for the dominating hyper-masculine values, halting progress to transition toward a more gender-inclusive and peaceful society in
El Salvador. Indeed, in the following decades, macho male-dominant gangs have terrorized men and women throughout El Salvador. As the 1992 opportunity for societal transformation excluded women, El Salvador remained a country facing armed conflict. In the future, political leaders should include women and their concerns, such as addressing VAW, to mitigate the risk of conflict and increase the likelihood of peace.

Conclusion

In this case study of El Salvador, I find that hyper-masculinity (a violent machismo) pervades both gang and local cultures in the region, contributing to a prevalence of VAW, with the seriousness of these instances escalating across multiple societal spheres. Subsequently, I also showed that the inadequate responsiveness of El Salvador’s government to address VAW originates from deeply entrenched patriarchal characteristics both in society and government structures. This paper highlights the “lack of consistency and accountability for violence against women” in the region, as stated by the U.S. Embassy of El Salvador. The hyper-masculine culture permeates every level of society and inflicts a significant impact on several aspects of women’s lives. VAW serves not only as a tool for regional gang dynamics but is also reflective of patriarchal gender norms and hyper-masculine beliefs prevalent in the region.

The state’s capacity to address this issue is compromised by gender norms, with political elites and government officials displaying clear hesitancy to honorably engage with legislation aimed at mitigating VAW. Despite the demonstrated capacity to handle regional conflicts, as evidenced by President Bukele’s robust crackdown on gang violence, the machismo culture creates fertile ground for VAW and fails to address this human rights issue. Political elites perpetuate the cycle of VAW by aligning with the hyper-masculine culture, creating an environment that accepts the violation of women’s rights at all levels of society and aims to control women’s bodies, including pregnant ones.

To meaningfully address the growing challenge of VAW, political elites need to reframe their efforts to achieve peace within the region. Creating initiatives against VAW and positioning them as opportunities to diminish the greater risk of violence could garner public support. Due to the statistically significant relationship between women’s physical security and the peacefulness of a state, as per Hudson et al., addressing VAW must be prioritized as a preventative measure to armed conflict in El Salvador. Importantly, substantive representation for women needs to be implemented across political, economic, and social arenas for women to have the agency to advocate for women’s rights without being excluded or labeled as ‘extreme.’ There must be a transformative shift in the cultural perceptions surrounding women and VAW. A dismantling of hyper-masculine culture and a shift from patriarchal to feminist or feminist-friendly gender norms is essential to alleviate VAW and raise boys and girls in a healthier society. These efforts combined with legislative interventions, such as funding all-age youth
programs for education on healthy relationships and healthy gender norms, create a potential to instigate genuine and transformative change in El Salvador. Creating a society where the rights and overall security of women are protected would increase peace for all Salvadorans.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my immense gratitude for the endless support and encouragement I received from my loved ones during this research process. First, I would like to thank Professor O’Brien for being an outstanding source of knowledge and mentorship during the writing process. Your support and academic guidance will remain with me forever.

Secondly, to my family thank you for continuously supporting me in my academic pursuits. Dad, thank you for igniting my passion for politics and international security, I will forever cherish our political discourse. To my mom, thank you for instilling in me a relentless work ethic and mindset allowing me to pursue academic greatness.

Finally, to my partner, thank you for your endless support and belief in me, you flourished my dreams and made me believe in my abilities. As a woman of color, I acknowledge the privilege and honor it is to be afforded the opportunity to pursue higher education. I hope to one day stand as a pillar of hope to young women of color everywhere that there is space in academia for our efforts.

I will end with the words that inspire my boundless efforts in higher education research: “Girls, I know it has not been easy, but I hope that you’ve seen that with hard work, determination, and love it can be done” - Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson.

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Shocking Tales of Domesticity in EC Comics and the Code that Altered Them

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A comparison of familial representations in Entertaining Comics’ (EC) Shock Suspenstories (1952-1955) with Shock Suspenstories’ successor from EC, Tales Designed to Carry an Impact (1955-1956) demonstrates how the 1954 Comics Code changed the images of, and storylines about, post-World War II domesticity. Three main goals guide the analysis that led me to this conclusion: identifying characters that express standards of beauty and domesticity, tracing storylines that depict the dynamics shared by said characters, and examining text that illuminates ideas central to the time of its creation either through its tone or wording. Augmenting the study is a review of interviews of EC contributors in the years following the changes the Code brought. Scholars have explored how these stories illuminate ideas of race (Whitted 2019), censorship (Yezbick 2015), and gender (Green 2012); yet none have investigated publications from EC with the intent of understanding how EC writers and artists commented on American domesticity following World War II. The published post-code issues of Impact, while maintaining a similar formula to other EC stories like a ‘shock ending’ or ‘preachy’ intent, moves away from the obvious and gory depictions of domesticity — domestic abuse, disobedience, parenticidal children, and even confronting the standards of paternity and maternity — to which readers of many pre-Code EC publications, specifically Shock Suspenstories, would have grown accustomed and arguably still wanted.

Key Words: Entertaining Comics, Comic books, Domesticity, Gender, Visual culture, Crime, Horror, Censorship
Introduction

In the February 1952 issue of the Ladies’ Home Journal an article under their “How America Lives” series introduced the Schmidt family.1 “The Schmidts of Cincinnati” were a White, middle-class family of six leading the hegemonically ideal suburban life: two loving parents raising four boys and enjoying domestic bliss. Carl is the handsome provider who greets his wife with armfuls of groceries after every payday and Patricia is the perfect housewife — “twenty-four-hour nurse-maid, cook, housekeeper, washwoman, governess, and bottle washer... the kind of blonde men prefer.”2 The faces of Chuck, Steve, Jackie, and Jeff bordered the left side of the first page along with a sentence to introduce the audience to their sweet, perhaps cheeky, even mischievous personalities. Spanning across the multiple page story are more photos of the boys and their parents, presenting even the most audacious sides of the children as manageable and tolerable.

Compare the Schmidts with another couple, the Berdeens, whose tumultuous relationship was introduced by writer Al Feldstein and artist Jack Kamen, in the same month of the same year in Entertaining Comics’ first issue of Shock Suspenstories.3 Newlyweds Eleanor Berdeen, a trim, beautiful blonde, and Arthur Berdeen, a slender, dark and handsome man, had recently married and moved into a house that Arthur had purchased just for the two of them. Arthur, much like Carl Schmidt, worked hard for the paycheck that would provide for both him and Eleanor while Eleanor stayed home and maintained the order of the house — an order that Arthur established and set a specific standard for. As time went on for the newlyweds, the specificity of Arthur’s standards began to weigh on Eleanor, whose housework Arthur had often berated.

Eleanor, who had broken a frame that was hanging on the wall, ventured down into the basement to grab a screw from one of Arthur’s labeled nuts-and-bolts jars only to accidentally break the jar. Upon finding out, Arthur, fueled by rage, began to scream at Eleanor. Eleanor grabbed a tool beneath the shelves of jars and hit Arthur with it. Later, talking with detectives, Eleanor revealed that she had organized Arthur’s remains into his beloved glass jars, labeling the jars according to which body part each held. She wanted to prove to Arthur that she could do a “neat job”.4

The story of the Berdeens is of course fictional, a part of the new-trend line published by Entertaining Comics. Their story, and the many stories of dynamics like theirs, are featured throughout the eighteen issues of Shock Suspenstories. While the Berdeens and Schmidts share many differences, predominantly that the Schmidts were a real family and the Berdeens were not, their similarities outline a clear idealized image that one publisher chose to emphasize and another chose to mock. (Figure 1.1 & 1.2)
Figure 1.1 Children Chuck, Steve, Jackie, and Jeff — together with their parents, Carl and Patricia, painted a picture of ideal domesticity on the pages of *Ladies Home Journal* (1952) ("How America Lives: The Schmidts of Cincinnati," *Ladies Home Journal* 69 [February 1952], p.127)
The existence of both the Schmidts and Berdeens in popular US publications suggests that ideas of domesticity were prominent in the 1950s among both readers of homemaker magazines and comic books. As both stories were printed in February of 1952, a mere seven years after the end of World War II, “Americans were well poised to embrace domesticity in the midst of the terrors of the atomic age [and] a home filled with children [created] a feeling of warmth and security against the cold forces of disruption.
and alienation” that characterized the postwar world. 7 As this was the reality that comprised the backdrop of EC’s stories, it is no surprise that the work of editors, writers, and artists of the company reflected American cultural thought and norms. But what are we to make of the satiric and cynical tone evident in EC’s reflection?

To answer that question, this article will look at depictions of aspects of the 1950s American nuclear unit specific to Entertaining Comics, a comic book publishing company where “there was no such thing as a happy household”, often critiquing and ridiculing elements of the postwar domestic sphere in their stories. 8 Furthermore, this article addresses how depictions of the quintessential American family in EC were impacted by the implementation of the 1954 Comics Code, a code that censored comic books’ additions of violence, gore, and satire specifically regarding marriage and children. This article is organized as follows: 1) an analysis of family/family adjacent representations in pre-code EC comic Shock Suspenstories; 2) an analysis of the 1954 Senate Subcommittee Hearing on Juvenile Delinquency which produced the Comics Code of 1954; and 3) an analysis of Shock Suspenstories’ post-code successor, Tales Designed to Carry an Impact, where details of the newly sanitized representations of the American family/family adjacent are discussed at length. Ultimately, this article analyzes why such satirical images of U.S. domesticity were so marketable as horror (!) to the U.S. public at the time, why psychiatrists and government officials were interested in censoring said images, and how a publishing company whose brand had become identifiable for its raunchy and clever stories chose to shift their narratives of domesticity as drastically as they did.

The study of postwar domesticity and the evolution of American culture at large following World War II has been the subject of a plethora of scholarship (e.g., Tyler May 1988, Bailey 1988). Research surrounding the influence and censorship of comic books, specifically as they relate to American visual culture, is similarly not new (e.g., Daniel 1971; Pustz 1999; York and York, eds., 2012). Scholarship pertaining to analyzing censorship largely or the 1954 comics code specifically include Nyberg (1998), Whitted (2010), and Yezbick (2015). None of these works have investigated publications from EC with the intent of understanding how EC writers and artists commented on American domesticity following World War II; hence the focus of this article: to demonstrate the heavily nuanced way in which depictions of the American family tie into both the history of EC and the 1954 comics code.

**Shock Suspenstories**

*Shock Suspenstories* was an addition to the new-trend line of comics that EC had introduced in spring of 1950 after longtime editor Max Gaines died suddenly, leaving his educationally based comic book company in the hands of his son, William Gaines. 9 William Gaines, not impressed with the biblical and historical based comic stories published by his father, decided to engage with genres like crime, science fiction, and, most popularly, horror. The
publication of *Shock Suspenstories* in early 1952, however, introduced audience members to multiple genres at once as each issue contained four stories from four different genres including those previously mentioned and one entirely EC generated: shock. Whether the story ended with alien skunks sporting scarves made of humans (science fiction), orphaned children turning the head of the orphanage’s owner into a human jack-o-lantern out of spite (horror), or the jarred body parts of Arthur Berdeen (crime), every story included a ‘shock’ ending. Not every story, however, featured a representation of the 1950s nuclear unit — whether that was a portion of the unit (i.e. parenthood, marriage, etc.) or a depiction of the entire idealized unit — but those that did tended to follow a formula designed to sell.

The nuclear unit as a whole consists of particular roles by definition – parents and their children – similar to the Schmidt’s from *Ladies Home Journal*, with a supportive father, doting mother, and obedient children. What precedes those identities is the relationship shared between the patriarchal and matriarchal figures and commentary on this relationship is at the center of many of the stories within *Shock Suspenstories*. What dominates the pages of *Shock Suspenstories* – particularly their crime genre — are stories that depict instances of domestic violence, abuse, and murder. Artist Jack Kamen, who was responsible for the artwork of such stories, had been described by long term writer Al Feldstein as the EC artist best at creating the “father-knows-best-until-his-wife-gets-pissed-off-at-him-and-cuts-off-his-head type stories.” Included within the hefty list of Kamen’s artistic renderings of vile and murderous marital relations are stories like that of “Dead Right!” in *Shock Suspenstories* #6, “Beauty and the Beach” in #7, “...Three’s a Crowd” in #11, and “Only Skin-Deep” in #13.

These four stories possess many similarities and above all exemplify the style of story that Al Feldstein had described as Jack Kamen’s specialty. Kamen’s art specifically embodies the iconicism of 1950s visual culture as his artistic renderings capture the ideal physical qualities of both men and women; women drawn in a manner that perpetuated the curvy and hyper-feminine body type and men drawn to be tall and masculine, possessing an athletic build and strong facial features. The first characters he drew for *Shock Suspenstories*, Eleanor and Arthur Berdeen, reveals this very idea — Eleanor has blonde hair, sharp lips, pronounced eyelashes, and a curvy, yet petite figure. Arthur has dark hair and eyes with strong facial features that pair well with his strong, yet lean build. These characteristics are found within all the characters created by Kamen, unless the character themselves is written to appear conventionally unattractive. In “Dead Right!”, for example (Figure 2), a young woman named Cathy seeks out a fortune teller who informs her of a large sum of money she will inherit after marrying an unattractive man.
Cathy believes the fortune teller and marries Charlie for his fortune, but soon after they wed Cathy manages to gain the fortune randomly and decides to tell Charlie of her real, disgusted feelings towards him. Angered, Charlie kills Cathy and inherits her fortune upon her death as he is her next of kin. Note that Charlie is drawn to be conventionally unattractive as it is vital to the plot, but if the plot did not require the characters to be drawn in such a way, they were not.

In “Only Skin-Deep”, Bob wakes from coma to Gloria, informing him that their plan to kill and steal the fortune of her husband, Charles, worked, but that Bob had gotten hurt in the process.18 Gloria and Bob leave the hospital, get married, and head home. Upon returning home, Bob slips and hits his head. He immediately strangles Gloria as he remembers he is not Bob, but Charles. He had overheard Bob and Gloria discussing his murder and decided to manipulate the situation so Bob would be the one to die instead of him. Note that in both stories the men are depicted variously, i.e., with an ability to feel on a spectrum, while the female characters are presented as either
damsels in distress or, most often, as women motivated by surface-level and selfish desires.

These examples are not the exception. Other comic stories represent domestic relationships and gender in a similarly sadistic, albeit satirical light. In Shock Suspenstories #3 the science-fiction story drawn by Joe Orlando, “The Big-Stand Up”, Bart Thompson, a television engineer, intercepts a message sent by a beautiful woman from a distant planet.9 Intrigued, Bart continues to talk to Lara and the two form a connection over several of his shifts. He convinces Lara to come to Earth and upon her arrival, Bart is shocked by Lara’s size as it is written that Lara stands at “about two hundred feet tall”.20 The entire ‘shock’ of “The Big-Stand Up” is centered around her height as Lara is perfect, Earth-worthy even, but reigns terror on Bart by both being physically intimidating and far from the feminine beauty he had fallen for.

In the horror vein, Shock Suspenstories #5 features “Cold Cuts!” a story about a man (Victor Benson) who kills his wife (Helen) and panicked, decides to hide her body in a freezer before hurriedly leaving home for work.21 Upon his return home, Victor is greeted by guests waiting for him, one of them having prepared dinner. After consuming some of the meal he is greeted by the realization that the meat he is consuming is the human-flesh of his wife he murdered only hours earlier. Similar to the crime narratives, Victor is drawn with an expressiveness that is obvious. Although he kills his wife, Victor is depicted as panicked, scared, anxious, and disgusted. This spectrum of male emotion is continually present as later in the publication’s run a story from the seven genre-less final issues, “For Cryin’ Out Loud!” in S.S. #15 has a plot that opens with a man strangling a woman.22 To make a long story short, the man expresses panic and anxiety over his choice; the woman, merely manipulative and selfish; her actions are not dissected beyond contributing to the direction of the plot. Their story in conjunction with the others reveals the two-dimensional portrayal of women and emotional complexity of male characters within Shock Suspenstories.

Romantic relationships were not the only component of the nuclear unit subject to challenge and mockery within EC’s Shock Suspenstories as depictions of American children took on a more devious and agential tone. There are two obvious examples of this within Shock Suspenstories, the first of that being “Halloween” drawn by Graham Ingels from issue #2.23 “Halloween” conveys the story of an orphanage run by an incompetent and unattractive headmaster who cycles through nannies for the children. The most recent hire, Ann Dennis, does something different than the other nannies had — she advocates for the children. The head master denies her requests and, in retaliation, the children of the orphanage turn the headmaster into a human jack-o-lantern; decapitating him and carving into his head. (Figure 3)
The second story is “The Orphan” from *Shock Suspenstories* #14. Drawn by Jack Kamen, this story certainly reflects the iconic, yet gory style he is known for. It tells of Lucy Johnson, a ten-year-old girl who kills her father and blames her mother and step-father. This truth, however, is only revealed in the last frame when Lucy winks at the reader and says: “The court sent me to live with Aunt Kate...which is just the way I’d hope it would work out when I shot daddy from the front bedroom window...and put the gun in mommy’s hand and started the crying act.”

Many stories demonstrate the evil lengths that maternal and paternal figures will go to, whether to protect or punish their kin. In the only war-genre story, “Yellow” from *Shock* #1, a World War I Lieutenant named Henderson finds out his son abandoned his mission and sentences him to death. The father, however, convinces his son that his life has been saved, allowing ‘Yellow’ to face his death with confidence instead of the usual anxiety and fear the son is known for. Another well-known EC tale from *Shock Suspenstories* #14 depicted the murder of a girl by her own father. Ed stood in the middle of his neighborhood recalling the events that had taken place with hate in his eyes. He recalled how a Mexican family had moved into the neighborhood and how he was appalled by this but could only get two of his friends to take his side that something should be done to get them to go away. He recalled that his daughter had come home one day talking about a nice boy that had just moved in. Despite receiving warnings from her father, Amy refused to stop seeing Louis. Ed recruited the other men in the neighborhood, telling them that Amy was grabbed by Louis, and he forced himself onto her. Having rounded up a group of angry White men, all of them bearing white hoods, Ed stole Louis from his bed and beat him. After the beating was finished, the real Louis appeared and revealed to the men in hoods that it was Amy, not Louis who had died. Ed, horrified, says “Amy! Amy! Oh Lord! I’ve killed my daughter!”
What was the comic-reading public’s perception of the domestic narratives within EC’s Shock Suspenstories? Fans and subscribers to EC’s publications would write letters to the company, and although many have surely never seen the light of day, others were published within issues of their publication of focus. In Shock Suspenstories, this feature of an issue was referred to as “Shock Talk”. While not included in every issue, “Shock Talk” allowed for both fans and critics to voice their opinions and receive a response from EC editors as it was designed to be a “letter page where [readers] [could] blow off steam, criticize, suggest, compliment, or say anything else [their] little hearts [desired].”26 While some feedback consisted of more criticism regarding a story, particular image, or the company at large, like that of reader M.E. Johnson who wrote in to share their opinion on “The Guilty” stating, “having just completed reading “The Guilty”… I found it the most disgusting, degrading, and unnecessary story I have ever read.”27 Others, like reader Irene Evans, offered words of encouragement as she wrote in to comment on Shock Suspenstories #7, writing “the idea for the cover was terrific, having a close-up of a guy being hit with a far shot of his reflection in a window.”28 Despite an obvious effort by the editors to include mostly positive comments in “Shock Talk”, any letter was welcomed by the editors, ensuring that the editors, writers, and artists of EC were aware of most (if not all) concern their readers (fans or not) had over the publication of their material.

The Code

While some may have considered tales Lucy or Louis entertainment, others considered it an unnecessary tale promoting juvenile delinquency — a major concern of psychiatrists, government officials, and U.S. parents at the time. Each of these groups related the alleged burgeoning rise in juvenile crime and mischief to child and adolescent readership of comics, with the concerns of United States government officials and one specific psychiatrist ultimately bringing about massive change to the comic book industry. While the rates of juvenile delinquency during the 1940s and 1950s are widely understood to have been no higher than a time before or after it,29 children’s readership of comics certainly is as “comics books were widely available at grocery stores, newsstands, and corner drug stores, and children were the primary audience.”30 In April of 1954 the United States Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency began court proceedings to, according to Chairman Robert C. Hendrickson, “find out what damage, if any, is being done to our children’s minds by certain types of publications that contain a substantial degree of sadism, crime, and horror.”31 In his introduction, Hendrickson also insisted that the committee’s interest was not one of censorship, although the court hearing would ultimately censor the comic book industry for decades to follow.

While several psychiatrists are listed within the hearing as supporting the crusade against comic books, one surely stood out. Fredric Wertham’s 1953 publication, Seduction of the Innocent, was the result of seven years of psychological evaluations of both adults and children and was a key
component in the testimony against comic book publishers in 1954. Wertham makes several interesting observations in his text, at one point commenting on the obvious racial prejudice evident in many comic books: “While the white people in jungle books are blonde and athletic and shapely, the idea conveyed about the natives is that there are fleeting transitions between apes and humans. I have repeatedly found in my studies that this characterization of colored peoples as subhuman, in conjunction with depiction of forceful heroes as blond Nordic supermen has made a deep...impression on young children.” At the same time that this observation exists, however, so does his chapter “Design for Delinquency: The Contribution of Crime Comic Books to Juvenile Delinquency” where Wertham walks his reader through various ‘real’ juvenile crimes that he connects back to those fictionally demonstrated in comic books ultimately writing that “our researchers have proved that there is a significant correlation between crime-comics reading and the more serious forms of juvenile delinquency.” However, this chapter (and every other chapter in his text) lacked any citation, reference, bibliographic, or notes section to confirm where he gathered these various stories from.

Whether or not Fredric Wertham’s influential text is one entirely sound or not does little to illuminate the fact that his work held a significance to the senate subcommittee on juvenile delinquency. Ultimately, Wertham sought to understand the relationship between violence in the media, specifically comic books, and children, calling for the termination of comic book sales to children. This idea, however, was not one that went without opposition.

While there were several comic book publishers and stories that were highlighted during the duration of the court proceedings, Entertaining Comics is highlighted specifically. Not only did they publish stories of interest, but publisher William Gaines voluntarily testified on the behalf of his company. In initial remarks, committee member Senator Clendenen introduced a number of comic books that he identified as possessing qualities that fall within the sadistic realm previously noted by Chairman Hendrickson. Two of the comic books were publications from EC, stories from Haunt of Fear and one particular story from Shock Suspenstories: the tale of Lucy Johnson. Clendenen simply summarizes the contents of Lucy’s story, but mentions that “The Orphan”, as well as the other stories, are “[illustrative] of the types of comics to which [they] are addressing [themselves].”

In his own testimony, William Gaines defined the stories that EC produced not as sadistic, but as forms of art: “We use the best writers, the finest artists; we spare nothing to make each magazine, each story, each page, a work of art.” Within his testimony he further added that Entertaining Comics’ main priority was to entertain. From the perspective of William Gaines, a man whose knowledge of the comic book industry was largely unparalleled, comic books were not merely as influential as the senate subcommittee and Dr. Fredric Wertham had argued stating that, “I don’t believe that anything that has ever been written can make a child overaggressive or delinquent.” Not only was this an opinion that he held, but an opinion he supported with words from psychiatrist, Dr. David
Abrahamsen — using the same psychiatrist-heavy rhetoric government officials were using against them.38

Following his own opinion on the illegitimacy of the previous arguments made in opposition to comic books, horror and crime comic books predominantly, he made clear that if anything was directed to readers specifically that it would be “spelled out carefully in the captions.”39 Author of EC Comics: Race, Shock, and Social Protest, Qiana Whitted said of this statement and others made by Gaines during his testimony that “EC singled out the message stories for the deliberateness with respect not only the creative labor but also the uncomfortable conversations that the comics sought to initiate,” identifying an alertness to the message-heavy comics (i.e. “The Guilty”) that separated them from the other stories published.40 Gaines and the other EC contributors did relay obvious messages to their readers, but when doing so, were obvious with their intention. Stories like that of “The Orphan”, “Only Skin-Deep”, “Cold Cuts”, or any other graphic, yet formulaic story did not typically fall within this realm and were written with the intent to entertain.

Despite his best efforts, the hearing that occurred on April 21, April 22, and June 4, 1954, resulted in a series of regulations to be placed on publishers of comics under the newly formed comics code authority. These regulations included a hefty list of dos and don’ts, all of which were expected to be complied by comic book publishers if they wanted their products to be sold by major distributors as said distributors were unlikely to sell any comic book that had not been approved. Of these regulations the ones that most directly affected EC were the following: “No comics shall explicitly present the unique details and methods of a crime;” “In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds;” “All lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations shall be eliminated;” “the treatment of love-romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage;” etc.41 The comics code of 1954 consisted of a plethora of more regulations, but those alone significantly reduced the types of publications EC could put out and changed the direction of their storylines and art forever.

**Tales Designed to Carry an Impact**

To combat new restrictions and ensure that their publications could be sold by major distributors, EC did away with their New Trend line of comics, choosing to release their new direction line. While many publications were released following the 1954 Senate Subcommittee Hearing, Tales Designed to Carry an Impact was released as the successor to Shock Suspenstories.42 While featuring different artists and doing-away entirely with the addition of clearly labeled genres, the link between Shock and Impact was solidified between the two via “The Punch Bowl” in the first issue as the editors described the contents of Impact to include “[EC’s] most cherished tradition...THE SURPRISE ENDING!”43 While true, this description fails to include how different the shock-endings were. Similarly to how the first story in the first issue of Shock Suspenstories depicts imagery of American domesticity in a
very specific light, the first story of the first issue of *Tales Designed to Carry an Impact* does the same, but with an opposing narrative.

Figure 4 Frank Monahan berates young Eddie for his delinquent choices, convincing him that he will face the consequences of his actions. In the end, however, the only consequence Eddie faces is a home-cooked meal by Monahan’s wife, Molly, in Carl Wessler’s “Tough Cop” (*Tales Designed to Carry an Impact* #1, 1955)

![Image available via the Underground and Independent Comics Database](https://search-alexanderstreet-com.libproxy.sdsu.edu/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Ccomic_book%7C2541088#page/7/mode/1/chapter/bibliographic_entity%7Cinstallment%7C2541091). Accessed 29 April 2024.)

While not strictly marital like “The Neat Job,” “Tough Cop” depicts the nuclear unit in a far less horrific and graphic way, conforming to the comics
code.44 (Figure 4) In this 1955 issue, artist Reed Crandall and writer Carl Wessler tell the story of a cop who has a reputation for being particularly tough. One day while out on patrol, the cop, Frank Monahan, confronts a young boy stealing. The boy, Eddie, confesses that he is only stealing to support his family, but the cop maintains his stern persona. That is until the Monahan brings Eddie back to the Monahan household where he is greeted by a diverse group of young boys surrounding a kitchen table, served by an apron-bearing housewife. Note that Officer Monahan’s wife, Molly, appears as neither damsel nor seductress, instead as the obedient and kind wife hinting at a perpetuation of a two-dimensional narrative of women that would persist outside of the previous norm and instead one delightfully comic code approved.

So, while Molly remains categorically ‘housewife’, Monahan is both a hard-edged cop and a helpful, pseudo-father. In Seduction of the Innocent, Wertham points out that he has “never seen in any of the crime, superman, adventure, space, horror, etc. comics books a normal family sitting down at a meal.”45 In the first story of the first issue of Impact, Fredric Wertham and EC readers saw just that. For the first time in any crime comic, a “normal family” sat down and enjoyed a meal — creating the first Wertham-approved ‘shock’ in EC history.46

In another iteration of a “normal family”, EC, with the aid of artist Reed Crandall, deliver “Life Sentence” in Impact #3.47 In “Life Sentence,” Ralph Cooper randomly leaves his family one day with no explanation. Frustrated and heartbroken, his son and wife live poorly and struggle to survive. Paul, his son, hates his father and upon finding out about his death tells the pastor that he does not care what becomes of his father’s body. The pastor explains the many things that Paul does not know about his father, including that Ralph was a typhoid carrier and hid himself away to not get anyone sick. When he is told this, Paul immediately changes his mind and accompanies his father to his burial. Ralph’s surprising selflessness and Paul’s ability to forgive would have previously not been featured in an EC shock-inducing comic book.

Depictions of strictly marital relationships within Impact consist of a dynamic altogether different from those within Shock Suspenstories — not defined by murder, sabotage, or vengeance, but by grief, loyalty, and respect. In one of the stories that exemplifies this best, “Paid in Full” from Tales Designed to Carry an Impact #2, Martha Wilson has just lost her husband, Walter.48 Martha’s sister, Helen insists that Walter was a horribly selfish man who cared more about assisting members of the community through his medical practice than caring for his wife. It is because of his pro bono work that Martha is currently unable to afford a gravestone for her deceased husband. Martha takes Helen to where Walter is buried and shows her that the same people that Walter helped had joined together to pay for a headstone for him. While stories of EC’s past consisted of images of domestic abuse and violence, Helen and Walter paint a picture of acceptance and loyalty. Their relationship is one complimentary to one previously mentioned point of the 1954 comics code: “the treatment of love-romance stories shall
emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage.” Despite the writer and artist creating image after image that shows Walter disappointing his wife, the ‘shock’ of it all is the soundness of Helen’s loyalty and the profound goodness of Walter’s intentions.

Much of the change between the two publications of Shock Suspenstories and Tales Designed to Carry an Impact lies in the quantity of publications pertaining to romantic/domestic relationships and those depicting children, particularly their relationships with parental and authoritative figures. While Kamen’s depictions of violence and abuse dominated the crime pages within Shock Suspenstories, similar depictions are heavily lacking from the pages of Impact. Similar to the juxtaposition evident within marital depictions, juvenile depictions take a far less sinister turn as demonstrated by the couple previously mentioned. Gone are the children who frame their mother and stepfather for murder or turn a male authority figure into a human jack-o-lantern. Children in Impact are innocent and pure – the product of following a code developed under the guise that children-see, children-do.

Conclusion

The characteristics of 1950s U.S. domesticity – ideal nuclear family, loving marriage with well-defined husband-wife roles, and obedient children — was severely compromised within Entertaining Comics’ Shock Suspenstories as domestic violence, murder, and parenticide were frequent plot points. These satirical representations of the post-War family within EC were altered, however, by the implementation of the 1954 Comics Code as evidenced by Shock Suspenstories’ successor, Tales Designed to Carry an Impact. What became of a once thrilling and audacious brand’s attempts at creating stories that reflected ideas of American culture, like that of the nuclear unit, were deeply sanitized by the censorship imposed by the 1954 Comics Code as the company attempted to transition from a mockery of the ideal to a strategic employment of it. The tame and filtered stories released by EC following the Comics Code ultimately led to the brand’s shrinking, leaving its only surviving publication MAD, a satirical magazine which successfully ran from 1952 to 2018.

Nonetheless, the visual culture of the 1950s has remained an iconic emblem in US history and the EC artists who worked at that time certainly contributed to its standard. Even in recent years, a plethora of brands (i.e. Benefit Cosmetics) and art forms (i.e. pin-up tattoos) imitate the style and/or concepts associated with the time. This visual culture coupled with the domestic sphere of the post-World War II era, while fictional, reveal a plethora of ideas regarding gender and familial dynamics (whether that be marital, parental, or juvenile) which provide insight into the problems and mindset of Americans in the mid-twentieth century. But censorship gravely affected post-50s branding and the stories that were told. Today, the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund currently works to protect comic books, of both entertaining and educational content, from censorship.
Understanding the domestic culture of the mid-twentieth century United States is often done through an analysis of cultural artifacts, including comic books. In analyzing *Shock Suspenstories* and *Tales Designed to Carry an Impact* it is evident that: 1) censorship deeply affects a company in what stories it can produce and how it can produce; 2) comic books are no different than other forms of fiction as they pull from real ideas and events; and 3) depictions of the 1950s nuclear unit possess an idyllicism so fondly protected that exists as the basis for suburban culture and, largely, the American dream. First critiquing and then sanitizing said depictions confirms the existence of that idyllicism. The government, psychiatrists, and parental attempts at controlling the narratives of domesticity within 1950s comic books further supports that imagery's significance. How the American family of the post-War World II era is depicted, both then and now, in comic book form or otherwise, reflects ideas of U.S. culture that are neither accurate nor productive.

For Entertaining Comics, it is likely the addition of elements of the American family to their most violent and ridiculous stories were an attempt to both engage readers and bring attention to some of the realities of domesticity not addressed by sanitized comic books or more adult-oriented publications like that of *Ladies’ Home Journal*. In reading between the lines of the obvious drama and falsehoods of *Shock Suspenstories*, what is left may provide insight into the American family as it exists today, both in modern popular culture and in everyday life.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to extend the biggest thank you to my honors thesis advisor and co-director of the SDSU Center for Comics Studies, Professor Elizabeth Pollard, for her selflessness, patience, and guidance as I have navigated this project. Her suggestions and encouragement have truly been the wind beneath my wings.

I would also like to thank pop culture librarian and co-director for the Center for Comics Studies at SDSU Pamela Jackson for her never-ending insights and encouragement.

Lastly, I would like to thank Professor Gregory Daddis for being a consistent sounding board and mentor; his knowledge and support have been a grounding force in seeing this project through.

**Endnotes**

3. Shock Suspenstories was a part of the New Trend line of Comics instituted after William Gaines took ownership of the company. Prior to New Trend’s horror and crime stories, EC was known for biblical and educational stories.
5. In the thirty-ninth volume of Ladies’ Home Journal, published in 1922, the magazine was labeled as “the family magazine of America.” This label would persist for the company as it published articles and photographs recording the ideal of American domesticity for over a century.
6. According to David Hajdu, author of the Ten Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How it Changed America, “by 1952, more than twenty publishers were producing nearly 650 comic titles per month, employing well over a thousand artists, writers, editors, letterers, and others,” demonstrating the presence and impact that comic books had on American culture in the 1950s.
10. With the exception of the first issue where there is a story under the ‘war’ genre instead of shock and all those after issue 14 where EC no longer differentiated between genres in Shock Suspenstories.
13. In the first issues “Shock Talk” the editors explained that Shock Suspenstories was to be an “EC Sampler” where their different genres would be made available in a single publication.
16. “Kamen’s Kalamity” Tales from the Crypt Vol 1 #31 (1952).
23. While one of the less public EC artists, Graham Ingels certainly made a name for himself in the EC universe by supplying his stories with some of the best gore and horror artwork in the EC universe. (Bas Schuddeboom, “Graham Ingels: Ghastly Graham,” Lambiek Comiclopedia (https://www.lambiek.net/artists/d/davis.htm), accessed 16 January 2024.)
27. “The Guilty” (Shock Suspenstories #5 1952) was a story written by Al Feldstein and drawn by Wallace Wood that followed the story of a wrongfully accused Black man and his eventual murder by the local sheriff. The editors famously put in the last panel the following statement: “Whether Aubrey Collins was innocent or guilty is not important! But for ANY American to have so little regard for life and the rights of any other American is a debasement of the principles of the constitution upon which our country is founded!! - editors.”
29. Statistics regarding the rates of juvenile crime are not easily found, but assorted scholars suggest that politicians who cited an increase in juvenile crime were unable to cite statistics of their own (Hadju, The Ten Cent Plague, page 213) and that many of the studies done by the infamous Dr. Wertham had been proven to be “conflated and stylized if not outright falsified.” (Carrol, Reading the Obscene, 78-9).
33. Wertham, Seduction of the Innocent, 164.
34. Amy Kiste Nyberg, Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code, 103.
35. Hearings Before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate, 9.
36. Hearings Before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate, 98.
37. Hearings Before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate, 98.
38. Dr. David Abrahamsen wrote, “Comics Books do not lead into crime, although they have been widely blamed for it. I find comic books many times helpful for children in that through them they can get rid of many of their aggressions and harmful fantasies.” in Abrahamsen’s text Who are the Guilty, referenced in Hearings Before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate, 100.
39. Hearings Before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate, 100.
42. In a letter to readers in the first issue of *Impact* (“The Punch Bowl”), the editors mention that even though the “new trend magazines...had been voluntarily buried by William Gaines” the EC tradition would be kept alive as the editors knew readers “liked them because [they] bought them, month after month, year after year, continually giving EC the highest percentage sales in Independent Distribution.”
43. The Editors, “Punch Bowl” in *Tales Designed to Carry an Impact #1* (1955).
50. In an article written for the Makeup Museum, “Borrowing from the Past: Benefit and the House of Plate”, one of the many cases of 1950s-influence that Benefit Cosmetics uses in their marketing and packaging is described at length. Please see the following for more information: https://www.makeupmuseum.org/home/2021/04/benefit-glamourette-plate-trio-ette.html.
51. Pin-up generally is best described by Joanne Meyerowitz as “illustrations of scantily clad and nude women, once considered disreputable, now grace billboards, calendars, television, movies, and magazines”. These popularized illustrations have taken on the form of body art as pin-up tattoos.
52. For more information on the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund visit their official website: https://cbldf.org/.

**Works Cited**

*Primary*


Feldstein, Al. “Kamen’s Kalamity.” *Tales from the Crypt* Vol 1 #31, 1952.


**Secondary**


Innocence

ANISA PROM
Department of English (Major) and (Minor) Art

How lucky I am to be entangled in your heliosphere!
Plucked from mere hell I was and
Sent starstruck into this glittering ball of light that’s
crashing about endlessly.

Many late nights are spent here, I see.
Many happy, beautiful nights with laughing and dancing and
As I stand here, whiplashed as I am from this sudden change of heart,
Greeted as I am with a smile, apology, and open arms,
I feel as if I should weep at the sight, my heart as cold as it is.

They call your kind the “untouched ones,”
A rare breed where nothing has struck you down to your knees.
Life has treated you kindly, her hold gentle and motherly; and as you stand
before me,
You glow blindingly for it.

Perhaps I should bow to you,
Surrender myself to this new flow—that’s chaotic, yes, but happy,
nonetheless.
And surrender I shall for as I stand here now,
Quivering in this night turned day,
Risen from the depths of this bottomless ocean,
I smile to myself at this new dawn and find myself feeling the semblance of
peace.

Oh, how lucky they are to be pure as they are,
My knees have remained unbowed, but I pray, no, beg that it stay.
Let me stay in this new Heaven, this new planet of joy,
Where I feel my scars, but they no longer ache,
Where I feel this sunburn of being in the shadow of their light, but relish in
its warmth,
Where I can finally let my weary bones rest.
Let me rest easy.
Let me stay.
And perhaps it won’t last but the journey is what counted and
Reaching a destination once is better than never at all.
So let it come:
This new tide,
This fiery heliosphere,
And please, I beg you, let it stay.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to Clare Colquitt for being
my mentor throughout college, and for helping make the acceptance of this
piece possible.

I also extend special thanks to my friends and classmates who often
listened to me read my work and helped with edits.

Lastly, I would be remiss to not thank my family for always supporting
me and my writing. Without them, I would not be the writer I am today.
Indigenous Agroforestry Experiences: Karen Hill Tribes in Thailand

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This qualitative study examines Indigenous Karen communities in Thailand; their agroforestry practices, spiritual customs, and attitudes toward government land use policies. The Karen have sustainably managed natural resources for generations through a culture of environmental stewardship and reverence for the forest. Their rotational farming traditions provide food security while promoting biodiversity, natural soil fertility, and forest regeneration through controlled burning. However, these practices are largely misunderstood by the Thai government who falsely accuse the Karen of causing destructive fires. As a result, their livelihoods are threatened by forest reclamation and fire suppression laws, and they are misconceived as deforestors and maligned as outsiders to Thai society. Many face charges of encroachment and have been arrested or extrajudicially killed by state forces. Many who have been forcibly displaced from their homelands must now use pollutant chemicals and farm cash crops for export, suffering from poverty, food insecurity, malnutrition, and illness. Despite these challenges, Karen people demonstrate resilience in organizing for greater autonomy. Methods of data collection include group interviews, participant observation, and analysis of news articles. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted with members of the Bang Kloi community who traveled to Bangkok to protest their displacement, and with villagers in Doi Chang Pa Pae, Lamphun province, who still practice rotational farming. In discussing my findings, I argue that those who have the closest connection with the natural environment and the deepest traditional ecological knowledge must be at the center of the decision-making process. Instead of top-down approaches to environmental policy, bottom-up approaches are needed to ensure effective protection of natural resources and human rights.
Keywords: Indigenous, Karen, traditional ecological knowledge, rotational farming, resource management, forest protection, environmental policy, human rights

Introduction

Thailand is the only country in Southeast Asia, and one of the few in the world, which has not been formally colonized by European powers. As the kingdom maintained sovereignty during the colonial era, it developed a distinct ethnocentric nationalist identity of “Thainess” based on cultural traits like Theravada Buddhism, Thai language, and monarchy. However, as neighboring countries like Burma (Myanmar) and Laos decolonized and gained independence after World War II, boundaries of these new nation-states were drawn through the ancestral homelands of diverse ethnic groups who are neither Burmese, Lao, nor Thai. Most of these groups have lived in the region’s highland forests for centuries, traditionally practicing forms of subsistence agroforestry. In northern and western Thailand, these groups are commonly called chao khao, or “hill tribes.” In certain contexts, this term can carry a derogatory connotation, indicating that ethnic minorities are often misconceived as savages and marginalized by the Thai majority in the central lowlands. These groups include the Karen, who are the most populous of the hill tribes, as well as the Akha, Hmong, H’tin, Khmu, Lahu, Lisu, Lua, Mien, and Palaung (Erni, 2008; Scott, 2009).

“Karen” refers to diverse groups of people, including those who call themselves Pgaz k’Nyau, Sgaw, Pwo, Kayah, Kayan and Pa-O. The Karen population is both transnational and stateless, with many groups originating from and residing in eastern Burma/Myanmar (Phatthanaphraiwan & Greene, 2023). This study highlights the experiences of Karen groups in Thailand.

The Indigenous movement in Thailand has drawn significant attention in recent decades. Although the Thai government ratified the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People in 2007, they still deny the relevance of Indigeneity in the country, they deny full legal citizenship status to Indigenous individuals, and their policies effectively oppress and threaten the livelihoods of Indigenous communities. Given that the country was never formally colonized by Europeans, the Indigenous movement in Thailand has considerable differences from its counterparts in settler-colonial states like in the Americas and Australia, but its prominence proves that “Indigeneity is a relational and malleable concept that acquires different meanings depending on the particular context into which it is adopted” (de la Cadena & Starn, 2007; Merlan, 2009; Morton, 2023, p. 4). In Thailand, Indigenous peoples affirm their identity by drawing on a modern understanding of Indigeneity promoted by the UN and other international organizations; they assert that they are the original inhabitants of the land who have been historically oppressed by the dominant powers which now claim control over their land. From this approach, Indigenous peoples in Thailand assert their cultural
distinctiveness, their demands for greater autonomy, and their desire for coexistence within the broader Thai nation (Morton & Baird, 2019; United Nations, 2007).

A significant cultural distinction between Indigenous minorities in the mountainous borderlands and the Thai majority in the central valleys is their differences in agricultural practices. Mainstream agriculture in Thailand emphasizes rice cultivation for export. Industrial methods like monocropping, intensive irrigation, and use of synthetic chemicals like fertilizers and pesticides have been the norm since the Green Revolution despite their destructive ecological and physiological effects. Although these chemicals increase yield productivity, they are harmful pollutants which either evaporate into the atmosphere, acidify rain, and contribute to global warming; or runoff into the watershed, damage the ecosystem, devastate biodiversity, and contaminate drinking water (Pollan, 2006). Exposure to agrochemicals is correlated with colorectal cancer, thyroid disease, neural tube defects, methemoglobinemia, adverse reproductive outcomes, as well as mental health problems including increased risk of anxiety, depression, and insomnia (Ong-Arthborirak et al., 2022; Ward et al., 2018).

Despite this, farmers and policymakers around the world, especially in developing countries, are generally under the assumption that they must continue to rely on agrochemicals in order to maximize production and maintain income stability. Thailand is the world’s second largest rice exporter, making rice a major source of the country’s revenue and economic growth. The Thai government subsidizes pesticides by exempting them from import duties and business taxes, and provides free pesticides in cases of sudden pest outbreaks, thus incentivizing farmers to become dependent on these ecologically destructive practices (Praneetvatakul et al., 2013; Schreinemachers et al., 2011; Wilson & Tisdell, 2001).

In stark contrast to the valley peoples’ agriculture, the hill tribes traditionally practice forms of agroforestry for subsistence instead of farming cash crops for exchange on the market. There are many terms to describe these practices, including rotational farming (the English term used most often to refer to traditional Karen practices), shifting cultivation (which implies more migratory patterns, often used to refer to traditional Hmong practices), swidden, and slash-and-burn agriculture (this term is typically pejorative).

While different groups have slight variations, the Karen generally begin their agricultural cycle by surveying the forest and performing spiritual ceremonies before clearing a plot of land. Trees are cut down to stumps with their roots and base still intact so that they can regenerate. Then, they set firebreaks and controlled burns to clear crop residue, protect against wildfires, and promote natural soil fertility without using synthetic chemicals. Next, 20 to 50 different species of vegetables, fruits, herbs, and flowers are planted along with rice. This polyculture, as opposed to monocropping, promotes biodiversity and is intimately integrated into the forest ecology, while providing self-sufficient food security. Different crops are planted and harvested throughout the year, with rice being harvested at the end of the
rainy season. This plot of land is then left to fallow and regenerate as farmers rotate to the next plot of land in the following year. As a result of generations of traditional ecological knowledge, the original plot of land typically reforests and fully restores its soil fertility after around seven years, and the community repeats the cycle again (field notes, 2023; Malmer & Trakansuphakon, 2018; Mellegård, 2018; Trakansuphakon et al., 2016).

The expansion of industrial agriculture from the central lowlands toward the northern and western highlands has brought the Thai majority and Indigenous minorities in conflict with each other. The growth of large industrial farms has been the primary contributor to deforestation in Thailand, along with teak logging. Forest cover decreased from an estimated 61 percent in 1945 to 22.8 percent in 1995, with the highest rate of deforestation in Southeast Asia in the 1980s during a period of rapid urbanization (ASEAN Post, 2018; Hirsch, 1990; Lakanavichian, 2001). In response, the government set a target to restore forest cover to 40% by demarcating protected areas like national parks, forest parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and non-hunting areas in which the usage of natural resources is prohibited. However, these boundaries have been arbitrarily drawn without adequate consultation from local communities. Forest reclamation policies and their enforcement have led to forced evictions, arrests, and killings of those who live in these areas. Thus, Indigenous peoples face threats to their traditional livelihoods and accusations of being trespassers in their own ancestral homelands, despite the fact that they have sustainably managed these resources for generations (field notes, 2023; Chandran, 2021; Laungaramsri, 2000).

Given this background, this study aims to investigate how the Indigenous Karen people relate and interact with their forest environment while assessing the Thai government’s approach to resource management. Subsequent sections outline my research sites and study methodology. Findings are then discussed in three sections, including: the cultural and spiritual significance of rotational farming, the ecological sustainability of these traditions, and the impacts of government policy on Karen communities.

**Research Sites**

This study highlights the experiences of two particular Karen communities: Doi Chang Pa Pae and Bang Kloi. Although I collected data from Bang Kloi community members first in my fieldwork, I begin this section by providing context behind Doi Chang Pa Pae, as they currently represent a continuation of their traditional customs; then I discuss Bang Kloi, who represent the experience of forced displacement from their ancestral homelands.
Pa Pae village is located on Doi Chang mountain in Ban Hong district, Lamphun province, with some farmlands extending into Chiang Mai province, in northwestern Thailand near the border with Burma/Myanmar. *Doi Chang* translates to “elephant mountain,” as the topography resembles the shape of an elephant (see Figure 1). The Karen have lived in this area for at least 200 years, preceding the establishment of the modern nation-states of Thailand and Burma (Myanmar). This Karen community, in contrast with Bang Kloi, still practices traditional rotational farming on their ancestral homelands. However, both groups, like most Indigenous communities, have faced significant threats to their traditional way of life and to their land.

Following the passage of forest reclamation laws, villagers in Doi Chang Pa Pae were threatened with dispossession, but they successfully resisted and were able to designate their community as a Special Cultural Zone (SCZ). Doi
Chang Pa Pae has become a model for government agencies to use as a policy guideline, serving as a valuable case study for sustainable resource management (field notes, 2023; Lawattanatrakul, 2021).

**Bang Kloi**

![Image](https://example.com/image.png)

*Figure 2 Public forum with members of Parliament at the demonstration outside Government House, Bangkok*

The Bang Kloi Karen community is known for their long and arduous struggle against the government’s dispossession of their ancestral homelands. Following the passage of the National Park Act, B.E. 2504 (1961), Kaeng Krachan National Park was established as Thailand’s largest protected area in 1981, located throughout the western provinces of Phetchaburi and Prachuap Khiri Khan along the Myanmar border. The Bang Kloi community’s ancestral homeland is called Chai Phaen Din, meaning “heart of the land,” located in the Kaeng Krachan forest. They were forcibly evicted in 1996, and after many returned home, they were evicted again in both 2011 and 2021. Separated from their traditional agroforestry practices, the community faces numerous struggles, which are discussed in the findings sections (field notes, 2023; Lawattanatrakul, 2021; Tohsan & Thanachaitemwong, 2022).

They have staged multiple demonstrations outside the Government House in Bangkok to protest these oppressive policies (Prachatai, 2023). I met with Bang Kloi community members and other marginalized groups from across the country during one such demonstration in October 2023 to collect data for this study (see Figure 2).
Research Methods

The methods for this study incorporate ethnographic field research, group interviews, and participant observation, supplemented with archival analysis of journalistic and academic articles. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted around an hour each. Respondents were asked for consent to voluntarily participate in the study, and their names have been kept confidential to protect their privacy. Translation and interpretation services were provided by members of the Northern Development Foundation, an environmental justice NGO who works closely with Indigenous communities.

I initially planned to conduct individual interviews, but given the collective nature of Karen communities, I found that group interviews were more culturally appropriate. My first interview started with one individual, then after a few questions, the participant asked additional community members to join and give their input. I conducted three group interviews with each group ranging from 3-5 people, for a total of 12 respondents. Respondents’ ages ranged between 19 to 50 years old, with a median age of 45. Seven respondents are women and five respondents are men.

In early October 2023, I attended one day of the fifteen-day long demonstration that the People’s Movement for a Just Society, Northern Development Foundation, Northern Peasant Federation, Assembly of the Poor, Save Bang Kloi Coalition, and related organizations staged outside the Government House in Bangkok. Here, I took field notes to document my observations of their actions and behaviors, as well as their community meetings, chants, and cultural performances. Members of Parliament from the progressive Move Forward Party visited to hold a public forum with the protestors to discuss their lived experiences and ideas for legislative action, wherein I also collected data (see Figure 2). Moreover, I learned from informal conversations and nonverbal interactions.

In late October 2023, I traveled to Doi Chang Pa Pae village, Lamphun province, for two days and two nights to visit a Karen family who graciously welcomed me to stay in their home. Three members from the Northern Development Foundation brought me and my Thai-Australian classmate to the village. Here, I observed the community’s daily life, shared meals together, saw their forests and rotational farmlands, participated in traditional customs, listened to them perform music, and experienced their vibrant culture. Some community members taught me how to harvest rice since I visited during that season, which was a wonderful learning experience. I conducted my last two group interviews here, and shared numerous informal conversations with many different community members. One main topic of discussion was comparing Indigenous history and current events in Thailand, Australia, the United States, and the Philippines – where my family is from.

This methodological framework involves short-term ethnography, which allowed me to have an intensive excursion into my participants’ lives with respect to time and funding limitations. The decision to employ a semi-structured interview format allowed me to explore the respondents’
experiences and perspectives in greater detail by asking follow-up questions to responses when appropriate, making the sessions naturally conversational (Bernard, 2006; Pink & Morgan, 2013). In the following sections, I reference additional sources to substantiate and contextualize my findings while bringing them into conversation with the existing literature.

**Culture & Spirituality**

Rotational farming has been the traditional form of subsistence for the Karen and is vital to their cultural identity. A complex series of spiritual rituals, ceremonies, customs, and beliefs associated with the agroforestry cycle and with individuals’ life cycles have been passed down through generations. These traditions establish a culture of environmental stewardship, regulate relationships between humans and the rest of the forest, and reinforce a worldview which acknowledges humans as part of nature rather than apart from it (field notes, 2023; Phathanaphraiwan & Greene, 2023).

**Tied to the Land**

From birth, the Karen view themselves as literally tied to the land and the spirits of the forest. Parents ritually place the newborn’s umbilical cord in a bamboo stalk, tie it to a tree, and ask the forest spirits for protection throughout the child’s life. One participant from Doi Chang Pa Pae said he visits his tree every day and it is a significant source of comfort.

All Doi Chang Pa Pae respondents said that when they were children, they started learning rotational farming traditions from as early as they can remember, and they have fond memories in the forest fields with their parents and grandparents teaching them. These have been incredibly formative experiences, helping them develop a sense of belonging and pride in their culture and homeland. They speak passionately about the beauty of the forest and the abundance it provides: “The air is so clean and the food is so fresh. Whenever you want something to eat, you just go out and pick it.” They express emotional ties to the land: “Although I don’t have money like the rich city people, I am never jealous. Here, I am filled with so much joy” (Doi Chang Pa Pae villagers, 2023).

Bang Kloi protestors expressed deep nostalgia for rotational farming, and intense longing to return to their homeland. Dispossession has severed their bond with their ancestral homeland and traditional practices. The most poignant response I recall from the Bang Kloi interview was by the youngest participant reflecting on the displacement experience, who simply stated, “I just want to go home” (Bang Kloi protestor, 2023).

**Permission, Atonement, and Thanksgiving**

Phathanaphraiwan & Greene (2023) identify three axes of environmental stewardship in Karen spiritual ceremonies: asking permission to temporarily use land, making amends for any misuse of land, and offering thanksgiving
for the gifts the land provides. Participants described a ceremony held at the beginning of the rotational farming cycle: when surveying the forest to decide which plot of land to clear, they will cut just one tree in the area then return home to sleep and dream. If they have a good dream (in which they envision flowing water or a river, for instance), then they may use that land.

However, if they have a bad dream (in which they envision fire or death, for instance), then they shall not use that land. Envisioning a turtle also signifies that they shall not use that land, since turtles are important to watershed ecology and must be protected. In explaining the purpose of this ceremony, one participant said, “Humans do not own the land. Land belongs to the spirits. We must ask them for permission to use the land” (Doi Chang Pa Pae villager, 2023). This stands in stark contrast to common attitudes in Western and industrialized societies, which view humans as having dominion over land.

After dreaming, the community engages in collaborative discussion between families/households to coordinate who should take responsibility for which land in the coming year. Suppose one person cuts down a tree and has a bad dream, but another person cuts down an adjacent tree and has a good dream, then the former will encourage the latter to farm on that land. However, it is important to note that farming is a collective effort, and individuals from different households help each other clear, plant, tend to, and harvest the land that their neighbors have designated responsibility for. Further, every meal is meant to be prepared and shared with others, serving as an opportunity to bond and gather together. These practices demonstrate the deeply collectivist nature of Karen culture.

One participant recalled a year when he cut a tree and had a nightmare but ignored the warning and farmed that land anyway. He lamented that he was not able to grow enough food and his family fell ill. To rectify this, he performed a ceremony of atonement to ask the forest spirits for forgiveness for misusing the land. After this experience, he said he developed a deeper appreciation for these traditional rituals because they help people recognize their duty of maintaining balance in the ecosystem.

Another ceremony is held after land has been cleared and before rice is planted. Doi Chang Pa Pae participants build small shrines from local wood and give various items like rice and whiskey as offerings of thanksgiving to the forest spirits. They express gratitude to all the spirits who carry out ecological processes, and to all the animals who temporarily sacrifice their homes for the harvest. The Karen believe that humans should not take more from the forest than they need, and they must share the abundance the forest offers with all the other beings which inhabit it (field notes, 2023). Capitalist society, on the other hand, is oriented around consumerism and maximizing resource extraction. The severe environmental degradation that has resulted from this demonstrates the dire need for a paradigm shift toward sustainable resource use and reverence for non-human beings.
Tradition and Change

Karen spiritual traditions continue to change and evolve over time as various factors influence culture. Christian missionaries and Buddhist monks have spread their religions to Karen communities, and different individuals have embraced these to varying degrees, but their animist spirituality remains fundamental to their worldview. Tree ordination is a growing practice in Thailand where Buddhist monastic robes are tied around trees to signify their sanctity, protecting them from being cut down.

Figure 3 shows one such tree in Doi Chang Pa Pae with a cross affixed onto it, demonstrating the coexistence of Buddhism, Christianity, and animism. One focus group said their village has many religions, but that does not divide the community – they all come together to perform their traditional ceremonies.

Music is an important medium for communicating cultural values and preserving oral histories. The tenaku harp is a Karen instrument which passes down traditional knowledge throughout generations while also demonstrating the evolution of Karen culture within a changing world. The body of the harp is made from local wood; whereas the strings used to be made from vines and animal hides, but with increased exposure to the outside...
world, the Karen now make the strings from recycled waste like old bicycle brake cables and fishing lines. These innovations demonstrate the blurred line between “tradition” and “modernity” in Karen culture. Yet despite these changes, the importance of environmental stewardship remains constant (field notes, 2023; Fairfield, 2013).

**Ecological Sustainability**

“*Live in forest, preserve forest. Drink water, preserve river.*” (see Figure 4)

These words are song lyrics that the Karen perform on the *tenaku* harp.

The Karen know that they must manage their resources responsibly since their livelihoods are deeply embedded in and intertwined with their forest environments, as demonstrated through the ecological sustainability of their agroforestry traditions.

![Figure 4](image)

Rotational farming maintains biodiversity within the forest by intercropping 20 to 50 different plant species, which simultaneously provides resources for nutritional, medicinal, weaving, timber, and ceremonial purposes (see Figures 5-8). Similar traditions are found among Indigenous groups across the world. For example, Indigenous peoples in Amazonia have comparable agroforestry practices which are well adapted to the soil
constraints of the tropical environment (Garí, 2001). The Three Sisters farming method in Haudenosaunee culture, with similar variations across the North American continent, involves planting maize/corn, beans, and squash together on the same plot of land. These polycultures form symbiotic relationships, causing each to thrive and grow more productively than if they were grown separately, eliminating the need for synthetic chemicals like fertilizers, pesticides, or herbicides, while providing a nutrient-rich diet (Kimmerer, 2013). Furthermore, polyculture provides resilience in food security. Indigenous groups in the Andes traditionally plant multiple different varieties of potato; this genetic variability ensures that if a blight were to destroy one variety, other food sources would be available to fall back on. In contrast, eighteenth century Ireland was dependent on monocropping a single variety of potato. The lack of biodiversity made Ireland incredibly vulnerable to blight, which destroyed crops throughout the country and led to the death of a million people in the Great Famine (Fraser, 2003).

Figures 5-8 (clockwise from top left)
5 Plot of rotational farmland; 6 various flowers, herbs, and other plants; young banana tree in the background; 7 vegetables and other plants; 8 harvested rice drying on tree stumps

Doi Chang Pa Pae villagers have significant confidence and trust that the forest land they farm on will regenerate after around seven years; the fact that they have continued to stay settled in this area for over 200 years proves
this has been the case (see Figure 9). Through conducting controlled burns, they help restore natural soil fertility and facilitate necessary ecological processes – some plants need fire in order for their seeds to germinate, for instance. Cultural burning practices are incredibly important to Indigenous groups throughout the world, especially in Australia and the Americas. Although controlled burns are essential to the functioning of fire-adapted ecosystems, colonial governments have historically misunderstood these practices, viewing them as savage. Fire suppression laws have criminalized Indigenous burning. However, without small-scale fires, debris is not effectively cleared from forest floors, which accumulates and serves as fuel loads for larger destructive fires to ravage through (Goode et al., 2022; Martinez et al., 2023).

![Figure 9 Clear boundary between uncultivated forest land (dark green, top left) and regenerated fallow seven years after cultivation (bright green, bottom right)](image)

Hill tribes are often used as a scapegoat to blame for wildfires and haze pollution in Thailand due to their cultural burning traditions, but Doi Chang Pa Pae serves as a case study which refutes this accusation. The community successfully integrates traditional wisdom with modern technologies in sustainable fire management. Villagers used to trek to the summit to keep watch for wildfires for hours, but now they implement camera monitoring systems and remote sensing technology to save time and labor. Respondents note that weather conditions have been significantly drier in recent years, increasing the frequency and intensity of wildfires. They blame urban activity and greenhouse gas emissions for climate change, which disrupts the seasons of their agricultural cycle. They express the grievance that they work diligently to fight forest fires, yet their communities are blamed for causing
them (field notes, 2023; Bhandari, 2023; Lertsinsrubtavee et al., 2022; Tanpipat et al., 2022).

**Government Policy**

*Misconceptions and Marginalization of Indigenous Peoples*

Dominant Thai discourse accuses hill tribes of being invaders, deforesters, and drug traffickers since their ancestral homelands span across modern national boundaries, their agroforestry traditions involve fire (though their reforestation efforts are largely overlooked), and some groups have historically been coerced into cultivating opium poppy in the Golden Triangle. Tensions between the Thai majority and Indigenous minorities increased when the government began cracking down on the jungles during the Cold War, seizing control of land and natural resources under the guise of national security and counterinsurgency against communist guerillas. Furthermore, the social construction of “Thainess” was adopted from Western ethnicity-based definitions of nationalism, and this identity has been restricted to the literate Buddhists living in the valleys. Other groups who have oral codes, practice animism, and live in the forests are vilified as backward and uncivilized (field notes, 2023; Hares, 2006; Hayami, 2006; Renard, 2006).

Studies analyzing media coverage of ethnic minorities found that major news networks reinforce negative stereotypes which exclude these communities as out-groups to Thai society, thus perpetuating inequality. Researchers found that Karen people were rarely given a voice in news articles while government sources largely dominated the discourse (Hongladarom, 2000; Yunchalard & Punkasirikul, 2023). Participants from both of my research sites feel they are an easy target for oppressive government policies since Thai society does not listen to them; they feel misrepresented and voiceless. They want to be properly understood and treated as equals. During the public forum with Members of Parliament at the demonstration outside Government House in Bangkok, one protestor said, “We eat rice. You eat rice. We are just as human as you are” (Bang Kloi protestor, 2023).

**Displacement and Discrimination**

All of my respondents viewed the government’s attempts at environmental protection to be false solutions. Bang Kloi respondents especially criticized the establishment of Kaeng Krachan National Park. They have lived in this “protected area” and sustainably managed its resources long before its borders were arbitrarily drawn, yet they were forcibly evicted in 1996. When they returned to Chai Phaen Din in 2011, park officials burned down the village (which is grossly ironic, considering that the government accuses Indigenous people of being arsonists) and they were relocated to Pong Luek-Bang Kloi. Here, authorities promised that each family would be allocated 7 rai (1.12 hectares) of land. However, due to complicated logistical and bureaucratic obstacles, many were unable to secure the land they were promised, and the land that was provided was unsuitable for agriculture. When they practiced
rotational farming in their homeland, they were self-sufficient and had abundant access to nutritious food and medicinal plants. Separated from these traditions, they suffer from food insecurity, malnutrition, and poverty. They also face epidemics of dengue fever and malaria with limited access to the closest hospital, and community members have died from being denied health services. They denounce the hospital’s discrimination and negligence. Those who found Pong Luek-Bang Kloi to be uninhabitable migrated to urban areas to find work.

When many lost their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic, 87 community members returned to Chai Phaen Din in 2021 in a desperate attempt to provide for themselves, but they were forcibly evicted again, detained, and charged with encroachment. They have traveled to Bangkok multiple times to protest these charges, expressing frustration that they have to sleep on the sidewalk in the heat and rain, inhaling car exhaust fumes, while government officials refuse to listen to them. “We are human too. We want to be treated with human dignity” (Bang Kloi protestors, 2023; Lawattanatrakul, 2021; Prachatai, 2023).

Earlier in 2014, the military led by General Prayut Chan-o-cha seized power in one of Thailand’s many coups d’état and established a junta called the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO). The NCPO passed Order No. 64/2557, the Forest Reclamation Policy, with the stated goal of reversing deforestation. Its implementation and enforcement resulted in the forced eviction of thousands of forest dwellers across the country. More than 46,000 were arrested and sued, and some were even killed by state forces (ASEAN Post, 2018; Triyos, 2023). The National Human Rights Committee (NHRC) received petitions from 38 communities against the policy, and Human Rights Watch criticized the junta’s forced evictions, arbitrary arrests, and intimidation of residents (Human Rights Watch, 2014; NRHC, 2014).

One particular human rights violation that is especially painful for the Bang Kloi community, and for social justice advocates across the country, is the extrajudicial killing of land defender, Porlajee "Billy" Rakchongcharoen. Thailand is notorious for its culture of impunity among government officials, and human rights defenders continue to demand justice and accountability (Amnesty International, 2020; Prachatai, 2019). Billy was a staunch advocate for Indigenous rights and has become a martyr for Indigenous communities and their struggle for self-determination. At the Government House demonstration, protestors sang a song commemorating his life.

**Resilience and Resistance**

At the demonstration, protestors called each other phi-nong, meaning “sibling.” Although they come from many different backgrounds across the country, they are united in their common struggle and treat each other like family. They also showed international solidarity with other Indigenous groups around the world. A performer sang “Colors of the Wind” from *Pocahontas* to express their similarities with Native Americans (see Figure 10). They particularly sympathize with those who were displaced from their
homeland amid the establishment of Yellowstone, the world’s first national park.

Protestors shared stories together, learned lessons from each other, and collaboratively strategized on how to move forward.

One strategic lesson came from Doi Chang Pa Pae. In 2018, around 80 local authorities came to the village and declared that a large area of land, belonging to four households in the village, must be evacuated. The community decided to collaborate with civil society groups, the Northern Peasant Federation and the People’s Movement for a Just Society, using collective strength to resist dispossession and organize for their land back. Together, they protested in Bangkok and demanded that their community be designated as a Special Cultural Zone (SCZ). SCZs are areas where ethnic minorities have legal protections which allow them to preserve traditional livelihoods and cultural practices which would otherwise be banned, like rotational farming (Phatthanaphraiwan et al., 2022). After many negotiations, their advocacy led to a Cabinet Resolution approval in 2020, and local authorities approved the land management plan in 2022. Their success story serves as a model for other communities. SCZs are an emerging strategy for biocultural and ecological conservation which offers legal alternatives to eviction and dispossession. Although there is much work to be done, there is hope for a brighter future.

**Conclusion**

The Thai government’s approach of dividing humans from demarcated “protected areas” to preserve nature supposes that humans must somehow be
separate from nature. Indigenous worldviews commonly recognize humans as part of nature, rather than apart from it. Many people in industrialized societies falsely assume that natural environments are “pristine” and untouched by humans, without recognizing that Indigenous peoples have sustainably modified and interacted with their environments for generations (Adams & McShane, 1992; Balée, 2002). We are made of the same atoms as the earth; the water that flows through our bodies is the same water that flows through the rivers. We are threads within the web of our greater ecosystems; the Karen teach us that when we make sure our ecosystem thrives, we thrive with it.

The Thai government’s approach to environmental policy has rendered itself ineffective at adequately protecting natural resources and human rights. The urban elite are far removed from the rural forests they claim control over. Indigenous communities have lived sustainably on their homelands for centuries; they know the land the best, and they ought to be the ones to decide how to manage their resources themselves. Community-level empowerment and collaboration with local officials is far more effective than top-down mandates. In order to effectively protect natural resources and human rights, it is vital that Indigenous peoples have the autonomy and self-determination to manage the lands they have called home for generations.

This research endeavors to offer contributions to the literature on developing sustainable food systems, preserving forest environments, improving fire management practices, and protecting Indigenous sovereignty and human rights. By learning from communities who have a long history and deep cultural connection with the natural environment, policymakers and researchers can develop resource management systems which are more ecologically sound and socially just. Overall, the research presented in this paper highlights the importance of recognizing and embracing traditional knowledge and cultural practices in the pursuit of environmental sustainability.

Acknowledgements

This project was completed as an assignment for PSFA 350 & 550 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the International Studies Minor. All of the photos appearing in this paper were taken by me and with permission.

I extend my deepest gratitude to my participants and the broader Karen community for sharing your stories and wisdom with me, and for welcoming me into your hearts and homes. You are some of the kindest, strongest, most caring and inspiring souls I have ever had the honor of meeting. I wish you peace, joy, and justice. I aim to share your lessons far and wide, and I strive to help build a better world together with you. To the Northern Development Foundation, People’s Movement for a Just Society, Northern Peasant Federation, Assembly of the Poor, Save Bang Kloi Coalition, and the other activist groups organizing to empower marginalized communities, I am inspired by your conviction and resilience. To Phatchara Kamchamnarn, I am inspired by your selfless service, humble leadership, and unwavering
dedication; thank you for connecting me with Karen communities, for translating, and for everything you do. To Jennifer Stannard, I am inspired by your international intelligence and compassionate friendship.

To Professor Trudi Andres, Professor Mei Zhong, and Thammasat University Professor Yingluck Kanchanaroek, thank you for providing me such helpful research mentorship. To Professor Savanna Schuermann, thank you for your endless support, encouraging advice, and influential passion. You taught me that a better world is possible and we must choose to create it together. Thank you to Associated Students for granting me a study abroad scholarship and providing me with life-changing leadership experience. Thank you to Andrés Bonfiacio Samahan and the broader Filipino community for showing me the invincible power of collective love.

Finally, thank you to my family for the gift of this life.

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https://doi.org/10.1007/s00267-008-9239-7


To the Grave: Determining Gender Through Artifacts and Bones

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Much of what we know regarding gendered societies of antiquity comes from the reasonings surrounding archeological artifacts and burial sites, yet deviations from these conclusions are often shucked rather than addressed. While feminist study has undoubtedly impacted archeology when addressing women’s roles in society, intersex and transgender narratives and lives easily fall into the subset of those cast aside due to a false assumption that biology alone (and not culture) dictates sex. Further, the cultural meaning of artifacts and remains often become stressors of a gendered system rather than indicators of life’s complexities. A literature review of gender in archeology signifies that, while archeological findings show many cases where remains and artifacts correlate, the cultural implications of those that do not align with patriarchal standards are consistently cast to the wayside. Also addressed are the arguments regarding whether artifacts can certifiably determine gender. In opposing this misguided tradition in archeological reasoning, this paper stresses a deeper understanding of the cultural context of grave goods and questions whether Euro-American standards and archeology’s androcentric beginnings overly influence current research. Referenced within this is the theory that modern society cannot definitively conclude binary gender throughout antiquity due to its separation from ancient times and a lack of complete information regarding cultural context. In the wake of global misunderstanding and current legislation that has been harmful to intersex and transgender communities, studies revolving around possible historical representation and any other arguments against binary gender throughout antiquity undo the biological determinist and pseudo-historical arguments that have bolstered such legislation.

Keywords: archeology, gender, sex, grave goods, burial rites, feminist studies, transgender, intersex
Introduction

As the cliche goes, death is a part of life. A lesser-known alternative exists, though: life is apparent in death. Archeologists dedicate their careers to the latter statement, pouring over sites and graves. Within these burial plots containing antiquity’s artifacts and bones; they hope to grasp the lives of ancient civilizations and understand their struggles. From this grasping emerges a narrative of the many civilizations before us. Artifacts, applicably termed grave goods, establish supposed gender, societal importance, and adhered lineage. Skeletal remains do much of the same, continuing to provide information regarding societal norms, working conditions, and nutrition (Fausto-Sterling, 2005). Archeologists employ both artifacts and burial remains, combined with burial rites (or, to America, funeral traditions), to discern the importance and function of binary gender roles within society. While artifacts and remains often work together to form their owner’s story, many deviations exist, highlighting a concerning number of untold tales.

Gender and sex are still explicitly locked within a biologically determined narrative in archeological study. While modern Western society has slowly begun to ponder the possibility of the social construction of gender and its separation from sex (which continues to be a widely debated topic itself), archeology has stayed rooted in the essentialist ideals of when it rose as a discipline. Gender in archeology is considered biologically determined and stagnant. The complexity of humanity and a community’s idiosyncrasies boils down to what is not much more than the shape of the skull and pelvis and what items those skeletal remains might be with (Marques, n.d.). While the relationship between gender and sex is becoming increasingly more complicated than previously expected, archeology continues to bind itself by the idea of a gender binary. Researchers look for proof of this system by separating burial rites, artifact use, and bone identification by gender instead of questioning established literature by focusing on these deviations. Because our bones tell the story of how our environment has shaped them, the argument that traditional archeology offers requires revision. Sex and gender, then, become far more interesting variables that exist as a result of the cultural conditions from which they emerged.

This paper seeks to unearth the true importance of gender in archeology—as pertinent, a hindrance, or something in between—and where transgender and intersex individuals fall within those perimeters. First, this paper inspects the use of grave goods in diverse settings and how archeologists shuck their meaning when the skeletal remains assumed gender differs from the surrounding artifacts, and continues to assess the argument that skeletal remains can verifiably provide information regarding biologically determined gender, considering the effect of lifestyle on the human body (Davison, 2023). Finally, this paper will address other approaches to gender archeology, which insist that positioning gender in ancient societies might damage our overall understanding of the intricacies
of life throughout history and connect the Smithsonian’s bone gendering techniques to the sedentary work of women computer scientists in Malaysia (Turek, 2013).

A Historiography of Gender Archeology

Archeology began as a historically European and masculine hobby of exploring other cultures and collecting artifacts for personal gain (Mortillaro, 2023). Arguably, while Norwegian feminist archeologists were calling for the subject’s improvement in the ‘70s, feminism influenced archeology most directly after American archeologists Conkey and Spector illuminated what they deemed an overall androcentric approach to the literature. Conkey and Spector were right—American archeology was an incredibly male-centered field before the ’90s, both by profession and subject (Englestad, 2015; Balme & Bulbeck, 2008). When the thought occurred to define women’s position in society as archeologists had defined men’s, the improvement was just that: women were now a recognizable addition to antiquity. From there, women’s importance to ancient societies did not stray much. Archeologists still commonly viewed women’s tasks—gathering—as subservient to men’s, whose occupation of hunting supposedly inspired language (Balme & Bulbeck, 2008). According to Balme & Bulbeck (2008):

> While these revisionist articles drew attention to male bias of previous work, conceptually there was no change, the assumption remaining that women and men did different things. Often the things they did were based on what women and men did in gender-differentiated societies of the present, presumably linked to biological reproductive function. (p. 6)

This history thoroughly enmeshed archeology in biological essentialism, showcased by the assumption that men hunted because their gender was intrinsically tied to their body’s ability. Alternatively, women, whose bodies were considered too frail to participate in such activities by the Western societal standards of the time, were assigned less physically exertive tasks like gathering. In other words, gender was still binary and wholly determined by anatomy, leaving no room for intersex or transgender identities within traditional archeological discussion.

Culture to burial grounds is what gold is to a safety deposit box. Communities package their culture within the lining of the burial rite—within each coffin, urn, and plot. Their culture is the treasure that archeologists uncover, from which they discern meaning. As feminist study has impacted archeology, scholars have noted a doubling-down on gender and sex as being biologically determined. Despite feminist scholars noting that such gendered archeological findings are merely conjecture, brought about by Euro-American ideals for a gender binary and separate workforces, patriarchal arguments nevertheless downplayed feminist archeological findings, relegating their work to the margins of its discourse. Indeed, when
women started entering the field of archeology in the 1970s, the field emphasized gender difference by relegating women and their “lesser” positions—the gatherer, the homemaker, the carer—to their biology (Balme & Bulbeck, 2008). As a result, many archeologists cast aside graves that might stress the appearance of transgender and intersex lives as deviations from the norm, opting for a limited understanding of civilization (Davison, 2023).

**The Gendered Meaning of an Item**

In traditional archeology, the objects individuals bury their loved ones with are integral in identifying gender and status. In multiple Jewish Palestinian-Roman graves, women lay next to their spindles, while men are indicated as scribes by their inkwells (Peskowitz, 1997). Relevantly, Doctor of Religion Miriam Peskowitz asserts that many archeologists studying Jewish grave sites in Palestinian Rome consistently simplify the meaning of grave goods (1997). The objects that loved ones buried with the dead do not have to be associated with their position in society or their gender. It is equally possible that grave goods have culturally unique meanings. Frequently, grave goods can equivalently suggest the characteristics that family and friends hope the deceased maintains. Following this train of thought, a spindle, rather than suggesting the deceased’s job title or sex, might represent their purity upheld even in death, or vice versa (Peskowitz, 1997).

If grave goods contain more culturally symbolic information than traditional archeology assumes, archeologists must more thoroughly investigate objects that might signify gender identification in relationship to their contemporary biases. Since the spindle—or weaving—is generally associated with women’s labor in more recent histories and understandings, traditional archeology posits that its placement in a burial plot commonly proposes that the individual’s gender is female, though its symbolic meaning can exist without any gender implied (Peskowitz, 1997). Likewise, the existence of an inkwell would seemingly connect the position of the scribe with the idea of masculinity (Peskowitz, 1997). Stepping away from these assigned stereotypes allows us to reimagine societies of antiquity in a different light. Cultural specificity should be integral to anthropological study, and ethnographic research carefully considers it. Still, archeology sometimes finds itself neglecting cultural specifics to form the feeling of a logical conclusion based on our contemporary sensibilities. Because an inkwell was found within a grave, and, because inkwells are customary for scribes who are most usually men, traditional archeology assumes that a man is likely buried here, while modern thought argues that society is almost never that straightforward. Instead, imagine the cultural meanings the inkwell might hold—what it might indicate about the person’s characteristics or the culture’s values—rather than its gendered specificities.
The Skeleton and Its Possessions

Sometimes, these grave goods surround skeletal remains and the remains tell a story themselves. An individual’s bones tell quite a bit about them. Bones suggest what nutrients a diet is rich in, where the individual came from and traveled to, and sex and gender (Fausto-Sterling, 2005). In the case of Anglo-Saxon burials, masculine items mostly found themselves with masculine-identified remains, while feminine beads and jewelry surrounded feminine-identified skeletons (Davison, 2023). Still, while deviations existed, archeologists routinely cast aside any that did not meet standard assumptions. In the case of Davison’s article, two stood out the most—one individual marked “definitely male” and one marked “possibly female.” “Definitely male’s” loved ones enveloped them in feminine items, including beads, jewelry, and keys.

Alternatively, “possibly female” found themselves surrounded by weapons and other markings of a warrior’s (and, therefore, a theorized man’s) burial. Notably, both held high status, identified by the depths of their graves and the number of cavities, among other indicators, potentially signaling a different understanding of gender than is generally told (Davison, 2023). There are three main takeaways from this example of atypicality. One, gendered bones do not always agree with gendered goods, yet they coexist in at least some graves. While the Anglo-Saxons only offer one case study of this, archeology lecturer Jan Turek references another in his analysis of the European Copper Age (2013). Suggested between these examples is a timespan of nearly 5,000 years where loved ones sometimes buried individuals with artifacts that did not match—to archeological standards—their biologically designated gender, thus negating their existence. Instead, these individuals existed in antiquity for millennia with honor—our second point. If these individuals were intersex or transgender, there were cases where their society found them to be highly esteemed, as is the case with the “possibly female” body mentioned above.

Though their skeletal remains designated them as likely female, their grave was one of less than twenty with weapons that indicated high status assigned to masculine individuals (Davison, 2023). The third takeaway exists in the if above. As was noted before with Jewish Palestinian-Roman burials, assuming burial items are innately female or male subtracts the intricacies of culture and potentially the irrelevance and/or nuance of gender to that culture. Definitively stating that, because these individuals’ loved ones buried them with gender non-conforming items, they are transgender or intersex is the same as equating that the owner of the inkwell is a man because it is a man’s item. There is no way to conclusively confirm gender identity as we know it today, whether grave goods and their owners agree or disagree.

A Story Carved in Bone

Finally, introduced is the variable of life within the body. Lifestyle innately shapes anatomy. Workload shows itself through bones, and bones, in turn,
communicate their experiences long after they have found their way underground. As Fausto-Sterling states, “...behavior (e.g., changing forms of exercise) and hormonal changes in the body might produce bone loss or gain” (2005, p. 1507). For example, Malaysian women often have STEM-adjacent jobs, represented by indoor, sedentary work, due to Malaysian culture’s view of women’s abilities (Mellstrom, 2009). Due to inactivity throughout the day, Malaysian women’s bones are less dense than those who are more active (Hanes, n.d.).

Comparatively, Malaysian men, who often enact more heavy-duty outdoor work, would have denser, more sturdy bones (Mellstrom, 2009; Fausto-Sterling, 2005). Archeological recovery would reflect precisely that: Malaysian men had stronger bones and, possibly due to unknown outside factors, were heftier and more likely to do heavy work. Thus, a strenuous workload would define men and their societal position. Then, hypothetically, archeologists might classify a Malaysian “definite female”—determined by her skull and pelvis as the Smithsonian references—who found herself outdoors and working heavy labor as an anomaly, separated from her biologically determined gender due to her more masculine work (Marques, n.d.). Likewise, someone archeologists might deem a “definite male” in Malaysian society, who for some reason or another lived a sedentary but otherwise healthy lifestyle, might be considered an anomaly as well. Individuals who fall in between these examples, intersex and transgender folk who are not well represented in death due to the societal standards of those researching them, easily slip between the cracks of the gender determinist narrative. Their bodies, worked and reworked by the lives they have lived, might never be well represented in death if traditional archeologists continue to ascribe binary gender and modern societal standards to them.

Conclusion

Above all else, cultural context is integral to archeological findings. A society and its individuals’ idiosyncrasies, including gender, are not so easily garnered through archeological analysis, which muddies them while attempting to discern a logical conclusion. Humanity is rarely straightforward, and society does not always conclude logically. None of this is to assume that archeologists do not try to keep the culture they are researching within its context. Cultural context is of utmost importance to any field of anthropology. By contrast, when delving so deeply into the past, it is not unlikely that archeologists must emphasize the culture they know in order to relate to the culture they are studying. Much of archeology far removes itself from any communication with cultures of antiquity, yet it relies heavily on drawn conclusions. Usually, no writings are available to detail daily life and societal standards. Instead, archeologists must pull from previously acquired knowledge of society to postulate their findings. Naturally, previously garnered knowledge might be equally influenced by the archeologist’s culture and upbringing. This bias can appear in the gendering of individuals’ remains, whose voices cannot be heard and, therefore, cannot
be analyzed to better understand the cultural construction of gender throughout antiquity.

Archeology, once inspired by a brutal hobby, stems from a historically White, Euro-American viewpoint and is bound to find itself suffocated by those ideals (Mortillaro, 2023). It is not deeply and irredeemably flawed, lost in standards that do not align with modernity. Archeology merely finds itself easily misguided. Understanding that there are areas that practitioners must approach differently is the first step to creating a better-rounded study. Culture is complicated because people are complicated. Archeologists cannot compress life into a few completely discernable patterns because too many variables occur within societies, classes, and even neighborhoods. Social constructions—gender—were just as malleable throughout antiquity as they are today. Acknowledging that gender is not genetically determined and, therefore, not as integral to an overall archeological conclusion as is currently stressed might influence growth in archeological study. Addressing the issues of sex and gender, of the anomalies cast aside for a more conclusive data set, and of increased knowledge of the impact of life on bones is a much-needed start to allow ancient cultures their voice. Modernity’s acknowledgment of the intricacies of human nature lends fantastic insight into the constructions and complications of society and culture. Because of this, it might carry archeology away from its Euro- and androcentric past—in part, away from a strictly biologically determined and binary-gendered society—if the study and its practitioners allow it.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my family, friends, and teachers who have inspired and supported me. A special thanks to those who listened to me talk about this paper, those who allowed me to read and reread it as I prepared it for publication, and to Dr. Amanda Beardsley, who encouraged my initial submission and notably helped throughout the process. This would not be possible without all of you—without your support, your encouragement, and your overwhelming love.

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L.A. Times: Unidentified Man Claims He Is the Late Jean-Jacques Rousseau of 18th Century France

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Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Second Discourse, Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men, was published in 1755 by the Academy of Dijon and has since received criticism from Enlightenment scholars, like M. de Voltaire, as well as contemporary ones, for being too pessimistic about civil society both in the 18th Century and onwards. Rousseau is widely acknowledged today as a proto-socialist thinker, as he condemned private property and all forms of government that were not direct democracies. His Second Discourse primarily focuses on the freedom of “natural man” and the state of barbarism. Rousseau argues that the creation of property and dependent social relationships, i.e., the evolution of civilization, is foremost to blame for present social inequality. Had mankind remained self-sufficient and avoidant of perception, renown, and economic and proprietary conquest, it would have avoided systemic disparities. The most poignant conclusion that Rousseau draws in the Second Discourse is that the future of society for generations to come is bleak. Rousseau is a prominent Enlightenment figure because he was forward-thinking in this way, offering his advice and sympathies to the unborn. With this story, I sought to reanimate Jean-Jacques Rousseau at a time and place where capitalist exploitation and social divide are starkly notable: modern-day Los Angeles. I ask the reader to suspend their disbelief in cryonics and join the narrator and Rousseau on an insightful walk through Beverly Hills as they encounter a modern couple, a Catholic church, an outlet mall, and all the intricacies of social media.

Note: This short story was written in response to an academic essay prompt.

Keywords: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Origins of Inequality, Political Theory, Democracy, Social Commentary, Political Philosophy, Creative Political Essay
Unbeknownst to most historians, Enlightenment scholar Jean-Jacques Rousseau was frozen by Denis Diderot and his other friends of letters, promptly after he died in 1778 in hopes he could someday be resurrected in mind, body, and soul. The men of the Enlightenment all agreed that it should be Rousseau for this experiment because it was he who had the most future-oriented outlook on philosophy as it pertained to the entirety of the human race—a scope that went far broader than just 18th-century France (Rousseau 25). Pessimistic as they may have been, the men of letters wanted Rousseau to see for himself if his assessments of and predictions for civil society would remain consistent as new generations emerged. They all hoped he would be wrong, yet secretly knew he wouldn’t be. See, cryopreservation was a well-kept secret between the Enlightenment scientists. It was to be posed as an afterlife alternative for atheists: “for those who want to live forever, but not by the means of God,” but never made it out of the testing stage. Rousseau scoffed at the idea, saying he did not wish to know the dread of the unhappiness of those living after him (39). So you can imagine how upset he was with his contemporaries for electing him as a guinea pig.

Indeed, Rousseau did not at all consent to this arrangement. Yet 245 years later, when the glacier he was lodged in eventually melted due to a rapidly deteriorating climate, he found himself (and his powdered wig) alive and well in the year 2023. Having floated to the by-now-well-established United States of America and washing up on the plastic shores of Santa Monica Pier, Rousseau already knew his exact circumstances. He was also very hungry. He could not help but be intrigued by the modern society presented before him. After finding $25 on the ground and spending it all on an oat milk latte and some avocado toast (which, even he had to admit, was pretty good), Rousseau decided to embark on a long walk to discover all the humane horrors of present-day Los Angeles. He kept a journal along the way.

The first thing he sought to observe was the modern family, as he already knew it would serve as a microcosm for society at large (62). As he wound through the residential streets of Beverly Hills, he overheard a fight between a couple in the front yard of their 8-million-dollar mid-century-style home. The quarrel was over whether they should buy a Mercedes Benz G-class or a Mercedes Benz C-class. Rousseau was quickly able to deduce that this meant the car, which meant one of those modern-day, cherry red, gas-guzzling stagecoaches he saw plaguing the highways and arterials along his walk. He also noted that the couple had three of them already, proudly displayed in their driveway. In his journal, he wrote:

I have said it before, and I will say it again: Being deprived of luxury seems to these people as much more cruel than possessing it is sweet (63). These modern-day conveniences for society have done nothing but create a false
sense of need (for things they do not need), all in man’s fruitless pursuit of esteem. What should I make of the man trimming the couple’s bushes, who only has one “car”? Or the people on the sidewalk I passed two neighborhoods ago who do not even have homes?

The bitter couple took a brief break from their bickering to let the yard worker know what a terrible job he was doing. They wanted their hedges spiraled, not rounded. The man had clearly been active all day, in between job sites, sweaty and agitated (80). *He will work until he dies*, Rousseau thought, *groveling in obscurity and misery* (70, 78). Rousseau recognized that these different “classes” of people he encountered along his walk were just direct reflections of the societal structure in France in 1754. Certainly, times have changed in the technical sense: horse hooves had turned into engines, and serfs had turned into landscapers, but humanity itself had remained the same:

Alas, the error was never corrected. The fruits of the earth, and even the earth itself, still only belong to a select few. If only I could have traveled back in time, rather than forward. If only I could have been there to stop the imposter who dared to claim any part of the land as his own (60). But, as it still stands in the year 2023, all people are still insatiable for material possessions, and esteem, and all people are still miserable. The rich need more. More luxuries, and with those luxuries, they need more services! And the poor, they need help. They need shelter. Those in-between need both the rich and the poor to even exist. Nobody can find safety in either poverty or wealth (67, 69). Some people are struggling to feed their families, or even just themselves! And the others are tormented over an uneven rose bush. I do not wish to trade places with any of them. Contrary to the law of nature, those at the top of the “Beverly Hill” gorge themselves on superfluities while those at the bottom, the starving multitude, lack necessities (81). I am disgusted but unsurprised.

Rousseau was beginning to rant a bit in his journal, but the argument between the couple quickly took a turn for the worse. He looked back up with intrigue. The two somehow segued into a heated conversation about “Klarissa”, the 24-year-old secretary who seemed to be the new source of the wife’s fury. Rousseau did not need (or want) to know the intimate details of the situation to construct his analysis:

Oh, jealousy. It indeed awakens with love. Impetuous fury at best, sheer resentment at worst (57, 64). The natural man would never be so pusillanimous to end up in such petty arguments with his partner about dissolute co-workers. I do pity them.

Rousseau heard faint noises of laughter and squealing. He looked to the side yard where three starry-eyed children were taking turns “pretending to be the princess” in a well-imagined fairytale scenario. He chuckled to himself and wrote:
I see we’re still glorifying that damn monarchy...
It appears this couple raises children together. They surely are bound
to each other for life, in some capacity at least. I must admit their
offspring are precious too... Long gone are the days when merely
reproductive intercourse occurred between two humans. Dysfunctional
ity indeed comes with dependence, but I too can attest
that when it is pure, the conjugal bond between two beings is
undoubtedly the sweetest sentiment known to man. Ah, Love. It gave
us all a more sedentary lifestyle. Which can be a good thing. Society
cannot possibly revert to naturality now, these constructs of love and
estem are far too comfortable, and our hearts are far too soft (63). I
wonder if the hedge trimmer is returning to a wife of his own later
today.

Rousseau eventually watched as the couple apologetically embraced each
other. He thought of his own wife, whom he was sure to never see again. With
cynical tenderness, he wrote: They do make a lovely pair. I wonder what they
will fight about tomorrow.

As most of us would be if there were a soggy old Frenchman in a powdered
wig peering through our hedges, the wife was immensely startled at the sight
of Rousseau, who had been lingering for quite some time now. It doesn’t just
take a 21st-century American to recognize the shape of a pistol, and Rousseau
was out of there faster than one could say “Enlightenment!”
He kept walking. As he passed by the Sunday crowd at the Hilltop Catholic
curch, he shook his head in vexation. He quickly noted:

People still seem to believe that everything exists by God’s will,
presumably even inequality. 245 years have passed, and no Christian
has been able to provide a reason for suffering that goes beyond
writing it off as “His” will (39).

Rousseau continued to make his way through the city. From a local
bookstore, he stole a French-to-English dictionary and learned enough words
to try to convince people of his identity, but it was to no avail. He then
decided that it would probably be a better idea to blend in with the rest of
L.A.’s inhabitants, so continuing his kleptomaniac tear, at the outlet mall he
acquired a pair of blue jeans and a “Trump 2024” T-shirt (unaware of what it
meant). He set to leave immediately after, finding the sight of retail stores,
soft pretzel stands, and large crowds of people flocking to and fro with such
excitement to satisfy their vices, an ostentatious display of capitalist society.
It is now more evident than ever that being something and appearing to be
something are two completely different things, he thought, as neon lights
spelling SALE flashed before him, these shoppers will return home with their
purchases, then go on to present themselves to society as deceptively cunning
(67). I am now even more nostalgic for something I have not even experienced
for myself: living according to necessity. The natural man need not clothe
himself in frivolous, bright pink accessories to survive, so why must modern
man? (61). Certainly, the “invisible hand” he had frequently heard of throughout his lifetime seemed to have accomplished absolutely nothing but slaps in the face and forceful shoves toward the doors of shopping centers. If only knowledge and reason could be sold as a Buy One Get One deal at “Bloomingdales” he figured, maybe then people would re-assess where their priorities should lie.

Rousseau indeed had seen enough, but as he approached the exit of the mall, his interest was again piqued, this time by a young girl on a bench, capturing hundreds of images of herself instantaneously. At the time of his death, photography had not yet been invented, so Rousseau was dumbfounded by the sight of this small rectangular orb accomplishing in seconds what the painters of his time sought to accomplish in months or years.

Now feeling more comfortable eavesdropping in his disguise, he casually sat next to the girl, peering over her shoulder at the contraption in her hands, which he would later learn was called an iPhone. She didn’t notice him. She didn’t even look up. What is so enamoring about this object? He wondered. He watched discreetly, for an entire hour, as she scrolled through her Instagram feed: liking, commenting, and posting, in a never-ending binge. Egocentric displays of people infested the small screen, one after the other, faces and figures all at the girl’s fingertips. He noted that she left many superlative and grandiose comments on other people’s images, almost as if it were a transaction to receive the same praise on her own:

Those accustomed to the ways of society still only know how to live within the opinion of others. External validation and the judgment of one’s contemporaries seem to be the only source of sentiment of their existence. With modern technology, a new web of communication has been spun for humanity to receive the fleeting validity of their personhood. Alas, it appears that we are still always asking others what we are and never daring to question ourselves on this matter (81). This “Instagram” invention seems to exacerbate these feelings of codependent egotism. Copious amounts of perceived esteem and renown at one’s disposal, all based upon superficial tenets. This girl must be one of many who are also subjecting themselves to these falsehoods and pseudo-senses of self.

Sure enough, she was. As Rousseau looked more closely around the food court, he saw dozens more people enthralled by their rectangular contraptions, capturing images of themselves, and uploading them into the abyss, as if they were all in some unspoken competition with each other,

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1 The invisible hand concept was introduced by economic philosopher, Adam Smith, who lived and worked approximately the same years as Rousseau. It argues that society’s best interests are fulfilled within a free market economy, where people can produce and consume “freely.” It is widely criticized through a socialist lens because this theory evidently only benefits individuals driven by greed and material interest.
seldom paying attention to the actual physical presence of each other, past the occasional glances up.

Nobody seems to be able to see through the imaginary barriers that separate people from other people. Look at all these folks on their devices, subjecting themselves to a universal dependence and obliging themselves to receive from those who do not oblige themselves to give them anything (52).

He then noticed a child holding the bathroom door open for an elderly man. The two exchanged smiles then went their separate ways.

Mankind has been, is, and always will be naturally compassionate. But how can we ever learn to embrace the true benevolence of the human race when we are impeded by the yoke of all the tacit conventions that perpetuate our ignorance? (53, 70).

Rousseau decided he had depressed himself enough by trying to make sense of all the intricacies of social media, but he was also left wanting to know more about smartphones, technology, and the Internet, especially once he found out he could spend hours loitering in the Apple Store surfing the web. By closing time, he was deep into scholarly journals and Britannica pages, filling himself in on all he could regarding what had happened in the world after his death: every invention, imperial conquest, prominent figure, world war, and discovery. He was too enthralled by this research to pay any mind to the store employees who had begun locking up for the evening.

“Look man, are you gonna buy the iPad or not?” One pressed.

“Just five more minutes, I beg, sir.”

After spending enough time on the internet, Rousseau eventually found out the meaning of his t-shirt, but he thought the irony to be comical and decided to keep it on anyway. This was because democracy in the modern-day United States, to him, was no better than monarchy in the Age of Enlightenment. Despots are timeless, as they sit at the head of their nations and revel in the misery of their subjects (78). Rousseau was a bit saddened by the current political climate. He figured it would be at least slightly better by now but still, he found himself noting:

Imbeciles are governing nations, as always (81). Government is being utilized as a class instrument, as always (69). I pity those who believe they can change their existential circumstances in this political system by the mere casting of one vote. I truly do.

His other findings on the Internet gravely overwhelmed him, especially once he started Googling himself. He found that over the last 245 years, he had been cited as a revolutionary by some, a proto-socialist by others, a Republican by several, and a pessimist by most. Somehow, he managed to find an essay prompt regarding his writings for an Enlightenment and Revolution graduate seminar at San Diego State University. It read:
Rousseau's Discourse on the Origins of Inequality is a deeply pessimistic work. In it, all forms of social relations are presented as necessarily compromised and compromising, leading to toxic dependence and diseased psychological states. Consequently, Rousseau's defense of natural equality is a hollow consolation for the reader who is looking for a way forward for modern man.

Rousseau felt a bit misunderstood and defeated by the prompt. He hoped that the students responding to it would be able to understand him as much more than a cynic whose only claim to fame is the glorification of natural savagery, for that is not how he would like to be remembered. These were his exact thoughts:

In writing my Second Discourse, I never intended to imply that reverting to savagery was the only way forward for modern men. I think it is nonsensical to destroy societies, annihilate thine and mine, and return to live in the forests with bears (94). By comparing the natural man to the civilized one, I merely intended to make a commentary that if we did not change our ways, reconstruct our values, and come to realize that man's power lies in who he is instinctively, and in his most vulnerable self, society would continue to worsen employing greed and inequality. The world is far worse now than how I originally left it. The laws of nature have become increasingly violated. I hope I am called "correct" before I am called a pessimist. I do however fear that parts of my "Discourse on the Origins of Inequality" have been overlooked. Does nobody recall the middle position I embraced? Between the indolence of our primitive state and the petulant activity of our egocentrism? That, I believe is the way forward for modern man (65). By removing despots and monarchs, uniting to protect the weak from oppression, restrain the ambitious, and assure everyone of possessing what belongs to him. Civil society, pay attention closely: instead of turning your forces against yourselves, gather them into one supreme power that governs you according to wise laws and maintains you in an eternal concord. Material desires and senseless renown must be suspended on a large scale to achieve this. It is not too late (69).

He tucked his journal behind a plastic plant in the mall's atrium and wrote on the cover: FOR: MAGNIFICENT, MOST HONORED AND SOVEREIGN LORDS, I envisage no greater happiness for myself than seeing all of you happy. Please read the following notes carefully. FROM: your most humble and most obedient fellow citizen, JJR (32).

And with those final remarks, Rousseau left the outlet mall. He knew his updated work would somehow end up in the hands of someone smart. His writings had already helped inspire one revolution, and society was surely on the brink of another, he thought. Out of the mall, past the church, down the hill, and into the woods Rousseau went. He was eventually mauled by a bear, never to be resurrected again. It was exactly the way he wanted to go.
Acknowledgments

Thank you to Dr. Emanuele Saccarelli for allowing me to write a creative response to an academic prompt. Also for the reminder to never let “them” clip my wings. Thank you to my editors and to Splice for helping me keep alive one of the most timeless and important bodies of philosophical work.

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I'M NOT OVARY-ACTING
THIS IS ABOUT
#WOMENSRIGHTS
Reproductive Justice & the United States
Prison System

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The essay draws upon grassroots feminist abolitionist writing and Black feminist theory to critique the prison industrial complex (PIC) in the U.S. and call for policy reform. Specifically, a theoretical framework of reproductive justice is utilized to highlight the systemic racism and sexism within the U.S. PIC, rooted in white supremacy and patriarchy. Using this theoretical framework, I present quantitative and qualitative examples of reproductive injustices against cis-gendered women. Based on the evidence, as viewed through a feminist abolitionist lens, my research calls for abolishment of the PIC as it does not and cannot work in tandem with a reproductive justice framework. I provide some examples of policy reform to address the three pillars of reproductive justice.

Key Words: Reproductive Justice, United States, Prison, Incarceration, Feminism, Intersectionality, Women, Healthcare

Introduction

I argue that the United States prison system needs to be reformed to include a reproductive justice model for women's prisons. I first discuss the pitfalls of the current system regarding reproductive rights and healthcare, while taking an intersectional approach to look at the systematic state-sanctioned violence that disproportionately affects women of color. I explain the reproductive justice framework and how it could expand reproductive rights and access to essential reproductive healthcare within the prison system. I support my argument with activist and legal theory, as well as reports that document incarcerated women’s negative experiences with reproductive healthcare. I conclude with a caveat to my argument that achieving reproductive justice in its fullest form would not be sustainable with the persistence of the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC), which should be abolished.

Before moving forward, it is important to discuss the focus of this paper in relation to inclusive language. While I focus on reproductive injustice in jails, prisons, and detention centers, I acknowledge that this is only one aspect of feminist abolitionist concerns in the overall PIC system. In addition,
informed by intersectional feminist theory (Crenshaw, 1989), I acknowledge the importance of interrogating intersecting oppressions and identities, such as ethnicity, race, class, gender, age, and so on. However, for the scope of this paper, I focus on cis-gendered women in prisons, and to a lesser extent girls. I acknowledge that girls, trans-men, trans-boys, and nonbinary persons are in the same carceral spaces as women, and that trans-men, trans-boys, and nonbinary people with uteruses can get pregnant and can give birth. I note the value of inclusive language, but to decrease confusion and maintain clarity of the argument, I will utilize the term “women” when referring cis-gendered women.

**Current Pitfalls of the U.S. “Justice” System**

The U.S. Prison System is one of the largest in the developed world and almost two million people are currently incarcerated within this system. According to the 2023 annual “Mass Incarceration” report from the Prison Policy Initiative, one of every five people that are incarcerated in the entire world is incarcerated in the U.S. (Sawyer and Wagner). Within this number, there are almost two-hundred thousand people incarcerated within women and girls’ state prisons, local jails, juvenile detention facilities, immigration detention facilities, psychiatric hospitals and others (Kajstura and Sawyer). Since the beginning, the “justice” system within the U.S. has been rooted in the ideas of white supremacy and the patriarchy to control and oppress the minoritized majority. Mass incarceration is a part of the larger PIC, which has created a cycle of incarceration for social groups who are particularly targeted by intersecting oppressions (e.g., racism, sexism, classism) at play in American society. In turn, reproductive rights are often completely overlooked for incarcerated persons, and this issue is exacerbated for people of color, disabled people, immigrants, and other disadvantaged populations.

Mass incarceration refers to the intense and continuous criminalization and incarceration of large numbers of people within the U.S. Mass incarceration also includes the criminal legal system and, “is a network of policing, prosecution, incarceration, surveillance, debt, and social control that is rooted in, builds upon, and reproduces economic and racial inequality and oppression” (Institute to End Mass Incarceration). Mass incarceration is dependent on the infliction of harm on people and entire communities in ways that are long-lasting and reproduce social problems. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, a well-known scholar of prison abolition, states, “[M]ass incarceration...is a machine for producing and exploiting group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (Gilmore 82-83). The continuous cycle of this damage is kept alive through more incarceration and through systematic flaws in the legal system that prioritize punishment over rehabilitation.

Mass incarceration works in tandem with the PIC. Prominent scholar-activist Angela Davis further explains: “Activists and scholars...have deployed the concept of the ‘prison industrial complex’ to point out that the proliferation of prisons and prisoners is more clearly linked to larger
economic and political structures and ideologies than to individual criminal conduct and efforts to curb ‘crime’” (Davis and Shaylor). Critical Resistance, a non-profit aiming to abolish the PIC, defines it as “the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems” (Critical Resistance). The PIC names the ways in which economic, political and social systems play a role in the mass incarceration of minoritized people and encourages the growth of surveillance, policing, and punitive approaches. White people have been underrepresented within the U.S. prison system, whereas Black, Latinx, and Indigenous peoples are a smaller portion of the U.S. population yet make up larger percentages of incarcerated people. This is indicative of the influence of white supremacist roots on the U.S. prison system.

Studies have also shown that the population of women in prison has grown faster than that of the population of men in prison (Kilmer and Antunes 2023). Since the peak of the U.S. prison population in 2008, the population of women in prison has declined by only five percent, whereas the population of men in prison has declined twelve percent (Sawyer and Wagner). This is also indicative of the prevalent influence that patriarchy has within the U.S. prison system. According to Dr. Crystal M. Hayes, “Black women are twice as likely to be incarcerated as White women, and 1 in 18 Black women will be imprisoned in her life, compared with 1 in 11 White women” (Hayes et al. 22). Systemic racism and white supremacy are foundational to the PIC, which is exemplified by this alarming statistic. Unfortunately, these statistics are getting worse and are dramatically impacting the lives of women, particularly women of color, and their communities.

Many women have faced barriers to their own reproductive healthcare throughout the history of the U.S.; however, the Dobbs v. Jackson (2022) decision to overturn Roe v. Wade (1973), which previously granted the constitutional right to abortion, reinforced these barriers. With the right to abortion now falling under state jurisdiction, states such as New York, Washington, and Minnesota have expanded access to abortion while states such as Idaho, Texas, and Missouri have made abortion illegal (Center for Reproductive Rights). Utilizing an intersectional feminist framework, the issue of bodily autonomy is exacerbated for poor women, women of color, uneducated, disabled, and immigrant women who are also at a higher risk of incarceration in the U.S. Since the establishment of the U.S., there has been a disproportionate amount of medical harm perpetrated against Black women dating back to the time of slavery. “Non-consensual gynecological and reproductive surgeries, such as Cesarean sections were performed and perfected on Black women so that the procedures could be used on other women in the future” (Turner).

These procedures often resulted in forced sterilization, long term negative health effects, and psychological harm. In more recent times, forced sterilizations have occurred within California state prisons over the course of over fifty years. Black women, and other women of color, were
disproportionately impacted by these forced sterilizations, which were legal under California state law until 1979 (Stern et al.). State-sanctioned sterilizations were a clear practice of eugenics that took the form of reproductive abuse. Dr. Alexandra Stern et al. states, “Marsha was but one of approximately 20,000 people affected by a law passed in 1909 that authorized such reproductive surgery on patients committed to state homes or hospitals and judged to be suffering from a ‘mental disease which may have been inherited’ and was ‘likely to be transmitted to descendants’” (Stern et al.). “Marsha” is a pseudonym for a person who was admitted to a California state institution, known as the Sonoma State Home, due to their low IQ, and was recommended for sterilization while there (Stern et al.). The state not only took away bodily autonomy of these women but was intentionally aiming to stop the reproduction of people who were seen as “undesirable” under the PIC systems of white-supremacy, patriarchy, ableism and classism. Minoritized women within the U.S. have consistently faced barriers to healthcare and suffered at the hands of those who are supposed to help. Although time and legislation has passed, there are still reproductive injustices and violations of bodily autonomy occurring to women who are incarcerated.

Reproductive rights, healthcare, human rights, and justice inform and influence each other but focus on distinct aspects of the reproductive experience within the current historical context. Reproductive rights are the legal rights for individuals to access services, such as safe abortion, sex education, prenatal care, safe childbirth, contraception, and other family planning services. For women who are incarcerated, reproductive rights are not guaranteed or protected, and there is a large possibility that women could be harmed in the process of trying to receive care. Reproductive rights can be determined through federal and state legislation, which can make upholding the rights of incarcerated women even more difficult depending on their location and if the prison is under the state or private ownership. The goal of establishing reproductive rights is to have adequate reproductive protections for all women under the U.S. Constitution.

Whereas reproductive healthcare is somewhat different, it is also not granted in its full capacity to those who are incarcerated. Reproductive healthcare describes the healthcare that an individual receives from a provider which can include access to safe abortions, birth control, emergency contraception, preventative screenings, prenatal care, and other sexual health services. A reproductive healthcare framework can also look at the lack of adequate information, research and health data and has a goal of improvement and expansion of individuals’ access and experience in healthcare settings (Ross and Solinger 68-69). Reproductive healthcare for incarcerated women is lower in quality, often very inaccessible, and in most instances employs reactive instead of preventative care. Azhar Gulaid and Evelyn F. McCoy discuss the barriers to adequate reproductive healthcare in carceral facilities within their 2022 report for the Urban Institute stating: “Access to OB-GYNs, who often perform critical screenings, may be limited in prisons across the United States, meaning many treatable conditions are going undetected and untreated” (Gulaid and McCoy, 4). Not only is the poor
reproductive healthcare within the U.S. prison system harming pregnant and parenting women, but all women in prison who have basic needs for wellness that are not being met.

Although incarcerated people still hold basic human rights, which includes reproductive rights, they are not being upheld within the U.S. prison system. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights declares that women’s sexual and reproductive rights fall into the protections of several human rights and notes that, “States have obligations to respect, protect and fulfill rights related to women’s sexual and reproductive health” (OHCHR). The OHCHR also provides examples of violations of sexual and reproductive rights which includes providing poor quality services, forced sterilizations, and denial of access to services that only women require. For incarcerated people, there is very limited accessibility to adequate and comprehensive healthcare. There is not a shortage of resources to provide this care but an absence of empathy for those who are incarcerated. This deficit of care is widened for incarcerated women of color, especially poor Black women, because of the significance of white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy rooted in the U.S. prison system. This can include stigmatization of incarcerated people through social discourse and narratives that present people who are incarcerated as undeserving of care and dignity. The U.S. PIC is designed to remove and disregard certain human beings from society while ignoring their basic human rights and needs.

**Reproductive Justice**

The three main pillars of reproductive justice include the right to have a child, the right to not have a child, and the right to raise that child in a safe and healthy environment (Ross and Solinger, 69). Reproductive justice differs from and expands on reproductive rights and reproductive healthcare by utilizing a holistic approach that aims to address intersecting systems of oppression against women and their bodies. Reproductive justice also centers a human rights framework with an activist approach. “Reproductive Justice is achieved when women, girls, and individuals have the social, economic, and political power and resources to make healthy decisions about our bodies, sexuality and reproduction for ourselves, our families and our communities” (Ross and Solinger 70). Reproduction not only looks at the bodies of women, but the circumstances around them that impact decision-making power and bodily autonomy.

The concept of reproductive justice comes from a group of Black women activists who formed an alliance to fight for reproductive rights and healthcare in response to President Bill Clinton’s healthcare reform proposal in 1994 (Abrams). This group called themselves Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice and later grew into what is now known as SisterSong, “a collective devoted to the reproductive and sexual health of women and gender-nonconforming people of color, based in Atlanta” (Abrams). Loretta Ross, one of the women in this group, cited many of her own personal experiences where bodily autonomy and choice were not the only factors
playing a role in women’s reproduction and that the current systems in place were not meeting the needs of women. Ross, along with fellow scholar-activist Rickie Solinger, published the book *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction*, which gave a much more comprehensive view of reproductive justice as a political movement with women of color at the forefront. It has been several decades since the term was coined, yet reproductive justice has still not been achieved in its fullest vision and reproductive rights and healthcare have fluctuated in their progress. Furthermore, incarcerated women continue to face a disregard for their legal rights and physical health. Reforms within the U.S. prison system need to be made to address the inadequate enforcement of reproductive rights and low-quality of reproductive healthcare that incarcerated women face. These reforms must implement a reproductive justice framework that emphasizes human rights and bodily autonomy. The three pillars of reproductive justice can be used to evaluate the pressing needs that incarcerated women face, as well as the many human rights abuses that occur in relation to women’s bodies.

The right to have a child is the first pillar within a reproductive justice framework and is crucial when dissecting the experiences of incarcerated women. If a person does become incarcerated while pregnant or gets pregnant while incarcerated, in most cases they are not able to birth that child with their full dignity, respect, and safety. Giving birth while in a prison already creates a traumatic environment for mothers; however, prison officials often make this experience worse by heavily restraining women in this process. “Being marked as a ‘prisoner’ on the labor and delivery ward by virtue of the use of restraints or the presence of correctional staff, created feelings of deep shame and stigma that made some women feel ‘less than human’” (Cavanaugh et al. 7).

The birth of a child is supposed to be one of the happiest moments of a parent’s life; however, incarcerated women have expressed isolation, stress, and unhappiness due to the multiple factors that push their humanity aside during the birthing process. There have been many reported accounts in prisons around the U.S. where women are shackled while giving birth. Dr. Jennifer Clarke and Rachel Simon specifically investigated the method of shackling women whilst they were giving birth within their article for the AMA Journal of Ethics: “While shackled, pregnant women are at increased risk of falling and sustaining injury to themselves and their fetuses. During labor and delivery, shackling interferes with a woman’s ability to assume various positions and prevents her immediate transport to the operating room if necessary” (Clarke and Simon, 780). The U.S. PIC has dehumanized vulnerable mothers through this practice while also putting both the mother and child’s safety and well-being at risk. Through political advocacy movements, there has been progress in passing legislation that prohibits restraining pregnant women. However, this legislation has proven to be less effective because of a lack of enforcement within the PIC. This lack of accountability allows for the prison system to keep violating the human rights of women while under the guise of “rehabilitation” and the “protection of society.” This pillar of reproductive justice also speaks to the problem of
forced sterilizations in prisons, as discussed earlier. Forced sterilization takes away people’s ability to make a choice to have biological children, often without their informed consent, and exemplifies the abuses that incarcerated women have faced in regard to bodily autonomy and reproduction.

More reforms must be made to protect incarcerated pregnant women that ensure: a licensed medical professional is present, the birthing environment is clean and sterile, and the person is safe from obstetric violence. Cara Terreri, a certified Doula in North America and childbirth educator, defines obstetric violence as, “the physical, sexual, and/or verbal abuse, bullying, coercion, humiliation, and/or assault that occurs to laboring and birthing people by medical staff” (Terreri). Obstetric violence is a general term that encompasses many of the injustices that incarcerated women experience during the birthing process from medical staff or prison officials. In settings where a pregnant woman is already under immense stress, obstetric violence and other forms of reproductive injustice reinforce feelings of isolation and inhumanity. A third-party advocate or a midwife who is knowledgeable of the person giving birth and is trauma-informed would provide more safety, security, and peace of mind to incarcerated mothers in this time. To ensure the first pillar of reproductive justice is protected within prisons, reforms to improve the birthing process for incarcerated women must not only be made but enforced to hold the prison officials accountable.

The right to not have a child is the second pillar of reproductive justice and emphasizes the bodily autonomy of women. Within this pillar, incarcerated women should have access to a safe and legal abortion without the risk of obstetric violence or coercive practices. Additionally, trauma informed counseling and support should be given following the procedure. Incarcerated women’s right to bodily autonomy is already compromised because their actions of movement are heavily restricted while in prison through small cells, limited time for the outdoors, and physical movement, as well as not being able to move outside of the facility. However, being incarcerated does not mean that they should have no control over their own body. The policies around abortions while incarcerated vary from one institution to the next, only allowing abortions within the first trimester or when the pregnancy threatens the health of the mother, as well as other stipulations.

Moreover, prison officials often disregard a women’s choice to have an abortion or they postpone abortions by claiming they are an “elective” procedure rather than an urgent medical need. Dr. Carolyn Sufrin states, “[P]rison authorities consistently claim that abortion is not a serious medical need and that, by preventing women from obtaining abortions, they are merely following the rules. It is a form of gendered violence to place pregnancy in such a bureaucratic rubric, failing to recognize the intimate and physical ways that it alters women’s lives and bodies” (Sufrin, 37). After the overturn of Roe v. Wade with the Dobbs v. Jackson (2022) decision, access to abortion has dwindled and allowed states to create their own protections or restrictions on the medical procedure. This devolution has created huge barriers to accessible and safe abortions, especially while incarcerated, and
has made it even harder to enforce the fair and just treatment of incarcerated individuals who are pregnant. Under the reproductive justice framework, the constitutional right to abortion must be reinstated and there must be a more comprehensive system introduced to ensure incarcerated women receive the medical care they need and do not lose more of their bodily autonomy.

The third and final pillar of reproductive justice describes the right to raise your child in a safe and healthy environment. This pillar is the most expansive within the reproductive justice framework, setting it apart from reproductive health and rights. The right to be a parent and the right to family are fundamental to being a human, and this opportunity is often taken away or strained by the U.S. PIC. Most U.S. prisons have very few exceptions to allowing children to live with their incarcerated mother, further traumatizing children and breaking apart families. The Equal Justice Initiative, a nonprofit devoted to ending mass incarceration and excessive punishment across the U.S., describes the standard conditions of prisons across the nation: “Incarcerated people are beaten, stabbed, raped, and killed in facilities run by corrupt officials who abuse their power with impunity. People...are denied care, ignored, punished, and placed in solitary confinement” (Equal Justice Initiative). The punitive approach to justice within the U.S. prison system has created an environment where violence and abuse are normalized. Overcrowding, small cells, minimal access to the outside, and limited bodily movement are additional factors that make the environment of a six by eight-foot cell unsafe to raise a child. The environment that incarcerated people are subjected to is not safe or healthy, and it would be unreasonable to address this pillar of reproductive justice by bringing children into the current U.S. prisons.

There have been legislative efforts made by states to remedy the traumatizing influence that incarceration can have on mothers, children, and their entire families. For example, Washington’s 2013 Children of Incarcerated Parents Bill’s main goal was to, “giv[e] incarcerated parents and their children a fair chance to work toward reunification and safe permanency options that do not involve severing familial ties forever” (Washington Defender Association). The bill provided a more comprehensive child welfare response to the families of incarcerated parents along with specific stipulations in every phase of the criminal justice process.

Other reforms that could help to maintain familial relationships with incarcerated persons would be having more hours and availability for children and families to visit as well as having a prison that is closer to where the family is located. There would also need to be significantly improved rehabilitation programs and preparation of incarcerated women for parenting, as well as other important life skills, after they are released from prison. In addition, one major issue that reforms should address is the womb-to-foster-care pipeline resulting from the loss of parental rights, especially for children under age 5, if parents in prison do not have a family member who can take care of the child (Ketteringham et al. 2016).
**Why the PIC and Reproductive Justice Cannot Coexist**

To achieve reproductive justice in its fullest vision, reforms must take a larger look at the PIC and mass incarceration’s effects on all people. Reproductive justice cannot coexist within and around the PIC because of the PIC’s inhumane and punitive practices that systematically oppress people. Within the PIC, there is minimal effort put toward healing the crime victims and their families; instead, the PIC focuses on punitive measures that can cause further harm by oppressing the incarcerated people. In addition, the PIC puts forth a minimal effort towards the reintegration of prisoners into society after they have completed their sentence. This completely negates the so-called purpose of “correctional” or “rehabilitative” facilities.

For women incarcerated in the PIC, bodily autonomy is not possible because the women cannot make reproductive healthcare choices. They face threats or actual assaults perpetrated by prison authorities. For instance, one California women’s prison is referred to as the “rape club” due to the prevalent institutionalized sexual violence against women (Goldberg). Although larger rooms or more freedom of movement aim to provide more autonomy for incarcerated women, there is still a lack of complete bodily autonomy when women are shackled while giving birth or prohibited from abortions. The environment is not safe or rehabilitative and some argue that the PIC relies on recidivism to increase profits (Godard).

The last pillar of reproductive justice, which describes the right to raise a child in a safe and healthy environment, completely refutes the idea of prisons, because the PIC creates an unsafe and unhealthy environment to raise children both inside and outside of prisons. Obviously, raising a child in a carceral setting is unhealthy, as discussed earlier. Yet, I argue that the PIC also fails to provide a safe and healthy environment for children outside of prisons, especially children from disadvantaged social groups. This has been evidenced in the over-policing of certain areas, such as communities of low socio-economic status and those with a large population of people of color. The reinforcement of the school-to-prison pipeline is also a part of the PIC, as it disproportionately affects young Black students through discriminatory applications of discipline. “Zero-tolerance’ policies criminalize minor infractions of school rules, while cops in schools lead to students being criminalized for behavior that should be handled inside the school” (American Civil Liberties Union). The school-to-prison-pipeline enforces stereotypical ideas of white supremacist and racist expectations for children of color within the PIC. Instead of schools providing a safe environment to learn and grow, certain children face disproportionate consequences that are more punitive. All aspects of the PIC rely on continuous familial and community-wide divisions and harms that reproduce larger societal problems.

Although gradual reforms can try to improve women’s lives while incarcerated, abolition aligns more closely with the idea of reproductive justice, at its fullest, to achieve transformative change in the U.S. Abolition, “is a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and
surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment” (Critical Resistance). The abolitionist framework imagines a world where prisons and police are not needed, or used, to attempt to address societal problems on an individual scale. Activist, educator, and scholar Mariame Kaba explains, “[A] system that never addresses the why behind a harm never actually contains the harm itself. Cages confine people, not the conditions that facilitated their harms or the mentalities that perpetuate violence” (Kaba, 29). Both abolition and reproductive justice emerged from black feminist scholars and activists and take a more comprehensive approach in addressing larger social problems by challenging the current PIC status quo. Reproductive justice could be achieved with a supportive community that allows for bodily autonomy, a safe and healthy environment in which to raise children, and a society without an oppressive system of incarceration or other forms of state-sanctioned violence. Beyond critiquing the punitive approach of the PIC, abolitionists are also concerned about forced, locked, and involuntary mental health and substance abuse treatment. To be clear, forced treatment for mental health and/or substance abuse needs to be addressed in the overall legal and social service systems in the U.S. (see for example, Ketteringham et al. 2016 and Goodwin 2020). However, this area of abolitionist concern goes beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses on reproductive abuse within prisons, jails, and detention centers.

**Conclusion**

The U.S. prison system must adopt reforms that protect the reproductive and human rights of incarcerated women. A reproductive justice framework that centers human rights would be beneficial in directing prison reforms to expand in a broader context. Reproductive justice cannot be achieved in its fullest vision within the U.S. PIC; however, an abolitionist framework envisions prison as obsolete institutions and would allow for reproductive justice to be wholly achieved. While some form of prisons may always exist in an imperfect world, we can work toward eliminating the conditions that create fertile ground for violence across all levels within society, and reproductive justice must be included in any transformative anti-violence efforts.

**Acknowledgments**

The author gratefully acknowledges Dr. Cheryl O’Brien for their unwavering support, guidance, and invaluable assistance throughout the research, writing, and editing phases to create this paper. Special thanks are extended to the SDSU Department of Women’s Studies for providing a rich academic environment and essential background knowledge that enabled the exploration of the complex topic of reproductive justice.
The author also expresses deep gratitude to the countless Black Feminist scholars, activists, and visionaries whose pioneering work has laid the groundwork for reproductive justice and abolitionist frameworks throughout history.

It is crucial to acknowledge that this research only scratches the surface of the reproductive injustices within the U.S. prison system. The author hopes this study will catalyze further exploration by scholar-activists committed to pursuing justice for all individuals impacted by these systems.

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The Role of Gender Constructions of Eating Disorders in Men

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Eating Disorders are characterized as a harmful psychiatric illness that considerably impairs an affected individual's physical health through the disruption and disabling of the psychosocial aspect. This mental disorder is distinguished through disturbances found in eating behaviors that go hand in hand with thoughts, emotions, and one's overall attitude about themselves. Historically, EDs are considered to be the most gendered as feminine amongst all psychiatric disorders. Thus, for a majority of history the notion and prevalence of EDs found in men has not been properly counted for as it is seen as “uncommon.” Men are often excluded and overlooked in the representation of EDs due to their assumed atypicality. For such reasons it can no longer be found tenable to put forward that EDs are relatively abnormal or unusual amongst men or that males count for an insignificant population of such illness. My thesis will focus on the need for society to shift away from a female oriented diagnostic type of framework and introduce an intersectional approach in which both genders are accounted for as well as other social groups. Understanding how Western culture and hegemonic masculinity impact men as well as the differences in EDs across social groups can improve our policies and programs to prevent, diagnose, and treat EDs.

Keywords: eating disorders, EDs, societal norms, masculinity, stigma, risk factors, mental health, LGBTQ, athletes

Background

The National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA) is a leading eating disorder organization that strives to advance research and build awareness to help individuals experiencing eating disorders (EDs) find the support they need. Approximately 30 million individuals living in the United States suffer from EDs; 25% of those are males (NEDA, 2012). Men have an increased risk of dying because they are diagnosed much
later than women. This is due to the misconception that men do not experience EDs (Eating Disorders Resource Catalog, 2014). A majority of the data has underrepresented males, despite EDs being the most fatal of mental illnesses (Curr Opinion Psychiatry, 2017).

Men are less likely to seek help for behavioral health support for a few reasons that will be discussed. One issue that should be acknowledged is EDs’ correlation to toxic masculinity, which repeatedly shows up as a concern for men’s physical health. In Masculinity Threat, Boyle and Scaptura explains, “When one’s masculinity is challenged or threatened, men react to social situations or interactions that put their gender identity in question. These challenges motivate behaviors that aim to correct these subordinating assumptions, through situationally appropriate actions” (Boyle and Scaptura, 2020). In line with toxic masculinity, an archetypal image of what masculinity should be can lead to harmful attitudes and behaviors. This unhealthy form of thinking can be traced to men’s emotional suppression (in comparison to women), pressures on men to dominate, and a disinclination to seek health care.

Another reason men may be less likely than women to seek health care for EDs specifically is that EDs have acquired and maintained a feminine stigma or label which wrongfully portrays EDs as “female disorders” or disorders of women and girls rather than as non-gendered “disorders” for which men can also suffer. The feminization of this illness decreases the likelihood of men being represented in the data on EDs. Moreover, the feminization of EDs makes men less likely to recognize ED symptoms within themselves, and increases shame among men experiencing EDs. The feminine stigma associated with this illness restrains men from seeking treatment, thereby decreasing men’s diagnoses. In addition, this feminization of EDs may decrease research on men’s experiences of EDs.

In order to understand and address EDs stigma, it is crucial to uncover where such negative connotations and preconceived ideas stem from. It is also important to explore how modern Western culture and its ideas about masculinity have contributed to unhealthy attitudes and behaviors, including ones that involve men obsessing about their appearance and having a sense of obligation to conform to the mesomorphic classification. This classification pertains to having a muscular build with a low body fat percentage, thus creating a culture that has accepted and made invisible the EDs among men.

**Western Culture’s Hegemonic Masculinity**

Western culture has influence and power over the social norms, traditions, values, tendencies, and customs of individuals in the Western world. The Western concept of masculinity is embedded and institutionalized in social structures and ideologies that reflect a gender hierarchy, which places men atop women, and certain idealized men as superior to all other men. One “ideal” man is the soldier, as discussed in political science, and this ideal includes a body type with low body fat or defined muscles. Given the diversity of body types, many men partake in dangerous lifestyle choices that can affect
their health in pursuit of this ideal masculine body type. The ideal or hegemonic masculinity can lead men to feel as if they need to attain unachievable expectations, thus resulting in a “masculine strain.” The concept of strained masculinity refers to men feeling challenged to achieve “masculine norms” and the dominant unhealthy forms of “being a man” in society. Strained masculinity can also take a more theoretically integrated approach, one where “[t]he construction of masculinity is shaped by social definitions... and it involves the internalization of risky behaviors like self-reliance, competition, toughness, or respect” (Morgan, Allion, and Klein, 2022). Men may harm their own health by complying with strict physical and mental rules, which can include trying to fit an ideal body type as well as not seeking help for a mental illness (i.e., being tough means not seeking help). Sadly, this internationalization and enforcement of hegemonic masculinity harms men even beyond the realm of EDs; for example, men commit suicide at higher rates than women, as men are less likely to get therapy for suicidal thoughts and men use more lethal methods for suicide attempts.

Men’s behaviors are different when compared to EDs in women. Although women similarly experience societal pressures to “be thin,” these issues tend to be more recognized as harmful expectations by society when placed upon women. In contrast, men’s pressure to live up to society’s standards via EDs is often overlooked and treated with limited resources. To date, there have only been two scholarly journals that researched men’s diagnosis and treatment experience for EDs in Western and non-Western countries. A 2015 study published in the National Library of Medicine reviewed the rates reported in academic research with a focus on two Western countries, the United Kingdom and the United States, finding: “The prevalence rate (weighted) of full or partial eating disorders for men was 2.0% compared with 4.8% for women. Out of 1,000, these percentages translate into 20 men and 48 women. This is a total of 68 with EDs out of 2,000 participants, which is 3.4% of the overall sample that has some type of ED. It is 20 men out of 68, which means 29.4% of those with EDs were men” (Hunt, et al., 2015). This particular research focused on the influence and effects that societal issues have on men and their eating habits. It was noted that participants expressed that they felt they needed to live up to impossible standards otherwise they would not “fit the cultural model of masculinity.” A hegemonic masculine culture or society can be defined as men upholding characteristics like being assertive, and independent, not showing weakness, and presenting themselves as strong and stoic. While there is nothing wrong with being physically strong, the concern is the pressure placed on men to fit an ideal body type that may be unhealthy to attain. In the above study, male participants admitted to experiencing low self-confidence and distorted perceptions of their physical appearance. Further, this study in the UK and the U.S. shows how Western constructs of hegemonic masculinity push men to not seek treatment or outside help, because seeking help is viewed as a sign of weakness in this version of masculinity. This study also demonstrated that societal norms failed to recognize both internal and external symptoms of men’s EDs.
The second study researched the prevalence of EDs between males and females and formed a comparison between Western and non-Western countries. Their data focused on two specific forms of EDs. The first one is Anorexia Nervosa, defined by the National Library of Medicine as “the restriction of nutrient intake relative to requirements leading to significantly low body weight” (Moore and Bokor, 2022). The second form of EDs focused on was Bulimia Nervosa, “a disorder that is characterized by binge eating and inappropriate compensatory behavior to control weight” (Jain and Yilanli, 2022). Their findings concluded that the frequency of EDs in non-Western countries, although found to be lower, appeared to be increasing in comparison to Western countries. Results showed that in Western countries prevalence for bulimia ranged from 0 to 2.1% in males and 0.3 to 7.3% in females. Anorexia in Western countries ranged from 0.5 to 2.9% in males and 0.1 to 4.3% in females. On the other hand, bulimia in non-Western countries ranged from 0.002 to 1.89% in males and 0.46 to 3.2% in females while anorexia was calculated from 0 to 0.04% in males to 0.003 to 0.9% in females (Jain and Yilanli, 2022). This data on EDs rates in both Western and non-Western countries is based on patients who were diagnosed with EDs, so a limitation of this study is that there may be people, particularly men, underrepresented due to a gender norm for men to not seek help. While females have higher rates in this study, the study still shows that males have been found to suffer from EDs. Thus, we need to shift away from characterizing EDs as “female disorders” so that men are more likely to seek help from EDs. Overall in the literature, I find a lack of attention to EDs in men, and this could reflect an underdiagnosis of EDs in men.

**Sex Differences between Different Age Groups**

After understanding the impact of Western culture on ideas about masculinity, it is crucial to inspect sex differences in EDs. This includes the progression of EDs in men, distinctions that can promote effectiveness of recognition, and an increase in treatment and diagnosis. Research has come to suggest that even if men and women present very similar signs and symptoms of EDs, the route toward development of EDs remains significantly different. Yet, the different progression of EDs between males and females is understudied based on my research.

Curr Psychiatry studied adolescents and adults while maintaining a particular focus on malnutrition and calorie restriction within these various age groups. It is normally assumed that males have less consistent and easy-to-overlook symptoms compared to females. However, a symptom profile showed female to male adult ratio ranging from 1:1 to 1:10. This ratio shows how males compared to females are more likely to demonstrate symptoms, such as restricting calorie intake and choosing calorie-deficient lifestyle choices. Men with such symptoms are typically characterized into two groups: Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (EDNOS) which according to the National Institute of Health is a “Diagnosis that is often received when an individual meets many, but not all, of the criteria for anorexia or bulimia”
and Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake disorder which is when “an individual avoids eating specific foods, restricts the amount of food they eat, or avoids eating altogether” (Fairburn and Bohn, 2005). Studies found that EDNOS was calculated in 51.25% of adolescent men ages 13-18 and 53.69% of men ages 19-25 (Crow et al., 2012). On the other hand, that same research showed that the same type of EDs (i.e., EDNOS) was found in 48.75% of adolescent women and 46.31% of adult women. However, women are more likely than men to be diagnosed with anorexia or bulimia. Using this data is important to urge medical professionals to better spot symptoms of EDs in men like they are found in women.

Although there is variation between women and men, it has been found that women and men share some similar symptoms, such as patterns of restrictive eating and laxative abuse. An apparent difference is that men engage more in over-exercising compared to women. Motivation for such disordered and restrictive eating also varies as the Journal of Adolescent Health has stated, “Adolescent males tend to show less concern about body image or drive for thinness but increased concern with musculosity and shape. On the other hand, adolescent females more consistently endorse a desire to be thinner” (Murray et al., 2019). EDs are more commonly found in younger age demographics due to their vulnerability, which can signify a target population for whom we need to fix the issue at its core. If the focus is shifted towards properly diagnosing and recognizing ED symptoms in young males as it is in young females, then early intervention can help prevent people from carrying this illness into adulthood. The longer one battles with an ED, the longer the road to recovery may be.

**Risk Associated with Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity**

ED risks cannot be fully addressed without considering sexual orientation and gender identity as a contribution to underrepresentation in diagnoses. Studies find that compared to heterosexual men, there has been a higher prevalence of homosexual men purging, using dietary medication, overly-exercising, and fasting as a way to lose weight. According to an ED report on 135 patients, Daniel Carlat states, “Survey studies of homosexual men have shown that they are more dissatisfied with their body weight and shape than heterosexual men and that they consider their physical appearance to be more important to their sense of self” (Carlat, 1997). This creates an increased vulnerability for homosexual men to develop EDs.

Sexual and gender minorities face stigma and discrimination, which can further complicate ED risks. In one study, 63% of gay participants reported basing their self-worth on their weight status, and at the same time one-half expressing dissatisfaction with their eating patterns (Bell et al., 2019). This group had a decrease in their Body Mass Index (BMI), cared deeply about their appearance, and commented on being less likely to gain weight even if needed. The Body Mass Index (BMI) is a useful concept in the study of EDs. The lower the BMI, the lower the body fat percentage one has. For homosexual men, having a higher BMI (i.e., a higher body fat percentage) was
linked with facing more peer pressure. At the same time, their body dysmorphia was associated with perceived lower levels of masculinity. Although heterosexual men strive towards protecting their masculinity just like men who identify as homosexual, they do so in different approaches. Heterosexual men demonstrate their drive for masculinity through gaining muscle and strength while homosexual men steer more towards excessive thinness. Thinness seems to be unique to gay male communities in which there is a heightened risk of developing EDs over time. Gender role conflict can result in psychological distress, which can be related to outcomes associated with disordered eating behaviors.

However, in its infancy, there are a few studies that touch base on the transgender community and gender non-conforming individuals. Studies done on transgender adults found that there were higher occurrences of diet pills being used, binging and purging, liquid laxative usage, and use of steroids without a prescription. In Bell’s same study, “almost 70% of the transgender and gender non-conforming adult participants had a pattern of distorted eating, and 67.2% reported obsessive behavior regarding their weight status” (Bell et al., 2019). Not being satisfied with bodily image seems to be a consistent trend for transgender and non-gender-conforming individuals. Given the prospect of experiencing stigma when interacting with the medical community, health care professionals and clinicians must be further educated or informed on ways to identify risky behavior patterns within the LGBTQ population. Failure to do so will only alienate these individuals from seeking and receiving the appropriate diagnosis and treatment.

It is also crucial for educators and school executives to obtain similar education to recognize risk factors for those in the LGTBQ community. As a result, young adults identifying as LGBTQ are at a disproportionate risk of experiencing certain distress compared to their heterosexual peers. Consideration of the sexual orientation and gender identity of young adults is an important step for those who can intervene in the development of EDs, for it acknowledges that “in addition to common strains, LGBT individuals also experience unique stressors (risk factors) related to their sexual and gender identity, and that these chronic stressors are associated with negative mental health outcomes” (Gibbs and Goldbach, 2015). Constructing an environment that is open-minded and accepting will increase the likelihood of diverse peoples to have a healthy body image and as well as seek help for EDs. In sum, intersectional approaches and policies that target youth and people across the LGBTQ spectrum in addition to heterosexual men and women are needed to fully address EDs.

**Eating Disorders in Male Athletes**

For a variety of reasons, EDs among male athletes are considered to be one of the most complex and difficult to diagnose. Male athletes are at a higher risk of developing EDs in comparison to the general male population. Male-dominated sports carry a high level of hegemonic masculinity that reinforces
an often dangerous culture. It is common for male athletes to develop a need to follow strict diets and rigorous exercise routines to maximize their performance. Some male athletes, such as wrestlers, self-induce vomiting and use laxatives, or other methods to decrease their weight to compete at a lower weight and/or enhance their athletic performance. However, there is no conclusive evidence that performance is enhanced. A study done on collegiate wrestlers’ perception of body image states, “Although many of these methods, including binge eating/vomiting and excessive exercise, have not necessarily been shown to be detrimental to performance, athletes participating in rapid weight loss have described altered perceptions of their body image, indicating that these behaviors may have a more negative effect on the athlete’s overall health” (Fasczewski 2021). Further, there is evidence that weight cutting (i.e., the term used for wrestlers engaging in ED behaviors) harms one’s health and can result in death. Cutting weight has driven wrestlers to attempt to shed fifteen percent of their body weight in only one month. They partake in such dangerous techniques, as confirmed by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which states, “There have been three cases of wrestlers who attempted to rapidly lose so much weight, have gone into cardiac arrest, and have passed away” (CDC, 1998). These rigid and even fatal diets and overexercising tendencies predispose male athletes to EDs as they feel the need to mold themselves into an ideal masculine body type. For male athletes, there is a greater sense of vulnerability, one where the line between eating for peak athletic performance and disordered eating can be easily crossed.

The investment done by athletes in their training and competition can translate into EDs explicitly associated with societal expectations. In a scientific study done by the Western Virginia School of Medicine, it was found that “[a]mong college-aged athletes, common behaviors include binge eating (7.9%), excessive/compulsive exercise (4.4%), fasting (4%), self-induced vomiting (2.7%), and (1.6%) laxative/diuretic abuse” (Cho et al., 2020). After analyzing these results, it was found that several factors contribute to elevated ED risks among men. This includes but is not limited to gender role expectations, society’s portrayals of dieting and exercise, a combination of muscularity and masculinity, as well as pressure from various people in their lives. Male athletes are more prone and at risk of developing EDs compared with other males in the general population because they have anxious thoughts that correlate with discontentedness with their bodies, all while finding it difficult to disclose their concerns. The issue of stigma remains, as there is still a view that male athletes who seek help for ongoing mental health issues, including ones regarding their bodies, may be seen as weak. In addition, there is a general stigma around men’s mental health issues, whether or not they are athletes. This goes against society’s high expectations of living up to the traits of toxic and hegemonic masculinity. Elite athletes usually are seen embodying the notion of “physical perfection” and as a result can undergo pressure to reach an ‘ideal’ body type.

It is clear from this analysis that there needs to be a better system implemented to identify male athletes with EDs and after doing so, it is vital to immediately refer them to treatment. Sports health professionals and
coaches must help diminish the shame many male athletes hold regarding EDs, especially those that correlate with masculine gender role conflict. This duty of care can ensure that men seek treatment for not just EDs but all possible behavioral health conditions.

**Moving Forward**

Through various data and credible sources on EDs across sports, nations, age groups, and sexual and gender identities, I find that EDs in men are underrepresented in the literature and are likely underdiagnosed. There seems to be an ongoing conflict engrossed around men experiencing an illness that has been initially associated with women. In order to combat this, society must send a clear message that boys and men, including but not only athletes, can and do suffer from EDs. As with all mental and behavioral health issues, getting support and help early is crucial. Most importantly, treatment is not just a “one size fits all” and improving health care for diverse people suffering from EDs demands an intersectional approach. Moving forward, strategies should include deconstructing the stigma facing male EDs, researching the different symptoms and progression of EDs that men present, creating plans that incorporate the social and cultural impacts on each patient, and properly monitoring patients, particularly males, even after treatment is concluded.

Men with EDs are hidden in plain sight and deserve to receive health care and research that takes into account their different experiences with EDs. Researchers, policymakers, and health care providers should continually evaluate ED policies, including medical insurance, sporting programs, and other relevant areas that impact ED diagnosis, research, and treatment. A more inclusive society should dismantle hegemonic masculinity, which threatens the health and well-being of boys and men, including those suffering from EDs.

**Acknowledgments**

I would like to dedicate my gratitude to Professor Cheryl O’Brien for her expertise, passion, and guidance in composing this manuscript. Thank you for seeing my potential. Her support and invaluable feedback have been instrumental in shaping the direction and scope of this research paper.

I would also like to thank the reviewers and editors for their constructive comments that greatly enhanced the manuscript in innumerable ways. Thank you all for your pivotal contributions to this project.

Lastly, I want to express my gratitude to my loved ones for their continuous love and encouragement during my time at San Diego State University.
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