



Number 11

*Shelter from the Storm: The Parish's Role in the Faith Life of
Vietnamese American Catholics in the United States*

Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate
Georgetown University
Washington, D.C.

*Shelter from the Storm: The Parish's Role in the Faith Life of
Vietnamese American Catholics in the United States*

August 2019



Jonathon Wiggins, Ph.D.

Sr. Thu Do, LHC, Ph.D.



© CARA, August 2019, Working Paper 11

CARA was founded by Catholic leaders in 1964 to put social science research tools at the service of the Catholic Church in the United States.

For information on CARA and its mission of research, analysis, and planning, contact:

Thomas Gaunt, S.J., Ph.D.

Executive Director

Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate

Georgetown University

Washington, DC 20057-1203

202-687-0839

tpg9@georgetown.edu

For information about the content of this working paper contact:

Jonathon Wiggins, Ph.D.

CARA Research Associate

Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate

Georgetown University

Washington, DC 20057-1203

202-687-1290

jlw8@georgetown.edu

Thu Do, LHC, Ph.D.

CARA Research Associate

Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate

Georgetown University

Washington, DC 20057-1203

202-687-1290

ttd9@georgetown.edu

CARA.georgetown.edu

With their robust participation in parish life in dioceses across the United States and the disproportionately large number of religious vocations they contribute, Vietnamese American Catholics have had an impact on the U.S. Catholic Church that belies their relatively small numbers. Signs that their presence continues to grow include the increasing number of personal parishes specific to Vietnamese ministry across U.S. dioceses, the expanding number of Vietnamese-language Masses being celebrated, and the more than 100,000 people who annually attend Marian Days, a festival and pilgrimage for Vietnamese American Catholics in Carthage, Missouri. Vietnamese American Catholics have been and remain a group to pay attention to in the U.S. Catholic Church.

That said, Vietnamese American Catholics face the same challenges as other U.S. immigrant groups, past and present. The values they carry with them from Vietnam do not always coincide with the ones they and their children encounter in the United States. As such, like so many immigrant groups before them, they seek to assimilate to the United States while still retaining many of their important cultural values. And, like so many other immigrant groups, their religious ties have helped them through these transitions, with Catholic parishes serving as a familiar refuge for them in their new country. At these parishes they find others facing the same challenges that they themselves grapple with (Gautier & Do, 2017; Gautier & Gaunt, 2016; Phan, 2005; Bankston, 2000).

This study, generously funded by the Project Grant for Researchers at Louisville Institute, explores an aspect of their immigrant experience: the roles their religious institutions have played in helping first-generation Vietnamese immigrants to the United States reconcile their traditional family roles with those they encounter in the United States. After a brief literature review, this working paper examines their relationship to their parishes, some possible explanations for their high levels of religious vocations, and their struggles adapting to the new culture in which they find themselves.

Brief Literature Review

The impetus for this study arose from co-author Sister Thu Do's interest in the similarities as well as noticeable differences between Vietnamese American Catholics and those in her home country. A review of the academic literature on the subject first led to Father Peter Phan's 2005 book *Vietnamese American Catholics* – a classic in the field – which noted that most conflicts in Vietnamese American families revolve around the issues of the role of women and the duties of children. That these are the primary issues of conflict within immigrant families in the American context more generally is reinforced by other studies of U.S. immigrant populations (Park & Ecklund, 2007; Ebaugh & Chavetz, 1999; Chai, 1998).

According to Phan, a primary cause of the role conflicts that Vietnamese women experience upon coming to the United States with their husbands is their having more freedom and employment opportunities in the United States than women do in Vietnam, where their role traditionally involves the domestic tasks of doing housework and raising the children. At the same time that wives find new roles available to them in the U.S. context, however, immigrant men are having to take jobs of a lower status than they were qualified for in Vietnam. The parishes they find in the United States reflect this new reality as well. While women in Vietnamese parishes do not assume prominent religious or spiritual roles, those in the United States increasingly take on central roles in the religious and spiritual life of their families and actively participate in the ministries and activities of their parishes (Phan 2005).

These gender role changes not only cause conflict between the husbands and wives, but within the inter-generational family as well, as many Vietnamese American households have multiple generations of a family living under the same roof. The oldest generation (usually the wife's parents or parents-in-law), for example, more strongly adhere to the traditional roles and object when the working mothers return and receive help from their husbands with child care and the housework. At the same time, the teens and young adults tend to be more accepting of the new family roles (Park and Ecklund, 2007; Chan, 2006; Phan, 2005; Ebaugh & Chafetz, 1999; Chai, 1998).

Concerning the youth, Vietnamese American parishes and ministries are key to providing them not only with catechesis as Catholics but also for some of their enculturation into Vietnamese traditions and language. Many of the first-generation youth left Vietnam at young ages and so their enculturation at the parish includes learning about the importance of family obligations and prescribed gender roles, many of which are not affirmed among the U.S. children with whom the youth go to school. As such, many youth desire to embrace American cultural values instead and have only a passing interest in Vietnamese culture. These youth resist the traditional, more subservient roles that youth play in Vietnamese families and fight against the restrictions placed upon them (Chan, 2006; Phan, 2005).

Methodology

To investigate how Catholic parishes and ministries help first-generation Vietnamese American women and youth to reconcile their traditional roles with those offered in American society, the authors utilized both quantitative and qualitative research tools.

The quantitative research consisted of surveys during spring, summer, and fall 2018 of parishioners and Mass attenders at five parishes in all four of the U.S. Census regions. The ethnic majority of each parish was Vietnamese, with the parishes considered personal parishes in their dioceses, that is ones that minister to those of Vietnamese heritage primarily. Although the original intent was to do an in-pew survey after the homily at all worship services over a weekend – with surveys in both Vietnamese and English – the authors found the participating parishes very resistant to the idea. The parishes believed that passing out the surveys and counting on respondents to return them would yield the best response under these circumstances. This method proved to have limited effectiveness, with the completed surveys we received being mostly from those born in Vietnam and skewed toward the older generations. Due to these limitations, the researchers made the decision to focus the study only on those born in Vietnam, of which there are 721 respondents in total.

The qualitative research employed a variety of methods:

- Two focus groups were conducted in two parishes with women concerning the satisfaction and challenges they face in their relationships within their families, as well as their experiences of parish life. Participants in the focus groups were invited by parish personnel and were members of at least one club in the parish. These focus groups took place primarily in the Vietnamese language, allowing women of all generations to participate.
- Two focus groups were conducted with parish youth focused on the satisfaction and challenges they face at home and at their parishes. One parish's youth were heavy with first-generation immigrant youth with the other more mixed. Despite our request to the parish

for a broad range of youth (including some not very involved in parish life), the participants were all members of the parish's branch of the Vietnamese Eucharistic Youth Movement.¹ These focus groups took place in English, which all participants were conversant with.

- Participant observation during our time at the parishes, which mainly included attending the Vietnamese-language Masses, introducing the surveys, and chatting after the Masses.
- Participant observation at Marian Days, an annual gathering of more than 100,000 Vietnamese American Catholics from across the United States as they celebrate their Vietnamese Catholic heritage in Carthage, Missouri. The multi-day festival features large-scale worship services, workshops, food, and an elaborate makeshift campground area where families and friends from across the country gather once a year.

As our results from the surveys conducted in parishes is the most representative of the components of our study, our study highlights that data and uses the qualitative data from the focus groups and participant observation to further elaborate on those survey findings.

Characteristics of the Survey Respondents and Focus Group Participants

Those 721 responding to the survey who were born in Vietnam and emigrated to the United States report an average age of 52-years old. For the purposes of comparison throughout much of the rest of this report, the age groups have been categorized as follows:²

- Young adults ages 15 to 35 (98 respondents or 18%)
- Adults ages 36 to 64 (359 respondents or 65%)
- Older adults ages 65 and older (95 respondents or 17%)

Seven in ten survey respondents (71%) are currently married or remarried, 20% have never married, 5% are widowed, and 4% are divorced or separated. Among the 71% who are married, 93% are married to someone of Vietnamese heritage. Some 41% have a high school diploma or less; 33% have some college, are in college, or have an associate's degree; and 26% have a bachelor's or graduate degree.

They report having been at the parish where they responded to the survey for an average of 13 years. These respondents frequently participate in their parishes: Eight in ten (79%) attend Mass once a week or more, with an additional 20% attending almost every week. Six in ten (61%) are involved in ministries or activities at their parishes in addition to their Mass attendance.

¹ This national group was very active in each parish we surveyed as well as at the Marian Days event described below. According to one youth focus group participant, the movement's goals are "to teach the kids, spread all the Good News, and make the kids to be a perfect Christian, and to have a better society." Besides the religious formation, many kids spend many hours participating in the movement at their parishes every weekend. As such, it becomes a primary place for them socially as well as religiously. Unlike the Masses for the adults, many of these programs and worship services are in English. More so than the parish clergy or staff members, one participant spoke of the movement leaders in his parish in this way: "Growing up as well, I had youth leaders that I was close to so if I had issues I could always reach out to them rather than my parish, just because they understand me a little bit better."

² Some 23% did not respond to the question about their ages, resulting in these numbers not adding up to 721. As was noted above, the researchers saw and met many young people at the parishes, many of whom would have only been able to respond to an English-language version of the survey. As 91% of our respondents filled out a Vietnamese-language survey, the researchers believe that only a certain subset of youth responded, which tended strongly towards those born in Vietnam for reasons the researchers are not sure of.

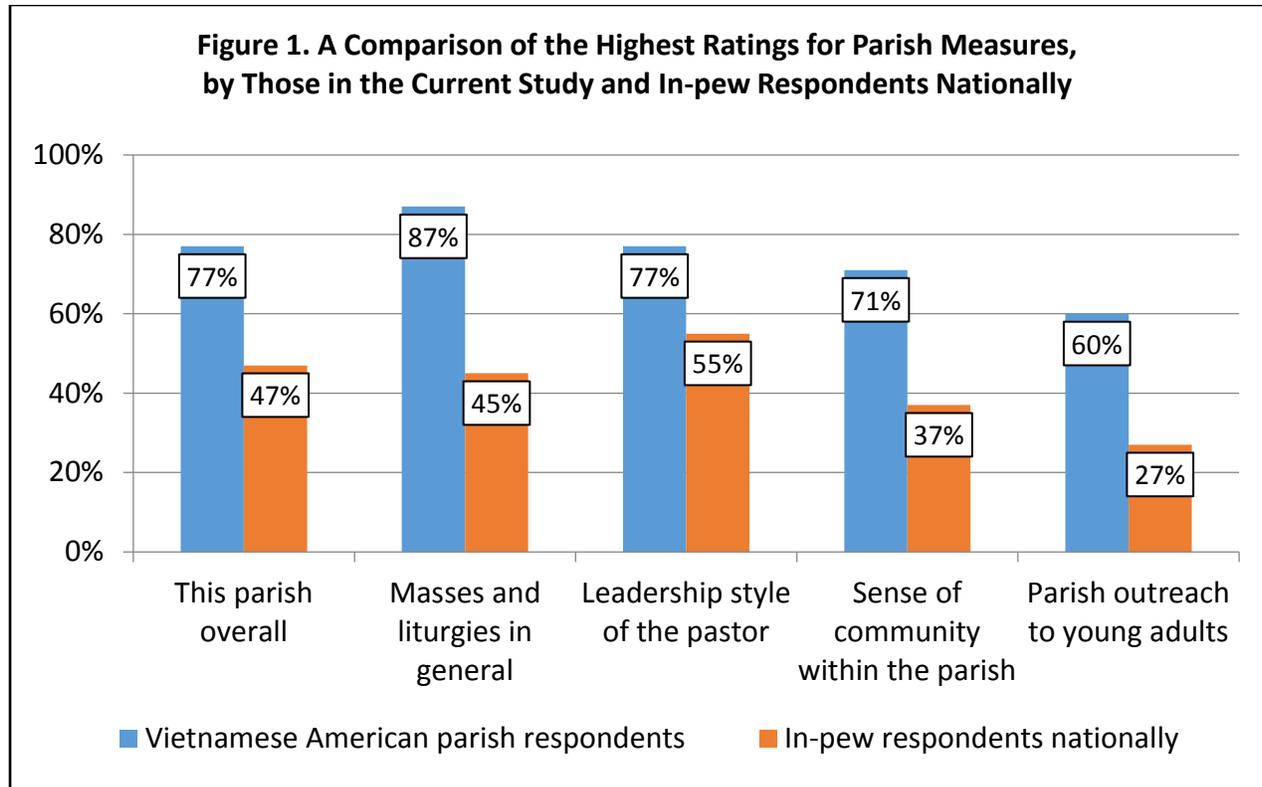
Concerning the focus groups with women, the women were selected by the parish because of their participation in the parish’s women groups. They had a great range of ages and were all fluent in spoken Vietnamese. The youth who participated in the focus groups ranged in age from teens to young adults and, again, all were active in the Vietnamese Eucharistic Youth Movement group in their parishes.

High Satisfaction with Parish Life

Those responding have very positive feelings about the parish where they responded. Table 1 below shows evaluations of some measures of parish life, with the Masses and liturgies in general especially highly evaluated. All measures receive a positive evaluation (the second column below) from at least 87% of those responding, with 60% to 87% rating each measure as “very” successful.

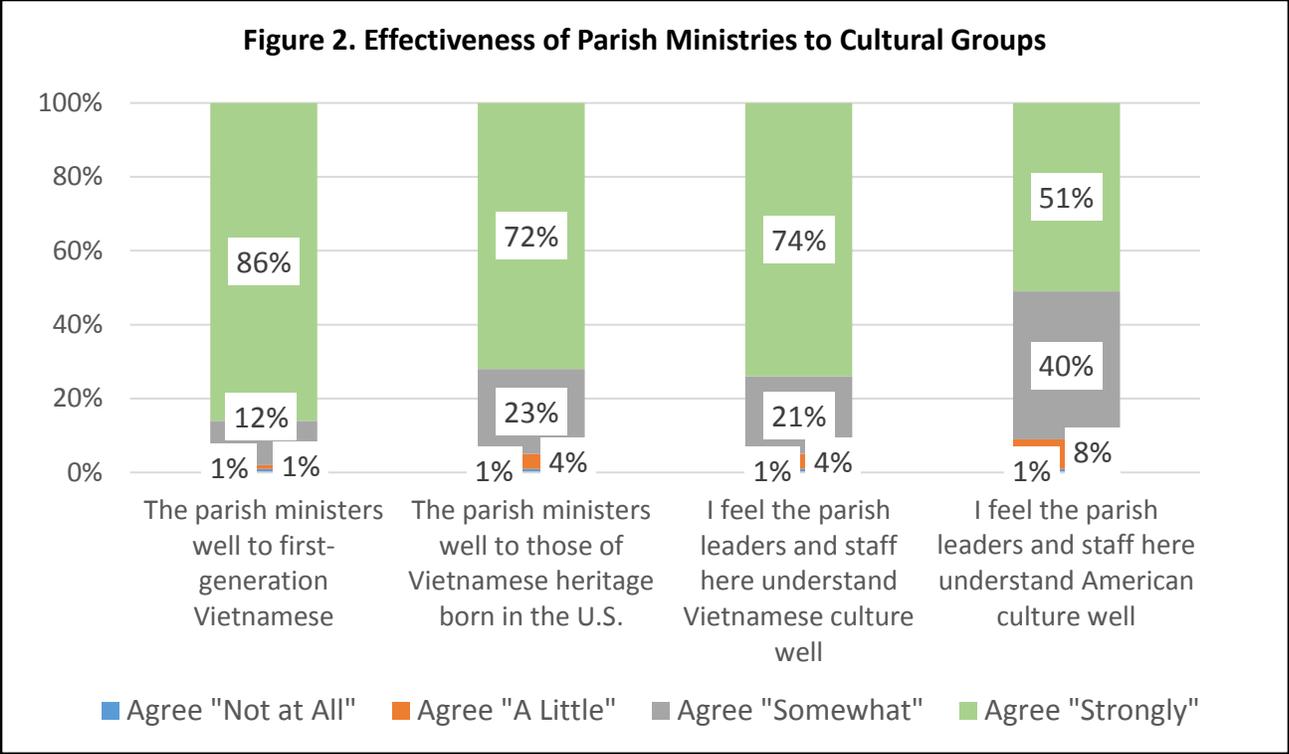
Table 1. Please evaluate these aspects of parish life		
<i>Percentage responding</i>		
	“Somewhat” or “Very” Successful Combined %	“Very” Successful Only %
Masses and liturgies in general	98	87
This parish overall	97	77
Sense of welcome at the parish	96	77
Leadership style of the pastor	96	77
Sense of community within the parish	95	71
Ministry to children, ages 4 to 12	92	70
Being welcoming to non-Catholic spouses	92	69
Ministry to teenagers, ages 13 to 17	92	66
Meeting your spiritual needs	92	62
Ministry to senior adults, ages 65 and older	91	64
Outreach to young adults, ages 18 to 35	87	60

CARA has corresponding national data for five of the measures above, although those respondents had “excellent” as their highest rating instead of “very” successful. As can be seen in Figure 1, those responding in the current study are 22 to 42 percentage points more likely than those in in-pew surveys nationally to give these five measures the highest rating offered.



Feelings about their Parish and Worship Life

As can be seen in Figure 2 below, while 95% to 98% combined agree “somewhat” or “strongly” that the parish ministers well to both first-generation Vietnamese and those born in the United States, they are more likely to “strongly” agree that the parish ministers well to those of the first-generation (86%) than to those born in the United States (72%). This phenomenon is also reflected in their feelings about the parish staff, where 74% “strongly” agree that the parish leaders and staff understand Vietnamese culture well, compared to 51% who agree as strongly that the leaders and staff understand American culture well.



This lesser lack of understanding of American culture among the clergy and staff at the parishes was also evident among the youth focus group participants featured in the exchange below:

Respondent: *I think it depends on the age of the priest. So last year we had a really good priest – I mean they are all good [laughs] – but he was really close to our age. And he really went out of his way to understand, and always talk to us and really see where we were struggling and, really, anything to help us keep on top of our faith, or something like that.*

Interviewer: *And did he happen to be born in the United States or in Vietnam?*

Respondent: *He was born in Vietnam. But his English was good, he went to school here.*

Respondent: *I think it's mainly the language...*

Interviewer: *The language is what makes it easier to relate or not relate?*

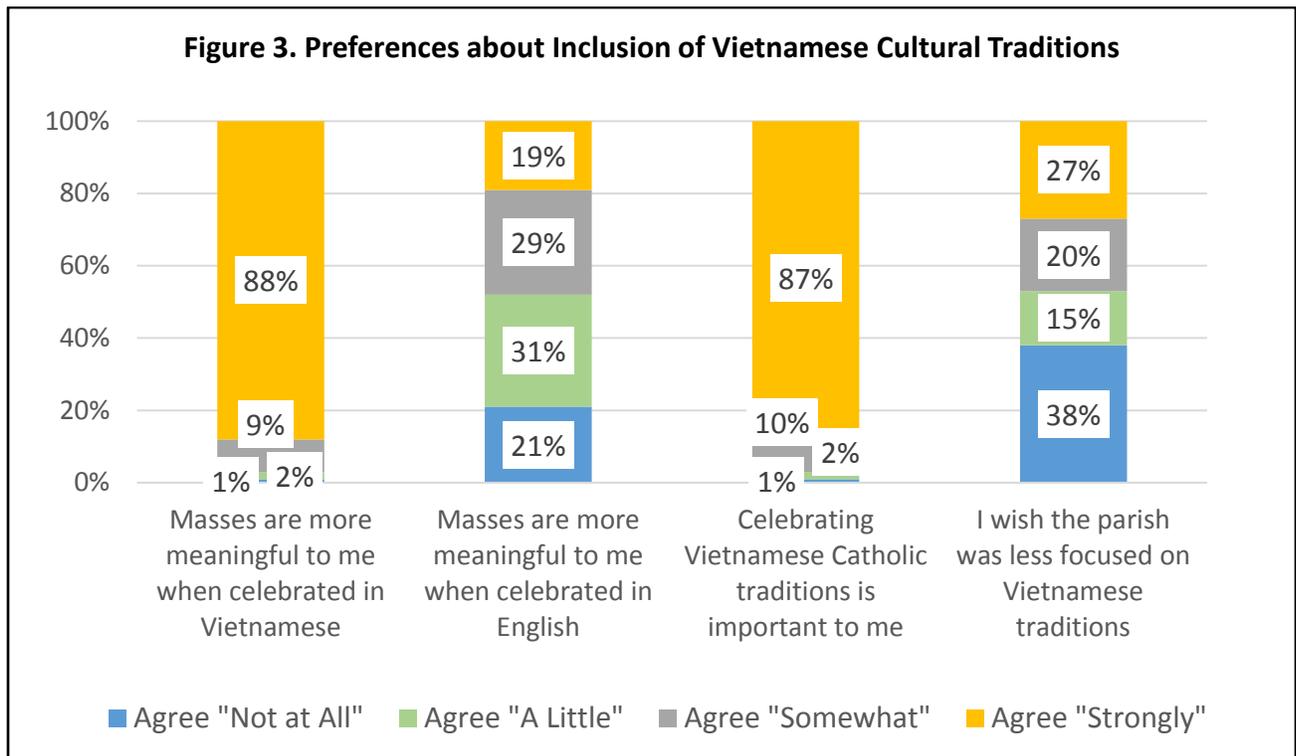
Respondent: *Yeah.*

A respondent at the parish with the other youth focus group agreed that language makes a large difference in terms of misunderstandings between the parish staff and the parish's youth:

I think the pastor has a disconnect with the youth – I think he means well but I don't think he understands how to approach young people. And when I say young, it's such a broad age bracket. You could talk from like seven to early young adult in their 20s. And so I think our pastor has a difficult time talking to the middle bracket – 20 year olds that were born here but come from parents that were refugees – and that kind

of creates this generational gap where us from that sphere have to navigate both Vietnamese culture and American culture so we reach an impasse very quickly. The younger group – the ones under about 20 – they were born here and they are almost fully integrated into Western American culture, so Vietnamese culture is very foreign to them and becomes kind of like a burden. And so when a pastor is from Vietnamese background, born and raised, tries to talk to them, miscommunication easily happens between the two.

In the researchers’ experience at the Masses during the weekends the surveys were conducted, few weekend Masses are English-language ones, but some English is interspersed throughout the Mass mostly to keep the English-speaking youth engaged. As Figure 3 shows, 88% agree “strongly” that Masses are meaningful to them when they are celebrated in Vietnamese, with only 19% “strongly” agreeing that they are more meaningful when celebrated in English. There is a strong desire among respondents for their parishes to remain rooted in Vietnamese Catholic culture as well, with 87% “strongly” agreeing that celebrating Vietnamese traditions is important to them, compared to the 27% who agree “strongly” that they wish the parish was less focused on Vietnamese traditions.



When women in one of the focus groups at the parishes were asked what they find most satisfying at their parish, many mentioned being able to attend Masses in the Vietnamese language, as is shown in the translated excerpt below:

Respondent: *We want to go Mass here, being involved in the parish activities here, because it is a Vietnamese parish. We could not understand anything at a U.S. parish. Here we are able to understand everything the priest says in his homily. We can meet other Vietnamese fellows.*

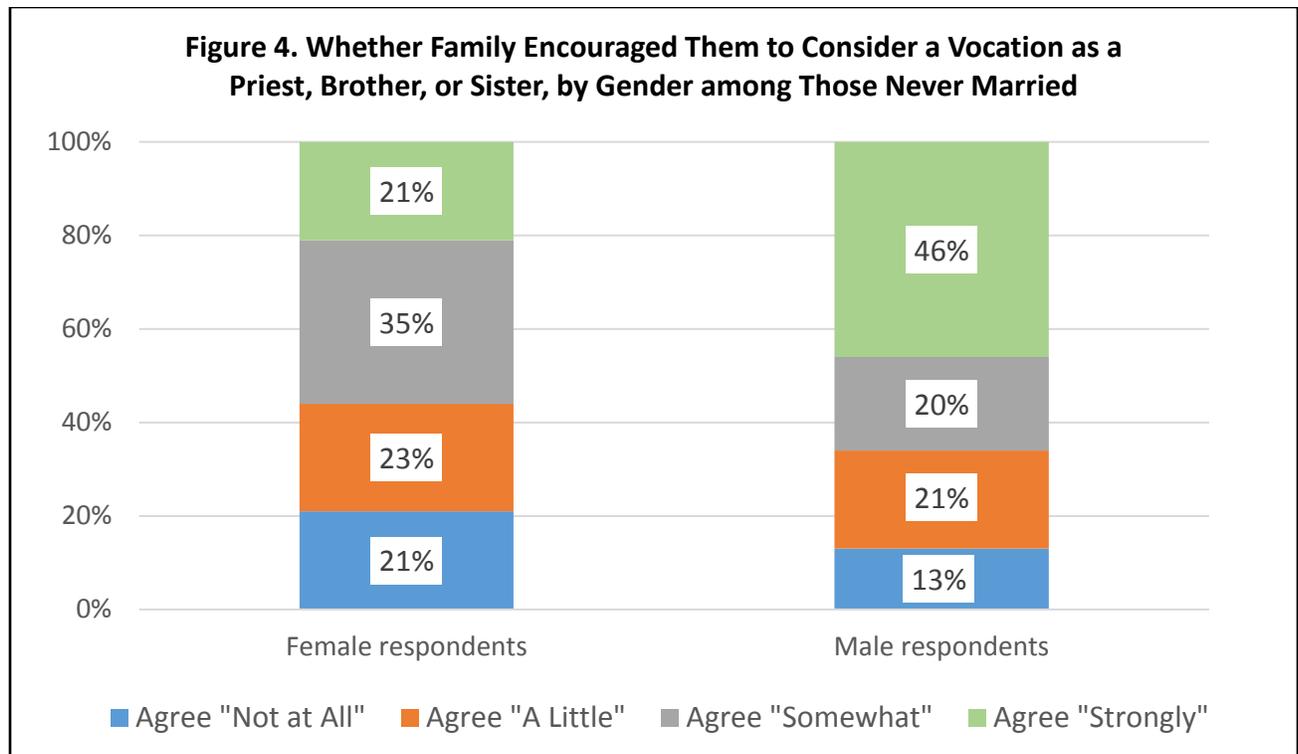
Respondent: *The daily Mass here in English, but the priest gives a bilingual homily both in English and Vietnam for Vietnamese people. He gives the homily in Vietnamese and reads the prayers in Vietnamese.*

Respondent: *Whenever I go to Mass at a U.S. parish, I feel lonely, not understanding, just like taking a walk in a park.*

That said, a participant in a youth focus groups in one of the parishes spoke of some frustration with so much of the worship service being in the Vietnamese language, saying “So for [the youth], I think it’s hard for them to understand what’s, like, going on within the Mass, just because of that language barrier.” Another participant added: “I think, for me, I prefer to go American Mass because I connect with it more and understand.”

Encouragement to Consider a Vocation as a Priest or as a Religious Brother or Sister

In a 2012 CARA national poll of self-identified Catholics, 11% of Mass-going³ never-married respondents reported that their mother had encouraged them to consider a vocation and 8% reported their father had done so (Gray & Gautier, 2012). As can be seen in Figure 4 below, generally, the Vietnamese American Catholics surveyed are considerably more likely than Catholics nationally to report that their family encouraged them to consider a vocation as a diocesan priest, religious order priest, religious order brother, or religious order sister. Gender matters here, however, as unmarried males (46%) in this study are more than twice as likely as unmarried females (21%) to “strongly” agree they have been encouraged to consider a vocation.



³ For our purposes here, “Mass-going” Catholics are those that report attending Mass at least once a month.

The focus groups with the youth show that the encouragement to discern a vocation comes from many sources. The first exchange below concerns their experiences with their parents:

Respondent: *It's either. I think in Vietnamese Catholic houses, it's either you're a doctor or you become...*

Respondents: *[Several laugh.]*

Respondent: *Stereotypes....*

Respondent: *Doctor, lawyer, engineer. We're kind of fixated on that.*

Respondent: *It's either, it's like they want you to be...*

Respondent: *A high-end job, or something religious.*

Respondents: *[Many murmur in agreement]*

Respondent: *You can't do it up there [as a doctor, engineer, etc.], at least you can be a priest.*

Respondent: *Or a nun, yeah.*

Respondent: *Well, the parents growing up in Vietnam...the parents really, the people in the parish are really close. And as a parent growing up in Vietnam, they really believe this. So, lots of our parents, they think like back then. They would try to go to for a vocation, they would try it out. From my personal experience, both my Mom and my Dad did. My Dad was a religious brother, and my Mom was a nun. Then after the war over there, they dropped out. So, now, like, since I was born, and then until now, they still really want me to finish the legacy. The way they grew me up, like, leading more to religious life. I think that would be one big part of life for our Asian culture.*

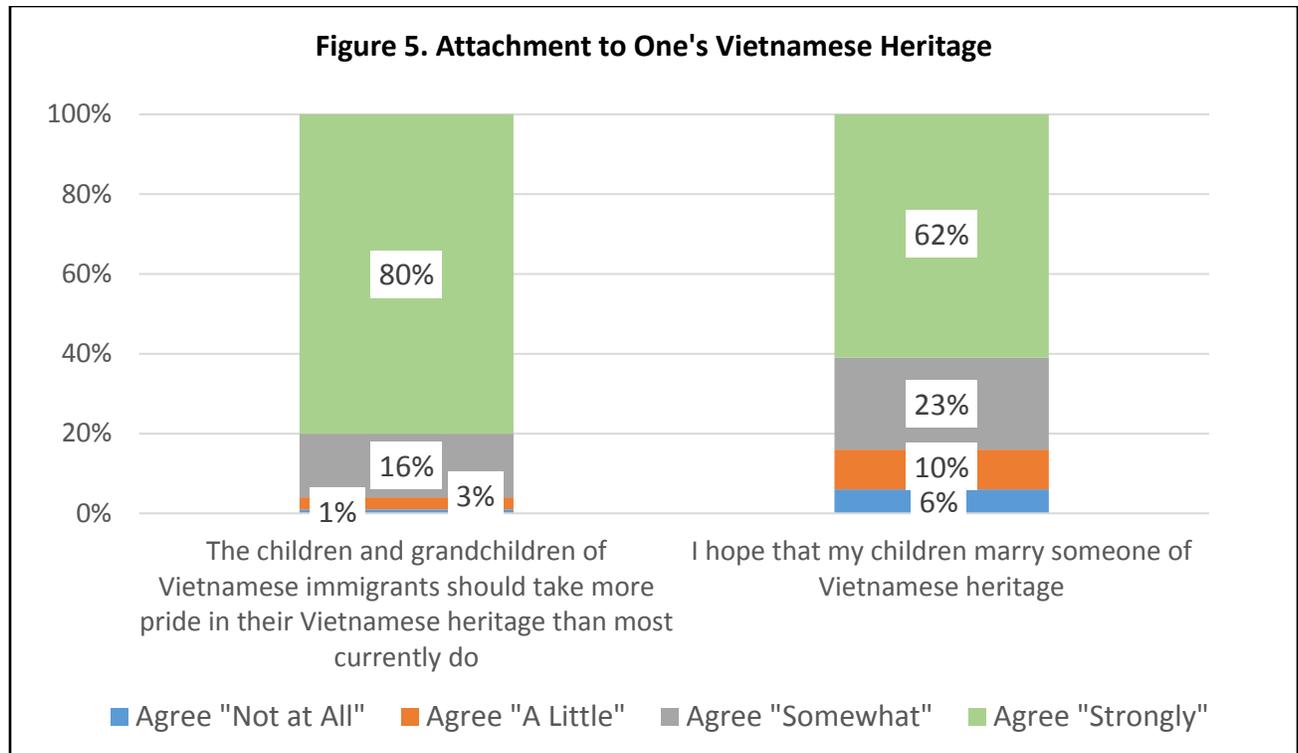
Respondent: *I would say parents are a very big impact. They're very religious.*

Respondent: *And you want to make your parents proud.*

Concerning other sources of encouragement, the youth at the other parish mentioned encouragement from their priests and their Vietnamese Eucharistic Youth Movement group, the influence of having relatives (siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins) who are priests and sisters, and the sight of the priests and sisters regularly at their parishes, which helps keep the topic of vocations on their minds.

Reconciling Traditional Vietnamese and U.S. Family Values

The academic literature on Vietnamese American Catholics posits significant conflict among the generations – particularly between those who were born in Vietnam and those who were born in the United States – in terms of how much they embrace their Vietnamese heritage. As can be seen in Figure 5 below, few of those born in Vietnam think that the children and grandchildren of immigrants take as much pride in their heritage as they should. The percentage “strongly” agreeing abates some though when asking whether they hope their children will marry someone of Vietnamese heritage (62%).



While the age groups do not differ significantly in their agreement with the first statement in Figure 5, those ages 65 and older (67%) and ages 36 to 64 (64%) are more likely than those ages 15 to 35 (48%) to “strongly” agree that they hope their children will marry someone of Vietnamese heritage.

The youth focus group participants at one parish joked about marrying someone of Vietnamese heritage, saying, however, that it is just as important to their parents – or maybe more important – that the person they marry is Catholic:

Respondent: *Vietnamese and Catholic, you got to have both. [Laughs.]*

Respondent: *They are more worried about the Catholic than the Vietnamese.*

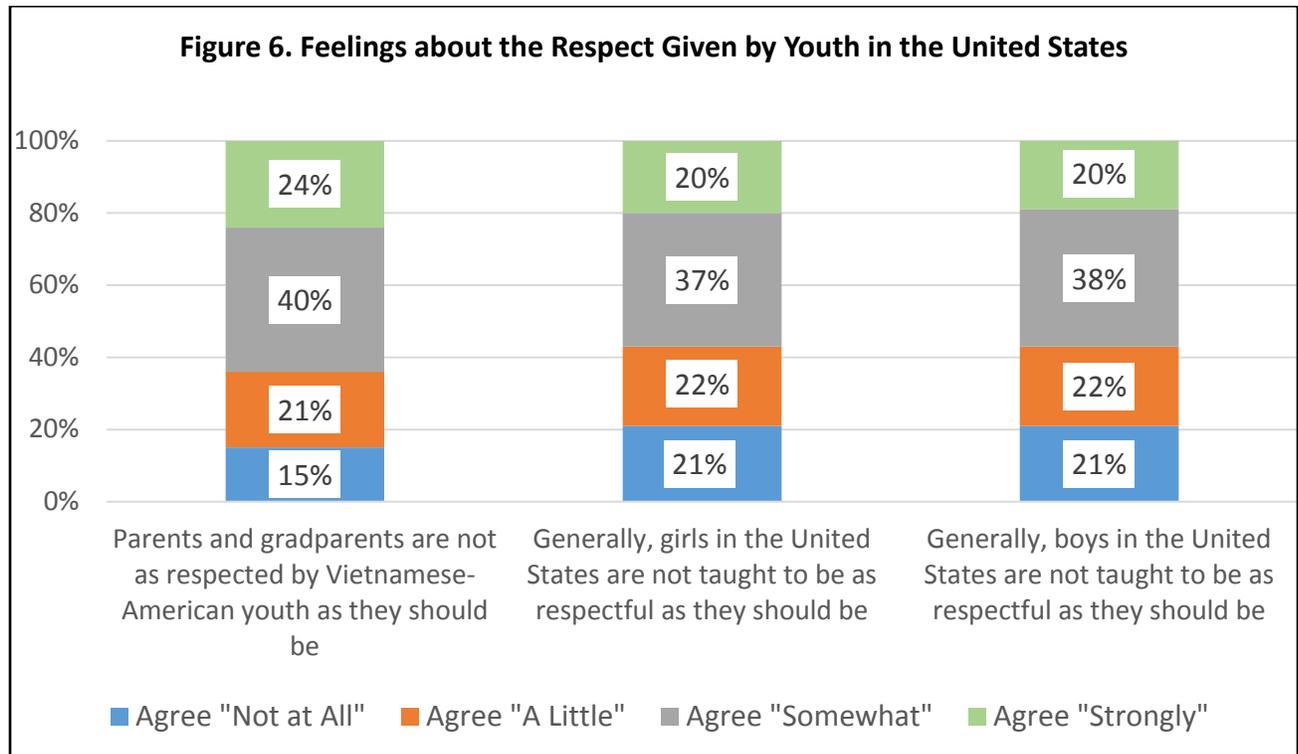
Respondent: *They don't really have to be Vietnamese, they have to be Catholic.*

Respondent: *It's a bonus!*

Respondent: *Most of my friends who I bring home are Catholic, I don't really bring home anyone else.*

Respondent: *Yeah if they are not Catholic you don't really bring home anyone, you just say this is a friend from school.*

There is consensus among those born in Vietnam that in the United States not enough respect is given to elders as should be. About six in ten (57% to 64%) agree “somewhat” or “strongly” with each of the statements in Figure 6 below, with about one-fifth agreeing “strongly” with each. Respondents believe the problem is almost equally distributed among both boys and girls in the United States.



The struggles the youth have in connecting with their grandparents was aptly described by the participants in one of the focus groups with youth:

Respondent: *She [her grandmother] stays in her room she does not watch anything. She does not really know what is going on inside the house.*

Respondent: *In a way sometimes the grandparents may say something about it but it is not like you act upon it, you just take it for like two seconds, and then keep doing what we are doing. And for the most part my Grandpa might say, “Oh girls should not do this” or “Boys should not do that.” And we would think about it, but in the end, like, times have changed. Girls can do this and guys can do that.*

Interviewer: *Okay, so you just kind of push back and it just kind of drops and it does not go any further?*

Respondent: *More like she just says something to just say something. You know?*

Interviewer: *Yeah, I do that sometimes myself. [Laughter].*

Respondent: *My Grandpa kind of like rules our house. He is super conservative. But then, like, so my family, my Dad has like ten sibs and they are kind of split up on, like, what he has to say, and then one of them deals with all the kids including, like, me because we don't want to talk to Gram about this.*

...

Respondent: *I think there is a language barrier there because like with my Grandma, she only speaks Vietnamese, and my Vietnamese only goes so much. In a way and you can't really engage with them, a really good conversation.*

Respondent: *I talk to my Grandma she doesn't really talk about anything really relevant, except to say, like, to say how fat I am or how she feels. All we talk about, nothing else, that's it.*

Respondent: *Okay*

Respondent: *You can only speak Vietnamese at home, you can't speak English at home. I get that a lot.*

Interviewer: *Okay.*

Respondent: *Because English is for outside and Vietnamese is at home.*

Respondent: *My Grandma never judges she always praises. ["Aw" responses, laughing]*

Respondent: *There are different types of Grandmas. [Laughter].*

Respondent: *The last of my grandparents died when I was four so I don't really...*

Interviewer: *So do you feel that there is still a reverence for their advice?*

Respondent: *There is, there is a lot. Like in terms of like raising families, our parents would listen to them a lot.*

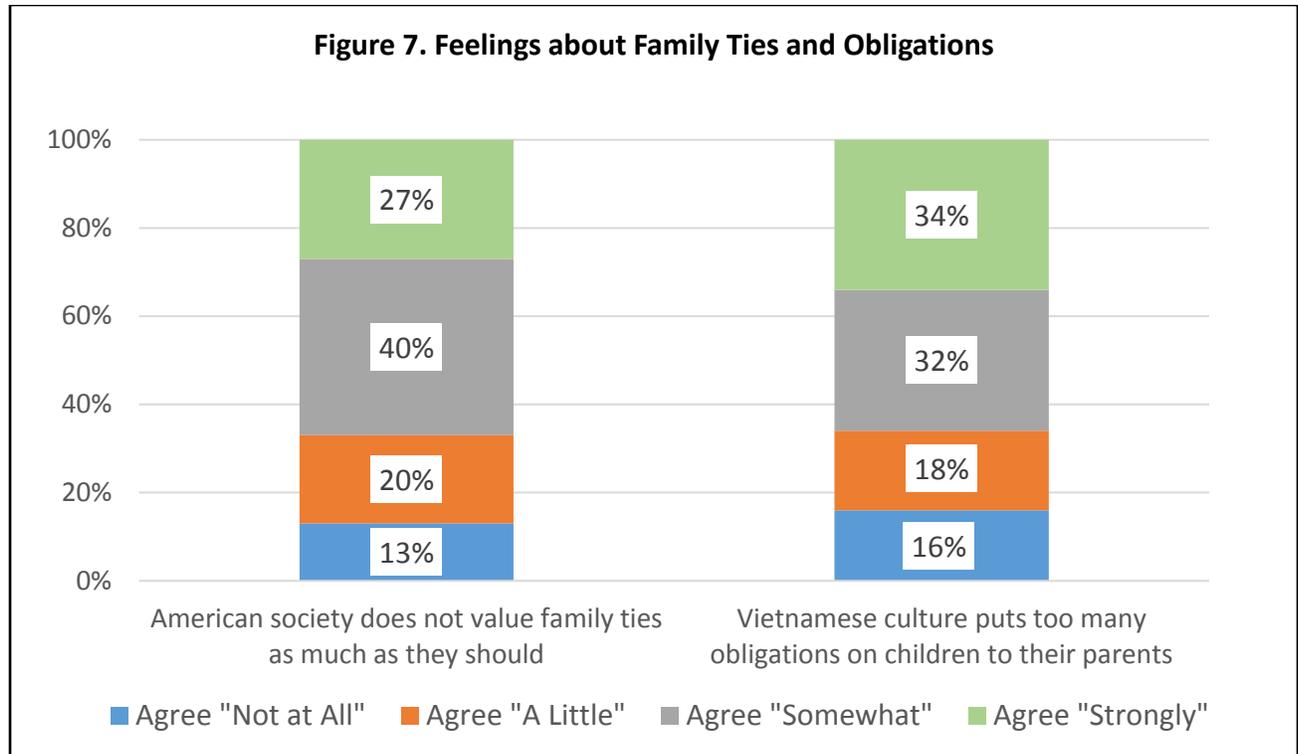
Respondent: *I think culturally, we really respect our elders, and we really put their words into, I guess, action in a sense.*

Interviewer: *But you would not necessarily take their advice about working in the United States or school.*

Respondent: *No.*

Respondent: *So that is like them talking to us but when they talk to our parents that is where there is more respect. Like there is that tighter knit. I think that is what I was trying to say earlier, because my Grandma was trying to tell me something I wouldn't necessarily agree with her, but I wouldn't say to her face that I don't agree with her. I listen out of respect but that is mostly it.*

Another strong traditional value among the Vietnamese is the great importance they place on family ties and obligations. As can be seen in Figure 7 below, about two in three (66% to 67%) agree “somewhat” or “strongly” with each of the statements about responsibilities to the family. While two-thirds is a sizable majority, the remaining one-third are a significant minority.



That said, however, those ages 35 and younger (26%) are less likely than those ages 36 to 64 (34%) or those ages 65 and older (35%) to “strongly” agree that Vietnamese culture puts too many obligations on children to their parents. Even so, the youth in one of the focus groups seemed to appreciate the strength of their families’ ties:

Respondent: But for the most part there is kinda this joke that we don’t really leave the nest until we are married and that could be 25 or 26 or it could be 30. [Laughs.] We are so close to our families we don’t feel like we need to leave, you know?

Respondent: While a lot of families they are, like, “oh, once I am 18 I am out” – a lot of my friends do that and like that is crazy, I could not live without my parents right now. I am still a baby. [Laughs.]

Respondent: There is also a thing that is like with nursing homes, um, you don’t really see that much Vietnamese grandparents in nursing homes – there is some, but it is not like a lot of people...

Interviewer: So culturally, they are much more likely to move in with one of their kids and help them?

Respondent: It is like kind of a big disrespect thing if you put your parents in nursing homes, like: “I cared for you all these years you can’t care for me, you know, my last few years.”

Respondent: I don't want to speak on behalf of you guys but for me, for sure, I definitely want to take care of my parents when they are older and like have them live with me instead of like having some random people take care of them. So I know a lot of my friends are, like, wanting to, like...I know some people who have like bought houses for their parents or like paid for all this for them just because of how much they gave us.

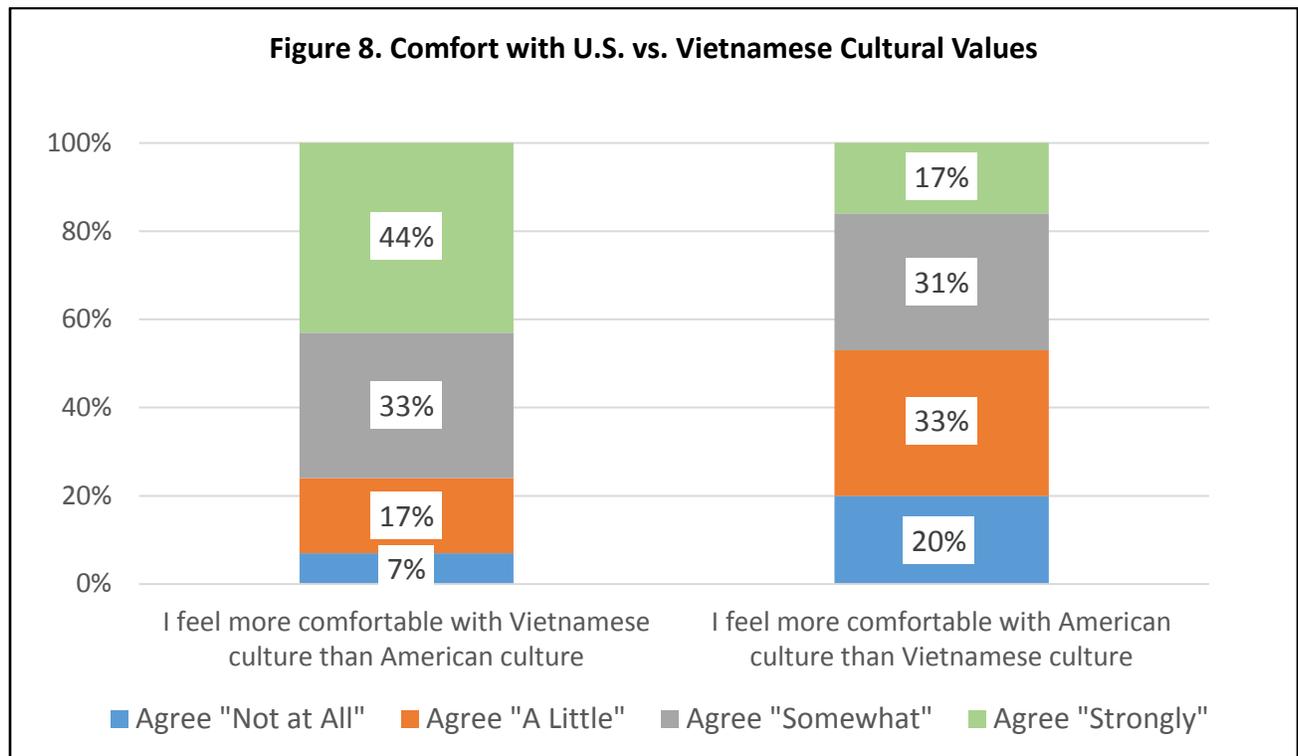
Respondent: That is also like – there are some Asian families, like my friends they are kinda white washed. So like once they are 18 they want to move out – but with me, but for us that are closer with our culture, we don't really want to move out until we are like ready or when we feel like we are old enough. Because like right now she says she is 21. She is not old enough to move out.

Respondent: It is nice staying at home and being with family even if they like annoy you and drive you crazy.

Respondent: You can't live without them. [Laughs.]

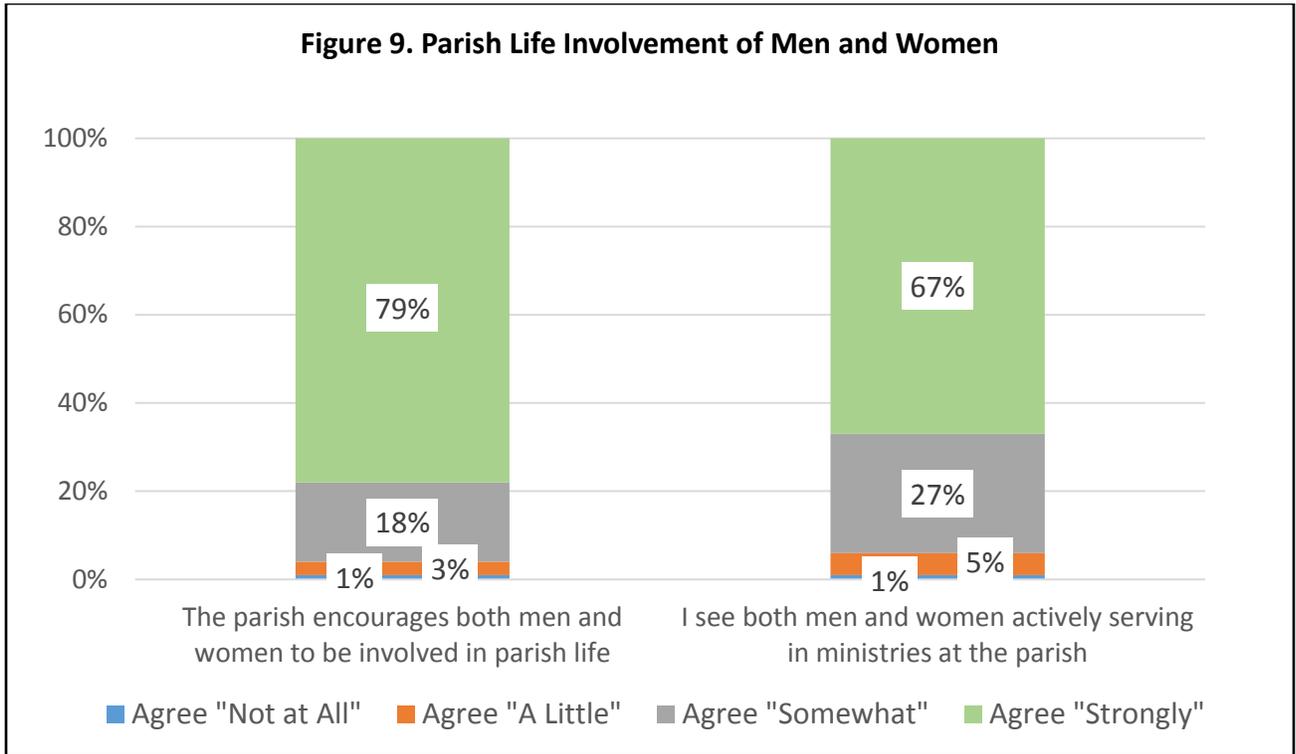
Respondent: It is just nice that you are taken care of, and vice versa, they take care of you and you take care of them.

Our respondents, all of whom were born in Vietnam, confess still feeling more comfortable with Vietnamese culture than American culture. While Figure 8 shows the responses for all respondents, the different age groups differ on the first (but not the second) measure below, with those ages 65 and older (56%) particularly likely to “strongly” agree that they feel more comfortable with Vietnamese culture, followed by those ages 36 to 64 (44%) and those ages 15 to 35 (24%).



Gender Role Conflict

The parishes are greatly seen as open to involvement from both men and women, as is shown in Figure 9. Looked at by gender, women (84%) are more likely than men (71%) to “strongly” agree that the parish encourages both men and women to be involved in parish life, but do not differ significantly in their opinion about seeing both being active in ministries.



This is amplified in the two women’s focus groups with most women identifying themselves as spiritual and religious leaders in their families. They report, for example, gathering the family for morning and evening prayers as well as making sure their children go to church weekly, participate in catechism classes, and are involved in their parish’s youth groups.

Respondent: *In Vietnam in my family, my mother took the lead role in our faith life. She reminded us of morning and night prayers, going to Mass. Here in the United States in a Vietnamese family, the mother also takes the role in children’s faith life while the father makes sure the children are well-behaved, which is sufficient. Seven to eight out of ten fathers have the same attitude about being well-behaved among children.*

Respondent: *I am a convert to the Catholic Church. But I am more religious than my husband. He only goes to Mass on Sunday because he works. I stay home taking care of three children. Thus we go to church more, making sure my children do daily prayers. Besides, I am also involved in the parish life.*

Respondent: *Women play the spiritual role in my family. The women remind the men of the religious and spiritual activities in the family.*

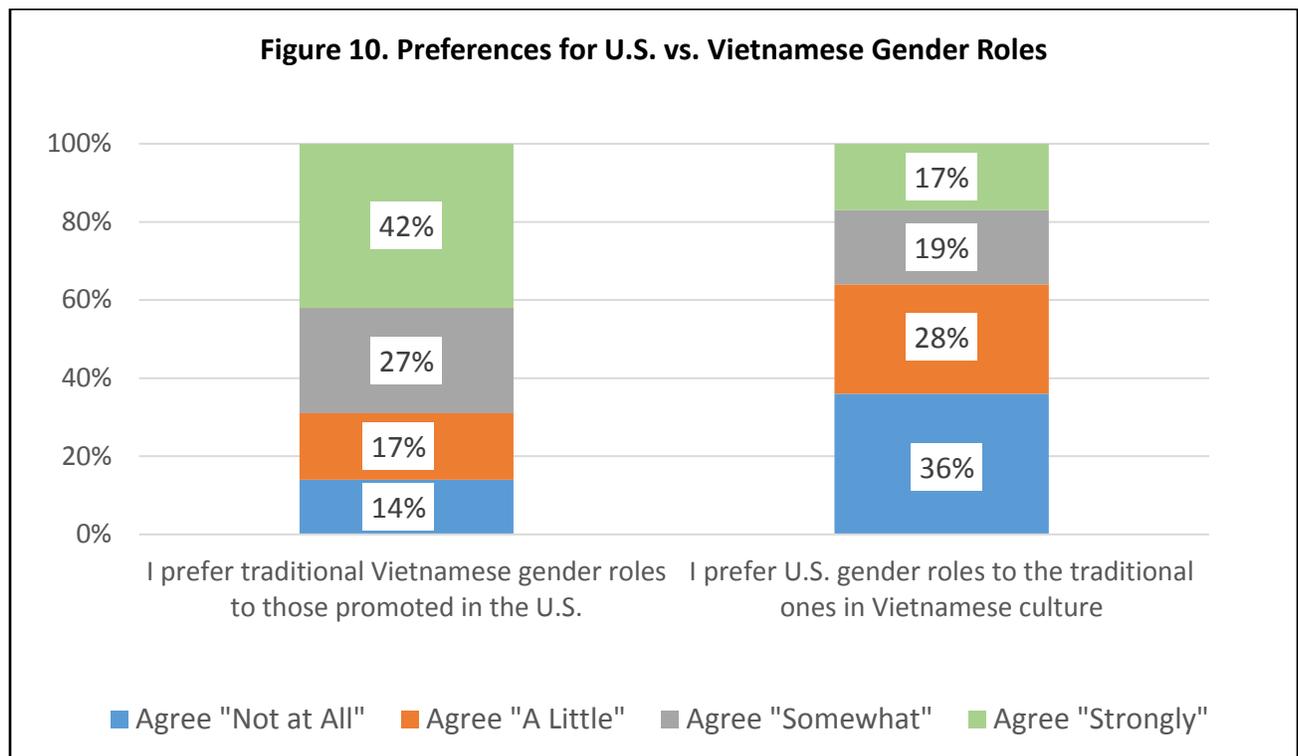
Some women in the same focus group, however, mentioned that their husbands are the spiritual leaders in their families.

Respondent: *In my family, my husband is very religious, but I am lazy.*

Respondent: *In my family, my father organizes the spiritual and faith activities, while my mother cleans the house.*

The women were also generally satisfied with their roles in their parishes and within the parish clubs they belonged to, feeling encouraged to use their skills and talents there. In the researchers' experiences, almost all Vietnamese Catholic communities and parishes organize different clubs for parishioners of all ages to participate in. The pastors particularly encourage women to be involved – especially those who do not work full time are very active in the work of the parish – with the pastors often relying on them for help.

The data about gender roles is the hardest to interpret in this study. Respondents throughout this section of the report will both be seen as professing to prefer traditional Vietnamese gender roles, and yet responding in favor of more equal gender roles than are present in Vietnam. In Figure 10 below, their preferences are made clear, with seven in ten agreeing “somewhat” or “strongly” that they prefer traditional Vietnamese gender roles, compared to just over a third preferring U.S. ones.



This was reflected in what was said by one of the participants in a youth focus group:

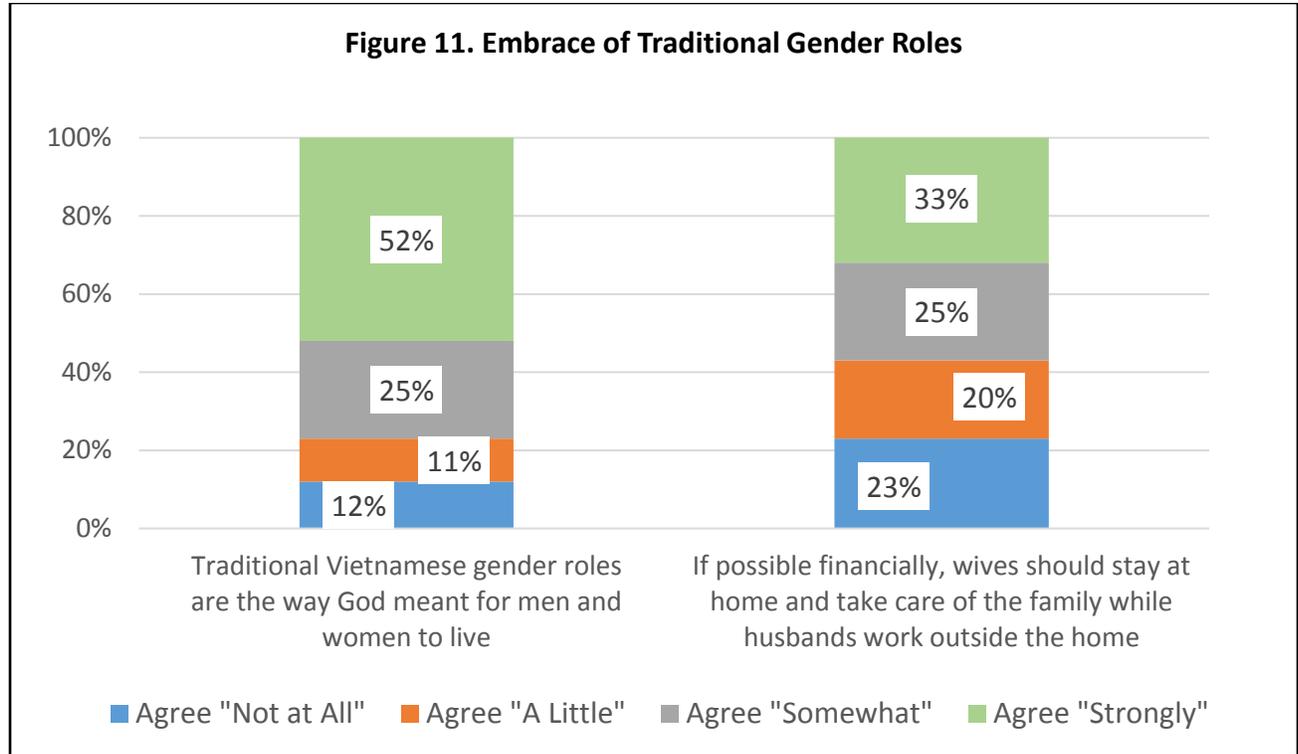
I think Vietnamese culture is fairly conservative and traditional I would say. However, when you get to America it is going to clash so some families grow up...some of the parents say okay you ignore everything about Vietnamese culture and you assimilate into American culture. And so kids grow up independent, individual, and gender roles are not the same. I noticed with myself as I come from a very conservative and traditional family and gender roles are pretty strong. Men do certain things and women do certain things and they don't transverse. In the church, in the home, outside in the streets, the roles are clearly defined. And I think it just comes from my parents coming from an older generation of Vietnamese people.

The two measures in figure 10 are a place where both gender and age group matter in how they responded. Table 2 below compares the responses by both attributes. For both measures, those ages 35 and younger are similar regardless of gender in being most likely to prefer U.S. gender roles and least likely to prefer traditional Vietnamese ones. The other two age groups do not follow as consistent of a pattern. Those females ages 65 and older, for example, are most likely to prefer traditional Vietnamese gender roles but are not least likely to prefer U.S. ones. Among the males, in contrast, the two older age groups are very similar in their preferences for Vietnamese gender roles.

Table 2. “Strong” Agreement with Statements, by Age Group and Gender

	I prefer traditional Vietnamese gender roles to those promoted in the U.S.	I prefer U.S. gender roles to the traditional ones in Vietnamese culture
	%	%
Females 15 to 35	23	30
Females 36 to 64	39	11
Females 65 and older	56	20
Males 15 to 35	27	33
Males 36 to 64	43	13
Males 65 and older	48	10

As was noted earlier, in Vietnam women typically stay at home while the husband is the breadwinner outside of the home. The tension between that value and the reality in U.S. Vietnamese American Catholic households is evident in Figure 11, where a majority (ranging from 58% to 77%) agree “somewhat” or “strongly” with both of the statements.



When examining these two measures by both age group and gender (see Table 3), only the women age 35 and younger and men ages 65 and older stand out. The young women are least likely to “strongly” agree with either statement, with the older men most likely.

Table 3. “Strong” Agreement with Statements, by Age Group and Gender

	Traditional Vietnamese gender roles are the way God meant for men and women to live	If possible financially, wives should stay at home and take care of the family while the husband works outside the home
	%	%
Females 16 to 35	28	9
Females 36 to 64	52	27
Females 65 and older	52	36
Males 16 to 35	48	38
Males 36 to 64	54	37
Males 65 and older	69	52

Acknowledging that the roles in traditional Vietnamese culture has the women doing the domestic work and the husband working outside of the home, women shared this about how their households operate:

Respondent: *We take care of our responsibilities together: We cook together. We raise our children together.*

Respondent: *Here in the U.S. husbands and wives share the same responsibilities. We go to work. The one who comes home first cooks dinners. There is no division between husbands and wives. Husbands and wives work together for the housework.*

Respondent: *In the United States, we are living in the two cultures. Before we came to the United States, living in Vietnam, it seemed that women, we did more housework, which was our main job. Women also worked outside, but our main responsibilities were the housework. Coming to the United States, our life here has changed. We still have to go to work. My husband also goes to work. But the tasks in the house that used to be for women only are also done by husbands. For example, husbands do laundry, folding clothes. I also force him to do that. That is the reality now. If he damages my new dress that is expensive, I can complain to him about why he is not careful about cleaning that dress "I have told you to hang it up after the laundry. Why did you put it in the drier and ruin the dress?": In the United States, everybody works. Some women who are a little more beautiful, having husbands who can earn more money, can stay home, doing housework in the family. In general both men and women go out and work. It is very hectic to stay home. Besides the income, the mentality is more relaxing. In general here in the United States, both men and women, both husbands and wives, work outside. When returning home, both husband and wives do the housework together. If the husband does not work, he will be assigned to do something. There is no such thing that the husband just sits there, lets the wife do all the housework. In that case, the wife could say "I do this. You do that." We divide the housework. There are men who voluntarily do the housework. But there are also men who do not know what to do. If we want to manage the family, we need to communicate with the husbands in a gentle way, like "Honey, please help me to do this. Thank you very much." There should be a constant communication with the husband so that the work could be done by the husband. If the communication is not done gently with appreciation, the husbands thinks we are bossy. They do not listen. Thus, while we ask for the husband's help, we need to show our appreciation to them. We need to have strategies to let our husbands listen to us and help us. Each of us has our own secret to make our husbands listen to us and help us with our housework.*

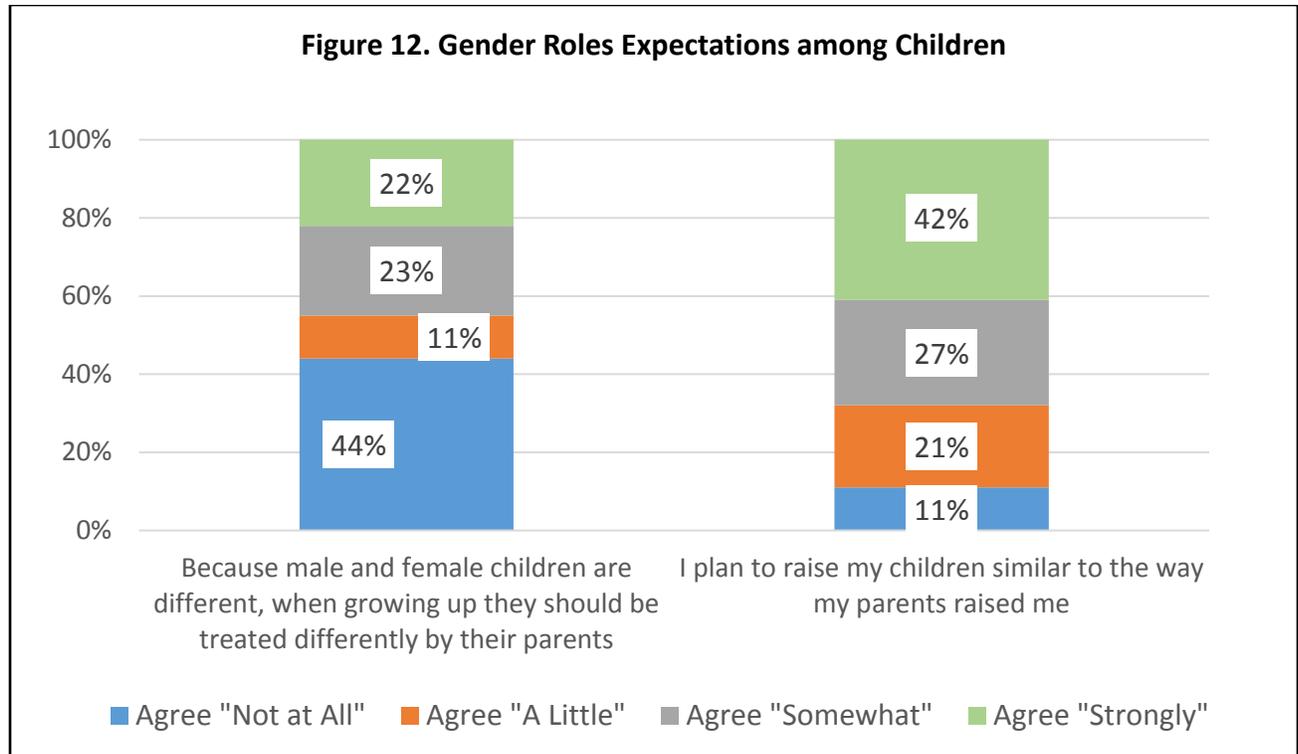
Women in the focus group are generally satisfied with the changes in gender roles in the United States, as is shown by this quote from one participant:

Oh yes, much better. We like that. When I was a little girl in Vietnam, one of my neighbors, the husband was drunk all the times, and beating the wife. It was very bad. Here in the U.S., the husbands do not dare to do so. The law here is different, with respect. While we eat together, sleep together, give birth together, why can the husbands beat the wife? It is very bad. Here in the U.S., it is changed. And it is very good. Another scenario: when the husband comes home from work seeing that the dinner is not ready, the husband yells at the wife bluntly, "You have not cooked dinner yet now?," it is very hard to hear. At the time I was a little girl. I told myself "If I have a husband like that, I would kill him." Why is that husband so brutal?

It is in fact not easy to adapt such changes. The women's focus group participants revealed that women of different generations had very different experiences, while living in the same households. The women who were born in Vietnam but came to the United States at an early age have had a difficult time reconciling the difference in their expectations concerning gender role with those of the oldest age group. They lamented that most of the oldest age group's men and women brought with them the idea that women do domestic work and so they do not feel comfortable seeing men washing the dishes or cooking for the family. Thus, these women felt strongly that the responsibilities in the family should be shared equally by everyone in the family, regardless of gender. One woman reported that she made an effort to help those of the oldest age group in her household understand the differences in cultures.

This is the psychological issue. I have been in the house with my parent in-laws for 20 years. My mother in-law considers me as her daughter. Of course she loves her son even jealous of me since he loves me more than her. Thanks God that I am blessed, knowing how to talk with her. I understand where she comes from. In the beginning, she was very unhappy to see her son helping me cook dinners and clean the kitchen after his long day at work. Then she asked to do the dishwashing instead of her son doing so. I let her do that. When she was happy, I shared with her that my husband and I made an agreement about that. I had asked him to help our children with their homework after dinner while I took care of dinner and the kitchen cleaning. After one week of doing so, my husband could not help with our children's homework. Then he wanted to shift the responsibilities. So if my mother in-law wanted to help with dishwashing, then she felt free to do so. Then she understood that. Likewise my father in-law also wondered why daughter in-laws in other Vietnamese families took care of all housework, including raising children while husbands just read newspapers and do not have to do those household things. Then I told him that would not happen between my husband and me. Gradually my parent in-laws understood and accepted that.

The fissure from traditional Vietnamese values is even wider when asked specific questions about how male and female children should be raised. As is shown in Figure 12 below, less than half (45%) “somewhat” or “strongly” agree that, because male and female children are different, when growing up they should be treated differently by their parents.



Women in the focus groups acknowledge the tendency in Vietnamese culture to prefer boys to girls. However, the Vietnamese women in our study have made efforts to change this.

Respondent: *In my family my mother prefers grandsons to granddaughters. I suggested to her not to treat them that way. When I showed her some evidence of her treating the boys and girls differently, she denied having done so.*

Respondent: *Preferring boys to girls commonly happens among Vietnamese families.*

One participant among the oldest age group of women also acknowledged their efforts to try to accept these differences.

In my opinion I realize that, my son is married. He has his own family. He takes care of that. These are their responsibilities to raise their children and build up their home. I do not interfere in their lives.

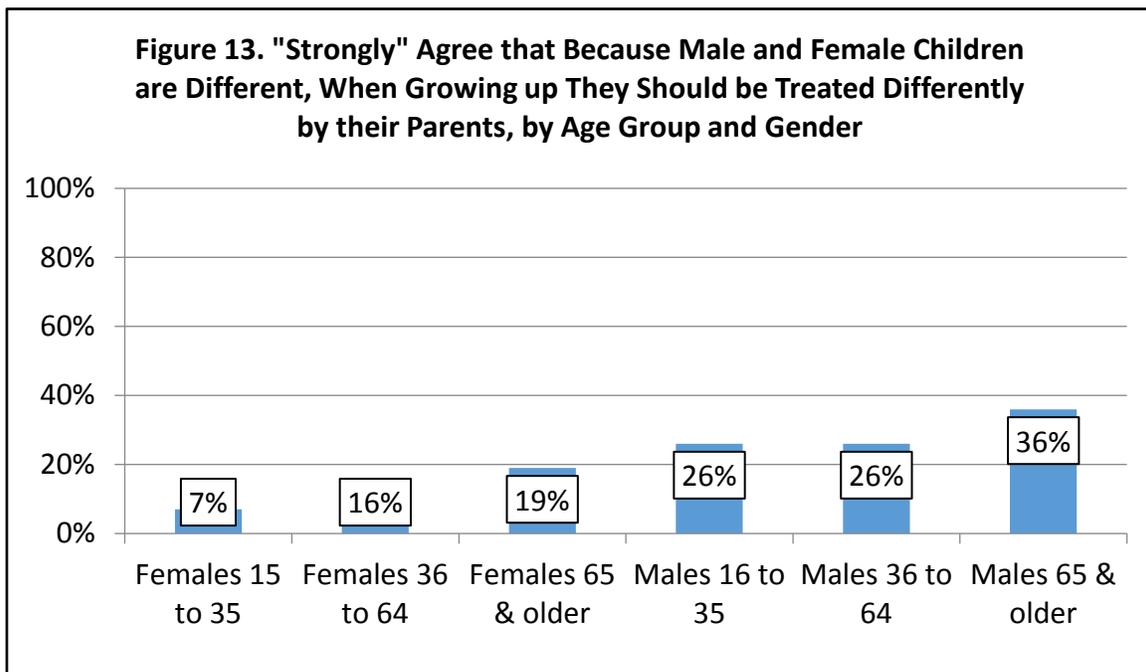
When asked if they plan to raise their children similar to how they were raised, two female participants offered these thoughts:

Respondent: *I think I kind of like American style more. So it's more equal, right? So it is just because in Vietnamese culture saying, like, how is it wasting all the time of my life when my brothers don't have to do those stuff, it feels like unfair, so I will treat my kid like American style more.*

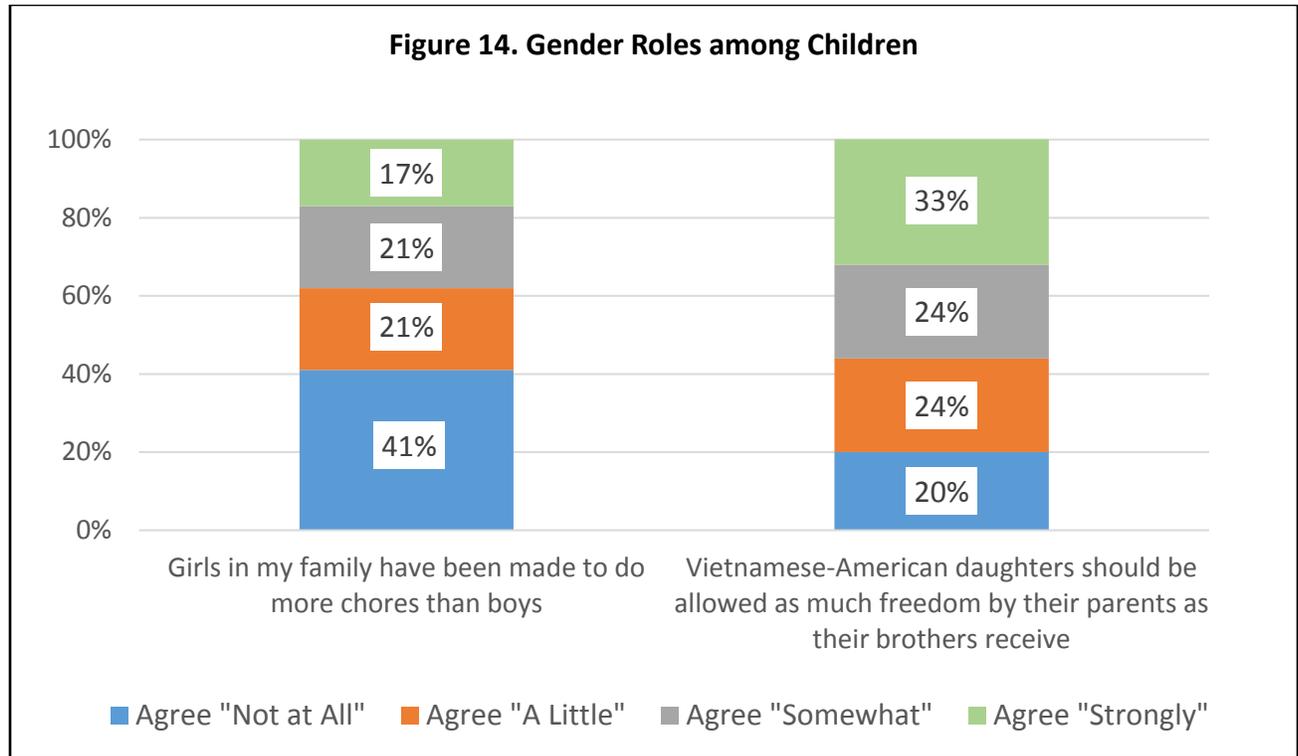
Interviewer: *How about the other girls?*

Respondent: *I think I would go with the American style because, like, in my family we don't really talk that much, we don't show love, we don't interact. Like my Mom would never tell me "Oh, I love you." So, like, that is one thing I will carry with me when I have kids or a child. [Laughs.] Like I would talk to them every day, like "How is school?" so that they know that whatever happens they know that they can talk to me and not be shy. Because I feel like in Vietnamese culture we don't really talk to each other that much. It is like a bridge that we can never cross.*

Generally, as can be seen in Figure 13, females are least likely to "strongly" agree that children of different genders should be treated differently. In addition, females ages 35 and younger are least likely to assert that boys and girls should be treated differently, with males ages 65 and older most likely.



Generally, despite the findings above concerning preference for traditional Vietnamese gender roles, however, less than half of those shown in Figure 14 report that girls in their family have been made to do more chores (38%), with more than half agreeing as strongly that Vietnamese-American daughters should be allowed as much freedom by their parents as their brothers receive (57%).



These findings are amplified by the participants in one of the youth focus groups.

Respondent: *I would smack my brother is if he didn't do any chores. [Laughs.]*

Respondent: *Our parents are very fair and everything in this household is fair, we split the chores even, do a one day you do this one chore, and it is very equal. Everybody understands that. Nobody gets mad and that is how we have grown up.*

Respondent: *It depends on the household.*

Respondent: *Yeah, yeah. [Many in agreement].*

Respondent: *I'm an only child and I do all the chores.*

Respondent: *My mom made my sisters cut the grass. [Laughs.] I wasn't old enough! Now I cut the grass! Whoever is free and does not do anything they have to do something.*

Further, a female youth group participant noted:

My parents are very, like, old school traditional and so my mom is always nagging at me expecting me to do all this at home. But then my brother chooses, like, whatever. I work as well, so coming home she expects me, like, to clean the house and do all this but I am, like, "I believe in equality." [Laughs.] So my mom will nag at me and then I will nag at my brothers to do it too.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our study affirms many of the findings from previous studies of Vietnamese Americans and immigrants more generally concerning how important their parishes are to Vietnamese American Catholics and that many of the issues going on in the households of these immigrants are also playing out in their parishes. That their parishes seem to have successfully navigated this difficult terrain for the first-generation immigrants is evident in the high satisfaction they express in their parishes overall as well as in specific attributes of those parishes.

This study reveals a first-generation group that grapples with both remaining true to their traditional Vietnamese family values and adapting to their new home country. While professing adherence to those values, a sizable minority nonetheless embraces the idea that women should stay at home and that their sons should be allowed more freedom than their daughters. The values many embrace are a hybrid of the two countries' cultures, which makes sense as they themselves must sometimes feel like they have their feet planted in both countries.

Bibliography

- Bankston, Carl L. 2000. "Vietnamese-American Catholicism: Transplanted and Flourishing." *U.S. Catholic Historian* 18 (1): 36–53.
- Chai, Karen J. 1998. "Competing for the Second Generation: English-Language Ministry at a Korean Protestant Church." In *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration*, edited by Stephen Warner and Judith Wittner, 295-332. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Chan, Sucheng. 2006. *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution, Flight, and New Beginnings*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Ebaugh, Helen R., and Janet S. Chafetz. 1999. "Agents for Cultural Reproduction and Structural Change: The Ironic Role of Women in Immigrant Religious Institutions." *Social Forces* 78:585-612.
- Gautier, Mary L. and Thu T. Do. 2017. "New Sisters and Brothers Professing Perpetual Vows in Religious Life: The Profession Class of 2016." <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/vocations/consecrated-life/upload/Profession-Class-2016-CARAreport.pdf>
- Gautier, Mary L. and Thomas P. Gaunt. 2016. "New Sisters and Brothers Professing Perpetual Vows in Religious Life: The Profession Class of 2015." <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/vocations/consecrated-life/profession-class/upload/profession-class-2015-report-final.pdf>
- Park, Jerry Z., and Elaine H. Ecklund. 2007. "Negotiating Continuity: Family and Religious Socialization for Second-Generation Asian Americans." *Sociological Quarterly* 48:93-118.
- Phan, Peter C. 2005. *Vietnamese-American Catholics*. New York: Paulist Press.