Women's Status in the Context of International Migration

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Abstract
International migration creates unique gendered work-family contexts that profoundly affect individual lives in various ways. This paper examines how immigration impacts women’s status in the labor force and in the family. Immigrant women who are laborers, self-employed entrepreneurs, and professionals experience very different changes in gender relations and work status resulting from immigration. While some become more egalitarian, others remain patriarchal; some enter the paid labor force for the first time, whereas others retreat from prominent careers to become homemakers; some are powerful in certain areas but vulnerable in others. Immigrant women’s gains and losses in their work and family domains are full of variations, contradictions, and constraints. In addition to reviewing the current state of knowledge in this area of study, this paper discusses parallels across scholarly work, inadequacies in the literature, and directions for future research.

Introduction
Examining how structural conditions place women in positions of disadvantage has been a major focus in gender scholarship. This concern remains central in studies of immigrant women. Since the 1980s, scholars in the area of gender and immigration have asked how international migration transforms or reinforces gender inequalities and what women gain or lose through international migration. Accordingly, empirical studies have investigated the changes that immigration brings to women’s lives, especially changes in their gender relations and labor force participation. Scholarly attention has centered on the economic and social resources that immigrant women attain or lose as a result of immigration as well as how the newly acquired or decreased socio-economic resources affect gender inequalities in immigrant families. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the current state of research in this area of study.

International migration is essentially a gender issue (Curran et al. 2006; Espiritu 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003; Pedraza 1991; Pessar 2003). In empirical studies of gender and immigration, gender and labor migration as well as gender relations in immigrant families constitute two major subareas of research (Nawyn 2010). This development, however, indicates that the interplay of work and family and its connections to gender have not been a main focus in this line of scholarship. In fact, the intersection of gender and work-family in the context of international migration has rarely been discussed as a central framework (with a few exceptions, e.g., Menjívar 1999; Smith and Mannon 2010; and Purkayastha 2005). Nevertheless, immigration is essentially a work-family issue (Grzywacz et al. 2005). The omission in the literature tends to overlook the interweaving factors of gender, immigration, work, and family, which provide vibrant elements for discussing the complexity of immigrant lives.
Since the mid-1990s, the study of work-family has emerged as a distinct research field resulting from the rapidly changing nature of work and family patterns (Pitt-Catsouphes et al. 2006). Some of the major changes include women’s rising status in the paid labor force, the need for two incomes, increasing work hours (both paid and unpaid), diversification of service work, and growing family diversity (Whitehead 2008). Work and family are no longer considered separate spheres but rather as inter-connected arenas (Pitt-Catsouphes et al. 2006). Central to the work-family scholarship and discussion is the important role of gender in structuring the work-family interface and shaping individual experiences (Gerson 2004; Wharton 2006). As Pessar (1984: 1188) contends, “the household and workplace are interdependent spheres of ideological, social, and material production.” The issue of families and work is essentially about gender relations, because it is through men and women’s different work and family activities that gender inequality is socially constituted (Gerson 2004; Gerstel and Gross 1987). In addition to gender, social class, race/ethnicity, sexuality, immigration, and cultural variations are critical for understanding the inequalities shaped by intersectional factors in the work-family interface (Gerstel and Sarkisian 2006; Marks 2006; Wharton 2006).

Following the work-family approach, I argue that women’s status in the context of international migration must be examined in the intersection of gender and work-family in order to further understand the multi-faceted connections of women’s life experiences. Gender across various domains is not only as important as gender within different domains (i.e., work, family, community), it is particularly helpful for uncovering the contextual complexity of gender as well as gender’s connections to social class and race-ethnicity. The purpose of this paper is therefore twofold. In addition to discussing the current state of research, it exemplifies an effort using the intersection approach, which weaves together gender, class, work, and family in the context of international migration. Race-ethnicity is also integrated into the discussion wherever applicable.

This paper begins with a synthesized review of immigrant women’s status situated in various class-based work-family contexts. Three types of immigrants are discussed: laborers and the lower class, self-employed entrepreneurs, and professionals and the middle class. Following this review, I discuss similarities and differences across scholarly work in this area of study, highlighting the central theme of gender inequality in this line of scholarship. I conclude by outlining inadequacies in the literature and suggesting future research directions.

**Work-family contexts of immigrant women in the United States**

Immigrant women are by no means homogeneous; their work-family contexts and statuses are shaped greatly by various factors. Following the categorization of immigrants outlined by Portes and Rumbaut (2006), I synthesize research findings concerning immigrant women in three categories: wage laborers and the lower class, self-employed entrepreneurs, and professionals and the middle class. For each type of immigrant, I discuss how women’s work-family contexts are shaped by international migration as well as how the contexts affect gender relations and women’s status in the family. Although these three types of immigrants can be perceived as a class-based categorization, they do not represent social class in a rigid sense. For example, many immigrants work in higher-wage but lower-status jobs in the host society. Also, immigrant women’s human capital or resources cannot be measured simply by their occupations or income in the host society, because many highly-skilled immigrant women become homemakers or work in family-owned businesses as unpaid labor. However loosely defined, this categorization...
helps to distinguish and discuss varied contexts of work and family in which immigrant women are situated.

The objective of this paper is to discuss how immigration affects women’s work-family contexts, employment, and gender relations; its emphasis lies primarily on immigrant women and families in the United States. Therefore, the reviewed studies are selective and do not represent a comprehensive list of all studies of immigrant women. In the literature, a great number of studies of immigrant women focus solely on work or on family. Only those studies that explore work-family interface are selected for the review. For the same reason, some studies of transnational families and refugees that address the connections of work-family and gender are integrated into the discussion; however, these two groups are not the main focus of this review because of their unique characteristics and migration contexts (i.e., core family relations across two or more societies, involuntary migration). The scope of the review and its discussions are thus shaped by this focus.

Wage laborers and the lower class

The growth of female- and labor-intensive industries since the late 1960s has brought a significant number of female immigrant workers to the United States, especially in the service, health care, microelectronic, garment, and apparel-manufacturing industries (Clement and Myles 1994; Espiritu 1999). The increasing employment rate among Western women also has created the need for domestic workers, especially cheap labor from overseas (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002). Most of these immigrant women workers come from non-Western regions such as Latin America and Southeast Asia. For instance, Hossfeld (1994) reports that Third World immigrants constitute more than 80 percent of workers in Silicon Valley’s semiconductor manufacturing industry, and most of them are women. The substantial portions of Korean women in Hawaii’s service industry and Dominican women in New York’s garment industry exemplify the high employment rate and visibility of female immigrant laborers in the American workforce (Chai 1987; Pessar 1984; Ui 1991). Female migrants overwhelmingly work as maids or domestics in the era of globalization (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Parreñas 2000).

From the employer’s perspective, immigrant women are ideal employees for unskilled and semiskilled assembly work, because employers believe that they are willing to work for less, do not mind dead-end jobs, and are psychologically suited for routine work, especially compared to male immigrants and US-born workers (Espiritu 1999; Hossfeld 1994; Tyner 2003). As a result, female immigrant laborers have greater accessibility to jobs than their male counterparts, who often end up with low-paying, unstable jobs or are unemployed in the receiving society. This gendered employability for immigrant laborers leads to women’s greater economic role in the family, as their husbands’ authority declines after immigration. Many wives who were homemakers prior to immigration become co-breadwinners after immigration, some of whose wages become the major source of family income.

Women’s increased financial contributions enhance their status in the family. In several studies, scholars share the observation that immigrant women laborers’ employment status has helped them gain greater bargaining power in their spousal relations. Many are able to negotiate a greater share of domestic labor from their husbands and have greater control over budgets (Kibria 1993; Min 2001; Pessar 1984). Women’s participation in the paid labor force also gives them more exposure to gender ideologies in the host society (Pessar 1984). They sometimes gain new social resources, such as ethnic networks from
which they receive social support (Kibria 1990). These new gains resulting from immi-
ration strengthen women’s abilities to change gender inequality at home.

However, in spite of women’s improved status in the family, patriarchal relations
remain under-challenged among immigrant laborer couples. Several factors prevent them
from achieving greater gender equality. First, male immigrant laborers’ low status in the
host society and their declined economic role in the family create enormous feelings of
insecurity and anxiety. Their frustrations often lead to marital conflicts, domestic vio-
lene, or marriage dissolution (Donnelly 1994; Min 2001). Losing their power as a result
of immigration, men are even more eager to sustain their dominance in the family; their
gender-role attitudes remain unchanged. Therefore, patriarchal relations often sustain in
working-class immigrant families (Gold 1989, 1995; Kibria 1990, 1993; Lim 1997; Min

Second, many immigrant women choose to preserve traditional gender norms and
family values despite their enhanced social and economic status (Baker 2004; Gu 2006;
Kibria 1990, 1993). Several reasons have been provided to explain women’s choices and
the perpetuation of traditional conjugal relations in immigrant laborers’ families. These
explanations include protecting family well-being, maintaining parental authority, and
preserving the foundation for resisting racism in US society. For instance, Kibria (1993)
observes that despite their economic contribution, Vietnamese immigrant women highly
value their traditional patriarchal family system, which provides them with economic pro-
tection and with authority over the younger generation. In her study of working-class
Korean immigrants, Lim (1997) also reports that many Korean wives are aware of their
contribution to the family economy. The women believe that the husbands should help
with housework and become less obedient to their husbands. Nevertheless, traditional
Confucian patriarchal ideology continues to restrain these women’s gender practice at
home.

In Hondagneu-Sotelo’s (1992, 1994) study of Mexican immigrants, women’s long sep-
aration from their husbands during the process of family stage migration gives them more
autonomy and influence in the family. Women take charge of daily household responsi-
bilities and utilize their social networks with other women to subvert their husbands’
opposition to family migration and to carry out their plans for immigration. After reuni-
ifying their families in the United States, Mexican women reaffirm their power in conju-
gal relations. Their efforts receive the most success in decision-making but far less in
domestic labor, since most men refuse to do “women’s work.”

Grasmuck and Pessar’s (1991) study of Dominicans in New York’s garment industry
found that women’s employment contributes to their greater power over budgets and
domestic labor as well as their more egalitarian beliefs. Nevertheless, their gains in the
household do not enhance their awareness of structural inequality in the workplace and
community. These cases suggest that women gain power in some areas while remaining
powerless in others. In other words, gender inequality within and across domains of fam-
ily and work is not always consistent; therefore, its complexity and multi-faceted factors
require close examination and in-depth understanding.

In my study of Taiwanese immigrants, working-class dual-income families are much
more patriarchal than their middle-class counterparts. In these families, the wives are
responsible for all domestic labor and have no decision-making power over family
finances and relocation. Although complaining about their husbands’ chauvinism (some-
times in front of their husbands), these women perceive their subordinate status in the
family as the norm in Asian culture and as their fate as women (Gu 2006). Such a tradi-
tional gender ideology is also shared by Mexican immigrant women in Baker’s (2004)
According to Baker, most Mexican immigrant women do not want to work in the paid labor force, because they believe that a woman’s “rightful place” is in the domestic sphere. These immigrant women, however, choose to work outside the home in order to improve the lives of their children. In other words, for working-class immigrant women, employment is an extension of their family obligations. Participating in the paid labor force is considered what women ought to do as wives and mothers in order to help sustain the family economy and to secure family well-being (Baker 2004; Ferree 1979; Grahame 2003; Kibria 1990, 1993; Kim and Hurh 1988; Menjivar 1999; Pedraza 1991).

Furthermore, like other ethnic minorities, lower-class immigrants are at a disadvantaged position both in the larger political-economic structure and in the racial and ethnic hierarchy of US society. As Glenn (1986) argues, in minority families, traditional patriarchy serves as a foundation of resistance against race and class oppression. By the same token, immigrants’ family traditions also provide a set of social relations and material resources to resist external inequalities and oppression (Baca Zinn 1987, 1990; Baker 2004; Glenn 1986; Kibria 1993; Pessar 2007). As Foner (1986) observed, Jamaican immigrant women experience racial and class inequalities more acutely than inequalities based on gender. This injustice gives these women a basis for unifying with Jamaican men; it also strengthens the women’s beliefs in the importance of family stability. Similarly, Smith and Mannon (2010) argue that inequalities and injustices derived from race-ethnicity, immigrant status, and social class significantly and brutally mark Latina immigrants’ daily experiences as working poor immigrants in northern Utah. Gender inequality at home becomes far less important in the women’s eyes.

In addition, although the immigrant poor who are on welfare have not drawn much attention in the scholarship of gender and immigration, it is worth highlighting this group’s work-family context and its impact on women’s lives. In Fujiwara’s (2008) study of Asian immigrants and refugees, many families experience high levels of hunger and poverty. The welfare reform and food stamp cuts of the 1990s worsened these families’ living conditions, especially those who were not citizens. Many poor Asian immigrant women lost their access to public benefits and struggled tremendously to secure the well-being of their children, their families, and themselves. Such hardship led several women to take their own lives as they worried about their families’ survival. Losing economic support from welfare also weakened women’s abilities to leave abusive relationships (Fujiwara 2005, 2008).

Ong’s (2003) study of Cambodian refugees also illustrates how the welfare system enhances poor immigrant women’s economic status and negotiation power in the family. As a result of the war and camp life, Cambodian patriarchal relations were undermined before the refugees arrived in the United States. Cambodian refugee women were forced into self-reliance during the war and gained a greater sense of control of their own lives. Since American welfare benefits were granted directly to women, female refugees gained an immediate source of power that further undercut male authority. They quickly learned how to use help from the aid and service agencies, sometimes manipulatively, to their own advantage, while Cambodian refugee men struggled to regain male domination even when they were unable to support their families in the receiving society.

In sum, for working-class families, immigration often equalizes or reverses the economic resources of men and women. Nevertheless, women’s earnings are insufficient to sustain their economic independence from men. To support their families and therefore to provide a better life for their children, women continue to rely on men and perceive their subordination to their husbands as a means to protect family well-being. Women also benefit from traditional family values to maintain their parental authority over the
children and to preserve their families as the base for resisting racism in the receiving society. Uprooted from their societies of origin, immigrants perceive their families as an important anchor that satisfies individuals’ fundamental needs for security, belonging, and happiness. Preserving cultural traditions of origin, including norms concerning gender and family relations, often becomes important in the new social context.

Self-employed entrepreneurs

Several immigrant groups have become known for their large portion of self-employed entrepreneurs, such as Jews and Chinese in the early 20th century as well as Koreans and Cubans in more recent times. Immigrant-owned businesses are widespread throughout the United States and are fairly visible in ethnic enclaves in metropolitan areas such as Koreatown in Los Angeles, Chinatown in New York City, and Little Italy in Boston. These family-owned small businesses are a major source of employment for co-ethnic laborers, who often lack English fluency and capital for acquiring White-collar jobs and therefore are willing to endure low wages, long hours, and lack of benefits. They also greatly rely on women family members who usually work long hours as unpaid employees. Both unpaid wives and underpaid immigrant employees contribute to the success of many small immigrant businesses (Phizacklea 1983).

Unpaid female labor enables many family stores to stay open long hours and on weekends without having to hire additional workers outside the family. According to Ong and Hee (1994), 75 percent of Asian immigrant businesses do not hire any employees outside of the family. In Min’s (1998) study of Koreans in New York City, although the wife plays a dominant role in operating family-owned stores, the husband is the legal owner in nearly all Korean family businesses. Wives in these immigrant family businesses perceive their unpaid and often unrecognized labor as an extension of their domestic obligation. Many choose to develop family businesses as a means to resist racist and sexist labor markets. These women tend to tolerate their husbands’ dominance in the family and in the workplace. Gender hierarchy is therefore sustained in entrepreneur immigrant families.

For immigrants who are self-employed entrepreneurs, the blurred distinction between work and family signifies their everyday life. In contrast to wage laborers and salaried professionals whose homes are separate from work, self-employed immigrants experience a large part of family life at their workplace since their stores operate long hours and many do not hire additional workers. In most cases, the couple works side by side each day. Their work relations and family relations overlap with each other. They are not only co-owners of the store as well as employer and employee but also husband and wife. No clear boundaries exist between work and family.

Working long hours together creates marital conflicts and is more stressful on the wives as the husbands continue to exercise patriarchal authority (Min 2001). By creating an isolated working and living environment, immigrants’ family businesses increase women’s financial and social dependence on their husbands. As a result, self-employed immigrants tend to be slower in changing patriarchal gender role divisions than their counterparts in other occupations (Kim and Hurh 1988; Min 1992, 2001).

Recent studies of immigrant women entrepreneurs have brought a somewhat different picture. Kang’s (2010) study in New York City found that many Korean immigrant women perceive the ownership of nail salons as their best chance at upward mobility, given the limited economic opportunities available to immigrant women of color. The female-dominated nail salon industry also gives immigrant women a space to work separately from their husbands, thereby preventing invisible and unpaid labor as seen in many
immigrant grocery and dry cleaning stores. Although gaining more autonomy, independence, and gender equality through entrepreneurship, Korean immigrant women who are salon owners struggle to balance work, childcare, and homemaking responsibilities. Rather than feeling liberated, many feel guilty about not devoting enough time to their roles as wives and mothers.

Businesses owned by immigrant women range from architecture and law firms to gift shops, travel agencies, childcare centers, and cafes (Dallafar 1994; Pearce et al. 2011). Sharing the desire for independence, autonomy, and challenges, female immigrant entrepreneurs also commonly face obstacles shaped by their gender, race-ethnicity, and immigrant status, especially in the early years of business establishment. More supportive than un-supportive husbands are reported, but a notable number of immigrant women take the path of entrepreneurship as a way to escape abuse both in the sending and the host societies. Similar to Kang’s observation, overcoming inequalities shaped by gender, race-ethnicity, and immigrant status as well as balancing business ownership with family demands continue to be the major challenges in these immigrant women’s lives (Pearce et al. 2011). These common challenges have also been reported in studies conducted in Israel (Kushnirovich 2007), New Zealand (Pio 2007), and Spain (González-González et al. 2011).

Professionals and the middle class

Studies that compare two social classes of an immigrant group reported that salaried professional women generally gain more gender equality at home than their working-class counterparts (Chen 1992; Gu 2006; Min 1998). Several factors shape more egalitarian relations of middle-class immigrant couples, including women’s ability to negotiate a larger share of the household labor from their husbands, the demands of the women’s careers, the small earning gaps between professional men and women, and the women’s status as the principal immigrants (Espiritu 1999). Middle-class men’s more egalitarian ideologies and more free time than their laborer counterparts are also reasons why immigrant husbands take up more housework (Chen 1992).

Many scholars use gender division of domestic labor as an indicator to measure gendered power relations in immigrant families. For instance, Min (1998) reports that in the Korean immigrant community, younger professional husbands undertake more housework than men in any other occupational category. In his study of Taiwanese immigrants in New York, Chen (1992) observed that White-collar professional men do a lot more household work than both their working-class and small-business counterparts. Pesquera (1993) also finds similar patterns among Chicano professional men whose wives are also White-collar professionals. Moreover, Filipino and Indian immigrant men whose wives are health professionals assume more childcare and household responsibilities (Espiritu 2002; George 2005). However, regardless of greater male involvement in the domestic labor of these middle-class immigrant families, many studies report that women unfortunately continue to perform more of the housework than their husbands (Chen 1992; Gu 2006; Min 1998; Pesquera 1993). Women’s burden of the second shift remains a challenging issue.

In addition to the gender division of domestic labor, a few scholars examine decision-making power as an indicator of gender inequality. For instance, researchers find that both Taiwanese professional women and Filipino women physicians tend to change their career paths in order to accommodate their husbands’ relocation decisions (Espiritu 2002; Gu 2006). Regardless of their occupations, Taiwanese immigrant wives in middle-class
families hold fairly equal power in deciding family finances and children’s education; some are primary decision-makers (Gu 2006).

Salaried professional immigrants share with their working-class counterparts the experience of encountering racism both in the workplace and in US society. Despite their high levels of education, racism threatens immigrant professionals’ employment security and class status; moreover, immigrant professionals’ economic returns are lower than those of their White counterparts who are of similar educational levels (Espiritu 1999). Furthermore, they are also more likely to encounter a glass ceiling at work, remain marginalized in work relations, and to be underemployed (Ong and Hee 1994; Yamanaka and McClelland 1994). In particular, immigrant women’s non-White and non-male status places them in a more vulnerable position than men. Many experience harassment and hostile environments at work (Cho 1997). Therefore, the family becomes an important bastion of resistance to racism for immigrants. Many middle-class immigrant women desire a strong and intact family, even at the cost of accepting certain components of the traditional patriarchal system (Espiritu 2002). Moreover, most middle-class immigrants reside in suburban White areas. In the case of Indian immigrants, for example, spatial isolation from ethnic peers tends to solidify conjugal bonds (Kurien 2003).

Not all professional immigrant women easily find work in the host society. In Purkayastha’s (2005) study of Asian Indians, highly skilled women encountered cumulative disadvantage when they migrated as dependents. Immigration leads to a great loss of social and professional networks. The women’s previous credentials are often devalued; they stumble upon glass ceilings in the workplace; and they struggle to balance their work and home life. Enormous barriers exit for these women to rebuild their careers and enter the labor force in the host society (Purkayastha 2005). Because of such cumulative disadvantage and visa restrictions on dependents, a great number of highly skilled immigrant women become full-time homemakers (Diggs 1998; Kurotani 2005; Yasuike 2011). Women’s weak economic power contributes to a clear breadwinner and homemaker division of labor in the family, binding them to the domestic sphere (Yasuike 2011). In spite of scant scholarly attention, the negative impacts of immigration on professional women’s careers have been documented in recent studies in the United States (Purkayastha 2005), Denmark (Liversage 2009), Australia (Ho 2008), Canada (Man 2004), and New Zealand (Meares 2010).

In sum, most studies find that professional immigrant women generally enjoy fairly egalitarian relations with their spouses, especially when compared to their laborer counterparts. Their high education and employment help to establish good social statuses, networks outside co-ethnics, and financial independence. Professional immigrant women also encounter significant challenges to re-enter the labor force after immigration when they are not the primary visa holders. Many become homemakers or choose a different career path for practical reasons. Even among those who work in the White-collar workplace, glass ceilings and the struggle to balance work and family remain challenging issues in their lives. Given the scarce research on middle-class immigrant women, their gender relations, perceptions of paid and unpaid work, and self-concepts remain important areas that need further investigations.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The studies reviewed in this essay share a common theme of gender inequality in immigrants’ work-family contexts. This central theme across empirical studies echoes the major concern in gender scholarship as introduced in the beginning of this paper. Scholars who
study immigrant women’s status and gender relations often show strong concerns for the women’s disadvantaged positions at home and in the workplace. They often focus on the women’s life stories in order to have women’s voices heard and use more qualitative than quantitative research methods. The shared positions among scholars in this area of study may have also shaped the results of the review and current knowledge of this line of research. Concerning gender inequality and injustice, scholars tend to study immigrant groups that come from patriarchal societies, most of which are non-Western countries. This tendency also leads to intensified contrasts between Western and non-Western, American and non-American, and egalitarian and patriarchal ideologies as dichotomously and unquestioningly presented in many studies. This tendency partially explains why disproportionate studies have been conducted about laborers. It is therefore important to note that not all immigrants’ cultures of origin are patriarchal and that national cultures are by no means lists of given traits and fixed qualities. This awareness will help to bring a critical perspective to the study of gender and immigration. It will also prevent othering immigrant cultures with a Western-centered viewpoint.

As reviewed in this article, many lower-class women participate in the paid labor force for the first time after immigration. Their economic contributions for the family enhance their status at home, although women’s gains have not been found to completely challenge men’s dominance. Many women consider employment as essential for family survival, rather than liberating from domestic obligations. They also tend to perceive the reservation of an intact family as the foundation for resisting racial inequality in the larger society. Many immigrant women in small family businesses work as unpaid labor and live in ethnic enclaves. Their economic and social resources are limited, which intensifies the women’s financial and social dependence on their husbands. In contrast, immigrant women entrepreneurs gain independence and autonomy by taking charge of a business; they are also able to negotiate more egalitarian spousal relationships when compared to those women who work alongside with their husbands in family businesses. However, significant challenges remain as the women struggle to balance their family and work as well as overcome obstacles resulting from inequalities shaped by their non-male, non-White, and non-native status in the host society.

The life experiences of professional women and middle-class housewives show great variations and contradictions. Many highly-skilled immigrant women encounter cumulative disadvantage in the host society’s labor market because of their dependent status; many are forced to change their career paths or become homemakers. Many housewives in middle-class immigrant families remain powerful in their conjugal relations regardless of their loss of economic and social resources. The majority of the middle class and professionals appears to accept some components of traditional patriarchal norms and continues to value their traditional family system. However, the women’s acceptance of traditional family values has ironically become the major source of distress in their lives. Moreover, while fairly traditional (i.e., accepting and accommodating) at home, the same women could be quite unconventional (i.e., vocal, tough, and aggressive) when encountering unfair treatment in the workplace and in the larger society (Gu 2010). Therefore, the intersecting effects of the work-family contexts on immigrant women’s status are far more complicated than our current understanding and theorization, which opens up new directions for future research.

In sum, immigrant women’s gains within a specific arena (such as work) are often accompanied by contradictions and constraints (Grzywacz et al. 2005; Pessar 1999). This paper discusses various benefits, costs, contradictions, tensions, and constraints that immigrant women encounter in different work-family contexts. As other scholars have
pointed out, the process of international migration involves a great deal of economic, social, and cultural risks, because relocating one’s self and family to a new society is one of the most drastic social actions that people can take during their lifetime (Amit and Riss 2007; Gold 1997). Women’s experiences provide an invaluable subject of research for discussing the changes, struggles, and adaptations that international migration brings to their individual lives.

While the current state of research concerning immigrant women’s status in their work-family contexts has produced fruitful results, several gaps remain in the literature. First, past studies excessively focus on laborers, leaving professional and self-employed women under-researched. In particular, middle-class housewives who gave up high-paying, high-status jobs in the host societies and retreat to their homes as a result of international migration remain a neglected population in sociological research. More studies concerning immigrant women entrepreneurs are also needed. Second, discussions of women’s status in their conjugal relations focus more on gender division of domestic labor and much less on other aspects of gendered power issues such as decisions concerning family finances, family relocations, and parenting. Rather than relying on a single indicator for measuring gender inequality, multiple indicators are needed in order to capture various aspects of gender relations.

Third, immigrant women’s interpretations of gender norms and practices as well as how they perceive employment and work relations also need to be investigated to help understand immigrant women’s lives from their own socio-cultural positions. Understanding women’s subjectivity will also help to prevent interpreting immigrant women’s life experiences from the researchers’ own viewpoints, which are often shaped by different socio-cultural contexts than the researched groups. Moreover, how other family relations (e.g., in-laws and children) affect conjugal relationships is seldom addressed. For instance, a great number of immigrant households include extended families. What are the family dynamics in these extended households? How do immigrant women’s interaction and conflicts with their in-laws affect their conjugal relationships? How do the women’s in-laws perceive and react to their status and power in the household? How do immigrant women sustain and negotiate parental authority when educating their American-born children? Does women’s parental authority affect their status in conjugal relationships, or vice versa? These questions exemplify some areas that are worth investigating in the future to enhance scholarly understanding of the complexity of gender relations and family dynamics in immigrant lives. Fourth, most studies do not compare variations within the researched population. More comparisons are needed to examine how women’s status is shaped by other social variables such as social class, ethnicity of origin, occupation, and migration cohort. Such analyses not only will prevent treating researched subjects as a homogenous group, they will also contextualize the intersecting factors that shape women’s status in varied social structures within an immigrant group.

Finally, many important issues relevant to immigrant women’s status remain understudied. Issues such as immigrant women’s senses of self at home and at work, ethnic identities at home and in the workplace, social networks within and outside co-ethnics, and how women’s status affects their psychological well-being all need further investigation. Moreover, a woman’s status and power changes in different contexts and in different time periods; it is important to discuss similarities, variations, contrasts, and contradictions across different domains such as family, work, ethnic-community, and the larger society. A longitudinal approach, such as the life history method, is also worth pursuing in order to help capture the processes of change in immigrant gender relations.
These efforts will definitely enhance scholarly understanding of the complexity of immigrant women’s life experiences.

Short Biography

Chien-Juh Gu is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at Western Michigan University. She received her PhD in Sociology from Michigan State University and was a post-doctoral research fellow at the Academia Sinica in Taiwan. Gu specializes in gender, social psychology, international migration, and medical sociology. She is the author of Mental Health among Taiwanese Americans: Gender, Immigration, and Transnational Struggles (2006, LFB Scholarly Publishing), and has published in the areas of gender, immigration, social psychology, and culture. Gu has received several research awards, including the Emerging Scholar Award and the Faculty Research and Creative Activities Award from Western Michigan University, as well as the Junior Scholar Award from the Chiang Ching-Kou Foundation. Her current research examines how gender relations change during different phases of settlement and their impact on immigrant women’s psychological well-being.

Notes

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1 Portes and Rumbaut (2006) use personal resources, including material and human capital, to discuss various types of immigrants to the United States. Human capital is particularly emphasized in their typology of immigrants and has been broadly adopted by immigration scholars.

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