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THE GENDERING OF IMMIGRATION STUDIES IN THE UNITED STATES

Chien-Juh Gu

ABSTRACT

Purpose – This chapter discusses how gender scholarship has transformed the study of immigration in the United States since the 1970s.

Methodology/approach – This discussion is based on a synthesized review of immigration studies and their connections to gender scholarship in different historical contexts.

Findings – Over the past four decades, gender scholarship has significantly shaped the theories, methodologies, and core concerns in immigration studies in the United States. Before the 1970s, immigration research focused on men. Studies of immigrant women began in the 1980s, which not only challenged previous gender-blind perspectives but also highlighted women’s unique experiences. From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, the study of gender and immigration focused on immigrant women’s vulnerabilities in the global economy and enhancing women’s status at home through employment in the host society. Since the 1990s, more diverse topics have emerged to involve discussion on globalization.
and transnationalism. These gendering trends in immigration studies have not taken place in an intellectual vacuum. Rather, they have been influenced by developments in gender scholarship within different historical contexts.

Research limitations/implications — To enrich gender-focused and feminism-informed research in immigration studies, scholars will have to build connections across subareas and engage in dialogues with each other. More immigrant groups must also be studied to reflect the extremely diverse make-up of current immigrants in the United States. Intersectional analyses are also needed to avoid homogenizing studied groups. Finally, mainstream immigration research must begin to perceive gender as an essential analytical framework.

Keywords: Gender; international migration; immigration studies; gender scholarship

While contemporary immigration scholars have broadly recognized the importance of gender in research, the study of immigration with a gender lens has a rather short history. For most of the 20th century, sociologists considered the experiences of immigrant men as generalizable to those of women and viewed women as irrelevant to understanding international migration. Therefore, empirical studies focused exclusively on male immigrants. Researchers first questioned this gender-blind viewpoint in the late 1970s when feminist perspectives began to affect social sciences. Since then, immigration studies have gone through several phases of a gender transformation. This chapter reviews the gendering trends in immigration studies in the United States over the past four decades and discusses different ways in which gender scholarship has shaped the research of international immigration.

**GENDER SCHOLARSHIP IN IMMIGRATION RESEARCH**

According to Hondagneu-Sotelo (2003), the development of gender scholarship in immigration research can be divided into three phases: (1) 1970s
to early 1980s: Women and Immigration Phase; (2) mid-1980s to early 1990s: Gender and Immigration Phase; and (3) mid-1990s to the present: Gender as a Constitutive Element of Immigration. Below, I discuss the gender transformation of immigration scholarship within these different historical contexts.

1970s to Early 1980s: Women and Immigration Phase

Sociological research on international migration studied only men for most of the 20th century. Prior to the 1980s, scholars prevalently assumed that immigrant women simply followed their husbands who were migration pioneers pursuing economic opportunities abroad and that women were considered insignificant and irrelevant to understanding immigration. Thus, women were largely invisible in the field of international migration for almost a century (Brettell & Simon, 1986).

The invisibility of women was first questioned in the 1970s as feminist perspectives emerged in various humanities and social science disciplines. The intellectual influences of feminism grew rapidly across social sciences during the 1970s and 1980s. Rooted in the civil rights and women’s movements of the 1960s and 1970s, women’s studies became a formal scholarly field and grew rapidly in the late 1970s. At the time, scholars in women’s studies asked a simple question: “Where are the women?” They called for attention to be placed on the importance of women’s experiences and voices in both social sciences and public policy. The development and growth of women’s studies during this period inspired scholars in other disciplines such as history, sociology, anthropology, ethnic studies, and political science. Many began to see the invisibility of women in their own fields and turned to new research directions that placed women’s experiences at the center of investigation, thus helping to fill the gender gap in the literature.

This “women-only approach” was influenced by sex role theory, a paradigm that maintained dominance in gender scholarship during the 1970s and 1980s. According to the theory, men and women play different but complementary roles in society. They engage in different activities based on their gender roles; therefore, they experience the social world differently. Likewise, several scholars argued that women experience immigration and adaptation in unique ways that significantly differ from men. Thus, treating men’s experiences as generalizable to women’s is problematic (Brettell & Simon, 1986). Rather, immigrant women should be studied as subjects in themselves.
Influenced by this intellectual development, some migration scholars asked, “Where are the women in immigration literature?” and they focused their studies on immigrant women’s experiences. In 1984, a special issue of *International Migration Review*, the leading journal of immigration studies, featured the theme, “Women in Migration.” In the introductory essay, “Birds of Passage are also Women,” Morokvasik (1984) discussed the state of knowledge concerning women in immigration. She criticized the persistent male bias in migration literature and policies and underlined the significance of women’s active participation in immigration flows. She also provided evidence that immigrant women are not simply followers of their husbands, as previous scholars considered, rather, women migrate for a variety of reasons, including pursuing their own economic opportunities. This special issue brought together 18 studies of immigrant women to highlight the variations and complexities of their experiences in international migration across the globe. Together, these studies challenged past stereotypes that treated immigrant women as passive family dependents.

Around the same time, several edited books focusing on immigrant women were published, including Phizacklea’s (1983) *One-Way Ticket: Migration and Female Labour*, Simon and Brettell’s (1986) *International Migration: The Female Experience*, and Gabaccia’s (1992) *Seeking Common Ground: Multidisciplinary Studies of Immigrant Women in the United States*. These books not only placed immigrant women under scholarly spotlights, but their inclusion in studies from different disciplines also promoted an interdisciplinary dialogue. Since then, studies of immigrant women have flourished in anthropology, sociology, history, demography, ethnic studies, and women’s studies.

Studies of immigrant women have enriched scholarly understanding of international migration as a gendered experience that affects the lives of women and men differently. This understanding has continued to inspire contemporary immigration research and studies of immigrant women have not stopped. Today, immigrants are no longer assumed male, and researchers have abandoned the previous gender-blind perspective. The “Women and Immigration Phase” marks a revolutionary breakthrough in the immigration literature, and it exemplifies how gender scholarship significantly shaped research development in this historically male-biased field.

Regardless of such a breakthrough, it is not enough simply to study immigrant women’s experiences. Although studies of immigrant women filled the gender gap in the previous literature, several scholars have criticized this “add and stir” approach as treating gender as a variable, neglecting the fluidity of gender, and overlooking how gender integrates the
migration process and its outcomes (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Cranford, 1999). Moreover, the “women-only” approach fails to address the issues of power relations and social processes (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003).

**1980s to early 1990s: Gender and Immigration Phase**

In the mid-1980s, scholars began paying attention to the gendering of immigration patterns and examining various ways in which international migration reconfigures systems of gender inequality. During this time, immigrant women were no longer considered a universal category; rather, the intersectionality of gender, race, and class became central to empirical analyses. Fruitful studies were produced during this new development in scholarship.

Two interconnected themes characterize most studies conducted during this period: the gendering of immigration and women’s gains and losses through immigration. Scholars examined closely how gendered labor markets and social networks contribute to varying immigration patterns, settlement processes, and adaptation experiences of men and women. They also discussed how employment re-shapes gender relations in the family. These research developments were influenced by two external factors: (1) the larger economic context that shapes gendered flows of immigration, and (2) the concern over power and inequality in gender scholarship.

In the larger economic context, the rapid growth of labor-intensive industries in the United States since the late 1960s brought a significant number of female immigrant workers to health care, microelectronic, and garment and apparel-manufacturing industries (Clement & Myles, 1994; Espiritu, 1999). Meanwhile, the increasing number of employed American women also created a need to hire domestic workers (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002). Women from non-Western countries became desirable because American employers believed they were willing to work for less, did not mind dead-end jobs, and were psychologically suited for routine work (Espiritu, 1999; Hossfeld, 1994; Tyner, 2003). As a result, a noticeable group of immigrant women laborers entered the American workforce such as Dominican women in New York’s garment industry, Korean women in Hawaii’s service industry, and Third World immigrant women in Silicon Valley’s semiconductor manufacturing industry (Chai, 1987; Pessar, 1984; Ui, 1991). Immigrant women also constituted the majority of domestics and maids in the global economy (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002; Parreñas, 2000). In fact, women have outnumbered men among legal immigrants to the United States since the 1980s (Donato, 1992).
The rapid growth and high visibility of immigrant women laborers in unskilled and semiskilled industries offered timely opportunities for research. Many sociologists conducted studies concerning gender, labor, and immigration in global contexts. The 1980s was also a period during which gender scholarship shifted from its previous focus on individual factors of gender differences to relational and structural factors of gender inequalities. Researchers perceived gender as a form of social relations, influenced by structural forces such as economic and political factors. This new conceptualization of gender resulted in many studies concerning how gender relations in immigrant families were affected by immigration, especially by the wives' greater economic power after immigration.

Scholars who adopted a gender lens also offered different explanations of women's economic migration than previous (male) perspectives, which considered international migration as simply rational actions in pursuing economic gains. These researchers underlined the conflict and tension within households when deciding on immigration, a consideration process greatly shaped by the gendered power relations in immigrant households (Nawyn, 2010).

Anthropologist Pessar was one of the first scholars to highlight the connections among gender, workplace, and household in immigration research. Her study of Dominican women in New York's garment industry showed that women's employment led to their greater decision-making power over family budgets and bargaining gains in their husbands' share of domestic labor (Pessar, 1984). Working outside of the home also exposed these women to western ideologies of gender, thereby shaping their more egalitarian values. Nevertheless, these women's greater awareness of inequality did not go beyond the family domain, as they remained in marginal positions in the workplace and in the larger community (Grasmuck & Pessar, 1991).

Sociologist Kibria's (1993) study of Vietnamese immigrants also exemplified how gender scholars addressed the interplay of economic power and gender inequality. Kibria found that Vietnamese immigrant women obtained employment in the United States more easily than their male counterparts; their greater financial contributions to the family enhanced their status at home. Many had greater control over family budgets and were able to negotiate a greater share of domestic labor by their husbands. Moreover, these women used their social networks with other Vietnamese women to help challenge patriarchal traditions at home, such as seeking employment regardless of their husbands' opposition, and they used community pressure to reduce wife-beating (Kibria, 1990, 1993).

Hondagneu-Sotelo's (1992, 1994) influential study of Mexican immigrants added a temporal factor to the study of gender and immigration in that the
social process of gender relations changed over time. She observed that Mexican women’s long separation from their husbands during the process of family stage migration gave them more autonomy and influence in the family. Women not only took charge of daily household responsibilities, they also used their social networks with other women to subvert their husbands’ opposition to family migration. In doing so, Mexican women eventually carried out their plans for immigration and were able to affirm their power in spousal relations after reuniting their families in the United States. While these women held a great deal of decision-making power in the family, they continued to shoulder most domestic labor because most Mexican immigrant men refused to do what they regarded as women’s work.

Examining how immigrant women’s labor force participation affects their gender relations at home reflects the intellectual tradition of resource theory, although this connection has not been stated in the literature explicitly. According to the resource theory, women’s economic and social resources are key factors that affect their status in the family; more socioeconomic resources lead to higher status at home (Blood & Wolf, 1960). This thesis has been the focus in numerous studies on immigrant women since the 1980s. In addition to the studies by Pessar (1984), Grasmuck and Pessar (1991), and Kibria (1993), Baker’s (2004) study of Mexican immigrant women, Lim’s (1997) study of Korean immigrant women, and Espiritu’s (2002) study of Filipino health-care professionals all discuss how immigrant women’s employment affects their spousal relations.

Following the thesis of resource theory to study immigrants, however, shows a different epistemology from studies concerning nonimmigrant women. The core research question is not simply “To what extent does women’s employment enhance their status at home?” as studies of nonimmigrant women have asked. Rather, scholars who study immigrant women often ask “To what extent does immigration emancipate women from patriarchal societies through their employment in the host society?” This question is central to many feminist studies of immigration in which scholars have shown deep concern and empathy for immigrant women constrained by patriarchal norms of their family traditions.

Nevertheless, this sense of concern and empathy also shows bias in mainstream U.S. feminist scholarship toward immigrant women. American feminists tend to perceive immigrant women as misfortunates who are trapped in their traditional social norms, which deviate from Western values. From such an ethnocentric perspective, immigrant women can be liberated by working in the United States and by learning the Western ideology of egalitarianism. For instance, Pessar (1984) argued that Dominican women’s
exposure to Western gender ideologies in the U.S. labor force increased their gender awareness and led them to challenge patriarchal norms at home. She also expressed disappointment when women did not battle labor exploitation in the workplace. While concerned about the well-being of these immigrant women, Pessar did not seem to understand the potential risks involved in challenging inequality in the workplace for these immigrant women laborers—it could potentially jeopardize their families’ survival if they lost their jobs because they spoke up for themselves. The daily struggles immigrants face are often more complex than what is addressed in scholarly discussions. Similar to Pessar’s study, feminist studies of immigrant women often convey Western-value-informed perspectives explicitly or inexplicitly.

Do immigrant women perceive their employment in the host society and their ethnic cultures the same way as American feminists do? Maybe not. For example, Baker (2004) found that Mexican immigrant women laborers did not want to work in the paid labor force. However, most of these women worked outside of the home in the meatpacking industry in rural Iowa for their families’ survival. These women believed that a wife should stay home and raise her family, and that male domination was part of Mexican culture. However, they chose to work so their children could have better material goods, education, and futures. From these women’s perspectives, employment was a means to improve the quality of their family lives, but they consciously preserved the traditional values and beliefs central to their lives as Mexicans.

In fact, many studies have reported that, regardless of immigrant women’s enhanced status due to their employment, many choose to preserve traditional social norms at home. For instance, Vietnamese immigrant women believe that their patriarchal family system provides them with economic protection and grants them parental authority over the next generation (Kibria, 1993). For many immigrant women, maintaining a stable family is particularly important for resisting racism in U.S. society, as well as for providing a foundation to meet individual needs (e.g., feelings of security and belongingness in a foreign country), even though it often requires women’s submission to patriarchal gender norms (Baker, 2004; Gu, 2006; Kim & Hurh, 1988; Lim, 1997).

Immigrant women’s reserved attitudes about challenging patriarchal relations have been observed across immigrant groups in the past decades. Foner (1986) pointed out that gender inequalities in Jamaican immigrant families are far less severe and threatening than the racial and class inequalities that Jamaicans face in U.S. society. Jamaican immigrant women feel a
strong need to unify with their male counterparts as they strive to sustain stable families, which serves as the foundation to fight injustice and inequalities in the host society. Similarly, in a recent study, Smith and Mannon (2010) argued that Latina immigrants in northern Utah experienced brutal racial discrimination and harsh poverty-filled lives. Thus, survival hardship exceeds gender inequality at home in affecting women’s concerns in their daily lives.

Furthermore, immigrant men’s downward mobility in the receiving society also affects spousal relations in immigrant families. Min (2001) observed that Korean immigrant men’s reduced economic role in the family and their low status in the host society created feelings of anxiety and insecurity. Men’s frustrations often led to domestic violence and marital conflicts (Min, 2001). To compensate for their lost power in the receiving society, many immigrant men developed stronger desires to sustain their dominance within the family and in their ethnic communities. As a result, immigrant families are often characterized by patriarchal relations (Gold, 1995; Lim, 1997; Min, 1998, 2001; Park, 1997; Pessar, 2007). Men also often dominate powerful positions in the immigrant community, such as in immigrant/ethnic churches (George, 2005).

Scholars have found that gender division of domestic labor is a prevalent indicator of power relations between the husband and wife in immigrant families. This division is also used to discuss differences between immigrant laborers and professionals. For instance, several researchers reported that middle-class immigrant men undertake more housework compared to their lower-class counterparts (Chen, 1992; Espiritu, 2002; Min, 1998; Pesquera, 1993). Men in middle-class immigrant families also hold more egalitarian ideologies and shoulder more childcare responsibilities. Nevertheless, women in both social classes still do more housework than their spouses (Chen, 1992; Min, 1998).

Spousal relations in immigrant entrepreneurs’ families are somewhat different. In immigrant-owned businesses, women are often unpaid laborers and work long hours alongside their husbands. Women’s unpaid and coethnics’ underpaid labor are key factors that enable immigrant entrepreneurs to profit and compete with native-owned businesses (Phizacklea, 1983). In these businesses, the distinction between work and family is blurred, and women tend to perceive their unpaid labor as an extension of their domestic responsibilities. As a result, men often dominate business decisions and register as the legal owners, although women usually perform most store operations, such as Korean immigrant businesses in New York City (Min, 1998).
When immigrant couples work side-by-side in family-owned businesses, husbands often maintain patriarchal authority. Family-owned businesses also create an isolated environment for women. Working long hours with their husbands not only creates marital conflicts, but also increases women’s economic and social dependence on their husbands. Therefore, gender relations among self-employed immigrant families remain the most patriarchal among immigrants of all occupations (Kim & Hurh, 1988; Min, 1992).

In sum, the Gender and Immigration Phase has been the highlight of gender scholarship in immigration studies. The research has produced fruitful discussions and numerous studies concerning two interconnected themes: (1) immigrant women’s vulnerability and exploitation in the global economy and (2) gender inequality in immigrant families. Many contemporary studies continue to inquire into or expand on the themes central to this phase.

As discussed in this section, immigration scholarship during this phase was influenced by both the larger economic context and the intellectual development in gender studies. Nevertheless, the same contexts also led to a disproportionate focus on laborers, most of whom migrated from non-Western societies, such as Latin America and Southeast Asia, where patriarchal systems and traditional gender norms are prevalent. Other immigrant groups remained understudied, such as professionals, entrepreneurs, and immigrants from other Western societies that represent individualist and egalitarian gender ideologies. This unbalanced scholarly attention could unintentionally shape the stereotypes that immigrants are poor and that immigrant families are patriarchal. Such research also fails to show the diversity among immigrants. This gap in immigration studies has continued, although more studies of immigrant professionals and entrepreneurs have been conducted since the mid-1990s.

**Mid-1990s to Present: Gender as a Constitutive Element of Immigration**

Since the mid-1990s, gender scholarship in immigration research has entered a new era. Gender is now considered a dynamic and constitutive element of immigration integration that infuses a range of institutions, social practices, and identities (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003). New directions in research, such as sexuality, political participation, care work, and globalization, have flourished and enriched gender scholarship in immigration studies.

Gender inequality in immigrant families continues to be a major theme in contemporary studies; however, scholars no longer use the single
indicator of gender division of domestic labor to measure spousal relations as seen in previous research. For instance, I examined multiple factors that shape power relations between immigrant couples, including decision-making power on family relocation, family finances, children's education, and gender division of housework. I argued that who is more powerful in the family depends on the issue. For example, Taiwanese immigrant husbands dominate decisions on family relocation and finances. However, wives are often entrusted with decisions concerning children's education, and they take charge of their families' investment decisions even though they are not the primary breadwinners. I also found that spousal relations are influenced by couples' social positions, such as social class and ethnicity of origin. Taiwanese immigrants of different social locations present different forms of gender relations (Gu, 2006). Therefore, gender inequality is more complex than gender division of domestic labor.

Over the past decade, scholars have paid much attention to the intersectional factors that shape immigrants' varied life experiences and social positions. In a recent book, Immigration and Women: Understanding the American Experience, Pearce, Clifford, and Tandon (2011) portrayed stories of 90 women who migrated from all over the world and who work in different occupations in the United States. Grounding their study in the intersectional theoretical framework, Pearce and her colleagues argue that nativity (i.e., immigrant or foreign-born status) should be considered a significant social location that intersects with gender in shaping women’s and men’s life experiences. With the objective of accentuating human agency, the authors documented how immigrant women independently take actions in various social contexts within the constraints of society in the process of international migration. This book shows several intellectual connections with the tradition and trends in gender scholarship. First, the intersectionality approach is the most prominent theme in current gender scholarship, which highlights the complexity and multifaceted factors of individual experiences. Second, subjects’ agency has been a major concern of numerous gender scholars. Telling women’s stories from their own standpoints is certainly a principal approach in gender and women’s studies. The many stories of immigrant professional and entrepreneur women in the book also challenge the stereotypes of immigrant women as poor, undocumented laborers from Latin America or Southeast Asia.

Regardless of the many successful stories in Pearce et al.'s (2011) book, racism facing immigrant professional and entrepreneur women warrants further research. Similar to previous studies of immigrant women laborers, Pearce et al. documented how racial inequality constrains immigrant
women’s achievements (e.g., glass ceilings) or business establishment (e.g., getting loans from banks). Indeed, racism not only affects lower-class immigrants but also immigrant professionals and entrepreneurs. For example, salaried professional immigrants are often underemployed, and they earn less than their White counterparts who are of similar educational levels (Espiritu, 1999). They are also more likely to encounter glass ceilings and remain marginalized in the workplace (Ong & Hee, 1994; Yamanaka & McClelland, 1994). Immigrant professional women are in a more vulnerable position than their male counterparts because of their non-White and non-male status. Further, many experience hostility and harassment at work (Cho, 1997).

My study (Gu, 2015a) of Taiwanese immigrant women revealed rather striking phenomena. Although encountering racial discrimination in the workplace, just like their male counterparts, Taiwanese immigrant professional women confronted their white superiors when mistreated. Many asked for the promotions they believed they deserved, asserted their authority when dismissed by their white supervisees, and sought help from the union to fight for equal treatment at work. In contrast, Taiwanese immigrant professional men tended to normalize racial inequality and accept their marginalized position in the white-collar workplace. Many men tolerated mistreatment and silenced themselves because they considered racial discrimination a part of U.S. reality. These gendered responses exemplify and suggest the importance of intersectional analysis in research and show the heterogeneity and complexity of immigrant experiences.

To some extent, racism has also pushed immigrants to entrepreneurship. Owning a small business not only avoids some obstacles caused by racial inequality and immigrant status when seeking employment in the white-dominant world, but it also gives immigrants and ethnic minorities valuable economic opportunities to pursue upward mobility through entrepreneurship. Historically, several immigrant groups have been known for their large portion of self-employed entrepreneurs, such as Chinese and Jews in the early 20th century and Cubans and Koreans in recent times. Immigrant-owned businesses can be found in most metropolitan areas, including Chinatown in New York City and San Francisco, Little Italy in Boston, Little India in Chicago, and Koreatown in Los Angeles.

Kang’s (2010) study of Korean-immigrant-owned nail salons in New York City provides a fresh picture of immigrant women entrepreneurs. In contrast to most previous studies that reported immigrant women working as unpaid labor in family-owned businesses, Korean immigrant women in nail salons use their business ownership to achieve upward mobility for
themselves and their families. Nail salons, a female-dominated industry, also give immigrant women a space to work separately from their husbands and to acquire independence and autonomy. Through entrepreneurship, Korean immigrant women gain more gender equality at home. Nevertheless, many struggle to balance their work and family responsibilities, and some feel guilty about not fulfilling their roles as mothers and wives.

Purkayastha’s (2005) work reminds immigrant scholars that many highly skilled immigrant women are constrained by a cumulative disadvantage when migrating as dependents. In her study, many Asian Indian women encountered various obstacles to rebuilding their careers and entering the labor force in the United States. Not only is employment for immigrant dependents restricted by their visa status, but also their education and professional credentials are not always recognized or valued by the host society. Even after immigrant women enter the U.S. labor force, they often face glass ceilings and struggle to balance work and family life. Other studies have found similar barriers that cause a great number of professional immigrant women to become full-time homemakers in host societies around the globe (see Diggs, 1998; Ho, 2008; Kurotani, 2005; Liversage, 2009; Man, 2004; Meares, 2010; Yasuike, 2011). In other words, international migration binds highly skilled women closer to the domestic sphere, and creates a clear breadwinner and homemaker division of labor in many middle-class immigrant families.

My study (Gu, 2015b) of middle-class Taiwanese immigrant housewives reveals the numerous struggles that highly skilled women experience in their adaptation processes. Many married women gave up high-paying, high-status jobs in Taiwan to unite their families in the United States when their U.S.-trained husbands found professional jobs. These women retreated from prominent careers and became housewives in predominantly white suburban areas. Restricted by their dependent visas to seek employment and lacking fulfillment in homemaking, many women endured unbearable feelings of loss, loneliness, and boredom in their early years of settlement. Some became depressed and a few were suicidal. The women began searching for new meaning in paid and unpaid work and in their self-worth in the new land. Some later entered the U.S. labor force in practical areas, such as accounting and computer programming. However, they no longer associated having a job with having a career as they had in their home country. Others remained homemakers for the rest of their lives and found satisfaction in their children’s achievements. Many regarded themselves as “nobodies” because they accomplished nothing professionally in the host society. In other words, international migration creates gendered
work—family contexts that reshape women’s senses of self, a topic that has rarely been discussed in the literature.

A few studies of Asian immigrant refugees and immigrant poor have challenged the public stereotype that perceives Asians as “the model minority” who are socioeconomically successful. Fujiwara (2008) reported that many Asian immigrants and refugees experience hunger and poverty, especially after the welfare reform and food stamp cuts in the 1990s. A great number of poor Asian immigrant mothers lost their public benefits and struggled tremendously to secure the well-being of their children. Several even took their own lives because of their unbearable hardships (Fujiwara, 2005, 2008). In her study of Cambodian refugees, Ong (2003) stressed the importance of the welfare policies to enhance immigrant women refugees’ lives. Because American welfare benefits are given directly to women, female refugees’ economic gains help improve their bargaining power over male domination within the family (Ong, 2003). Similar to previous research in the Gender and Immigration Phase, these studies of immigrant poor reflect the thesis of resource theory and show great empathy and concern for women’s vulnerability under the constraints of social structure.

The topic of sexuality recently emerged in immigration research, influenced by contemporary debates in queer theory, gay identities, and cultural studies. For instance, Luibheid (2002) argued that U.S. immigration laws deny entrance to queer and LBGT immigrants through same-sex marriage with American citizens, which reveals the dominant ideology of heteronormativity in immigration control. Manalansan’s (2003) ethnographic study demonstrated how Filipino immigrant gay men in New York City navigated their paths to citizenship and negotiated their identities that were shaped by their gender, race, and sexuality. However, not all studies of sexuality are about gay men. Gonzalez-Lopez (2005) examined the sex lives of heterosexual Mexican immigrant women in Los Angeles, and the ways in which their sex lives were relevant to their immigration experiences.

Since the discussion of globalization emerged in sociology over a decade ago, the study of gender and immigration began to broaden its U.S.-focused scope. In particular, the newly developed concept of transnationalism prompted gender-immigration scholars to examine the sociocultural connections between host and sending societies in women’s gender-role practices. For instance, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997) coined the term transnational motherhood to describe how Latina immigrant domestic workers in the United States perceived their roles as mothers and to explain how they took care of their children who remained in their countries of origin. Separated from their children, these Latina women considered their
employment in the United States as the best means to fulfill their traditional responsibilities as mothers. By playing the role of primary breadwinners for their families, these women were able to provide their children with material goods and better futures. Moreover, the women strongly believed that they practiced high-quality mothering by maintaining emotional connections with their children through phone calls and letters. Some claimed to be better mothers than their employers whom they had closely observed.

Sáiz López (2012) applied the concept of transnational motherhood to study Chinese business families in Spain. In her research, Chinese immigrant business owners in Spain sent their infants and young children back to China so they could devote themselves fully to starting their family businesses in a foreign country. Because of the geographic distance, Chinese mothers practiced symbolic motherhood by making their presence in their children’s lives known through Skype and phone calls. Their reproduction roles as mothers were carried out by their production roles in pursuit of family prosperity.

Along this line of research, scholars have explored the rapid growth of domestic workers in the global economy. For example, Anderson (2000) discussed the inequality of migrant domestic workers throughout the world. She argued that white middle-class women in the North outsourced their domestic responsibilities to other women — mostly immigrant women of color from the South. In so doing, they increased their presence in the public sphere and simultaneously placed immigrant women domestics in vulnerable positions to endure domestic oppression shaped by race and class. Similarly, Parreñas (2001, 2005) examined the lives of Filipina domestic workers and their children in the United States and the Philippines. Lan (2006) studied Southeast immigrant workers in Taiwan, and Hochschild and Ehrenreich’s (2003) edited book, Global Woman, included essays concerning immigrant women nannies, maids, and sex workers around the world. The study of gender and immigration has largely expanded its scope and complexity in the globalization era. Scholars now treat femininities and masculinities as multiple, relational, and interconnected with various inequalities of race, class, sexuality, and nationality as a result of the global economy.

The range of topics in contemporary research on immigration and gender has significantly broadened the scope of scholarly inquiry. Gender is no longer considered a fixed variable. Many contemporary immigration scholars consciously use feminist methods and provide reflexive thoughts about the power relations between researchers and their subjects. Further, they conduct multilevel analyses on gender, explore intersectional factors, and highlight the fluidity of gender identity.
Moreover, immigrant women are no longer studied only within the domestic sphere. Current trends of gender studies in immigration research include diverse topics, ranging from female migration labor and globalization to sexuality and identity issues. However, this broad scope of research also has led to a more segmented scholarly dialogue than seen in previous phases. For instance, the stream of research on care work is discussed more so in the sociology of work and gender than it is in the study of immigration. The study of immigrants’ sexuality and gay identity has attracted more attention from women and gender studies than from mainstream immigration research. However, the lack of scholarly attention and dialogue may not be an intentional neglect. For instance, research on care work draws largely from theories in labor studies but not from the immigration literature. Studies of immigrant sexuality often follow discussions on cultural studies and gay identity research. For many gender-immigration scholars who are not familiar with the sociology of work and sexuality studies, it may not always be an easy task to make connections across topics.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The gendering of immigration studies did not occur in an intellectual vacuum. Rather, how gender is perceived and studied in the immigration literature reflects intellectual influences from gender scholarship in various historical contexts. Before the 1970s, immigration research was all about men. Women were considered passive followers of their husbands and, thus, irrelevant to understanding international migration. The “Where are the women?” question initially asked during the Women’s Movement inspired many scholars to question previously gender-blind perspectives in immigration research. Studies of immigrant women flourished in the 1980s and highlighted the uniqueness of immigrant women’s experiences. Studies of gender differences reflected the major tenet of the sex role theory: Men and women are fundamentally different. During this time, the gender gap in the immigration literature was filled to some extent, and gendered experiences of immigration were recognized.

From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, scholars were no longer satisfied by the simple “add and stir” approach to studying women and immigration, and they began to question the dichotomous perception of gender in previous studies. Many began to examine how the global economy creates gendered flows of immigration and how international migration changes
gender inequality in the home. Immigrant women laborers’ economic exploitations and their bargaining power in the family were main concerns of scholarship during this period. Gender scholarship in immigration studies showed traditional feminist concerns about women’s vulnerabilities and disadvantages because of the constraints placed by the larger social structure. Nevertheless, American feminists often convey ethnocentric perspectives, suggesting that immigrant women can only accomplish equality by practicing Western ideologies. Examining how women’s employment enhances their status at home also reflects the main thesis of resource theory. Gender was no longer treated as a fixed variable; rather, it was studied as structural and relational factors that intersect with immigration.

Since the 1990s, gender in migration research has entered a new era. A wide scope of topics has emerged in contemporary literature that has fueled vibrant energy into the gender and immigration scholarship. Gender is now studied at multiple levels of analysis and conceptualized in various ways, ranging from structural examination of immigration patterns to microlevel research on identity and sexuality. Studies of immigrant women and gender inequality in immigrant families have also continued; however, research has expanded to explore more diverse groups than that in previous phases. Scholars have broadened their geographical scope to study non-U.S. societies and transnational connections.

Intersectionality stands out as an important theoretical and methodological approach in studying gender and immigration. Many influential scholars have highlighted the varied intersectional factors in shaping the dynamic relationships between gender and immigration. Immigrant women’s agency and empowerment are also major concerns in contemporary studies of gender and immigration. These developments reflect the intellectual traditions, core notions, and major concerns in gender scholarship.

Unquestionably, the study of gender has produced fruitful results in immigration research. However, several obstacles remain that prevent further development of gender scholarship in immigration studies. First, laborers and Mexican immigrants (both documented and undocumented) continue to dominate scholarly discussions, leaving other groups underresearched. Second, many studies continue to treat the researched groups as homogenous. Thus, more intersectional investigations are needed to underscore heterogeneities of immigrant groups and to portray the complexity of immigrant lives. Finally, gender-centered work is rarely seen in major journals of immigration studies. Compared to the immense growth of immigration studies over the past three decades, gender remains “ghettoized in immigration scholarship” regardless of its greater scholarly
attention in recent years (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013, p. 180). As a result, mainstream immigration research continues to overlook gender as an essential analytical framework.

International migration is fundamentally a gender issue (Curran, Shafer, Donato, & Garip, 2006; Espiritu, 2002; Gu, 2012; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003, 2013; Pedraza, 1991; Pessar, 2003). Over the past four decades, we have seen a remarkable increase of gender studies in immigration research. The gendering trends of immigration studies have been influenced closely by intellectual developments in gender scholarship. Gender scholarship will certainly continue to guide immigration studies. While the current state of immigration scholarship has not fully embraced gender as a central theoretical and analytical framework, more gender-focused and feminism-informed research is greatly needed to rejuvenate the abundant discussions in previous phases of gender and immigration scholarship.

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