Gender and U.S. Immigration

Contemporary Trends

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and social ro-es-actions that at once reinforce their improved status in the house-
hold and ultimately advance their families' integration in the United States. She
tde-ties three arenas in which this consolidation takes place: the labor market in
which women are more permanent, nonseasonal employment; institutions for public
and private assistance; and the immigrant/ethnic community. Hondagneu-Sotelo
and others have shown that women are particularly adept at locating and using
financial aid-doi, such as social services available in the new society (Chavira, 1988;Khibria-
1993) and mainstream, social-networking skills for community building (O'Connor,
1990).

As researchers continue to explore community building and community activism
among new Immigrants, they would be wise to take a leaf from immigration histor-
ians who have noted that women's sense of community often differs substi-
tially from that of men, who tend to gravitate to formal institutions such as politi-
cal parties and labor unions (Hyman, 1980; Weinberg, 1992). Moreover, it should
be borne in mind that women are positioned differently than men with regard to
both the broader economy and the state. As women, they are socially assigned re-
 sponsibilities by the daily and generational sustenance of household members even
when, as she case for many immigrants, family wages are wholly insufficient. Res-
earch by Sandhya Shukla (1997) helps us to determine whether and how immigrant women
man-
age to overcome very real concerns over legal vulnerability to confront the state
over family and community welfare issues (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1995; Sacks, 1989;
Susser, 1982; Torreallas, Benmayor, & Juarez, 1997; Zavella, 1987).

Recent work on migrants' transnational identities, practices, and institutions
-let us say that prerranent settlement or permanent return are merely two of the pos-
ible outcomes; lives constructed across national boundaries is another. As several
scholars have noted, gender remains marginalized within transnational migration theo-
Based on the few studies that do consider gender, we are left with the impression
that men are the major players in transnational social fields (Graham, 1997; Ong,
1993). Sarah Mahler (n.d.) astutely questions the implicit message that women are
more passive and argues that when the research focus is shifted from public do-
 mains, such as international investment and hometown associations, to more pri-
 vate ones, such as the management of transnational migrant households, a differ-
ent representational emerge (see also Ho, 1993; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997;
Soto, 1987). On this score, Sandhya Shukla (1997) observes that South Asian women
have, or amized across the diaspora and subcontinent around the problem of do-
 mestic Violence. She notes that through these transnational activities, the "South
Asian woman" is being constituted as a political subject. As such, some of these
women have come to contest the more mainstream, patriarchal narratives of eth-
ic identity and solidarity that are emerging in diverse diaspora communities. These
mainstream narratives, she claims, are vigorously and romantically nationalist.
A more passive role is assigned to the "women's role" as a metaphor for distinctly cultural values in the face of Western change" (p. 277). Shukla's work alert us to an important dialectic that has received insufficient scholarly attention: the mutually constituting projects of racial and ethnic "othering" of immigrants and ethnicities that are carried out by members of host countries and the creation of nationalistic, often fundamentalist, counternarratives produced by these othered subjects. What are the roles of men and women in either supporting or challenging these projects? And in what ways are the symbols of nation, diaspora, and belonging imbued with notions of gender and sexuality? Surely, much more research is needed to determine how transnational migration identi-
ties, practices, and experiences are gendered and whether patriarchal ideologies and roles are reaffirmed, tempered, or both within transnational social spaces. We also need to situate gender within the current historical moment-one in which re-
searchers note the contradiction between economic globalization and the renas-
centializing of politics (Harriss, 1995; Sassen, 1996). One extremely unfortunate by-
product of this contradiction is the recent tendency for U.S. policy makers to char-
acterize immigrant women and children as dangerous others whose rapacious
demands on the public coffers thwart the state's ability to fulfill its social contract
with the "authentic" and truly "deserving" members of the nation (Chavez, 1996;
Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1995; Naples, 1997).

A REENCOUNTER WITH FEMINIST STUDIES

In my earliest work on Dominican migration, I was quite adamant about the gains
I believed Dominican immigrant women had made (Pessar, 1986). My enthusiasm
originated from several sources: a flush of early feminist optimism (see Pessar,
1995a), my observations based on fieldwork in both the Dominican Republic and
the United States of changes in gender practices (Grasmuck & Pessar, 1991) and a
desire to communicate my female informants' pleasure at how they viewed as far
more equitable gender relations. Yet, as I have come to both follow the lives of
several of these women over the years and critically engage the comparative liter-
ature on immigration and patriarchy, I have tempered my enthusiasm. I now con-
clude that, in general, immigrant women's gains have been modest. In retrospect,
I believe many of us anticipated a far greater degree of emancipation for immi-
gants because our theoretical guardposts were firmly planted in early fem-
inist theory. To understand why most immigrant women have only nibbled at the
margins of patriarchy, we must abandon the notion that gender hierarchy is the
most determinative structure in their lives. This leaves us with the far more daunt-
ing task of examining how women's and men's lives are affected by multiple and
interrelated forms of oppression linked to gender, class, race, ethnicity, and for-
eign status.

Many U.S. feminists were encouraged by economic trends in the 1970s and
1980s. There was a marked increase in the proportion of dual-wage-earning fam-
ilies, and escalating rates of male unemployment served to underscore the centrality

engendering migration studies
of women's contributions to household budgets. Predictions of profound changes in U.S. gen-er relations a-d family structure- followed. H-for h-le-le-hp-te-c1. th-e-clain that t-e-re-ent-mcn as U-gemal- headed households as by definition deterservent for women and their families. She wrote, "To the ex-
cept, and are expected, to be the breadwinners. Yet they face structural impedi-
tions that block the fulfillment of this role. As Patricia Fernandez-Kelly and Anna
ment that there is a family crisis, it is by and large a healthy one, particularly for women" (p. 49). This was the case, she maintained, because increased economic oppor-
tunities for women had, in her words, allowed women "to choose" to head
their own households rather than to live with men. Along similar lines, Alice
Kessler-Harris and Karen Brodkin Sacks (1987) observed that women's improved
access to wages allowed them either to resist gender and generational subordina-
tion within the family or to "avoid family situations altogether" (p. 70).

A review of the literature on immigrant families unearthed scant evidence of a
radical revamping of gender ideology and lines of authority or of an emancipa-
tory abandonment of conjugal units, despite rates of employment for immigrant
women that rival those of native-born Americans. We learn of Vietnamese immi-
gnant women who defend their own "traditional" family forms against what they
perceive to be individualistic and unregulated American family practices (Kibria,
1993); and of Latina nannies who endorse motherhood as a full-time vocation when
financial resources permit (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997). We encounter a Do-
mician woman who describes her divorce as "one of the saddest days in my life.
Not only did I lose the respect I once had as a married woman, but my children
and I lost the material support [my husband] was able to provide" (Pessar, 1995a,
p. 41). Many researchers report that immigrant women view their employment as
an extension of their obligations as wives and mothers (Pedraza, 1991; Segura, 1994).
With the caveat that they are merely "helping their husbands" — a refrain that im-
migrant women frequently repeat to researchers (Chavira, 1988; Pessar, 1995a)—
they attempt to manage to keep the fires of patriarchy burning by minimizing
hours in the workplace and substantial contributions to the household budget. Why
have these immigrant women been less inclined than their White, North Ameri-
can counterparts to level assaults on patriarchal domestic ideologies and practices?

IMMIGRANT FAMILIES AS BASTIONS OF RESISTANCE

There are multiple external forces that buffet immigrant families. Legislation in-
formed by racist and sexist discourse has in the past and present severely challenged
the survival and well-being of immigrant families (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1995; Mo-
hanty, 1991). Immigrant men are increasingly frustrated and scapegoated; they ex-
pect, and are expected, to be the breadwinners. Yet they face structural imped-
timents that block the fulfillment of this role. As Patricia Fernandez-Kelly and Ana
García (1990) remind us, "For poor men and women the issue is not so much the
presence of the sexual division of labor or the persistence of patriarchal ideolo-
gies but the difficulties of upholding either" (p. 148). Owing to an all too common
tendency to conflate male dominance with patriarchy, many social scientists have
been slow, or reluctant, to appreciate their informants' unwillingness to lose the
benefits derived from some patriarchal marital unions (Nash, 1988). Whether
through choice or necessity, large numbers of immigrant women have also assumed
wage-earning responsibilities. Their pursuit of employment is far more often the
result of severe economic need and an expression of vulnerability than an indica-
tion of their strength within the home and marketplace (Fernandez-Kelly & Gar-
cía, 1990). As noted above, it is often because they are "small, foreign, female" and
non-White that they enjoy the dubious advantage of being the preferred category
of labor for the lowest paid and most insecure segment of the economy. In light of
these multiple assaults, it would be patronizing to interpret immigrant women's
struggles to maintain intact families as acquiescence to traditional patriarchy.

Rather, in many cases, these struggles represent acts of resistance against those
forces within the dominant society that threaten the existence of poor, minority
families (see Collins, 1990; Zinn, Weber Cannon, Higginbotham, & Thornton Dill,
1986). This does not mean, as Evelyn Glenn (1986) reminds us, that immigrant
women do not simultaneously experience the family as an instrument of gender
subordination. Indeed, their attempts to use wages as leverage for greater gender
parity in certain arenas of domestic life attest to this fact. The dilemma confronting
many immigrant women, it would seem, is to defend and hold together the family
while attempting to reform the norms and practices that subординatethe women
(Glenn, 1986, p. 193).

The importance of keeping multiple-wage-earning families intact is underscored
by statistics revealing far higher incidents of poverty among female-headed immi-
grant households than among similar conjugal units (Bean & Tienda, 1988; Pes-
sar, 1995b; Rosenberg & Gilbertson, 1995). Maxine Zinn (1987) provides a more ade-
quate depiction of these female-headed units than that proposed by Hartmann
(1987):

co-conditions associated with female-headedfamiliesamong r-ial-ethniccare differ-
et and should be interpreted differentlyBecausewhilethe family is headed by women
have much higher average incomes than minority families in the same situation, we
must not confuse an overall improvement with what is in fact an improvementfor
women in certain social categories, while other women are left at the bottom in even
worse conditions (p. 16).

In spite of the many social and material disincentives militating against the dis-
banding of unions and the formation of female-headed households, there are,
nonetheless, several immigrant populations, such as Dominicans, with extremely
high rates of female headedness. Research is needed to account for the factors con-
tributing to differing rates of marital instability and female headedness within and
among immigrant populations in the United States (Bean, Berg, & Van Hook,
1996). We also require more in-depth investigations to document the survival strate-
gies of poor immigrant families (Menjivar, 1995). Several researchers have pointed
to the importance of household extension, that is, the incorporation of adults other
Other Dominican women accounted for their departure from the workforce in terms similar to those of Cuban women interviewed by Fernandez-Kelly and Garcia (1990). They had envisioned their employment alongside their husbands as a temporary venture necessary until the family could achieve its goal of social advancement. Once this goal was attained, women's employment apparently contradicted a more enduring and apparently valued notion of the family and the sexes that features the successful man as the sole breadwinner and the successful woman as the guardian of a unified household. These cases reveal that a unilinear and unproblematic progression from patriarchy to parity is by no means assured. They also point out the need for continuing research on class differences not only between immigrant and native-born women but among immigrant women as well.

Relatively few studies address the question of whether migration promotes or hampers a feminist consciousness (Shukla, 1997). Most of these report, not surprisingly, that the majority of the immigrant women studied do not tend to identify as feminists or participate in feminist organizations (Foner, 1986; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1995; Pessar, 1984). Immigrant women, we are told, are more likely to base their dissatisfaction and complaints about life in the United States on injustices linked to class, race, ethnicity, and legal-status discrimination rather than to gender. For example, according to Nancy Foner (1986), her Jamaican female informants experienced racial and class inequalities more acutely than gender-based inequalities, and this sense of injustice gave them a basis for unity with Jamaican men. Moreover, the many domestic workers in their ranks felt no sense of sisterhood with their upper-middle-class White employers, whose “liberation” these immigrant women facilitated by providing inexpensive child care so that their female employers could compete in the male occupational world (Foner, 1986). Nonetheless, Hondagneu-Sotelo’s (1994) point is well taken when she concludes that although none of the Mexican immigrant women she interviewed identified “gender subordination” as a primary problem, rearrangements induced by migration do result in the diminution of familial patriarchy, and these transformations may enable immigrant women to better confront problems derived from class, racial and ethnic, and legal-status subordination. Their endeavors may prompt more receptivity to feminist ideology and organizations in the future. (p. 197)

Clearly, more comparative research is needed on the local and global factors and processes leading both to the development of feminist consciousness and organization and to its suppression.

The materials presented in this section highlight the inadequacy of studying gender removed from other interpenetrating structures of difference, such as race and social class. Another related body of scholarship that merits serious attention consists of works emerging out of cultural studies and ethnic studies. This scholarship addresses how representations of majority White American men and women and those of immigrants and ethnic groups are mutually constituting. This schol-
arship makes the important point that ideological representations of gender and sexuality are central in the exercise and perpetuation of patriarchal, racial, and class domination (Espiritu, 1997). For example, it has been claimed that the representation of Asian men as both hypersexual and asexual and of Asian women as both superfeminine and masculine exists to define, maintain, and legitimate White male virility and supremacy (Espiritu, 1997). Male virility and supremacy (Espiritu, 1997). And the days when gender was treated as merely one of several equally significant variables, such as education and marital status, are mostly behind us. We are now moving toward a more fully engendered understanding of the migration process. This article has noted several key advances and has signaled the way to future developments in theory and research. We are starting to accumulate case studies documenting how men and women experience migration differently, how they create and encounter patriarchal ideologies and institutions across transnational migration circuits, and how patriarchy is reaffirmed, reconfigured, or both as a consequence of migration. The time is ripe to build on and move beyond these rich individual case studies toward a more comparative framework of migration and patriarchy. In doing so, it will be necessary to discard the notion that gender oppression transcends all divisions among men and women. Rather, we must develop theories and analytical frameworks that allow us to capture and compare the simultaneity of the impact of gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, class, and legal status on the lives of immigrants and native-born men and women. Thus, we await the next wave of research that is at once committed to comparative studies among immigrants yet refuses to stop there. We should resist the temptation to ghettoize the gendered study of immigrants within migration studies. We are all far better served by taking the next step to relate our investigations of the representations, identities, and social conditions of immigrant men and women to those prevailing among members of the majority, White and minority "brown" segments of U.S. society as well.

CONCLUSION

Migration scholars have made great advances in moving beyond an earlier male bias in theory and research. And the days when gender was treated as merely one of several equally significant variables, such as education and marital status, are mostly behind us. We are now moving toward a more fully engendered understanding of the migration process. This article has noted several key advances and has signaled the way to future developments in theory and research. We are starting to accumulate case studies documenting how men and women experience migration differently, how they create and encounter patriarchal ideologies and institutions across transnational migration circuits, and how patriarchy is reaffirmed, reconfigured, or both as a consequence of migration. The time is ripe to build on and move beyond these rich individual case studies toward a more comparative framework of migration and patriarchy. In doing so, it will be necessary to discard the notion that gender oppression transcends all divisions among men and women. Rather, we must develop theories and analytical frameworks that allow us to capture and compare the simultaneity of the impact of gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, class, and legal status on the lives of immigrants and native-born men and women. Thus, we await the next wave of research that is at once committed to comparative studies among immigrants yet refuses to stop there. We should resist the temptation to ghettoize the gendered study of immigrants within migration studies. We are all far better served by taking the next step to relate our investigations of the representations, identities, and social conditions of immigrant men and women to those prevailing among members of the majority, White and minority "brown" segments of U.S. society as well.

NOTES

2. Of the ligited scholarship that does exist on the factors contributing to displacement, far more attention has been paid to what is conventionally thought of as labor immigration rather than refugee displacement. In my view, this imbalance needs redressing; recent scholarship that examines rape and genital mutilation as human rights violations generally targeted at women is a step in the right direction (Hoskin, 1981; Saadawi, 1980). Another promising line of scholarship challenges the assumption that women, in particular, are subordinate and "silenced" in refugee camps (Billings, 1995).
3. For research on female-led Salvadoran migration to Washington, D.C., see Cohen (1977) and Repak (1995). Although Kibria (1993) stresses Vietnamese immigrant mothers' use of patriarchal privilege to maintain authority over children who emulate elements of American youth culture, Vicki Ruiz (1992) describes Mexican immigrant mothers who find themselves not pitied between two worlds "but navigating multiple terrains at home, at work, and at play" (p. 15). Following on Ruiz's observations, I suspect that immigrant women may sometimes find themselves as captive to transgressive elements of U.S. popular culture as are their children (though perhaps for differing motives) and may accordingly join forces with their progeny to challenge features of traditional family ideology and patriarchal practices. At other times, women may find that their own attempts to nibble at patriarchal structures make it difficult for them to fully oppose their children's related challenges. For example, Dominican women's desires to anchor their families in the United States by expending income on expensive commodities likely compromises their opposition to their children's use of their own income to participate in commercial youth culture. More work needs to be done to identify and explore the subjectivities, social practices, and social sites around which immigrant mothers (and parents) enforce children's adherence to premigration patterns and those around which new coalitions for change are emerging.
4. I thank June Nash for pointing this out to me.
5. A topic that merits further study is national and global initiatives taken by immigrant and refugee women to engender the universalist conception of human rights (see Afkhami, 1994; Smith, 1994).

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