

Gender and Labor in Asian Immigrant Families

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This article explores the effects of employment patterns on gender relations among contemporary Asian immigrants. The existing data on Asian immigrant salaried professionals, self-employed entrepreneurs, and wage laborers suggest that economic constraints and opportunities have reconfigured gender relations within contemporary Asian America society. The patriarchal authority of Asian immigrant men, particularly those of the working class, has been challenged due to the social and economic losses that they suffered in their transition to the status of men of color in the United States. On the other hand, the recent growth of female-intensive industries—and the racist and sexist “preference” for the labor of immigrant women—has enhanced women’s employability over that of some men. In all three groups, however, Asian women’s ability to transform patriarchal family relations is often constrained by their social positions as racially subordinate women in U.S. society.

Through the process of migration and settlement, patriarchal relations undergo continual negotiation as women and men rebuild their lives in the new country. An important task in the study of immigration has been to examine this reconfiguration of gender relations. Central to the reconfiguration of gender hierarchies is the change in immigrant women’s and men’s relative positions of power and status in the country of settlement. Theoretically, migration may improve women’s social position if it leads to increased participation in wage employment, more control over earnings, and greater participation in family decision making (Pessar, 1984). Alternatively, migration may leave gender asymmetries largely unchanged even though certain dimensions of gender inequalities are modified (Curtis, 1986). The existing literature on migration and changing gender relations suggests contradictory outcomes whereby the position of immigrant women is improved in some domains even as it is eroded in others (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Morokvasic, 1984; Tienda & Booth, 1991).

This article is a first attempt to survey the field of contemporary Asian immigrants and the effects of employment patterns on gender relations. My review indicates that the growth of female-intensive industries in the United

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States—and the corresponding preference for racialized and female labor—has enhanced the employability of some Asian immigrant women over that of their male counterparts and positioned them as coproviders, if not primary providers, for their families. The existing data also suggest that gender relations are experienced differently in different structural occupational locations. In contrast to the largely unskilled immigrant population of the pre–World War II period, today’s Asian immigrants include not only low-wage service sector workers but also significant numbers of white-collar professionals. A large number of immigrants have also turned to self-employment (Ong & Hee, 1994). Given this occupational diversity, I divide the following discussion into three occupational categories and examine gender issues within each group: the salaried professionals, the self-employed entrepreneurs, and the wage laborers.¹ Although changes in gender relations have been slow and uneven in each of these three groups, the existing data indicate that men’s dependence on the economic and social resources of women is most pronounced among the wage laborers. In all three groups, however, Asian women’s ability to transform patriarchal family relations is often constrained by their social position as racially subordinated women in U.S. society.

As a review of existing works, this article reflects the gaps in the field. Overall, most studies of contemporary Asian immigrants have focused more on the issues of economic adaptation than on the effects of employment patterns on gender relations. Because there is still little information on the connections between work and home life—particularly among the salaried professionals—the following discussion on gender relations among contemporary Asian immigrants is at times necessarily exploratory.

IMMIGRATION LAWS, LABOR NEEDS, AND CHANGING GENDER COMPOSITION

Asian Americans’ lives have been fundamentally shaped by the legal exclusions of 1882, 1917, 1924, and 1934, and by the liberalization laws of 1965.² Exclusion laws restricted Asian immigration to the United States, skewed the sex ratio of the early communities so that men were disproportionately represented, and truncated the development of conjugal families. The 1965 Immigration Act equalized immigration rights for all nationalities. No longer constrained by exclusion laws, Asian immigrants began coming in much larger numbers than ever before. In the period from 1971 to 1990, approximately 855,500 Filipinos, 610,800 Koreans, and 576,100 Chinese entered the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992). Moreover, with the collapse of U.S.-backed governments in South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in 1975, more than one million escapees from these countries have resettled in the United States. As a consequence, in the 1980s, Asia was the largest source of U.S. legal immigrants, accounting for 40% to 47% of the total influx (Min, 1995b, p. 12).³

In 1990, 66% of Asians in the United States were foreign born (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993, Figure 3).

Whereas pre-World War II immigration from Asia was composed mostly of men, the contemporary flow is dominated by women. Women comprise the clear majority among U.S. immigrants from nations in Asia but also from those in Central and South America, the Caribbean, and Europe (Donato, 1992). Between 1975 and 1980, women (20 years and older) constituted more than 50% of the immigrants from China, Burma, Indonesia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, the Philippines, Korea, Japan, and Thailand (Donato, 1992). The dual goals of the 1965 Immigration Act—to facilitate family reunification and, secondarily, to admit workers with special job skills—have produced a female-dominated flow. Since 1965, most visas have been allocated to relatives of U.S. residents. Women who came as wives, daughters, or mothers of U.S. permanent residents and citizens comprise the primary component of change (Donato, 1992, p. 164). The dominance of women immigrants also reflects the growth of female-intensive industries in the United States, particularly in the service, health care, microelectronics, and apparel-manufacturing industries (Clement & Myles, 1994, p. 26). Of all women in the United States, Asian immigrant women have recorded the highest rate of labor force participation (Gardner, Robey, & Smith, 1985). In 1980, among married immigrant women between 25 and 64 years of age, 61% of Korean women, 65% of Chinese women, and 83% of Filipino women were in the labor force (Duleep & Sanders, 1993). In 1990, Asian women had a slightly higher labor force participation rate than all women, 60% to 57%, respectively (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993, Figure 6).

ECONOMIC DIVERSITY AMONG CONTEMPORARY ASIAN IMMIGRANTS

Relative to earlier historical periods, the employment pattern of today's Asian Americans is considerably more varied, a result of both immigration and a changing structure of opportunity. During the first half of the 20th century, Asians were concentrated at the bottom of the economic ladder—restricted to retailing, food service, menial service, and agricultural occupations. After World War II, economic opportunities improved but not sufficiently for educated Asian Americans to achieve parity. In the post-1965 era, the economic status of Asian Americans has bifurcated, showing some great improvements but also persistent problems. The 1965 Immigration Act and a restructuring of the economy brought a large number of low-skilled and highly educated Asians to this country, creating a bimodalism (Ong & Hee, 1994). As indicated in Table 1, Asian Americans were overrepresented in the well-paid, educated, white-collar sector of the workforce and in the lower paying service and manufacturing jobs. This bimodalism is most evident among Chinese men: although 24% of Chinese men were professionals in 1990, another 19% were in service jobs.

TABLE 1: Occupational Distribution by Gender and Ethnicity—1990 (in percentages)

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>Japanese</i>	<i>Filipino</i>	<i>Koreans</i>	<i>Vietnamese</i>
Men						
Managerial	13	15	20	10	15	5
Professional	12	24	20	12	16	13
Technical, Sales	15	18	17	15	29	18
Administrative Support	7	8	9	16	6	8
Service	10	19	9	16	10	12
Fish, Forestry	4	< 1	4	2	1	2
Production, craft	19	8	12	12	12	19
Operators	20	9	8	15	12	22
Women						
Managerial	11	15	14	10	9	7
Professional	17	17	19	20	11	9
Technical, Sales	16	17	16	16	25	17
Administrative Support	28	21	28	25	14	18
Service	17	14	14	17	20	19
Fish, Forestry	1	< 1	1	1	< 1	< 1
Production, craft	2	3	3	3	6	10
Operators	8	13	5	7	14	20

SOURCE: Mar and Kim (1994, p. 25, Table 3). Reprinted with permission.

Asian professional immigrants are overrepresented as scientists, engineers, and health care professionals in the United States. In 1990, Asians were 3% of the U.S. total population but accounted for close to 7% of the scientist and engineer workforce. Their greatest presence was among engineers with doctorate degrees, comprising more than one fifth of this group in 1980 and in 1990 (Ong & Blumenberg, 1994, p. 169). Although Asian immigrant men dominated the fields of engineering, mathematics, and computer science, Asian immigrant women were also overrepresented in these traditionally male-dominated professions. In 1990, Asian women accounted for 5% of all female college graduates in the U.S. labor force but 10% to 15% of engineers and architects, computer scientists, and researchers in the hard sciences (Rong & Preissle, 1997, pp. 279-280).

In the field of health care, two thirds of foreign nurses and 60% of foreign doctors admitted to the United States during the fiscal years 1988 to 1990 were from Asia (Kanjanapan, 1995, p. 18). Today, Asian immigrants represent nearly a quarter of the health care providers in public hospitals in major U.S. metropolitan areas (Ong & Azores, 1994a, p. 139). Of the 55,400 Asian American nurses registered in 1990, 90% were foreign born (Rong & Preissle 1997, pp. 279-280). The Philippines is the largest supplier of health professionals to the United States, sending nearly 25,000 nurses to this country between 1966 and 1985 and another 10,000 between 1989 and 1991 (Ong & Azores, 1994a, p. 154). Due to the dominance of nurses, Filipinas are more likely than other women and than Filipino men to be in professional jobs. Table 1 indicates that in 1990, 20% of Filipino women but only 12% of Filipino men had professional occupations.

Responding to limited job opportunities, particularly for the highly educated, a large number of Asian Americans have also turned to self-employment. Asian immigrants are much more likely than their native-born counterparts to be entrepreneurs: In 1990, 85% of the Asian American self-employed population were immigrants (Ong & Hee, 1994, p. 51). Korean immigrants have the highest self-employment rate of any minority and immigrant group (Light & Bonacich, 1986). A 1986 survey showed that 45% of Korean immigrants in Los Angeles and Orange counties were self-employed. A survey conducted in New York City revealed an even higher self-employment rate of more than 50% (Min, 1996, p. 48). Because another 30% of Korean immigrants work in the Korean ethnic market, the vast majority of the Korean workforce—three out of four Korean workers—is segregated in the Korean ethnic economy either as business owners or as employees of coethnic businesses (Min, 1998, p. 17). The problems of underemployment, misemployment, and discrimination in the U.S. labor market have turned many educated and professional Korean immigrants toward self-employment (Min, 1995a, p. 209). Based on a 1988 survey, nearly half of the Korean male entrepreneurs had completed college (Fawcett & Gardner, 1994, p. 220).

Although some Asian immigrants constitute “brain drain” workers and self-employed entrepreneurs, others labor in peripheral and labor-intensive industries. The typical pattern of a dual-worker family is a husband who works as a waiter, cook, janitor, or store helper and a wife who is employed in a garment shop or on an assembly line. In a study conducted by the Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA), 93% of the 166 seamstresses surveyed in the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Area listed their husbands’ jobs as unskilled or semi-skilled, including waiter, bus boy, gardener, day laborer, and the like (Louie, 1992, p. 9). Most disadvantaged male immigrants can get jobs only in ethnic businesses in which wages are low but in which only simple English is required (Chen, 1992, p. 103). On the other hand, since the late 1960s, the United States has generated a significant number of informal sector service occupations—paid domestic work, child care, garment and electronic assembly—that rely primarily on female immigrant workers (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994, pp. 186-187). Due to the perceived vulnerability of their class, gender, ethnicity, and immigration status, Asian immigrant women—and other immigrant women of color—have been heavily recruited to toil in these low-wage industries. As indicated in Table 1, Asian women of all ethnic groups were much more likely than Asian men to be in administrative support and service jobs.

GENDER RELATIONS AMONG SALARIED PROFESSIONALS

Although the large presence of Asian professional workers is now well documented, we still have little information on the connections between work and home life—between the public and private spheres—of this population. The

available case studies suggest greater male involvement in household labor in these families. In a study of Taiwan immigrants in New York, Hsiang-Shui Chen (1992) reports that the degree of husbands' participation in household labor varied considerably along class lines, with men in the professional class doing a greater share than men in the working and small-business classes (p. 77). Although women still performed most of the household labor, men helped with vacuuming, disposing of garbage, laundry, dishwashing, and bathroom cleaning. In a survey of Korean immigrant families in New York, Pyong Gap Min (1998) found a similar pattern: younger, professional husbands undertook more housework than did men in other occupational categories, although their wives still did the lion's share (pp. 42-43). Professional couples of other racial-ethnic groups also seem to enjoy more gender equality. For example, Beatriz M. Pesquera (1993) reports that Chicano "professional men married to professional women did a greater share than most other men" (p. 194). This more equitable household division of labor can be attributed to the lack of a substantial earning gap between professional men and women, the demands of the women's careers, and the women's ability to pressure their husbands into doing their share of the household chores (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Hood, 1983; Kibria, 1993; Pesquera, 1993). On the other hand, Chen (1992), Min (1998), and Pesquera (1993) all conclude that women in professional families still perform more of the household labor than their husbands do. Moreover, Pesquera reports that, for the most part, the only way women have altered the distribution of household labor has been through conflict and confrontation, suggesting that ideologically most men continue to view housework as women's work (p. 185). These three case studies remind us that professional women, like most other working women, have to juggle full-time work outside the home with the responsibilities of child care and housework. This burden is magnified for professional women because most tend to live in largely White, suburban neighborhoods where they have little or no access to the women's social networks that exist in highly connected ethnic communities (Glenn, 1983, p. 41; Kibria, 1993).

Given the shortage of medical personnel in the United States, particularly in the inner cities and in rural areas, Asian women health professionals may be in a relatively strong position to modify traditional patriarchy. First, as a much sought-after group among U.S. immigrants, Asian women health professionals can enter the United States as the principal immigrants (Espiritu, 1995, p. 21). This means that unmarried women can immigrate on their own accord, and married women can enter as the primary immigrants, with their husbands and children following as dependents. My field research of Filipino American families in San Diego suggests that a female-first migration stream, especially when the women are married, has enormous ramifications for both family relations and domestic roles. For example, when Joey Laguda's mother, a Filipina medical technologist, entered the country in 1965, she carried the primary immigrant status and sponsored Joey's father and two other sons as her dependents. Joey describes the downward occupational shift that his father experienced on

immigrating to the United States: "My father had graduated in the Philippines with a bachelor's degree in criminology but couldn't get a job as a police officer here because he was not a U.S. citizen. So he only worked blue-collar jobs" (Espiritu, 1995, p. 181). The experience of Joey's father suggests that Asian men who immigrate as their wives' dependents often experience downward occupational mobility in the United States, while their wives maintain their professional status. The same pattern exists among Korean immigrant families in New York: while Korean nurses hold stable jobs, many of their educated husbands are unemployed or underemployed (Min, 1998, p. 52).

Moreover, given the long hours and the graveyard shifts that typify a nurse's work schedule, many husbands have had to assume more child care and other household responsibilities in their wives' absences. A survey of Filipino nurses in Los Angeles County reveals that these women, to increase their incomes, tend to work double shifts or in the higher paying evening and night shifts (Ong & Azores, 1994b, pp. 183-184). In her research on shift work and dual-earner spouses with children, Harriet Pressner (1988) finds that the husbands of night-shift workers do a significant part of child care; in all cases, it was the husbands who supervised the oft-rushed morning routines of getting their children up and off to school or to child care. Finally, unlike most other women professionals, Asian American nurses often work among their coethnics and thus benefit from these social support systems. According to Paul Ong and Tania Azores (1994b), there are "visible clusterings of Filipino nurses" in many hospitals in large metropolitan areas (p. 187). These women's social networks can provide the emotional and material support needed to challenge male dominance.

Despite their high levels of education,⁴ racism in the workplace threatens the employment security and class status of Asian immigrant professional men and women. Even when these women and men have superior levels of education, they still receive economic returns lower than those of their White counterparts and are more likely to remain marginalized in their work organizations, to encounter a glass ceiling, and to be underemployed (Chai, 1987; Ong & Hee, 1994, pp. 40-41; Yamanaka & McClelland, 1994, p. 86). As racialized women, Asian professional women also suffer greater sexual harassment than do their Western counterparts due to racialized ascription that depicts them as politically passive and sexually exotic and submissive. In her research on racialized sexual harassment in institutions of higher education, Sumi Cho (1997) argues that Asian American women faculty are especially susceptible to hostile-environment forms of harassment. This hostile environment may partly explain why Asian American women faculty continue to have the lowest tenure and promotion rate of all groups (Hune & Chan, 1997).

Racism in the workplace can put undue stress on the family. Singh, a mechanical engineer who immigrated to the United States from India in 1972, became discouraged when he was not advancing at the same rate as his colleagues and attributed his difficulties to job discrimination based on national and racial origins. Singh's wife, Kaur, describes how racism affected her husband

and her family: "It became harder and harder for my husband to put up with the discrimination at work. He was always stressed out. This affected the whole family" (Dhaliwal, 1995, p. 78). Among Korean immigrant families in New York, the husbands' losses in occupational status led to marital conflicts, violence, and ultimately divorce. Some Korean men turned to excessive drinking and gambling, which contributed to marital difficulties (Min, 1998, pp. 52, 55). A Korean wife attributes their marital problems to her husband's frustration over his low economic status:

Five years ago, he left home after a little argument with me and came back two weeks later. He wanted to get respect from me. But a real source of the problem was not me but his frustration over low status. (Min, 1998, p. 54)

Constrained by racial and gender discrimination, Asian professional women, on the other hand, may accept certain components of the traditional patriarchal system because they need their husbands' incomes and because they desire a strong and intact family—an important bastion of resistance to oppression.

GENDER RELATIONS AMONG SELF-EMPLOYED ENTREPRENEURS

Ethnic entrepreneurship is often seen as proof of the benefits of the enterprise system: If people are ambitious and willing to work hard, they can succeed in the United States. In reality, few Asian immigrant business owners manage to achieve upward mobility through entrepreneurship. The majority of the businesses have very low gross earnings and run a high risk of failure. Because of limited capital and skills, Asian immigrant entrepreneurs congregate in highly competitive, marginally profitable, and labor-intensive businesses such as small markets, clothing subcontracting, and restaurants (Ong, 1984, p. 46). In an analysis of the 1990 census data, Ong and Hee (1994) show that the median annual income of self-employed Asian Americans is \$23,000, which is slightly higher than that of Whites (\$20,000) (p. 47). But there is a great deal of variation in earnings: a quarter earn \$10,400 or less, another quarter earn at least \$47,000, and 1% earn more than \$200,000 (Ong & Hee, 1994, p. 55, Note 17). The chances for business failure appear particularly high for Southeast Asian immigrants; for every 20 businesses started by them each month, 18 fail during the first year (May, 1987).

Given the labor-intensive and competitive nature of small businesses, women's participation makes possible the development and viability of family enterprises. Initially, women contribute to capital accumulation by engaging in wage work to provide the additional capital needed to launch a business (Kim & Hurh, 1985). In a study of professional and educated Korean couples in Hawaii, Alice Chai (1987) found that Korean immigrant women resisted both class and domestic oppression by struggling to develop small family businesses where

they work in partnership with their husbands. Operating a family business removes them from the racist and sexist labor market and increases their interdependence with their husbands. Women also keep down labor costs by working without pay in the family enterprise (Kim & Hurh, 1988, p. 154). Often, unpaid female labor enables the family store to stay open as many as 14 hours a day, and on weekends, without having to hire additional workers (Bonacich, Hossain, & Park, 1987, p. 237). According to Ong and Hee (1994), three quarters of Asian immigrant businesses do not have a single outside employee—the typical store is run by a single person or by a family (p. 52).⁵ Their profits come directly from their labor, the labor of their families, and from staying open long hours (Gold, 1994). According to Ong and Hee (1994), approximately 42% of Asian American business owners work 50 hours or more per week, and 26% work 60 hours or more per week (p. 47). Finally, the grandmothers who watch the children while the mothers labor at the family stores form an additional layer of unpaid family labor that also supports these stores (Bonacich et al., 1987, p. 237).

Because of their crucial contributions to the family enterprise, wives are an economically valuable commodity. A 1996-1997 survey of Koreans in New York City indicates that 38% of the working women worked together with their husbands in the same businesses (Min, 1998, pp. 38-39). A study of Korean immigrants in Elmhurst, Illinois, indicates that “a man cannot even think of establishing his own business without a wife to support and work with” (Park, 1989, p. 144). Yoon (1997) reports a similar finding among Korean businesses in Chicago and Los Angeles: Wives are the most important source of family labor (p. 157). Corresponding changes in conjugal relationships, however, have been slow and uneven. Unlike paid employment, work in a family business seldom gives women economic independence from their husbands. She is co-owner of the small business, working for herself and for her family, but she is also unpaid family labor, working as an unpaid employee of her husband. It is conceivable that, for many immigrant women in small businesses, the latter role predominates. Min (1998) reports that in almost all cases, when a Korean husband and wife run a business, the husband is the legal owner and controls the money and personnel management of the business. Even when the wife plays a dominant role and the husband a marginal role in operating and managing the family business, the husband is still considered the owner by the family and by the larger Korean immigrant community (Min, 1998, pp. 45-46). In such instances, the husbands could be the women’s “most immediate and harshest employers” (Bonacich et al., 1987, p. 237).

Even though the family business, in some ways, is the antithesis of the separate gender spheres (men’s public world of work and women’s private world of domesticity), it can exacerbate dependency. Like housework, managing stores fosters alienation and isolation because it “affords little time and opportunity for women who run them to develop other skills or to establish close friendships” (Mazumdar, 1989, p. 17). Also, living and working in isolation, immigrant entrepreneurs may not be as influenced by the more flexible gender roles of U.S.

middle-class couples and thus seem to be slower than other immigrant groups to discard rigid gender role divisions (Min, 1992). In most instances, women's labor in family businesses is defined as an extension of their domestic responsibilities. Kaur, a South Asian immigrant woman who manages the family grocery store, describes the blurred boundaries between home and work:

I have a desk at home where I do my paperwork. This way I can be home when my daughters get home from school, and when my husband gets home from work I can serve him dinner right away. . . . I bought a stove for the store on which I cook meals for my husband and children during the hours when business is slow at the store. . . . I try to combine my housework with the store work such as grocery shopping. When I go shopping I buy stuff for home and the store. (Dhaliwal, 1995, p. 80)

The family's construction of Kaur's work as an extension of her domestic responsibilities stabilizes patriarchal ideology because it reconciles the new gender arrangement (Kaur's participation in the public sphere) with previous gender expectations and ideologies. Similarly, Min (1998) reports that in most Korean produce, grocery, and liquor stores that stay open long hours, wives are expected to perform domestic functions at work such as cooking for their husbands and, often, other employees (p. 49).

When these small businesses employ coethnics, wages are low and working conditions dismal. Ong and Umemoto (1994) list some of the unfair labor practices endured by workers in ethnic businesses: unpaid wages and unpaid workers' compensation, violation of worker health and safety regulations, and violation of minimum wage laws (p. 100). The exploitation of coethnic workers, specifically of women workers, is rampant in the clothing subcontracting business. Asian immigrant women comprise a significant proportion of garment workers. Asian immigrant men also toil in the garment industry but mostly as contractors—small-business owners who subcontract from manufacturers to do the cutting and sewing of garments from the manufacturers' designs and textiles. Because they directly employ labor, garment contractors are in a sense labor contractors who mobilize, employ, and control labor for the rest of the industry (Bonacich, 1994).

As middlemen between the manufacturers and the garment workers, these contractors struggle as marginally secure entrepreneurs on the very fringes of the garment industry (Wong, 1983, p. 365). The precarious nature of the business is indicated by the high number of garment factories that close each year (Ong, 1984, p. 48; Wong, 1983, p. 370).⁶ Given the stiff business competition, Asian male contractors have had to exploit the labor of immigrant women to survive. The steady influx of female limited-English-speaking immigrants puts the sweatshop owner in an extremely powerful position. Because these women have few alternative job opportunities, the owners can virtually dictate the terms of employment: They can pay low wages, ignore overtime work, provide poor working conditions, and fire anyone who is dissatisfied or considered to be a

troublemaker (Wong, 1983, p. 370). In retaliation, various unionization and employment organizations such as AIWA have worked for the empowerment of immigrant Asian women workers in the garment industry as well as in the hotel and electronics industries (Lowe, 1997, p. 275). It is important to stress that the problem of exploitation is not primarily gender- or ethnic-based but also inherent in the organization of the garment industry. Embedded in a larger, hierarchically organized structure, Asian immigrant contractors both victimize the workers they employ and are victimized by those higher up in the hierarchy. The contracting system insulates the industry's principal beneficiaries—the manufacturers, retailers, and bankers—from the grim realities of the sweatshops and the workers' hostility (Bonacich, 1994). Against these more dominant forces, Asian American men and women have, occasionally, formed a shared sense of ethnic and class solidarity that can, at times, blunt some of the antagonism in the contractor-worker relationship (Bonacich, 1994, p. 150; Wong, 1983, p. 370).

In sum, the burgeoning Asian immigrant small-business sector is being built, in part, on the racist, patriarchal, and class exploitation of Asian (and other) immigrant women. Barred from decent-paying jobs in the general labor market, Asian immigrant women labor long and hard for the benefit of men who are either their husbands or their employers or both—and in many cases, for the benefit of corporate America (Bonacich et al., 1987, p. 238). The ethnic business confers quite different economic and social rewards on men and women (Zhou & Logan 1989). Whereas men benefit economically and socially from the unpaid or underpaid female labor, women bear the added burden of the double work day. Thus, it is critical to recognize that the ethnic economy is both a thriving center and a source of hardship and exploitation for Asian immigrant women.

GENDER RELATIONS AMONG THE WAGE LABORERS

Of the three occupational groups reviewed in this article, gender role reversals—wives' increased economic role and husbands' reduced economic role—seem to be most pronounced among the wage laborers. In part, these changes reflect the growth of female-intensive industries in the United States, particularly in the garment and microelectronics industries, and the corresponding decline of male-dominated industries specializing in the production and distribution of goods (Clement & Myles, 1994, p. 26). As a consequence, Asian immigrant women with limited education, skills, and English fluency have more employment options than do their male counterparts. Since the late 1960s, a significant number of U.S. informal sector occupations have recruited primarily female immigrant workers. The garment industry is a top employer of immigrant women from Asia and Latin America. The growth of U.S. apparel production, especially in the large cities, has been largely driven by the influx of low-wage labor from these two regions (Blumenberg & Ong, 1994, p. 325). In Los

Angeles, Latin American immigrants (mainly from Mexico) and Asian immigrants (from China, Vietnam, Korea, Thailand, and Cambodia) comprise the majority of the garment work force; in New York, Chinese and Dominican workers predominate; and in San Francisco, Chinese and other Asians prevail (Loucky, Soldatenko, Scott, & Bonacich, 1994, p. 345). The microelectronics industry also draws heavily on immigrant women workers from Asia (mainly Vietnam, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan) and from Latin America (mainly Mexico) for its low-paid manufacturing assembly work (Green, 1980; Katz & Kemnitzer, 1984; Snow, 1986). Of the more than 200,000 people employed in California's Silicon Valley microelectronics industry in 1980, approximately 50% (100,000 employees) were in production-related jobs; half of these production-related workers (50,000-70,000) worked in semiskilled operative jobs (Siegel & Borock, 1982). In a study of Silicon Valley's semiconductor manufacturing industry, Karen Hossfeld (1994) reports that the industry's division of labor is highly skewed by gender and race. At each of the 15 subcontracting firms (which specialize in unskilled and semiskilled assembly work) that Hossfeld observed, between 80% and 100% of workers were Third World immigrants, the majority of whom were women (p. 72). Based on interviews with employers and workers at these firms, Hossfeld concludes that "the lower the skill and pay level of the job, the greater the proportion of Third World immigrant women tends to be" (p. 73).

In labor-intensive industries such as garment and microelectronics, employers prefer to hire immigrant women, as compared to immigrant men, because they believe that women can afford to work for less, do not mind dead-end jobs, and are more suited physiologically to certain kinds of detailed and routine work. The following comment from a male manager at a microelectronics subcontracting assembly plant typifies this "gender logic": "The relatively small size [of many Asian and Mexican women] makes it easier for them to sit quietly for long periods of time, doing small detail work that would drive a large person like [him] crazy" (Hossfeld, 1994, p. 74). As Linda Lim (1983) observes, it is the "*comparative disadvantage* of women in the wage-labor market that gives them a comparative advantage vis-à-vis men in the occupations and industries where they are concentrated—so-called female ghettos of employment" (p. 78). A White male production manager and hiring supervisor in a Silicon Valley assembly shop discusses his formula for hiring:

Just three things I look for in hiring [entry-level, high-tech manufacturing operatives]: small, foreign, and female. You find those three things and you're pretty much automatically guaranteed the right kind of work force. These little foreign gals are grateful to be hired—very, very grateful—no matter what. (Hossfeld, 1994, p. 65)

In Hawaii, Korean immigrant women likewise had an easier time securing employment than men did because of their domestic skills and because of the

demand for service workers in restaurants, hotels, hospitals, and factories (Chai, 1987). These examples illustrate the interconnections of race, class, and gender. On one hand, patriarchal and racist ideologies consign women to a secondary and inferior position in the capitalist wage-labor market. On the other hand, their very disadvantage enhances women's employability over that of men in certain industries, thus affording them an opportunity to sharpen their claims against patriarchal authority in their homes.

The shifts in women's and men's access to economic and social resources is most acute among disadvantaged Southeast Asian refugees (Donnelly, 1994; Kibria, 1993). The lives of the Cambodian refugees in Stockton, California, provide an example (Ui, 1991). In Stockton, an agricultural town in which the agricultural jobs have already been taken by Mexican workers, the unemployment rate for Cambodian men is estimated to be between 80% and 90%. Unemployed for long periods of time, these men gather at the corners of the enclaves to drink and gamble. In contrast, Cambodian women have transformed their traditional roles and skills—as providers of food and clothing for family and community members and as small traders—into informal economic activities that contribute cash to family incomes. Women have also benefited more than men from government-funded language and job-training programs. Because traditionally male jobs are scarce in Stockton, these programs have focused on the education of the more employable refugee women (Ui, 1991, pp. 166-167). In particular, refugee women are trained to work in social service agencies serving their coethnics primarily in secretarial, clerical, and interpreter positions. In a refugee community with limited economic opportunities, social service programs—even though they are usually part-time, ethnic specific, and highly susceptible to budget cuts—provide one of the few new job opportunities for this population, and in this case, most of these jobs go to the women. Relying on gender stereotypes, social service agency executives have preferred women over men, claiming that women are ideal workers because they are more patient and easier to work with than men (Ui, 1991, p. 169). Thus, in the Cambodian community of Stockton, it is often women, and not men, who have relatively greater economic opportunities and who become the primary breadwinners in their families. On the other hand, stripped of opportunities for employment, men often lose their “place to be” in the new society (Ui, 1991, pp. 170-171).

The shifts in the resources of immigrant men and women have challenged the patriarchal authority of Asian men. Men's loss of status and power—not only in the public but also in the domestic arena—places severe pressure on their sense of well-being, leading in some instances to spousal abuse and divorce (Luu, 1989, p. 68). A Korean immigrant man describes his frustrations over changing gender roles and expectations:

In Korea [my wife] used to have breakfast ready for me. . . . She didn't do it any more because she said she was too busy getting ready to go to work. If I

complained she talked back at me, telling me to fix my own breakfast. . . . I was very frustrated about her, started fighting and hit her. (Yim, 1978, as cited in Mazumdar, 1989, p. 18)

According to a 1979 survey, marital conflict was one of the top four problems of Vietnamese refugees in the United States (Davidson, 1979, as cited in Luu, 1989, p. 69). A Vietnamese man, recently divorced after 10 years of marriage, blamed his wife's new role and newfound freedom for their breakup:

Back in the country, my role was only to bring home money from work, and my wife would take care of the household. Now everything has changed. My wife had to work as hard as I did to support the family. Soon after, she demanded more power at home. In other words, she wanted equal partnership. I am so disappointed! I realized that things are different now, but I could not help feeling the way I do. It is hard to get rid of or change my principles and beliefs which are deeply rooted in me. (Luu, 1989, p. 69)

Loss of status and power has similarly led to depression and anxieties in Hmong males. In particular, the women's ability—and the men's inability—to earn money for households “has undermined severely male omnipotence” (Irby & Pon, 1988, p. 112). Male unhappiness and helplessness can be detected in the following joke told at a family picnic: “When we get on the plane to go back to Laos, the first thing we will do is beat up the women!” The joke—which generated laughter by both men and women—drew upon a combination of “the men's unemployability, the sudden economic value placed on women's work, and men's fear of losing power in their families” (Donnelly, 1994, pp. 74-75).

The shifts in the resources of men and women have created an opportunity for women to contest the traditional hierarchies of family life (Chai, 1987; Kibria, 1993; Williams, 1989, p. 157). Existing data indicate, however, that working-class Asian immigrant women have not used their new resources to radically restructure the old family system but only to redefine it in a more satisfying manner (Kibria, 1993). Some cultural conceptions, such as the belief that the male should be the head of the household, remain despite the economic contributions of women. Nancy Donnelly (1994) reports that although Hmong women contribute the profits of their needlework sales to the family economy, the traditional construction of Hmong women as “creators of beauty, skilled in devotion to their families, and embedded in a social order dominated by men” has not changed (p. 185). In the following quotation, a Cambodian wife describes her reluctance to upset her husband's authority:

If we lived in Cambodia I would have behaved differently toward my husband. Over there we have to always try to be nice to the husband. Wives don't talk back, but sometimes I do that here a little bit, because I have more freedom to say what I think here. However, I am careful not to speak too disrespectfully to him, and in that way, I think I am different from the Americans. (Welaratna, 1993, p. 233)

The traditional division of household labor also remains relatively intact. In a study of Chinatown women, Loo and Ong (1982) found that despite their employment outside the home, three fourths of the working mothers were solely responsible for all household chores. In her study of Vietnamese American families, Kibria (1993) argues that Vietnamese American women (and children) walk an “ideological tightrope”—struggling both to preserve the traditional Vietnamese family system and to enhance their power within the context of this system. According to Kibria, the traditional family system is valuable to Vietnamese American women because it offers them economic protection and gives them authority, as mothers, over the younger generation.

For the wage laborers then, the family—and the traditional patriarchy within it—becomes simultaneously a bastion of resistance to race and class oppression and an instrument for gender subordination (Glenn, 1986, p. 193). Women also preserve the traditional family system—albeit in a tempered form—because they value the promise of male economic protection. Although migration may have equalized or reversed the economic resources of working-class men and women, women’s earnings continue to be too meager to sustain their economic independence from men. Because the wage each earns is low, only by pooling incomes can a husband and wife earn enough to support a family. Finally, like many ethnic, immigrant, poor, and working-class women, working-class Asian women view work as an opportunity to raise the family’s living standards and not only as a path to self-fulfillment or even upward mobility as idealized by the White feminist movement. As such, employment is defined as an extension of their family obligations—of their roles as mothers and wives (Kim & Hurh, 1988, p. 162; Pedraza, 1991; Romero, 1992).

CONCLUSION

My review of the existing literature on Asian immigrant salaried professionals, self-employed entrepreneurs, and wage laborers suggests that economic constraints (and opportunities) have reconfigured gender relations within contemporary Asian America society. The patriarchal authority of Asian immigrant men, particularly those of the working class, has been challenged due to the social and economic losses that they suffered in their transition to the status of men of color in the United States. On the other hand, the recent growth of female-intensive industries—and the racist and sexist “preference” for the labor of immigrant women—has enhanced women’s employability over that of men and has changed their role to that of a coprovider, if not primary provider, for their families. These shifts in immigrant men’s and women’s access to economic and social resources have not occurred without friction. Men’s loss of status in both public and private arenas has placed severe pressures on the traditional family, leading at times to resentment, spousal abuse, and divorce. For their part, Asian women’s ability to restructure the traditional patriarchy system is often

constrained by their social-structural location—as racially subordinated immigrant women—in the dominant society. In the best scenario, responding to the structural barriers in the larger society, both husbands and wives become more interdependent and equal as they are forced to rely on each other, and on the traditional family and immigrant community, for economic security and emotional support. On the other hand, to the extent that the traditional division of labor and male privilege persists, wage work adds to the women's overall workload. The existing research indicates that both of these tendencies exist, though the increased burdens for women are more obvious.

NOTES

1. Certainly, these three categories are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive. They are also linked in the sense that there is mobility between them, particularly from professional to small-business employment (Chen, 1992, p. 142). Nevertheless, they represent perhaps the most important sociological groupings within the contemporary Asian immigrant community (Ong & Hee, 1994, p. 31).

2. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 suspended immigration of laborers for 10 years. The 1917 Immigration Act delineated a "barred zone" from whence no immigrants could come. The 1924 Immigration Act denied entry to virtually all Asians. The 1934 Tydings-McDuffie Act reduced Filipino immigration to 50 persons a year. The 1965 Immigration Law abolished "national origins" as a basis for allocating immigration quotas to various countries—Asian countries were finally placed on equal footing.

3. After Mexico, the Philippines and South Korea were the second- and third-largest source countries of immigrants, respectively. Three other Asian countries—China, India, and Vietnam—were among the 10 major source countries of U.S. immigrants in the 1980s (Min, 1995b, p. 12).

4. According to the 1990 U.S. Census, 43% of Asian men and 32% of Asian women 25 years of age and older had at least a bachelor's degree, compared with 23% and 17%, respectively, of the total U.S. population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993, p. 4). Moreover, the proportion of Asians with graduate or professional degrees was higher than that of Whites: 14% versus 8% (Ong & Hee, 1994). Immigrants account for about two thirds to three quarters of the highly educated population (Ong & Hee, 1994, pp. 38-39).

5. For example, in Southern California, many Cambodian-owned doughnut shops are open 24 hours a day, with the husbands typically baking all night, while wives and teenage children work the counter by day (Akast, 1993).

6. In New York City, more than a quarter of Chinatown garment shops went out of business between 1980 and 1981. Similarly, of the nearly 200 Chinatown garment shops that registered with California's Department of Employment in 1978, 23% were sold or closed by 1982 and another 8% were inactive (Ong, 1984, p. 48)

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