

Joy Guo
Majority rule and minority rights
Professor Smith
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Issue Brief - Immigration and Gender Issues

Key Words:

Immigration, gender issues, child-rearing, sex trafficking, socioeconomic differences, mobilization

Description:

This brief examines the intersections between immigration and gender issues, and explores the implications for such issues as class-based distinctions, sexual trafficking, mail order brides, and child-rearing. It also discusses demographics and potential capacity for mobilization for immigrant women.

Key Points:

- Socioeconomic status has been found to be inversely correlated with both country of origin and duration of stay. However, immigrant women tend to experience faster social mobility than their male counterparts, especially if they hail from East Asian and Western European countries.
- Besides SES differences, immigrant women are particularly vulnerable to sexual trafficking and other areas of exploitation, particularly when they satisfy one precondition: occupation as a migrant worker in their home country.
- Nearly 200,000 women are brought into the United States each year as mail order brides, with few social networks outside of the spouse.
- In terms of child-rearing, immigrant women espouse different methods from immigrant men, such as refraining from corporal punishment, enrolling children in school early on, and joining school parent associations.
- Organizations dedicated to the advancement of immigrant women have increased twofold since 1991.
- Mobilization capacity for immigrant women depends on several interacting factors: degree of exclusion, resentment, ability to speak English or English-speaking representatives, among others.

Brief:

Approximately four percent of the United States population (thirty-eight million) is comprised of first-generation immigrants, according to the 2000 United States Census; out of that, around ten million are women. As an umbrella category, immigration crossed with gender issues includes such contentious topics as sexual trafficking, mail order brides, and differences in child-rearing (compared to both their male counterparts).

One emerging field of study is fluctuations in socioeconomic status of immigrant women, depending on their country of origin and duration of stay. For women arriving from China, Japan, Australia, Mexico, Chile, and Peru, Seungsook Moon has found negative correlations between class status and the length of time that they had been living in America thus far (Moon

2003, 842). That is, compared to their male counterparts, female immigrants from the aforementioned countries are more likely to find themselves on the lowest rung of the totem pole for around two to seven years after immigrating, though numbers vary for individual cases (Moon 2003, 843). Lack of community links, unfamiliarity with the predominant language, and inability or unwillingness to secure jobs are cited as contributory reasons for why immigrant women are shunted to the lower poles of the class ladder (Moon 2003, 843). However, despite a slow start, immigrant women have been found to undergo faster rates of social mobility than immigrant males who come from the same country and who have been living in the United States for the same amount of time (Gabaccia 1991, 65). Immigrant females from East Asian and Western European countries specifically frequently experience jumps in socioeconomic status (lower-middle to middle or middle-upper class) within a span of just one generation (Gabaccia 1991, 68). Explanations for why this is so include more perfectionistic tendencies, an emphasis placed on hard work, and an initial acceptance of the social hierarchy (Gabaccia 1991, 70).

Besides class-based distinctions, immigrant women face a number of demoralizing issues in the transition of moving and settling into a new country. Both international and domestic sexual trafficking of females and children have spiked in the last decade; policy implications aside, sexual trafficking, or the shifting of human cargo across borders for sexual and commercial sale, severely constrains newly immigrated women from adapting to their new country after they have been released or sold (Feingold 2005, 27). Follow-up studies conducted on sexual trafficking victims who have been allowed to stay in the United States for research and policy purposes have found an association between trafficking and occupations as migrant workers in their home country, suggesting that perpetrators deliberately look in one occupation for easily transportable victims (Feingold 2005, 28). In addition, while male or child victims of human trafficking generally work as forced laborers, female victims are usually sold into prostitution and street stripping (Feingold 2005, 29).

A no less divisive issue concerns mail order brides; approximately 200,000 women are brought each year into the United States with minimal support networks, a tenuous grasp on the language, and debacles over acquiring green cards and visas. Moreover, such women are particularly susceptible to domestic abuse when things do not work out with their spouses. Women whose immigration status depends on the success of their marriage report more 911 calls as a result of spousal abuse, prolonged battering, and fewer legal protections than women whose immigration status does not weigh as heavily upon them (Narayan 1995, 104). Social and institutional barriers, including minimal secondary education, slim work prospects (due to visas), and sole dependence on the other spouse for support and guidance also prevent successful integration into the larger community, exacerbating psychological and physical problems (Narayan 1995, 106). For both sexual trafficking victims and mail order brides, the welfare of their children is also at stake, with barely any opportunities, funds, or time for schooling. However, for those immigrant women who have had the chance to build from the ground up, different methods for child-rearing are utilized, relative to those used by immigrant men. Females are less likely to engage in spanking as punishment, more likely to enroll children in kindergarten and first grade early on (four to five years old as compared to six or seven), and to attend parent-teacher conferences and join parent associations (Foner 1999, 100).

In the face of these detriments, organizations dedicated to the furthering of immigrant women have doubled since 1991, though they are mainly concentrated near domestic borders, including Texas and California (Menjivar & Salcido 2002, 898-920). Opportunities for mobilization depend primarily on the nature of the grievances (housing vs. employment

discrimination), resentment, and other social factors, such as proficiency in English. (Foner 1999, 101). Establishing English language programs in employment centers and schools have so far exerted a beneficial impact on immigrant women's integration into society and larger social support networks (Foner 1999, 102). Thus, the intersections between immigration and gender issues provide no shortage of diverse topics to be addressed in the coming years.

Images:



Source: StabilityPact.org. Flow chart for human trafficking. Economic and social issues, and human rights issues are particularly relevant.



Source: LIFE. Mail order brides from Russia wait for deportation due to visa violations.



Source: LIFE. Latin American immigration rally for women's rights.

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http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois_lpr_pe_2008.pdf

Estimates of Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States, 2009:

http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois_ill_pe_2009.pdf

Immigrant Women: Stewards of the 21st Century (statistics on language, gender, race, ethnicity, and discrimination):

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