

**Pride and Prejudice: The Struggles of  
Finding Identity in Asian and Latino  
Immigrant Women in Professional and  
Political Domains**

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The combination of strict and inflexible immigration policies of the United States and a lack of institutional support to help immigrant women adjust to the professional, educational, and political aspects of a new country prevented many minority immigrant women from establishing a distinctive identity within their respective professional occupations. By applying a gender neutral and a gender-sensitive lens to the immigration policies of the United States, the gender discrimination that results in additional barriers for Asian and Latino immigrant women in assimilating into American society can be reformed. The underrepresentation of Asian and Latino immigrant women in higher education and

STEM professions constantly undermines the scientific competence, performance, and recognition of these minority groups as they are unable to develop the concept of a science identity, “the extent to which a student identifies as a science person” (Diamond and Stebleton 2). The Race-Gendered Model, defined as a model that demonstrates the parallels between race and gender in politics, can be used to convey the unequal opportunities to reach into the center of political power for Asian and Latino immigrant women on the basis of race and gender has led to the exclusion of these minority groups from the sphere of political influence and has inhibited them from building successful careers in politics.

The social and political turmoil of the African American Civil Rights Movement that characterized the mid-to-late 20th century accelerated change among ethnic immigrant women in America. Impacted by the struggle against racism in the 1960s and

1970s, Asian-American and Latino immigrant women began to fight for civil rights, jobs, education, and better living conditions for their own communities. Motivated by the traditions of black unions and neighborhood activism, ethnic immigrant women began organizing to improve local housing, education, and health care to preserve the history and the lifestyle of their inner-city ethnic neighborhoods. “They picketed, demonstrated, lobbied, outmaneuvered local politicians, and ran for office themselves to bring about social change” (Seller 304). As a result, by integrating civil rights legislation and anti-poverty programs, they inadvertently acquired self-confidence and instilled enough security into American society to encompass individuality and diversity (Seller 304). The “new ethnicity,” as Seller calls it, emerged in the late 1960s, and was characterized by a revival of Asian and Hispanic arts, crafts, dances, and foods and an embrace for one’s

racial origin and identity (Seller 304). The emergence of these diverse ethnic cultures allowed Asian-American and Latino immigrant women to more confidently begin to demand change in the scientific and political spheres of American society.

The start of the women's liberation movement, often referred to as the “second wave” of feminism, in the 1960s allowed for ethnic immigrant women to identify with the feminist goals of legal and social equality for women. But still, many ethnic immigrant women felt that White Americans needed to make a commitment to fight racism alongside sexism. The gap between ethnic women and the women’s liberation movement, characterized by feminist activism, narrowed as an increasing number of ethnic women joined the workforce and became more sympathetic towards the feminist goals of economic and legal equality (Seller 304). With the formation of feminist organizations such as the National Organization for

Women and the National Women's Studies Association, ethnic women began to fight for issues such as better health care, social security for homemakers, welfare rights, and battled against involuntary sterilization and involuntary motherhood.

A look into the gender bias that existed in immigration selection in the 1990s in the United States is necessary in understanding the struggles of Asian and Latino immigrant women in assimilating to the professional, political, and educational aspects of the United States in that time. Immigration selection is primarily focused on the “skills of the principal applicant”, usually the man (Iredale 3). Moreover, the definition and identification of skills in the selection of immigrant women for specific occupations creates additional barriers to integrating into a professional career. Because women tend to move as dependents rather than as principal applicants, their skills are often ignored in their new countries, and they are more likely

to sacrifice their own careers for the sake of their family compared to men (Iredale 3). Even if they can overcome the disadvantages incited by gender bias in immigration selection, there is still a divide between the different genders in immigration after arrival. Iredale pinpoints that at the root of the divide, immigrant women often cannot move forward with occupation-specific assessment procedures and training in the same way as immigrant men can (Iredale 3). “Women frequently delay applying for recognition of their qualifications until their spouses have completed the process, especially as many more women come to the United States through the family-based immigration system” (Iredale 3). The family-based immigration system reached its peak in the 1990s when 39 percent of immigrant women gained acceptance into the US as spouses (Kelson and Delaet 85). The family reunification policy, signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965,

encourages immigration in a family context and is defined by marriage as a means of immigrating when it would otherwise be difficult (Kelson and Delaet 85). Iredale indicates that the peak of the family-based immigration system in the 1990s often meant “delaying the learning of the language of the destination in the first instance and remaining at home to attend to the needs of the family as a whole” and further postponement of the accreditation process by women if it became too costly (Iredale 3).

If immigrant women are able to apply for entry to specific occupations, additional obstacles of gender and ethnic bias in competency-based assessments — defined as those that require candidates to provide real-life examples as the basis of their answers — in employment bar them from successful entrance into professional careers (Iredale 4). “Competency-based assessment is further categorized into employer interview in non-registrable occupations or tests in licensable

occupations” (Iredale 4). While competency tests are fairer because there is a lower margin for gender bias, employer interviews of competency incorporate potential for both gender and ethnic bias that is exacerbated in private enterprise and male-dominated occupations. Women are excluded at the interview stage at greater numbers because of the hidden factors of “inadequate experience, disrupted career paths, employer's concerns about the possibility of pregnancy and family responsibilities interfering with their commitment to the job” (Iredale 4). Furthermore, women with family structures and obligations are more likely to become discouraged and decide not to proceed with attempting to gain recognition of their skills because they tend to be out of professional networks of support to accomplish such. Iredale conveys that “the cost of examinations and bridging courses often means that women decide not to continue with the process as they perceive this as a

selfish pursuit of their own interests” (Iredale 4). The women are often conditioned to put themselves last and feel that their spouse’s and children’s needs are more important than their own. The doors for immigrant women to enter professional careers are further closed with gender bias in employment, as “discrimination in skilled employment may take an overt form such as refusing to employ women engineers on building or construction sites because of the lack of female toilets” (Iredale 4). Discrimination tends to be greatly concealed and less easily identified and so anecdotal excuses are often used to justify not hiring women.

To successfully apply a more gender-sensitive lens to immigration policy, the continuing presence of a patriarchal ideology, defined as the operation of ideology that legitimates and constructs relations of domination of women by men, in both countries of origin and countries of destination have to be reformed (Iredale 4).

The outdated definitions of gender roles manifest gender discrimination in highly industrially developed countries. To prevent the continual denial of access to immigrant women to particular occupations, immigration policies need to be not only gender neutral but more importantly that gender sensitive to the needs and special circumstances of women.

After settling in the United States, minority immigrant women shared a common set of problems, usually of adjusting to an unfamiliar, hostile physical environment characterized by unfamiliar food, clothing, language, customs and values. These problems were often exacerbated by the lack of institutional support to adjust to a new life. Seller states “age, personality, and earlier experiences affected the way women coped with the shock of immigration” (Seller 45). The immigrant women were far removed from the comfort of familiar culture and customs and values and homesickness was a

nearly universal problem among all ethnicities of immigrant women because coming to the United States often meant cutting ties with their loved ones for many years, possibly forever. Motherhood opened yet another set of challenges for ethnic immigrant women but the beginning of a family in the United States carried a special significance even with the lack of institutional support in fostering adjustment. As Seller describes, “improvement in the material conditions of life, the creation of their own families, and close ties maintained with children and other family members aided the positive adjustment of immigrant women throughout the United States” (Seller 67). Motherhood was the one universal factor under which most immigrant women were able to lead a full and successful life free of the limitations of gender and ethnic bias.

Representation of Asian and Latino immigrant women in STEM serves to allow ethnic minority women to develop the

concept of a science identity, “the extent to which a student identifies as a science person” (Diamond and Stebleton 2). The development of a science identity is directly related to internal recognition, where an individual sees themselves as belonging to the STEM fields, as well as external recognition, where others see them as a science person. Internal recognition is conveyed in different ways in individual Asian and Latino immigrant women. Women of color in health professions believe that they were pursuing an altruistic career, or one in which they were contributing to the greater good. These students held “altruistic science identities” that developed interests in STEM fields to positively impact society which proves to be crucial to their internal recognition as science students (Diamond and Stebleton 2). Other ethnic immigrant women developed internal recognition and belonging to the STEM fields with intrinsic interest in STEM subjects, whether it be

loving the puzzle of setting up experiments or discovering what went wrong afterwards. External recognition is just as important as internal recognition in associating oneself with a science identity, defined as being seen “by relevant others as a science person” (Diamond and Stebleton 2). The idea that “one cannot claim an identity all by oneself; being ‘somebody’ requires the participation of others” is conveyed by having someone that is ethnically and racially similar to these students to facilitate external recognition (Diamond and Stebleton 2).

With factors such as discrimination against gender, race, ethnicity, and immigration status and the underrepresentation of Asian and Latino immigrant women in STEM, many young ethnic students encountering these discriminatory environments become increasingly discouraged to participate in STEM fields and experience a diminished sense of science identity. Negative stigmas of

ethnic minorities in STEM due to racism and ethno-nationalism can be detrimental to young ethnic minority students in STEM fields, “even for students who were highly identified with their discipline, when they encountered racial stigma enacted by others, they were more likely to leave STEM” (Diamond and Stebleton 2). Experiences of cultural incongruence can be characterized as microaggressions, such as small, everyday acts of prejudice or be defined in a more harmful sense, as ethnic immigrant women are more likely to be confronted with neo-racism, or discrimination enacted due to country of origin and perceived cultural differences in religion and language. Furthermore, implicit biases that “women do not belong in STEM, male-dominated disciplinary cultures, and feelings of isolation” in classroom and laboratory settings may cause ethnic immigrant women to experience anxiety as they attempt to actively steer away from confirming these

negative stereotypes with women in STEM (Diamond and Stebleton 3). Women of color in STEM are held in a “double bind” as they experience discrimination due to both their gender and racial identities, where “undergraduate Women of color in physics often engaged in both ‘gendered passing and racial passing’ where they simultaneously downplayed their racial and/or ethnic minoritized status and took on masculine behaviors and appearances (Diamond and Stebleton 3).

Additional sources of discrimination in science and math classroom cultures can serve to undermine the scientific competence, performance, and recognition of Asian and Latino immigrant women. “Unpleasant classroom experiences can include avoiding group work with certain ethnic minority immigrant women or advisors and professors expressing doubt about a student’s ability to perform at a certain level” (Diamond and Stebleton 3).

Other forms of neo-racism such as marginalization based on language, dress, and other features invalidate the experiences of Asian and Latino immigrant women in STEM and diminish opportunities for positive external recognition and science identity development.

Asian and Latino immigrant women in positions of power in STEM fields can serve as “identity agents”— defined as a person looked up to by others as an example to be imitated — to provide young Asian and Latino immigrant students support in their science identity development. Student interactions with peers, faculty, family members, and practitioners in the field of STEM proved to counteract any negative recognition these students may have experienced and reinforce STEM-focused decisions. A more specific look on Han, a general science major from Vietnam at North Coast University, and Daniela, a biology major from Colombia enrolled at Mid-

Central University through their individual case studies can help us conceptualize the impact external recognition has on ethnic minority immigrant women. Han had a family that did not support her goal of becoming a physician's assistant, as they saw becoming a pharmacist as a better option (Diamond and Stebleton 3). But even with the negative external recognition from her family, Han was able to counteract the lack of support and sustain her goal with positive external recognition from her friends (Diamond and Stebleton 3). In other cases, findings suggested that "student affairs educators and other higher education professionals can foster science identity development for these women by acknowledging their unique reasons for pursuing STEM" (Diamond and Stebleton 3). In this way, Asian and Latino immigrant women can have multiple sources of positive external recognition and support in addressing negative external recognition.

Daniela's story was similar to Han in that she sought positive recognition for her academic and career goals (Diamond and Stebleton 3). Her program director shared the same belief with her that students need to diversify STEM professions in order to advance social justice and acknowledged the discrimination felt by Asian and Latino immigrant women in STEM fields (Diamond and Stebleton 3). Daniela recounts that her program director served as an important source of positive external recognition and encouraged and assured her early on that she could succeed in difficult science and math coursework and find her place in STEM (Diamond and Stebleton 3). Positive sources of external recognition provides Asian and Latino immigrant women with a sense of identity as STEM students.

Using a Race-Gendered Model, defined as a model that demonstrates the parallels between race and gender in politics that helps us locate important differences

between different race and gender groups, we see that White men are uniquely placed in close proximity of political influence, while Asian and Latino immigrant women are the least visible group and are usually placed in a space completely outside the field of political competition (Phillips 10). Since 1920, “White women have had de jure access to the voting franchise and in the intervening period, women have made up approximately half the population, and outnumbered male voters in every presidential election since 1964” (Seller 260). Yet, women have held a quarter or less of all state legislative seats across the country for well over two decades, and only reached 100 members of Congress in 2014 (Seller 260). Presently, Asian Americans and Latina/os make up 23 percent of the U.S. population and are the two fastest growing racial groups in the country. Members of these immigrant communities hold less than ten percent of all state legislative seats, and a similar fraction of

seats in the 115th Congress. Asian and Latina immigrant women are rarely in the room even though they have socioeconomic experiences, political perspectives and policy priorities that are distinct from that of their most likely descriptive representative—a White man. White men are “not required to overcome systemic challenges in political competition related to their race and/or gender faced by others” (Phillips 10). White men are historically and presently overrepresented in politics, and they are assisted by the marginal growth in the number of total opportunities for representation, and the electoral benefits that often come with incumbency. Women of color are the least visible and available group, and most likely to be positioned in a space completely outside of the field of political competition. Their visibility is limited in part by men of color who achieve mainstream political influence and are viewed as speaking “on behalf” of all members of their

racial group (Phillips 10). As racial minority groups struggle to achieve and maintain mainstream political influence, “relatively privileged “representatives” of those groups often render marginalized subgroups, like women, and their interests, invisible” (Phillips 10). As a result, women of color are excluded and obscured such that they can rarely access the field of political competition. The frequent absence of competition for descriptive representation for White men, size of the field of competition such that men and women of color rarely have access to electoral contests, and the potential exclusion of women of color from electoral competition limits the choices voters face in electing a descriptive representative long before election day.

In the late twentieth century, a small number of Asian and Latino immigrant women held office, usually at the local level on school boards or city councils. The limits on racial minority groups’ political

incorporation often made many ethnic immigrant women enter politics rather hesitantly, aiming to solve a particular problem rather than to build a career in politics. In the 1970s and 1980s, a small number of Asian women served on school boards and city councils; for example, “Taiwan-born Lily Chen of Monterey Park became the nation's first Chinese-American woman mayor, and Hong Kong Born Mae Yih served in the Oregon state senate” (Seller, 260). These women drew strength from their families and had to overcome immigrant stereotypes, including the belief that Asian women were passive and not suited for leadership roles. Similarly, the redistricting battles fought over Koreatown following the 2010 U.S. Census was a moment of opportunity for Asian and Latino immigrant women to ignite a fire in politics and build political capacity. In the City of Los Angeles, Korean American activists fought to bring Koreatown under one City Council

but they faced resistance from many older generations of Korean business owners and Whites that dominated the City Council leadership (Phillips 112). The redistricting battles put a spotlight on internal political divisions in building Korean political influence into mainstream politics, namely the race and gender gap. Asian American women in politics “attributed the gender gap in Asian American candidacies to an interaction between Asian American women’s professional and sociocultural positions” and face discrimination because of underrepresentation among partners in law firms, corporate boards, or other professions where potential candidates would be expected to otherwise emerge (Phillips 118).

Latina immigrant women discuss how their professional focus on local issues and community activism rather than building careers in politics as a direct result of the unequal opportunities into the center of political power was often viewed as a

negative mark by powerful political leaders. As a result, Latina women are underrepresented in politics and the types of work and social expectations are much lower than that of Latino men and White counterparts. Talented and qualified Latina women are often told that it is not their time to be unique in politics, and that is because, as said by a Latina organization leader “it’s never our time because we are never in that line because we’re busy being the caretakers, the teachers, the community activists doing the work and not kissing the pinky finger. So it’s never our time. So we’re never at the top of the list” (Phillips 105). Additionally, Latina women who choose to further their political mobility independent of the “machine” created by Latina/o and Democratic leaders are closed off and effectively blocked from receiving major endorsements because her own “supporters” are unsure of her motivations and loyalties. Finally, Latinas are often “not in the mix” of

potential favored candidates because of the internalized misogyny in political fields dominated by White and Latino men, in that Latinas are not seen as “Latina/o candidates” by Latino men, but rather as “women candidates” (Phillips 106). As a result, it is extremely difficult for Latina women to achieve recognition in leadership positions and to be elected because of a lack of voter base and a lack of support for the possibility of a woman holding a seat.

In closing, the gender bias that exists in the inflexible immigration policies of the United States creates obstacles for Asian and Latino immigrant women in integrating their identity to the professional, political, and educational aspects of the United States. The disadvantages that Asian and Latino immigrant women face creates a divide between the different genders even after arrival in that immigrant women often cannot move forward with occupation-specific assessment procedures and training in the

same way as immigrant men can. By applying a gender neutral and a gender-sensitive lens to the strict immigration policies of the United States, the additional barriers of gender and ethnic bias that may bar them in finding success in their professional careers can be reformed. In the 1960s and the 1970s, Asian and Latino immigrant women had newly instilled confidence and inspiration from the African American Civil Rights Movement to fight for better conditions within their own communities. They were able to establish a “new ethnicity” that allowed them to confidently establish their diverse ethnicity cultures in the underrepresented scientific and political spheres of American society. The development of a science identity, “the extent to which a student identifies as a science person” (Diamond and Stebleton 2), allows Asian and Latino immigrant women achieve internal and external recognition as they see themselves belonging to the STEM

community and as others see them as a science person, respectively. Internal and external recognition can be amplified with Asian and Latino immigrant women in positions of power in STEM fields who serve as “identity agents”, or a person looked up to by others as an example to be imitated. Finally, Asian and Latino immigrant women are at a disadvantage in attaining opportunities in the sphere of political influence as White men are uniquely placed in close proximity of political influence, while Asian and Latino immigrant women are the least visible group and are usually placed in a space completely outside the field of political competition. As a result, Asian and Latino immigrant women may disproportionately be inhibited from building successful careers in politics. The problems of under representation and workplace inequity of Asian and Latino immigrant women are still present today among women who work in male dominated STEM fields.

Discrimination and sexual harassment are seen as more frequent, and gender is often perceived as more of an impediment than an advantage to career success in those fields (Funk and Parker 1). The pay inequalities between women of color in STEM and their White counterparts also represents the same problems that persist in our society today. According to a 2018 report by the Pew Research Center, underrepresented minorities in STEM earn much less than their White counterparts. For instance, black women earn about 87% of white women’s salary and about 62% of white men’s salary. Hispanic women earn about 85% of white women’s salary and about 61% of white men’s salary (Pew Research Center 1). Though the under representation of Asian and Latino immigrant women is still very apparent in the United States Government today, ethnic minority women made history in the 2020 Congressional races. Representatives Alexandria Ocasio Cortez,

Rashida Talib, Ayanna Pressley and Ilhan Omar — otherwise known as The Squad — were all re-elected and will be welcoming a new cohort of women to the House (Coulehan 1). Cori Bush won her race for Missouri's 1st District, making her the first Black woman to represent the state in Congress (Coulehan 1). Bush is known for her leadership role in the Ferguson protests and as a Black Lives Matter activist (Coulehan 1). Down South, Michele Rayner-Goolsby was elected to the state House of Florida, making her the first Black openly LGBTQ+ woman member of the Florida legislature (Coulehan 1). Georgia also elected its first openly gay LGBTQ+ member of the legislature, Kim Jackson, who will now serve in the state Senate (Coulehan 1). In Oklahoma, Mauree Turner was elected to the state House for the 88th District (Coulehan 1). Turner, who is queer, is now the first Muslim person elected to the Oklahoma state legislature (Coulehan 1). Congresswoman

Veronica Escobar was re-elected to El Paso's 16th Congressional District and is looking forward to building on the foundation of efforts she's worked on during her first term, which includes women's reproductive rights and immigration (Coulehan 1). A record number of minority immigrant women made history in 2020, overcoming the traditional barriers of being placed in a field completely outside of the sphere of political influence and succeeding in the fight to find a voice in the United States Government.

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