ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Negotiating and Reinventing Identities by South Asian Women in the Context of Transnational Mobility

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Abstract

This study investigates the experiences of women spouses of international students from South Asia in the United States to understand how they navigate, adapt, and reinvent their identities in the new environment. Through intimate narratives gathered from 15 participants via semi-structured qualitative interviews, their lived experiences were thoroughly examined. Employing grounded theory and inductive analysis, three key themes emerged: (1) the loss of professional identities established in their home countries due to the devaluation of academic credentials and work experience in the new setting; (2) the challenges of identity conflict encountered while transitioning between different work cultures; and (3) the significance placed on gendered identities and associated roles within the family sphere. The analysis highlights the dynamic evolution of these women's identities, shaped by the intersectionality of various systems of oppression. Despite facing compromised status and familial responsibilities, the participants exhibited resilience by embracing differences and redefining meanings of life across times and spaces. This study contributes to our understanding of how transnational mobility for higher education from the Global South to the Global North, sustained by the racialized labor market, perpetuates a heteronormative gender order that privileges men and marginalizes women.

Keywords Cultural capital · Heteropatriarchy · Identity negotiation · Occupational mobility · South Asia · Women spouses

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Introduction

Universities in North America have seen a significant increase in international student enrollment, especially in the United States, which remains the top choice for international students (Opendoors, 2023). Many graduate students from the Global South come to the US with their spouses, who are often women (Bordoloi, 2016). These accompanying spouses usually have university degrees and work experience in their home countries (Suto, 2009). They are commonly referred to as "trailing spouses" (Hiller & McCaig, 2007), as they leave their careers to support their husbands' pursuit of education abroad (Park, 2009). This decision is influenced by the belief about the US as a land of opportunities not only for their husbands but also for themselves. Prevailing discourses create an optimistic narrative, fostering aspirations for their personal and professional growth (Elitok & Nawyn, 2023). However, these women face various challenges, including work permit restrictions, engagement in reproductive labor, and devaluation of their educational credentials (Banerjee, 2022; Elitok & Nawyn, 2023; Liamputtong, 2006). US immigration law classifies student spouses as "dependents," creating barriers that force women into reproductive labor, informal employment, and unskilled, low-paying jobs, a situation referred to as a "relic of coverture" by Balgamwall (2014). Over time, this leads to a phenomenon known as "re-domestication," where these women prioritize their families' well-being at the cost of their own career advancement (Elitok & Nawyn, 2023).

While existing research has primarily focused on various aspects of international migration, scant attention has been paid to the life trajectories of the women spouses of international students. This study examines such gendered phenomenon by scrutinizing how the women spouses negotiate their often multiple and conflicting identities within the intersection of discriminatory visa policies and the racialized job market in the US. Despite their compromised status and familial responsibilities, I demonstrate that the participants exhibit resilience by embracing the divergent work cultures between their home countries and the US. The study draws upon interview data from the "dependent" women spouses of international graduate students from South Asia. The term "dependent" denotes their legal status as recipients of a family visa under the categories of F-2 or J-2. The former prohibits individuals from engaging in paid employment, while the latter allows a valid work permit for seeking paid employment. In either category, it is crucial to note that the legal standing of these women is intricately linked to the legal status of their husbands, thereby constraining the autonomy of the visa holders. Ultimately, the study aims to enhance our understanding of how transnational mobility for higher education from the Global South to the US subtly reproduces a heteronormative gender order that privileges men and marginalizes women.

Transnational Mobility and Immigrant[1] Identities

This study draws theoretical inspiration from existing scholarship on the intersection between identity and transnational mobility, specifically within two major strands: acculturation and social mobility. The U-curve theory of acculturation has been extensively employed to examine the process of immigrants' acculturation as they navigate their identities across time and space (Gutman & Yemini, 2023; Lysgaard, 1955; Oberg, 1960; Zhao & Schartner, 2023). According to this theory, individuals adapt to new identities by progressing through various successive stages. A notable study by Sakamoto (2006) offers a robust illustration of the expanded version of the U-curve theory. The research focused on 30 Japanese students and their spouses, delving into the nuanced processes through which academic sojourners navigate their identities across multiple cultural spheres during pre-sojourning, sojourning, and post-sojourning stages in the US. Sakamoto introduced a Model of Cultural Negotiation, comprising six stages that shape individuals' identities: cultural encounters, acculturation, resistance to the host culture and re-enculturation into the original culture, reevaluation of the host culture(s), reevaluation of the original culture, and transculturation.

The theory of social mobility represents another major conceptual framework applied in the study of transnationals' evolving identities (Fokber, 2019; Manohar, 2019). This concept typically signifies the extent to which an individual or group can bring about a change in their status and position within the social hierarchy. Historical studies on social mobility often employ occupation as a key indicator of an individual's identity (van Leeuwen & Maas, 2010). Occupational change, whether in the form of upward or downward mobility, indicates any shift in an individual's occupational or employment status throughout their life, influencing their identity within societal stratification (Kerr et al., 1973). Empirical findings from studies on the work experiences of educated and skilled women immigrants in many Global North countries demonstrate a detrimental impact on their professional identities and career trajectories (Bordoloi, 2016; Fokber, 2019; Manohar, 2019; Meares, 2010). These women often find themselves unemployed or working in "low-skilled" jobs, a phenomenon referred to as "brain waste" (Batalova et al., 2016). Additionally, a consistent pattern emerges wherein women spouses experience a reduction in earnings when migrating internationally with their husbands as primary candidates, even when the wives have greater earning potential than their husbands (Cooke, 2003). This gendered phenomenon of identity positions has been labeled in various ways, including de-skilling (Man, 2004), feminization (Ho & Alcorso, 2004), compromised careers (Suto, 2009), and re-domestication (Elitok & Nawyn, 2023). Compounding these challenges, heteropatriarchal cultural norms, which prioritize men's careers and confine women to roles deemed suitable for reproductive labor (Cooke, 2003; Laur-

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[1] I Acknowledge the Distinct Demographic Categories of Sojourners, Including International Students and Their Spouses, and Immigrants. Within the Context of the Current Study, it is Noteworthy that, with the Exception of One Participant, all Respondents Disclosed Their Intention to Remain and seek Employment in the US Subsequent to the Completion of Their Husbands' Education. In Light of this Observation, the Study References Literature that Addresses both Identity categories—sojourners and Immigrant Populations, with a Specific Focus on Perspectives of the Transnationals from South Asia.

ing & Selmer, 2010), contribute to a complex network of overlapping oppressions (Elitok & Nawyn, 2023) based on unequal gender identities.

US immigration policies exert divergent impacts on transnationals' opportunities for social mobility and identity trajectories (Banerjee, 2022; Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). For example, dependent family visa status, particularly F2, is a primary constraint preventing spouses of international students from engaging in gainful employment. This barrier not only creates multiple dimensions of dependence among immigrants but also manifests in the exertion of patriarchal control by men over their spouses (Balgamwalla, 2014; Banerjee, 2019). Consequently, women possessing substantial human capital encounter daunting obstacles in advancing their identities as professionals. One major factor contributing to this occupational regression is the systematic devaluation of foreign credentials and work experience, resulting in the deskilling of their professional competencies and creating a barrier to accessing career opportunities (Suto, 2009). Purkayastha's (2005) study found that even women with medical degrees from South Asia, officially categorized as high-skilled, faced significant challenges in re-entering their respective fields in the US due to the prevailing segregated access to jobs based on the geographical origin of their medical qualifications. Bordoloi (2015) similarly demonstrates that the loss of professional identity in the context of the US resulted in substantial damage to long-term career prospects, compelling these women to rely on their husbands and generating structural barriers in their pursuit of opportunities. These diverse obstacles collectively contribute to their conditions of underemployment and precarious situations (Anderson, 2015). The intricate interplay of these factors significantly influences and shapes their gender identities.

Cultural Capital and Immigrant Identities

While some migrants are highly sought after in global labor markets due to their transnationally valid cultural capital (Triadafilopoulos, 2013; Weiss, 2005), attributed to their attainment of skilled positions in the host country labor market (Nowicka, 2014: 171), others often encounter difficulties in utilizing their skills without compromising the status, reputation, and cultural capital (Nowicka, 2014; Ji & Batalova, 2020). Several studies indicate that women experience compromised identities in host countries compared to their male counterparts (Elitok & Nawyn, 2023; Purkayastha, 2005; Meares, 2010). To comprehend these dynamics of life situations, we need to consider both agency and structure to understand international students' women spouses' lived experiences in the U.S., allowing us to examine their identity negotiations at personal and structural levels. Bourdieu's (1986) notion of cultural capital helps explain the identity trajectories of the highly educated women population in this study.

Bourdieu (1986) introduces capital as a collection of valued resources with the potential capacity to "produce profits and reproduce itself in an identical or expanded form" (p 241). One of the ways the capital is realized is through educational credentials or degrees, which represent institutionalized aspects of cultural capital. Institutionalized cultural capital gains institutional recognition usually in the form of an individual's academic qualifications or credentials, and this in turn plays a prominent

role in the labor market. As an example, Bauder (2005a) makes a case when he mentions that immigrants embody the habitus of a foreign place, and this habitus may not match the rules of the labor market in the new context. Habitus is a system of disposition and a key to social reproduction since it helps to create and monitor the ordinary practices of social life (Bourdieu, 1977). Apart from attitudes or behaviors and cultural goods, cultural capital is actualized through an institutionalized state of academic qualifications, degrees and informal education (Bourdieu, 1986).

After arriving in the US, South Asian women spouses of graduate students bring capital acquired in their home country. However, the geographical relocation may lead to a reduction in the functionality and recognition of their habitus, as cultural capital becomes contingent on the specific context (Kelly & Luis, 2006; Weiss et al., 2018). Consequently, the non-transferability of context-specific cultural capital into the host country can result in unexpected identity trajectories. In response to this challenge, the skilled women sojourners need to enhance the perceived value of their capital by adopting new strategies in the host country (Creese & Wiebe, 2012). Bauder's (2005b) study of the employment situations of South Asian immigrants in Vancouver, Canada, shows that "being unfamiliar with the rules of the Canadian labor market, immigrants may fail to navigate the labor market effectively or may even inadvertently communicate to Canadian employers that they are not culturally competent for an advertised job" (p. 83). Additionally, people may bring the identity depositions from their home countries of categorizing types of jobs tied to a status symbol. Bauder's (2005b) findings show that South Asians tend to have hierarchical attitudes about different types of jobs and classify them as tied to the identity of a particular social class. This means working in a restaurant, for example, can be tied to a working-class identity while owning a restaurant would be considered more middle- or higher-class marker.

The exploration of identity emerges as a crucial factor within the relocations of women sojourners, navigating challenges like diminished educational credentials, discriminatory visa policies, and a complex job market. Identity, in this context, denotes the social significance attributed to the self (Liamputtong, 2006). Since identity is enacted in interaction through different social relationships (McMahon, 1995), it tends to be an 'unstable, multiple, fluctuating, and fragmented nature of the contemporary self' (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000:8). Identity constitutes various traits, experiences, and memories that acquire meaning within specific social situations. In this study, cultural capital serves as a crucial conceptual framework for understanding gendered identities, offering a heuristic lens to examine the life trajectories of transnational individuals under the "dependent" visa status.

Methods, Participants and Data

Having initially entered the United States as a dependent spouse of a graduate student, my personal experiences paved the way for the exploration in this study. First, I undertook a pilot study as part of my qualitative research class focusing on one South Asian country to fulfill the graduate course's research paper requirements. During this phase, I interviewed three women who were spouses of graduate students from

Nepal. This research experience helped me hone my skills in interviewing and data coding. Recognizing the significance of documenting the voices of this underrepresented demographic, I pursued an MA dissertation on the subject, aiming to include a more diverse range of participants. To achieve maximum diversity in sampling, the university administration assisted by circulating recruitment letters across the campus, urging individuals who met the criteria to reach out to me. This effort resulted in six individuals contacting me to participate in the study.

The remaining participants were approached using snowball sampling, also known as chain referral sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). For the purpose of the dissertation research, I ended up interviewing ten participants. However, to enhance credibility for this paper, five more individuals were interviewed, bringing the total sample population to 15. However, after conducting 13 interviews, I realized that no new information was emerging, indicating saturation had been reached. Six participants were interviewed twice. Additionally, I conducted participant validation checks with three participants after formulating my major thematic categories. The repeated interviews and validation checks helped enhance the confirmability of my analysis. The recursive data sources helped me triangulate some key claims against my reflexivity and prior identity as a South Asian graduate student's spouse. This suggested a potential transferability of the findings in studying similar demography in other contexts. Additionally, I sought peer review of the identified themes from a qualitative researcher within a distinct academic department, originating from South Asia and presently situated in the United States. As this peer had no direct involvement in the study, his perspective offered valuable insights from both an insider (possessing intimate knowledge of the South Asian context) and outsider (lacking direct involvement in the research) standpoint, thereby augmenting the credibility and corroboration of the research findings. All of these processes contributed to achieving trustworthiness in both the research process and the resulting findings.

Motivated by the notion that interviews unravel the narratives of individuals and aid in understanding the world from the subject's perspective (Charmaz, 2014), I employed qualitative interviews to understand the identity trajectories of South Asian women in the US. Participants were selected based on the criterion of being South Asian women spouses of male international students pursuing graduate studies in the US. All male spouses were graduate students at Coastline University (pseudonym) in the Polynesian region of the US. Additionally, participants were required to possess at least a college degree (minimum undergraduate), have prior employment in their home countries, quit their jobs before arriving in the US, and enter the US as "dependents" of their husbands with either a J-2 or an F-2 visa status. The names used in this study are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the participants. Human subject approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board before contacting the participants.

Each interview ranged from one to three hours, and they were recorded and transcribed in full. The interviews typically began by gathering demographic information from the participants and addressing general questions related particularly to their educational credentials, and occupational status prior coming to the US. Then they were asked about their prior expectations regarding their prospective life and the current lived experiences in the US. The interviews included numerous follow-up ques-

tions. Of particular interest during the interviews was their subjective understanding and interpretation of their identities as they described their life trajectories. Table 1 provides the basic demographic information about the participants.

Of the 15 interviewees, seven had teaching experience in school, colleges or universities within their respective home countries. Two individuals had professional backgrounds in non-governmental organizations, while other one having worked in a tourism company, two others in a bank, one individual employed in an information technology company, and two in private companies; notably, all interviewees came from major urban centers in South Asia. Eleven participants held master's degrees in diverse fields, while four of them had completed bachelor's degree in different fields. Their age ranged from 24 years to 49 years. Most participants came from middle-class backgrounds, collectively representing a generation that experienced relatively greater freedom in comparison to their mothers' generation, particularly in the context of choosing career paths and witnessing some relaxation of traditional patriarchal gender roles. At the time of the interviews, six participants had at least one child after their arrival in the US, one of them had left a child with the grandparents in her

Table 1 Research participants and their demographic information

Name	Home country	Highest level of education	Work experience in home country	Visa type	Current occupation
Meena	Nepal	MA in English Education	2 years teaching	J-2	Cashier in store
Kamala	Nepal	MA in English literature	10 years teaching	F-2	Babysitting
Soma	Nepal	MA in English Literature	6 years teaching	F-2	Unemployed
Juna	Nepal	BBS	1 year experience in a bank	F-2	Informal household help for a family
Tanuja	India	MA Public Health	11 years in an INGO	J-2	Fast food restaurant
Preeti	India	MA in Travel and Tourism	9 years in travel and tourism company	F-2+J-2	Pre-school teacher
Shilpa	India	BA in Biotechnology	2 years in a private company	F-2	Babysitting
Deepali	India	MBS	1 year in a bank	F-2	Unemployed
Huma	Pakistan	BBA	2 years teaching	J-2	Unemployed
Noor	Pakistan	MA in Literature	4 years teaching	J-2	Working in ethnic grocery store
Hajiya	Bangladesh	MS in Information Technology	3 years as IT personnel	F-2	Unemployed
Tamanna	Bangladesh	MS in Computer Science	3 years teaching	J-2	Bakery store
Malini	Sri Lanka	MA in International Relations	3 years in an INGO	J-2	Unemployed
Chhimi	Bhutan	MA in Accounting	4 years working in private organization	J-2	Fast food restaurant
Sonam	Bhutan	BA in Child Education	6 years working in a school	J-2	Fast food restaurant

home country, while many others expressed intentions to start a family soon. Their duration of stay in the US varied, ranging from 2 to 8 years. All these individuals had discontinued their employment in their home countries before relocating to the US.

Following Charmaz's (2014) constructivist approach, I employed an analytical method that seeks to understand the data by incorporating contextual information and the subjective understanding of the respondents. Aligned with the foundational principles of Glaser and Strauss's (2017) grounded theory, an inductive method was employed to discern emergent themes within the dataset. Within the corpus of transcribed data, my analysis concentrated on instances and incidents in which the participants defined and made meaning of their identities as they narrated their life trajectories. Although generalizability is not the goal of this research, I believe that findings are applicable to similar settings or individuals given the structural constraints in the United States. As grounded theory aims to uncover insights into patterned relationships among social actors and the way these interactions construct reality (Glaser & Strauss, 2017), I ensured that my research echoed this ethos through rigorous in-depth interview and multiple levels of coding, including initial, focused (or axial), and theoretical coding to extract first-order, second order and aggregate themes. To facilitate a clearer understanding of the analysis, Fig. 1 presents the systematic approach I followed in coding and creating the thematic categories.
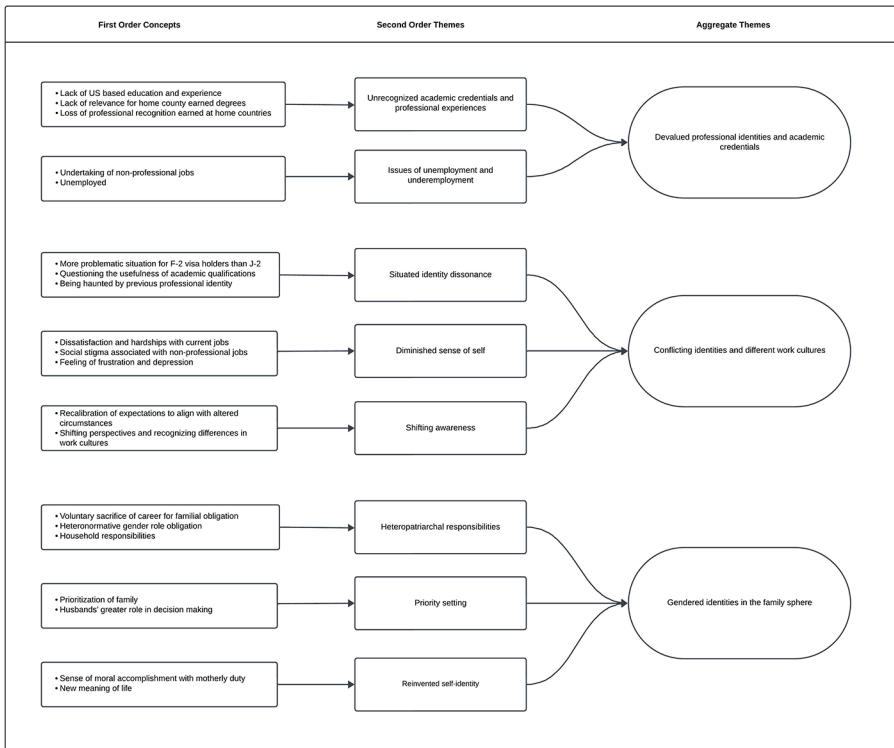

Fig. 1 Data structure figure. Graphic program: Lucid visual Collaboration suite

Findings

The evolving identity trajectories of the South Asian women in the study were the result of the interaction between their gendered conceptualization of the self and various social structures in the US and in South Asia. The three themes presented below unravel the complex dynamics underlying the participants' constructions and rationalizations of who they are, and the social context variously shaped by the academic credentials, job market, work cultures, and gendered family responsibilities.

Professional Identities and the Devaluation of Academic Credentials

Upon their entry into the US, the participants confronted many obstacles, involving both personal and structural nature. This experience significantly influenced their sense of the self when their identities as educated professionals were not recognized by the job market. A notable issue identified is the widespread issue of underemployment or unemployment, attributable to the lack of relevant labor market experiences within the US and the devaluation of educational credentials obtained in their home countries. The participants had anticipated a more seamless transition, grounded in their prior academic credentials and professional experience; however, this expectation failed to materialize. Preeti, originating from India, concisely summarizes how the employment challenges impacted her sense of the self,

> *When you come to the USA, they [employers] always want you to do their course in their universities in their level. Maybe they think that their level and our level is not the same and they cannot accept the degree from there. I was very sad. People here ask how you could speak such good English. They have a policy that whoever comes here no matter what you have, get your degree from this county [the US] and then only you approach for a job.*

Preeti expressed disappointment, observing that her master's degree in Travel and Tourism and years of work experience in India lacked relevance in securing a desired job in the US. Preeti held J2 visa which permitted her legal employment in the US. She said she had anticipated of getting a job similar to her previous one. Although she did not have a legal barrier for work permission, her story revealed a structural barrier in the form of a lack of academic recognition from the US. This discrepancy is regulated in a way that allocates limited acknowledgement for designations from foreign institutions, for example, from South Asian countries. Another participant, Malini, from Sri Lanka recounted a similar experience:

> *I never have had a degree from this country [the US] and though my English is good, it is not my first language. I applied to several places for the job even where the educational requirement was less than mine. Even though I have several years of experience working in the Philippines and Sri Lanka, I could not get the job, perhaps the problem lies in their [employers] thinking, they doubt my skills and qualification.*

Despite the assertion that women relocating to the US as "dependents" of career-pursuing husbands encounter language proficiency as a significant impediment to reestablishing their careers in the US (Elitok & Nawyn, 2023), Preeti and Malini do not seem to have language-related challenges. Moreover, Malini's professional background extends beyond her native Sri Lanka; however, this intercountry diversification in work experience did not appear to enhance her employability. Her account implies that employers in the US may not comprehensively evaluate job applicants based on their skills and experience if they come from other countries.

Tanuja, a professional with prior employment in an international non-government organization specializing in HIV/AIDS and reproductive health in India, boasting over a decade of work experience and a background of international tasks, entered the US as a "dependent" of her husband with the expectation of securing a commensurate position. Nevertheless, she expressed her frustration, revealing the pervasive structural constraints that simply disqualify the credentials and experiences of immigrants from her home country. Possessing a robust educational qualification and a wealth of experiences in her specialized domain, her current employment in a fast-food context appears incongruous and fails to leverage the depth and breadth of her skills and knowledge. Tanuja stated,

> I was hoping that there [in the US] might be some jobs on HIV/AIDS and reproductive health and I can go and work'…. I was frustrated for not getting the similar kind of opportunity here and I do not think they will offer any opportunity of my level and I could not get a job when I applied even for a bit lower level'…. the labor market is not that what you think. I finally started working in subway.

The stratified job market in the US prevents people from using the skills they learned before coming to the US. Tanuja's response shows that places where someone gets their degree from is important for how well migrant women can find jobs in the new country. The degree is a type of cultural knowledge that affects how they fit into the job market. Another participant, Meena shared her experience of attending job interviews in the US,

> I attended so many interviews for educated jobs; I even cannot remember all, every time they asked me if I have any degree from the US, I am tired of it and then finally I ended up working in a grocery store.

Meena's use of the phrase "ended up working in a grocery store" clearly indicates that the position she obtained did not align with her professional aspirations. The participants consistently articulated their underutilized skills and experiences in the US market, similar to a pattern known as "brain waste" (Batalova et al., 2016) mentioned earlier. All these experiences impacted these women's conceptualization of who they were and what they could do in the US, contributing to the devaluation of their professional identity by the market.

Conflicting Identities While Shuttling Between Different Work Cultures

As their academic qualifications and professional experiences acquired in South Asia were subject to devaluation or outright disregard in the US, these women experienced tensions and contradictions regarding their skills and professional identities. They were compelled to navigate the constricting parameters of the available options. This meant that these women needed to recalibrate their expectations to align with the demands of their altered circumstances. A notable subset expressed sentiments of frustration, and in certain instances, yielded to states of hopelessness, with some participants reporting manifestations of depression during this transition. They stated of being frequently haunted by their prior professional positions and the associated higher social status they had occupied in South Asia as they vented out the nexus between unemployment, regulatory constraints, and psychological well-being. This particular condition was much more problematic for those with the F-2 visa status, who were unemployed due to the lack of a valid work permit.

Upon finding herself to undertake an informal babysitting job as the only available option, Kamala demonstrated a distinct aversion to the job, as articulated in her response: *"when the baby was coming to my house, it was a kind of nightmare to me."* Due to her F-2 visa status, she could not formally apply for any jobs. Within this context, Kamala conveyed an intense "sense of deprivation", as her existing circumstances starkly deviated from her prior career expectations. The misalignment between her professional aspirations and the needs of her present role prompted her to question the practical utility of her academic qualifications, as she said, "*what is the use of my education that I completed in my country and all those experiences teaching in a college? I need a degree from here. I need US education and experience."* This reflective comment summarizes an emotional illustration of the incompatibility between her background and the realities of her current employment, thereby illuminating a notable disconnection in her career trajectory.

In instances where the participants failed to identify desired career prospects, they were often overwhelmed by reminiscences of their former career statuses. Such nostalgic sentiments typically surfaced during moments of reflection when participants recalled their prior professional positions and drew comparisons with their current employment situations. For instance, Soma experienced a wave of nostalgia when she compared her current state of unemployment in the US with her former role as a college teacher in Nepal. She stated,

> *My job and my career back in my country used to haunt me all the time. I used to think that I had a very good job in Nepal. Besides working in a college, I used to do translation jobs. I used to write articles in a newspaper. But here I am not like that. I think things work differently here.*

A parallel situation is clearly depicted in Meena's account as well. Confronted with the absence of gainful employment commensurate with her qualifications, she resorted to seeking a position in a retail store. However, she was rejected from this type of job as well due to the lack of related work experience. Faced with this difficulty, Meena opted to disguise her prior qualifications and experiences to align

more closely with the prerequisites of the positions for which she was applying. She recalled her experience,

> *Even applying to two or three places where my qualification and experience met, I immediately knew that I could not get the job there. Then I revised my resume and started applying for manual work; I had to struggle hard for a long time even to get this type of store job. Now I have to do a lot of physical work that I had not expected before. Sometimes, I feel I am discriminated against in my workplace.*

Consequently, Meena shifted her strategy towards seeking manual labor positions grappling with unanticipated challenges. The statement also highlights the prolonged effort entailed in securing a store job, signifying a departure from her initial expectations regarding the nature of the work. The prestige associated with the nature of their work this way constituted a significant aspect of the identity of these women.

Tamanna, employed in a bakery store, manifested notable reluctance in disclosing this information within her diasporic ethnic community. From her perspective, the revelation of her employment in a bakery store had the potential to subject her prestige and identity to humiliation. According to her, such disclosure could mean a social stigma, especially if her relatives and family members in her home country learned about her current job. She recalled a specific instance when a member of her ethnic community visited her workplace:

> *You know what happened one day? I was working in a restaurant, and a Bangladeshi visited the store. He did not know I was working there. I saw him entering the store, but he did not see me. Then I told my friend to take care of my duty for a while and then I went to the kitchen to hide from him. I still remember I was feeling so hard to face him that I was working in such a bakery shop.*

Tamanna aspired to maintain her purported middle-class recognition within her ethnic community, a pivotal element in her attempt to sustain her societal standing. She frequently encountered a conflict within her professional identities, thereby constituting a significant source of anxiety and potential public stigma. These unfulfilled expectations translated into an undesired identity within the occupational hierarchy.

While initially experiencing intense feelings of denigration and occupational devaluation, the participants eventually underwent a shift in their perspectives as they came to recognize the variances in work cultures across different cultural contexts. When Tanuja was offered a position in a fast-food restaurant, initially, she experienced shock and frustration, attributing such job to a low societal status. However, over time, her attitude underwent a notable transformation, as she articulated, "*I stopped thinking in a traditional way like you have to have a super prestigious job and this and that.*" At this juncture, Tanuja had already embraced the distinct work culture in the US. She stated further, *"If I were there [in my home country], I would never ever work in a restaurant because back home people do not see it as a good way, but when I came here, I later realized that people respect work here, not what you are doing."* Tanuja's response alludes to the social context in most South

Asian countries where women from middle-class backgrounds typically refrain from undertaking non-skilled or manual work beyond their households. Another participant Kamala likewise legitimized her current employment and accepted her present professional situation independently of her prior career: *"I knew life goes that way, so I just started thinking that's okay, it's just for four or five years. This is how things work here in America."* A change in perspectives like this indicates the participant's capacity to not only resist the racialized job situation in the US but also to show their awareness of cross-cultural differences in work cultures. As a result, they experienced a transition in their identities resulting from their initial emotions of surprise, shock and frustration to an acknowledgement for different types of jobs.

Gendered Identities in the Family Sphere

Participants' responses showed tensions and contradictions, validations and resistance, and frustrations and satisfactions as they contemplated on their gendered identities in family and society. Many conveyed that they had made identity "sacrifices" of careered women in deference to familial obligations, particularly concerning their husbands and children. It is important to note that the concept of sacrifice extends beyond the mere act of resigning from their previous employment; it also includes the prioritization of family life in the US. A gendered dimension emerged in the participants' perspectives, wherein womanhood was construed as inherently tied to the imperative of learning to sacrifice as a wife, with an emphasis on strength and adaptability to fulfill their heteronormative gender roles. This point was noted by Soma when she mentioned that she started thinking her identity as not separate from her husband. Throughout her responses, she consistently demonstrated a tendency to align herself with her husband's identity, using the inclusive first-person pronoun and maintaining a cohesive pursuit of shared goals: "*our first plan was my husband getting good education and finding a good job*". The participants who were also mothers articulated that their identities as mothers provided them with the endurance and resilience necessary to adapt to various circumstances including the ones they were going through at the moment. Kamala expressed her opinion,

> *I think it happened because I am a woman. If my husband has had the same situation, then he would not just sacrifice all these things. You know that it's a male-dominated society and then we must support the male and that's the tradition and if we do not do that, we feel guilty, if we do not support them, we have that kind of upbringing, we have that kind of thinking.*

This excerpt illustrates both a resistance as well as a cultural rationale underlying these women's sacrifices. The prevailing male-dominated patriarchal tradition and the upbringing these women had received in South Asia fostered a cultural norm that normalizes voluntary "sacrifice", a practice that many women deemed essential for them. The sacrifices facilitated the attainment of university education for their husbands, potentially enabling the family to live a "standard" life in the US after their husbands find employment.

The participants articulated their gender roles within the framework of South Asian patriarchal cultural norms that prioritize raising a family, notably their responsibilities towards their children. In this context, Kamala's opinion is highly relevant,

> *My husband and baby could not stay separately, and he missed family and I had to come so I have to decide my family is more important than my career so just left my job there and came here. Now, I want to raise my kids in the US and give them a good education.*

In many instances, the participants noted that their husbands made major decisions regarding their wives' responsibilities. Kamala elaborated on this dynamic, stating, "*actually my husband wants me to take care of my kids and be at home, and he does not allow me to work at night or something like that. He thinks that he cannot take care of kids when I'm at work.*" According to her, household responsibilities and the care of children are gendered practices typically not anticipated for males. She emphasized the primary focus on addressing her daughters' needs and demands, explaining, "*I just think every day about kids … when mothers just see their kids, they feel that oh I am only for these kids. I should not think about myself. I have to do everything for my kids.*" Soma likewise asserted that women's first and foremost obligation is to take care of their children, a duty that instilled her with profound satisfaction and a great sense moral accomplishment. She said, "*the responsibility makes you feel that you have to do it because you are a mother.*" Similarly, another participant, Sonam also emphasized the centrality of her child in her life asserting, "*when you become a mother, the child becomes a focus of your life especially when the child is something you care about*". Opinions like these emphasize the transformative nature of motherhood, viewing it as a catalyst for the emergence of a new identity that elicits happiness, satisfaction and moral duty.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has shown that women spouses of international students from South Asia to the US underwent a complex trajectory of identities as they confronted an array of circumstances rooted in heteropatriarchal social norms, a racialized labor market, and institutional regulations governing immigrants' visas. The initial period was marked by their unmet expectations as they grappled with the challenges of securing employment that matched their educational background, skills, and experience. This initial disconnection caused some emotional responses, including confusion, frustration, and, in certain instances, manifestations of depression.

The devaluation of academic credentials significantly contributes to their sense of self, characterized by a perceived downward social status and occupational mobility. Similar to the paradox noted by Meares (2010), these women cannot "obtain employment because they lack local experience, and they cannot obtain local experience because employers will not hire them" (p. 477). Discriminatory visa policies exacerbate these challenges, compelling many women into compromised career trajectories. It suggests that even for those granted the opportunity to work under the J-2 visa, the

cultural capital and educational credentials are not accorded equivalent value to U.S. standards. This lack of recognition can be traced back to institutionalized cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990) where the educational credentials of the participants act as a catalyst for downward occupational mobility. This downward trajectory is exemplified by their engagement in roles perceived as "low-level," eliciting a pervasive sense of status diminution. The negative sentiments associated with these roles are further compounded by the participants' habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) cultivated in their home countries, where only white-collar occupations are deemed desirable.

Numerous studies have highlighted the challenges faced by immigrants from the Global South countries in the Global North labor market, emphasizing variations in the assessment of education and experiences depending on their region of origin (e.g., Batalova et al., 2016; Meares; 2010; Purkayastha, 2005). This variation results in disparate opportunities for acquiring highly skilled positions (Weiss, 2005). In the context of this study, Tanuja's response serves as an illustrative example; labor market disadvantages individuals like her despite possessing a well-qualified educational background, proficiency in English, and extensive work experiences in India. The conceptual framework of "ethnicity as skill" aids in comprehending how employers tend to categorize different ethnic groups into specific job roles, thereby establishing a hierarchy among migrants. This is a recurrent pattern among many studies examining employers' perceptions of ethnic and racial minority groups, leading to the underutilization of migrant skills (Batalova et al., 2016; Esses, AbuAyyash & Lapshina, 2014; Friberg & Midtbøen, 2018).

Initially, the incompatibility between the skills and expectations acquired in their home countries and the ground realities in the US led to frustration among many participants. However, over time, they began to develop a nuanced understanding of their situation and gained insights into the cultural differences between South Asia and the US. This process facilitated the formation of a revised self-identity and provided a foundation for the negotiation of multiple identities. This negotiation of multiple identities became more pronounced, especially when participants perceived a "sacrifice" of their careers. Unlike studies that depicted similar women as helpless "trailing spouses" (Hiller & McCaig, 2007), the participants in this study retained their agency by critically reshaping the meaning of their identities. The meaning of their gender-emphasized specific roles and their identity as mothers for many participants continued to instill their lives with a distinct sense of achievement.

These findings provide insights into the complex relationship of patriarchy within the discriminatory visa policy in the US. They demonstrate how the concept of "migration of love" (Aure, 2013) has guided these women toward compromised careers shaped by cultural norms prevalent in their home countries. Primarily, patriarchy has exerted a substantial influence on the decision-making process of these women as they navigate their identities amidst challenges and opportunities. This tendency of patriarchal domination is largely reflective in other South Asian people relocating in different countries (Aryal, 2023; Mehrotra, 2016). Similar to some other studies (e.g., Chen, 2009; De La Serna, 2022; Elitok & Nawyn, 2023; Meares, 2010; Purkayastha, 2005), the career prospects of these women took a backseat to the needs of their husbands and children. The emphasis placed on being a "woman" or "mother" was a recurrent identity marker, highlighting their commitment to compromising personal

advancements for the sake of the family. On the flip side, given the constraints where many of these "untapped talents" (Batalova et al., 2016) were either restricted from working or faced challenges in securing suitable employment, they actively engaged in reinventing the meaning of their lives within the context of multiple barriers.

Declarations

Ethical Approval I declare that I have no relevant or material financial interests that relate to the research described in this paper. The research described in this paper involves human participants. The research was reviewed and approved as "exempt" by the Human Subjects Committee of Institutional Review Board at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, USA. Informed consent was obtained from each human participant included in this study.

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