
IMMIGRANT WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES:

A Demographic Portrait

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by Susan C. Pearce

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The migration of women to the United States is characterized by two contradictory trends. On the one hand, over the past 20 years women have comprised a growing share of new legal immigrants admitted to the country, a trend which mirrors the feminization of migration in Europe, Africa, and Latin America since 1960. On the other hand, since 1970 women have constituted a declining share of the U.S. foreign-born population as a whole. This most likely is due to the fact that the hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants entering the country each year are predominantly male, although the numbers of undocumented women are on the rise. Reflecting the overall increase in both legal and undocumented immigration by men and women alike in recent decades, nearly half of all foreign-born women in the United States entered the country since 1990.

As with their male counterparts, today's immigrant women are most likely to come from Mexico, China, India, or the Philippines, and to settle in California, New York, Texas, or Florida. Women significantly outnumber men among immigrants from Germany, the Philippines, and South Korea. Conversely, men significantly outnumber women among Mexican, Salvadoran, and Indian immigrants. Immigrant women today are more likely than in the past to be single, to have few children, and to join the labor force. The highest rates of employment are found among women from Jamaica and the Philippines. Foreign-born women are much less likely to have graduated from high school than native-born women, but nearly as likely to have completed college and slightly more likely to have a doctorate or professional degree. The top two occupations among both foreign-born and native-born

women are "office and administrative support," followed by "sales and related," while foreign-born men are concentrated in "construction and extraction," followed by "production". About a third of newly admitted legal immigrants who are women work in professional fields.

Although changing gender roles have opened up new educational, professional, and personal opportunities for women in many parts of the world, immigrant women often find the United States to be especially liberating in this regard when compared to their home countries. However, gender disparities persist. Foreign-born women in the United States earn lower wages than either native-born women or foreign-born and native-born men. Among the recipients of employment-based visas, women are far more likely than men to be "dependent" visa holders (the spouses or children of workers receiving visas) as opposed to "principal" visa holders (the workers themselves). And immigrant women are more likely than immigrant men to enter the country as immediate relatives of U.S. citizens through the family-based immigration system. Nevertheless, modern immigrant women in the United States—like modern native-born women—have entered a greater range of occupations and achieved higher levels of independence than at any time in the past.

Among the findings of this report:

Patterns of Female Migration

- The proportion of new legal immigrants admitted into the United States who were female rose from 49.8 percent in Fiscal Year (FY) 1985 to 54.5 percent in FY 2004.

- The proportion of the adult foreign-born population in the United States that is comprised of women declined from 54.6 percent in 1970 to 50.4 percent in 2004.

Visas and Classes of Admission

- In FY 2004, 47.3 percent of all female immigrants legally admitted into the United States entered the country through the immediate-relative category of the family-based immigration system, compared to 37.6 percent of male immigrants.
- In FY 2004, 26.8 percent of women who received employment-based visas were principal visa holders (compared to 73.2 percent who were dependents of a principal visa holder), while 65.3 percent of men receiving employment-based visas were principals (vs. 34.7 percent who were dependents).

Countries of Origin

- As of 2004, the largest number of adult foreign-born women came from Mexico—four-and-a-half times more than came from China, which was the number two sending country. The remaining top-ten sending countries were the Philippines, India, Vietnam, South Korea, Cuba, El Salvador, Germany, and Canada.
- As of 2004, the proportion of the adult foreign-born population comprised of women was largest among Germans (65 percent), Filipinos (59 percent), and South Koreans (56 percent)—and lowest among Mexicans (44 percent), Salvadorans (46 percent), and Indians (47 percent).

Places of Residence

- As of 2004, 28 percent of all adult foreign-born women lived in California. The remaining top-ten states of residence for foreign-born women were New York, Florida, Texas, New Jersey, Illinois, Massachusetts, Arizona, Washington, and Virginia.

Presence in the Labor Market

- In 2004, 54 percent of adult foreign-born women were in the labor force, with the highest employment rates found among women from Jamaica (84 percent) and the Philippines (80 percent).

Occupations

- As of 2004, 15.7 percent of all employed, adult foreign-born women worked in “office and administrative support,” followed by “sales and related” at 11 percent.
- In FY 2004, 31.6 percent of all employed, adult women who legally immigrated to the United States worked in “professional and technical fields,” followed by “service” (19.9 percent) and “operators, fabricators, and laborers” (13 percent).

Wages

- In 2003, 61.7 percent of foreign-born women earned less than \$25,000, compared to 54.4 percent of native-born women and 47.8 percent of foreign-born men.
- In 2003, 5.2 percent of foreign-born women earned \$75,000 or more, compared to 4.7 percent of native-born women and 10.8 percent of foreign-born men.

Education

- In 2000, 37.9 percent of foreign-born women lacked a high-school diploma (compared to 17 percent of native-born women), while 20.3 percent of foreign-born women had a bachelor’s degree or more (compared to 21.4 percent of native-born women).
- In 2000, foreign-born women were about as likely as native-born women to have a doctorate (0.8 percent vs. 0.5 percent) or a professional degree (1.9 percent vs. 1.2 percent).

Marital Status and Family Size

- In 2004, 62.3 percent of foreign-born women were married, compared to 52.8 percent of native-born women. And 43.7 percent of married immigrant women had no children, while another 42.5 percent had just one or two.

INTRODUCTION

Popular perceptions of immigrant women in the United States, as well as in U.S. immigration policy, long have been characterized by a narrow profile of their backgrounds, professions, and lives. Familiar images are those of military brides, trailing spouses, and sex workers. Like immigrant men, however, immigrant women always have been diverse in their occupations, personal circumstances, and reasons for immigrating. Early in U.S. history, independent women often arrived on our shores, sometimes without an accompanying family. Polish immigrant Ernestine Rose came to the United States in 1836 after suing her father, a rabbi, over control of her inheritance and rejecting an arranged marriage. After her arrival, she became an abolitionist and active member of the women's movement and was renowned for her public speaking, earning the title "queen of the platform."¹ Other women immigrated with their families in tow, such as Ann Lee, or "Mother Ann," who convinced her brothers and husband to immigrate with her to the American colonies from England in 1774. She became the leader of the Shaker movement in the United States, a Protestant sect that broke off from the Quakers and eventually attracted thousands of adherents to live in Shaker villages across the country.²

The early successes of women such as these notwithstanding, U.S. immigration laws severely limited the rights and opportunities of immigrant women up until about fifty years ago. Initially, U.S. immigration laws were based upon the English common-law tradition of "coverture", under which the legal status of a woman was derived from the status of her husband. In keeping with this tradition, the first U.S. naturalization law of 1790 excluded most foreign-born women, as well as enslaved Africans and indentured servants, because they were viewed as dependents.³ As a result, a married woman could not possess an immigration status separate from that of her husband. U.S. immigration laws even contained certain twists that affected citizens. Between 1907 and 1922, for example, a female U.S. citizen could lose her citizenship if she married an immigrant man. And a woman who was a U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident could not file an immigration petition for her foreign-born husband, even though men who were U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents could file such petitions for their foreign-born wives. In 1922, one observer commented about the foreign-born that "a man is a man, while a woman is a maid, wife, widow, or mother."⁴ Advocates for change succeeded in revising U.S. immigration laws in 1952

with enactment of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), which was written in gender-neutral language.

Today, foreign-born women in the United States occupy all rungs of the socio-economic ladder. Compared to their predecessors, modern immigrant women are more likely to be single, employed, and highly educated. For instance, Azar Nafisi, an Iranian writer and college professor who was expelled from the University of Tehran for refusing to wear a veil, came to the United States and went on to write a best-selling book, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, about her underground endeavors to educate young Iranian women.⁵ Many other, less-educated women from abroad continue to arrive each year and fall into jobs or personal situations in which they are exploited and underpaid. In some urban areas, hiring halls report growing numbers of female immigrants seeking employment as day laborers. At one location in New York, for example, the number of female day laborers has doubled or tripled in the past six years to between 100 and 150 women per day, six days per week, as of 2005. One such woman is Rosario Jocha, a 49-year-old immigrant who has been lining up in a New York City hiring hall for 11 years and is still awaiting her first well-paying job. She remarks, "What else is there to do if you have nothing to eat?"⁶ Countless women like Ms. Jocha represent a burgeoning invisible labor force of women who often disappear into domestic positions, hidden in suburban neighborhoods or urban apartment complexes.

PATTERNS OF FEMALE MIGRATION

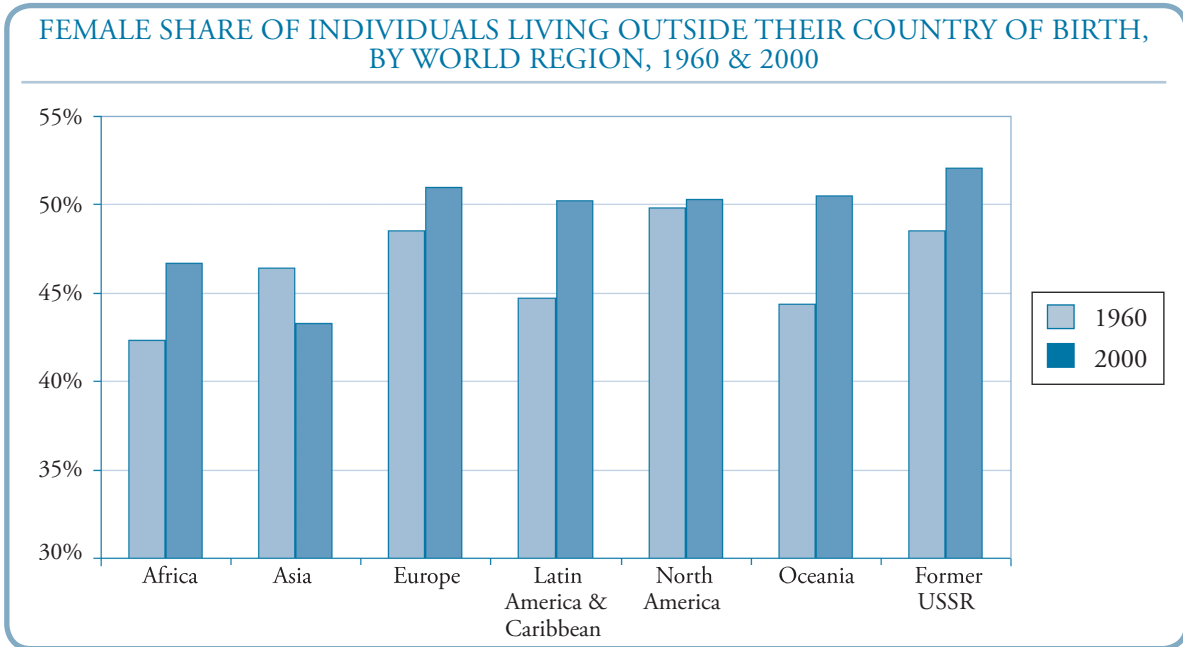
Women comprise a growing share of migrants around the world. Researchers Katharine Donato and Evelyn Patterson refer to this phenomenon as the "feminization of migration."⁷ In 1960, 46.7 percent of all people living outside their country of birth were female. This figure had risen to 48.6 percent by 2000. However, some regions experienced significantly larger increases. For instance, the female share of the foreign-born population rose from 44.4 percent to 50.5 percent in Oceania, from 44.7 percent to 50.2 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean, and from 42.3 percent to 46.7 percent in Africa (where armed conflicts in some countries since the early 1990s have displaced many women and children). In North America, the female share of the foreign-born stayed roughly the same between 1960 (49.8 percent) and 2000 (50.3 percent). Only in Asia did the female proportion of the foreign-born decrease during this period,

from 46.4 percent in 1960 to 43.3 percent in 2000 {Figure 1}.⁸ Nevertheless, the countries known as the “Asian tigers” (China, Japan, India, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan), as well as Arab countries, are attracting large numbers of women who migrate as domestic workers.⁹

In the United States, the proportion of legal immigrants admitted into the country each year who are women has generally

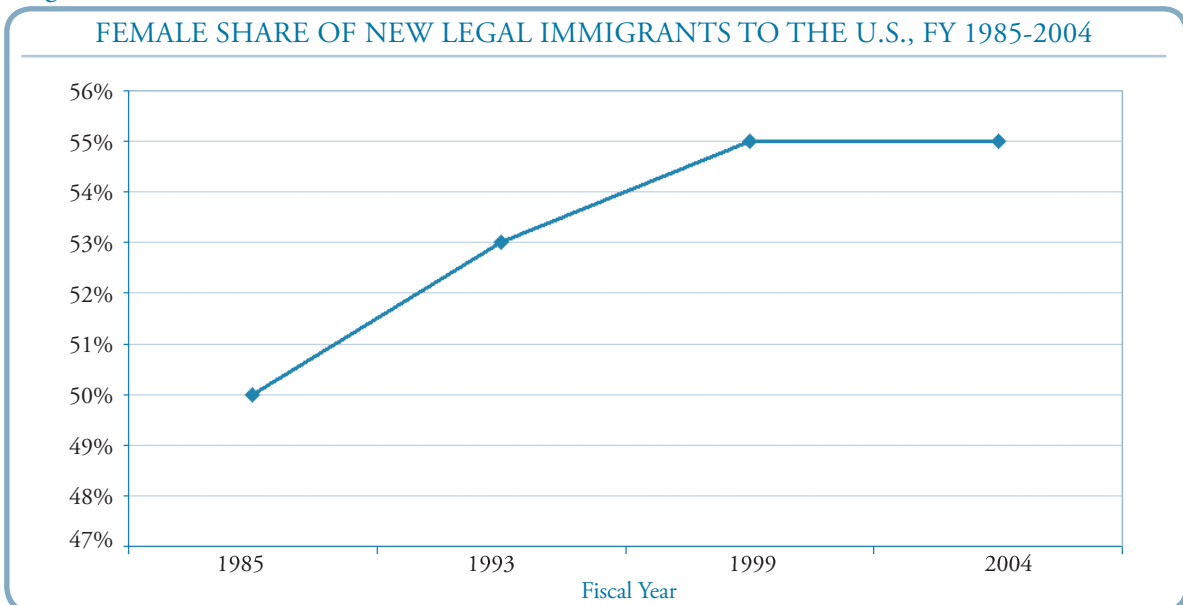
increased over the past two decades, rising from 49.8 percent in 1985 to 54.5 percent in 2004. Females have constituted more than 50 percent of legal immigration since 1993, when 53 percent of immigrant visas were awarded to women. This percentage increased to 55 percent in 1999 and has remained at approximately the same level since then {Figure 2}.¹⁰ Among immigrants 21 years of age and older, women outnumbered men by 68,000 in 2003 and 85,000 in 2004.¹¹

Figure 1:



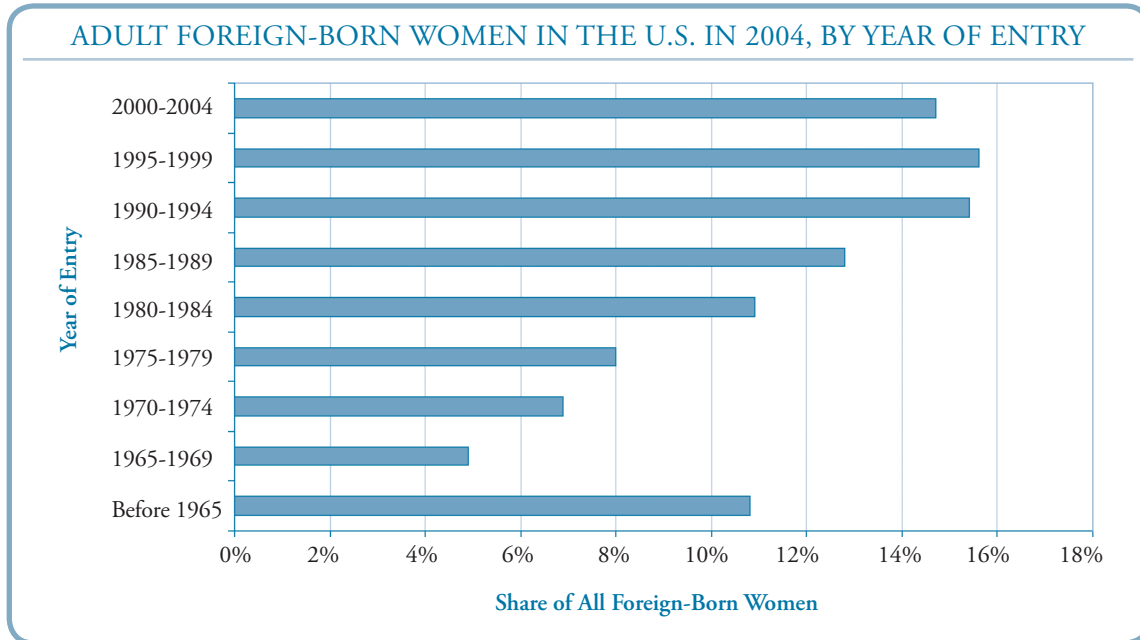
Source: U.N. Dept. of Economic & Social Affairs, *2004 World Survey on the Role of Women in Development*, 2005, p. 8, 10.

Figure 2:



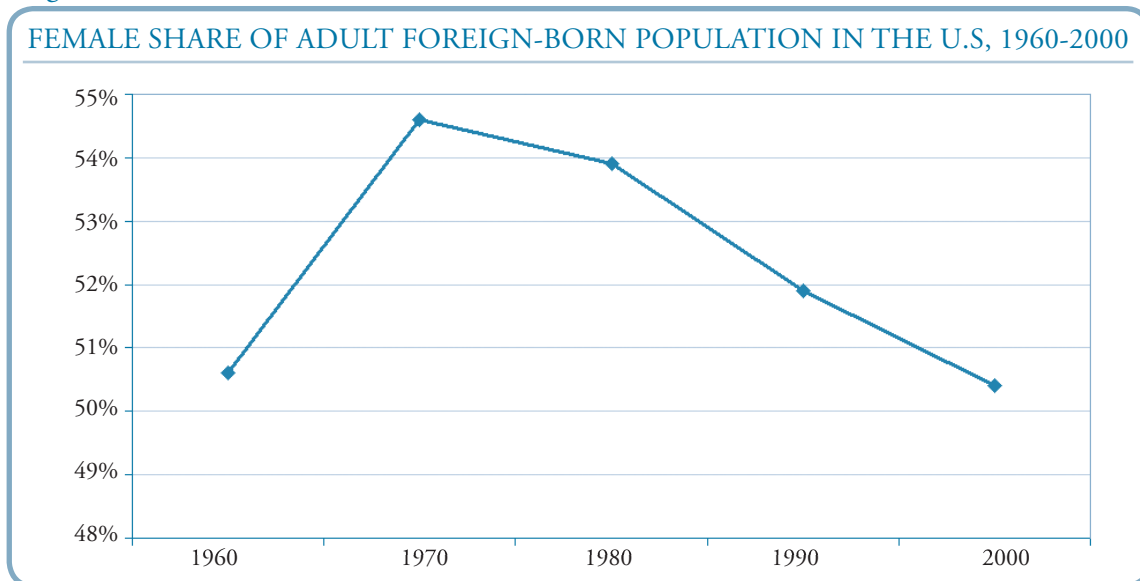
Source: Min Zhou, “Contemporary Female Immigration to the United States,” *Women Immigrants in the United States*, 2003, p. 27; Office of Immigration Statistics, *2004 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, Table 6.

Figure 3:



Source: 2004 American Community Survey.

Figure 4:



Source: U.S. Decennial Census, 1960-2000.

Historically, men constituted the large majority of immigrants in the United States until the 1930s, when new laws were introduced to allow “war brides” to join their husbands in the United States.¹² Thus, changes in immigration policy influence the gender distribution of arriving immigrants. As of 2004, 45.7 percent of all foreign-born women in the United States had entered the country on or after 1990 {Figure 3}.¹³ Immigrant women also are more likely than immigrant men to be naturalized citizens, which may be explained in part by the higher proportion of men among undocumented immigrants. In 2004, 54 percent of all naturalized citizens were women.¹⁴

Despite their rising numbers among legal immigrants, the female share of the foreign-born population as a whole in the United States has declined since 1970. In 2004, just over 50 percent of all foreign-born adults were women, compared to more than 52 percent of native-born adults.¹⁵ The female share of the adult foreign-born population rose from 50.6 percent in 1960 to 54.6 percent in 1970, then declined to 53.9 percent in 1980, 51.9 percent in 1990, and 50.4 percent in 2000 {Figure 4}.¹⁶ This decline can be attributed in part to the fact that there are more men than women among undocumented immigrants, although the number of

undocumented women is generally rising.¹⁷ Data collected by the Mexican Migration Project suggest that the number of undocumented immigrants from Mexico who are women began to increase following the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). During the 1980 to 1986 period, an estimated 25.7 percent of undocumented Mexican migrants age 13 and above were female. This number jumped to 34.3 percent between 1987 and 1992, and declined slightly to 32.5 percent between 1993 and 1998.¹⁸

There are many factors explaining the changing patterns of female migration to the United States in recent decades:

- Changes in immigration laws since 1965 have favored family reunification, allowing wives, mothers, daughters, and other female relatives to join men already in the United States.
- Labor shortages in some traditionally female professions have prompted the U.S. government to recruit female workers from abroad. Immediately after World War II, for example, the U.S. government began recruiting nurses from the Philippines to fill labor shortages.¹⁹ Following the creation of employment-preference categories in immigration law in 1965, more than 13,000 South Korean medical professionals immigrated to the United States, with the majority being female nurses.²⁰
- Women have found greater access to legal safeguards and employment opportunities in the United States than in countries with hiring and educational policies that are openly discriminatory against women.
- Some countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh have lifted bans on the emigration of women as workers. Such bans did not completely prevent labor migration by women, but rather encouraged illegal migration and human trafficking.²¹
- In some countries such as Sri Lanka and the Philippines, governments have long encouraged women to emigrate and send remittances back home.
- Shifting attitudes about family roles also have changed the immigration experience. Among Italians, for example, men traditionally immigrated, leaving entire villages in Italy without men. Approximately 80 percent of Italian immigrants to the United States in the early 20th century were men, but since the 1960s, Italian wives have been more likely to immigrate with their husbands.²²
- In recent years the “mail-order bride” business has grown in popularity. In 2005, researchers found 590,000 internet websites advertising mail-order brides. And between 4,000 and 6,000 marriages in the United States are brokered through the mail-order bride industry every year. The former Soviet Union is one of the major sending regions of these brides due to the struggles of the region’s changing economy.²³ Ironically, changing gender roles in the United States fuel this trend. Men who order foreign-born brides report that they are seeking wives more “traditional” than most native-born women.²⁴
- The displacement of women and children by armed conflicts has contributed to refugee flows. For instance, in the 1970s the United States received many women from Vietnam and Cambodia who were displaced by the Vietnam War. More recently, female refugees have fled civil wars in the former Yugoslavia and African nations such as Rwanda, Somalia, and Liberia. In addition, there is greater access now than in the past to asylum in the United States in cases of gender-based persecution.²⁵
- The growth of human trafficking, which disproportionately victimizes women and children, has added to the feminization of migration. The U.S. State Department’s most recent estimate is that between 14,500 and 17,500 people are trafficked into the United States annually.²⁶
- Tighter border controls between the United States and Mexico since the early 1990s have spurred an increase in the number of undocumented immigrants from Mexico who are women. Throughout most of the 20th century, Mexican men worked in the United States and returned home regularly, a practice called “circular migration.” With heightened border enforcement and visa processing delays, especially after 9/11, circular migration has become more difficult. Therefore, more wives and children are joining the men in their families in the United States, both legal and illegal. In addition, many wives and mothers joined their husbands in the United States after 1.8 million undocumented Mexicans, most of whom were men, received amnesty under IRCA.

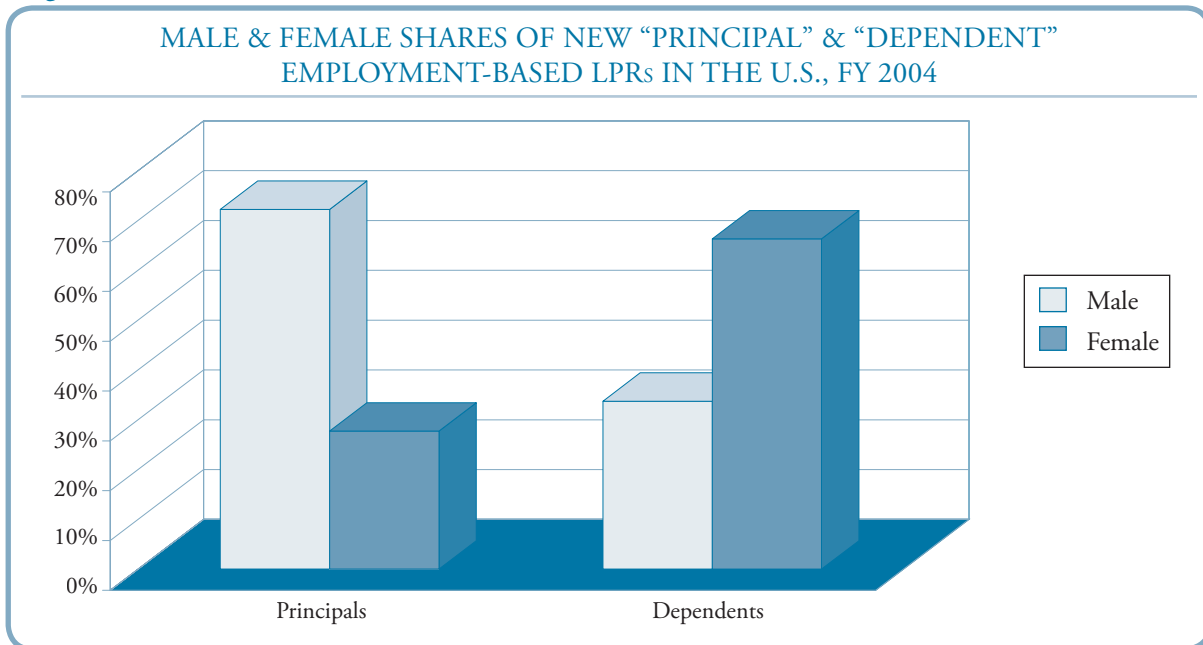
VISAS AND CLASSES OF ADMISSION

Permanent, legal immigrants to the United States generally are admitted into the country through either the family-based or employment-based immigration system. Under the family-based system, immigrants enter the country as “immediate relatives” (spouses, minor children, and parents) of U.S. citizens or under “family-sponsored preference” categories which apply to other close relatives of U.S. citizens (adult children and siblings) and qualifying relatives (spouses and unmarried children) of Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs). Although the majority of immigrants, both male and female, have come to the United States through the family-based system since 1965, women are more likely than men to enter as immediate relatives of U.S. citizens. Conversely, women are somewhat less likely than men to enter through employment-based channels. In FY 2004, 47.3 percent of female immigrants were admitted in the immediate-relative category, compared to 37.6 percent of male immigrants. Roughly equal shares were admitted under family-sponsored

preferences: 22.4 percent of women and 23.0 percent of men. A slightly lower share of women than men entered the country under “employment-based preferences”: 14.6 percent of women and 18.6 percent of men.²⁷

Although women received nearly half of employment-based immigration visas in FY 2004, they were much more likely to be dependent visa holders (the spouses or children of workers) rather than principal visa holders (the workers themselves). Women received 66.3 percent of dependent employment-based visas, while only 33.7 percent went to men. Conversely, 72.2 percent of principal employment-based visas were granted to men, as opposed to only 27.7 percent to women {Figure 5}. Looked at differently, only 26.8 percent of women receiving employment-based visas were principals (compared to 73.2 percent who were dependents), while 65.3 percent of men receiving employment-based visas were principals (vs. 34.7 percent who were dependents).²⁸

Figure 5:



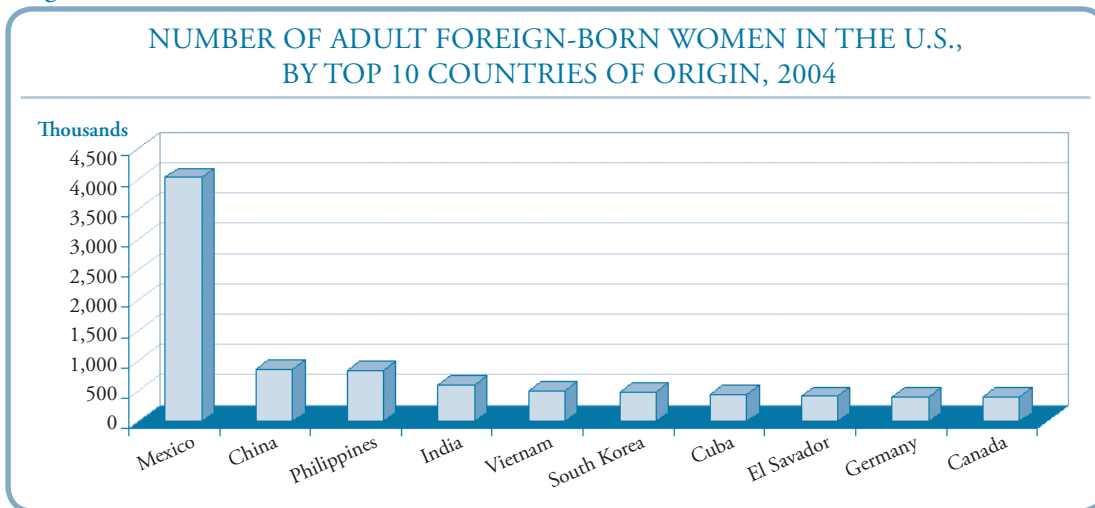
Source: Kelly Jefferys, *Characteristics of Employment-Based Legal Permanent Residents: 2004*, Table 1.

COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN

As with foreign-born men, the countries from which most foreign-born women come have changed significantly over time. In 1940, for example, Italy was the top country of origin for foreign-born women in the United States. But Italy had dropped to 7th place by 1990 and 16th by 2000. Similarly, England was among the top ten countries of origin throughout most of the 20th century, but dropped to 14th by 2000. China first appeared on the top-ten list in 1980, while El Salvador and the Dominican Republic joined the top ten in 2000.²⁹

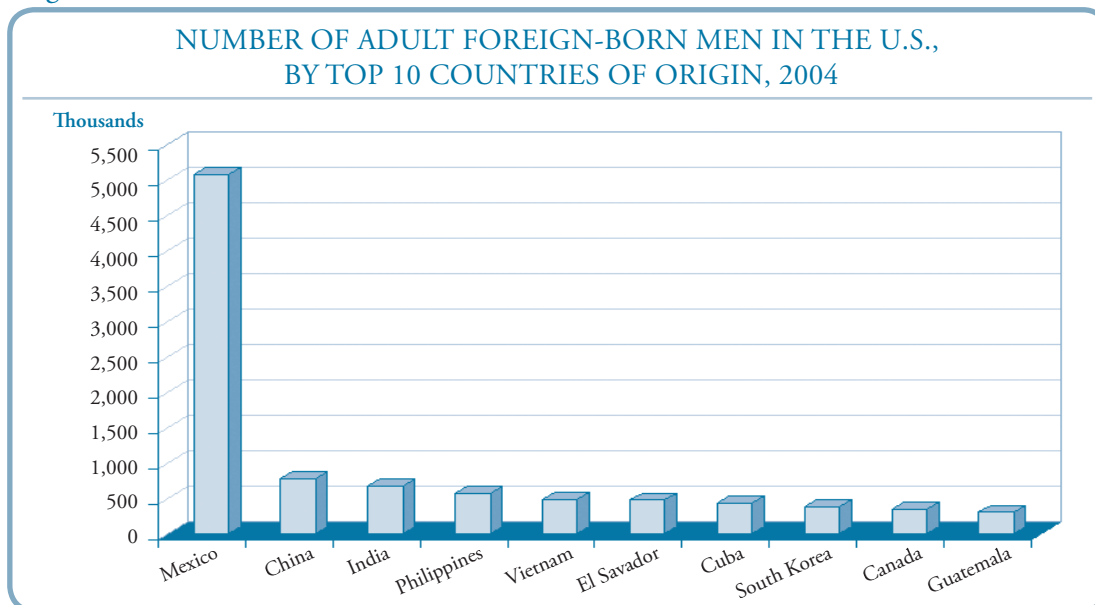
Most foreign-born women in the United States today represent the “new immigration” from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. In 2004, the largest number of foreign-born women came from Mexico—four-and-a-half times more than came from China, which was the number two sending country. Yet women continue to migrate to the United States from “older” immigrant-sending countries such as Germany. The other top-ten countries of origin in 2004 were the Philippines, India, Vietnam, South Korea, Cuba, El Salvador, Germany, and Canada {Figure 6}.³⁰ Among foreign-born men, the top ten countries of origin in 2004 were nearly the same as for women, with the exception of Germany, which was ranked 9th for women and 14th for men {Figure 7}.³¹

Figure 6:



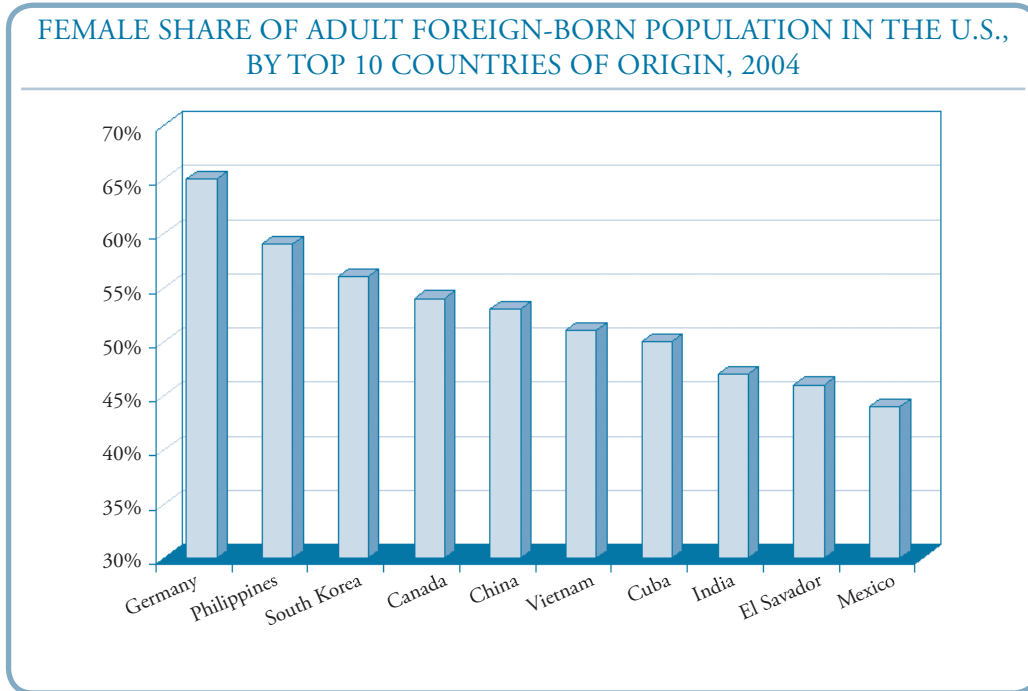
Source: 2004 American Community Survey

Figure 7:



Source: 2004 American Community Survey

Figure 8:



Source: 2004 American Community Survey

The female share of the foreign-born population in 2004 varied widely by country of origin. Women outnumbered men among immigrants from six of the top-ten countries of origin for foreign-born women: Germany, the Philippines, South Korea, Canada, China, and Vietnam. The largest share of women was found among Germans (65 percent), Filipinos (59 percent), and South Koreans (56 percent). Only 3 countries on the top-ten list sent more men than women: India, El Salvador, and Mexico {Figure 8}.³²

Looking beyond the top-ten sending countries, women also significantly outnumber men among Jamaican immigrants. For instance, in nearly every year since passage of the 1965 Immigration Act, more Jamaican women than men have immigrated to the United States. In 1967, 76 percent of Jamaican immigrants arriving in the country were women. This percentage declined to between 52 percent and 54 percent in the 1980s and 1990s,³³ but had risen to 57 percent by 2004.³⁰ Sociologist Nancy Foner observes that the long history of Jamaican women’s migration to the United States in higher numbers than men reflects the strong desire among Jamaican women for financial independence. Women in Jamaica have been in the workforce since the days of slavery and continued working in paid occupations after

emancipation in the 1830s. Caribbean women in general are breaking traditional immigration patterns in other ways, often being the first in their families to immigrate to the United States and then applying for family members under the family reunification system.³⁵

Female-to-male ratios among immigrants sometimes are affected by historical trends, such as the influx of foreign war brides into the United States after World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. Another example is the recruitment of female nurses and medical technicians from the Philippines.³⁶ Large numbers of nurses from the Philippines began to enter the United States beginning in 1948, when the U.S. government instituted the Exchange Visitors Program (EVP), a Cold War program to bolster the image of the United States internationally and to combat post-World War II labor shortages. Nurses and other professionals from abroad could stay for a maximum of two years. By the 1960s, 80 percent of the program’s participants were from the Philippines, and most of those were nurses. Between 1956 and 1969, more than 11,000 Filipino nurses participated. After their two years, however, many nurses found a way to remain in or return to the United States as immigrants.³⁷ The 1965 Immigration

Act introduced new occupational preference categories that further enabled Filipino nurses to immigrate. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) reported that between 1966 and 1970, 3,222 Filipino nurses immigrated legally (not including those who entered under the EVP).³⁸

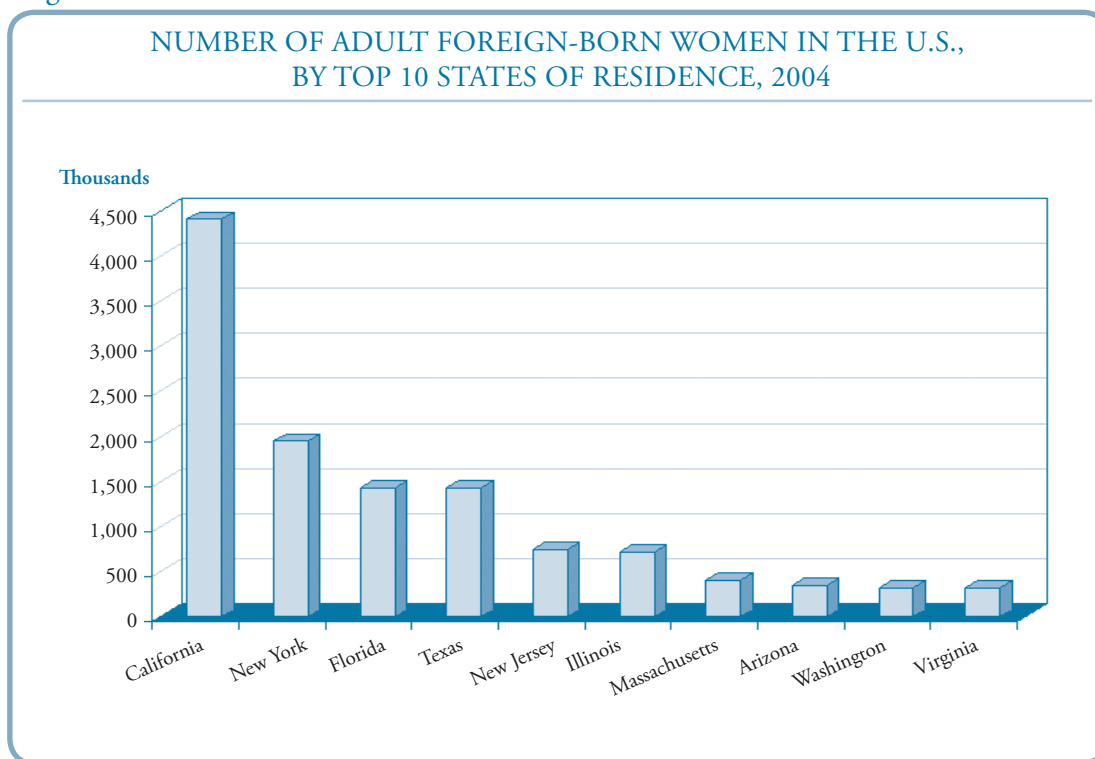
PLACES OF RESIDENCE

New York was home to the greatest number of foreign-born women from 1850 until 1980, when California moved into first place.³⁹ In 2004, 4.4 million adult foreign-born women resided in California, representing 50.7 percent

of the adult foreign-born population of the state and 28 percent of all foreign-born women in the United States. The other top ten states for foreign-born women were Florida, Texas, New Jersey, Illinois, Massachusetts, Arizona, Washington, and Virginia {Figure 9}.

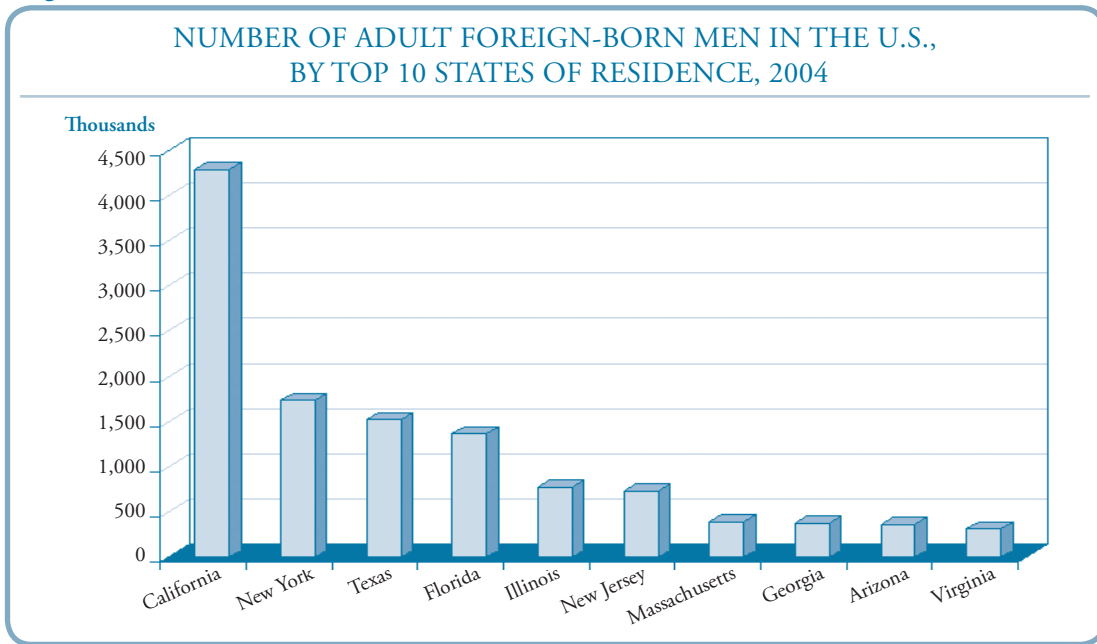
The top ten states for foreign-born men were almost the same as those for women, with some differences in ranking {Figure 10}. The one exception was Georgia—ranked 9th for men, but 11th for women. Washington, on the other hand, is 10th for women, but 11th for men. Of the top ten states where foreign-born women reside, 7 have more foreign-born women than men. The greatest disparity is

Figure 9:



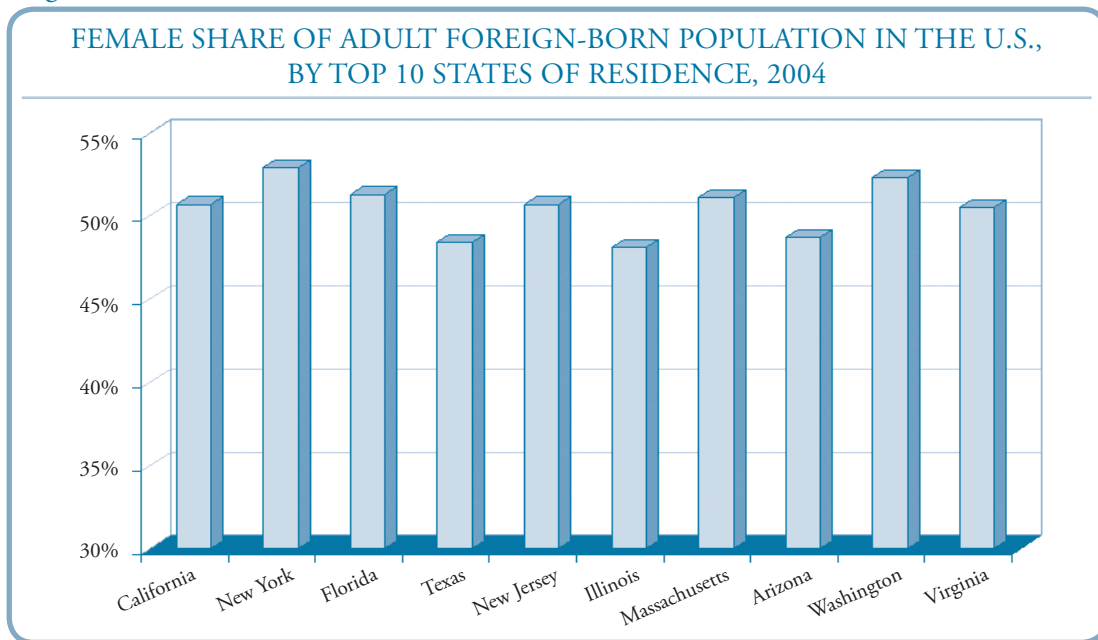
Source: 2004 American Community Survey

Figure 10:



Source: 2004 American Community Survey

Figure 11:



Source: 2004 American Community Survey

in New York, where women represent 52.9 percent of the foreign-born population {Figure 11}. Within the top 11 states of residence for foreign-born men are two of the new immigrant “gateways” that have become major immigrant destinations in recent years: Virginia and Georgia. The states

with the lowest number of foreign-born women have low numbers of immigrants generally and are among the least populous states: North Dakota, Wyoming, West Virginia, and South Dakota.⁴⁰

PRESENCE IN THE LABOR MARKET

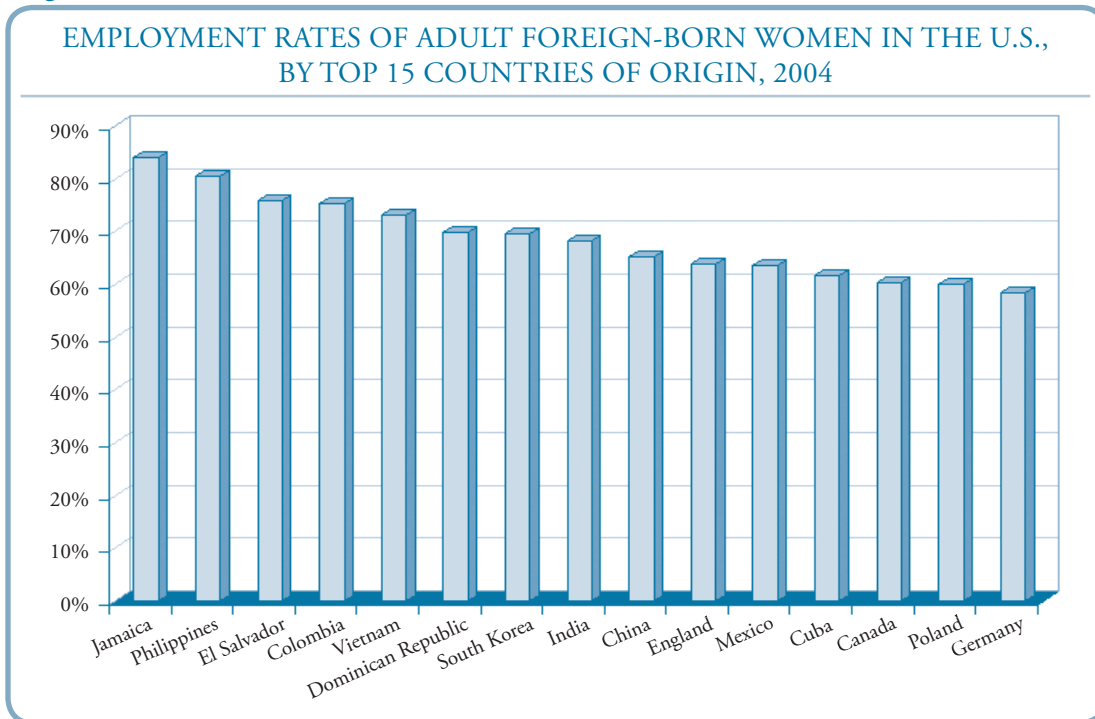
Employment prospects in the United States have attracted foreign women as well as men throughout the nation’s history. Different immigrant groups are attracted to different locations and types of jobs at different points in history. For example, New York City long was known for appealing to immigrant women in garment industries. Garment work did not require a strong command of English and many women came to the United States already proficient in sewing and garment cutting. Historically, Italians, Poles, Jews, Russians, and Eastern Europeans worked in this sector. More recently, Latin American and Asian women have filled these positions.⁴¹

One famous female immigrant garment worker was Dorothy Jacobs-Bellanca of Lithuania, who worked in Baltimore’s factories in the early years of the 20th century. Observing the harsh working conditions of her fellow workers, she began to organize strikes at an early age. She went on to become the first full-time organizer for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America.⁴² Preceding her in the garment industry was

the legendary Mary Harris Jones, or “Mother Jones,” an Irish immigrant who became a tireless labor organizer, particularly on behalf of child workers.⁴³

There are several historical examples of other immigrant women who came to the United States and became successful in high-skilled professions. For instance, English-born Elizabeth Blackwell, the country’s first woman doctor, immigrated with her family as a child in 1832. With her sister, Emily Blackwell, and another immigrant woman, Dr. Marie E. Zakrzewska, from Poland, Dr. Blackwell co-founded the New York Infirmary for Women and Children to serve women in the slums of New York City. The Blackwell sisters also helped establish the Women’s Central Association of Relief during the Civil War to provide training for nurses.⁴⁴ Dr. Zakrzewska, trained in midwifery in Berlin, moved to the United States and earned her doctorate in medicine. She went on to found the New England Hospital for Women and Children, the first hospital in Boston and the second in the United States that was run by women physicians and surgeons.⁴⁵

Figure 12:



Source: 2004 American Community Survey

Although immigrant women have long played a significant role in the U.S. labor force, the post-World War II period has seen the arrival of women in new types of vocations and an increase in the number of women in the paid labor force. Between 1960 and 1990, the employment rate of foreign-born women age 25-54 rose from 48 percent to 68 percent, where it remained during the 1990s.⁴⁶ Earlier in U.S. history, female wage earners in immigrant households were more likely to be daughters than mothers. Today, however, it is the mother who is employed while the daughters usually are in school.⁴⁷ In 2004, 54 percent of foreign-born women age 18 and older were in the labor force.⁴⁸ The highest employment rate is found among Jamaican women, 84 percent of whom were in the paid work force in 2004 {Figure 12}.⁴⁹

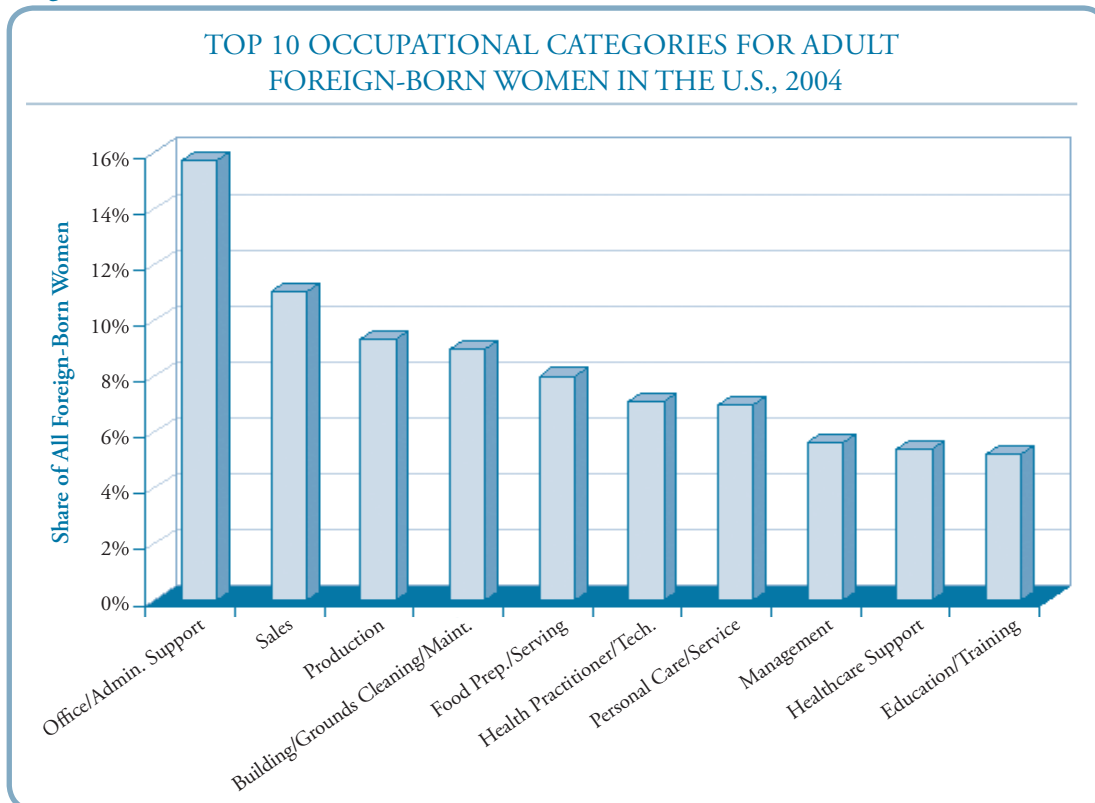
OCCUPATIONS

Women today are pursuing a wide variety of occupations. However, as with immigrant men, their occupations may not match the fields in which they were trained in their

home countries. Some find the U.S. labor market to be liberating, allowing them to move into new professions in which there may have been few opportunities in their home countries. Historian Donna Gabaccia observes that the United States is the recipient of a growing number of “gender pioneers”: women with professional training in nontraditional fields in their home countries, who became business executives, technical experts, doctors, lawyers, professors, and researchers when they immigrated to the United States.⁵⁰

In 2004, the top occupational category for foreign-born women was “office and administrative support,”⁵¹ in which 15.7 percent of all employed foreign-born women worked. The second largest category was “sales and related,” at 11 percent, followed by “production,” “building and grounds cleaning and maintenance,” “food preparation and serving,” “health practitioner or technician,” “personal care and service,” “management,” “healthcare support,” and “education and training” {Figure 13}.⁵²

Figure 13:



Source: 2004 American Community Survey

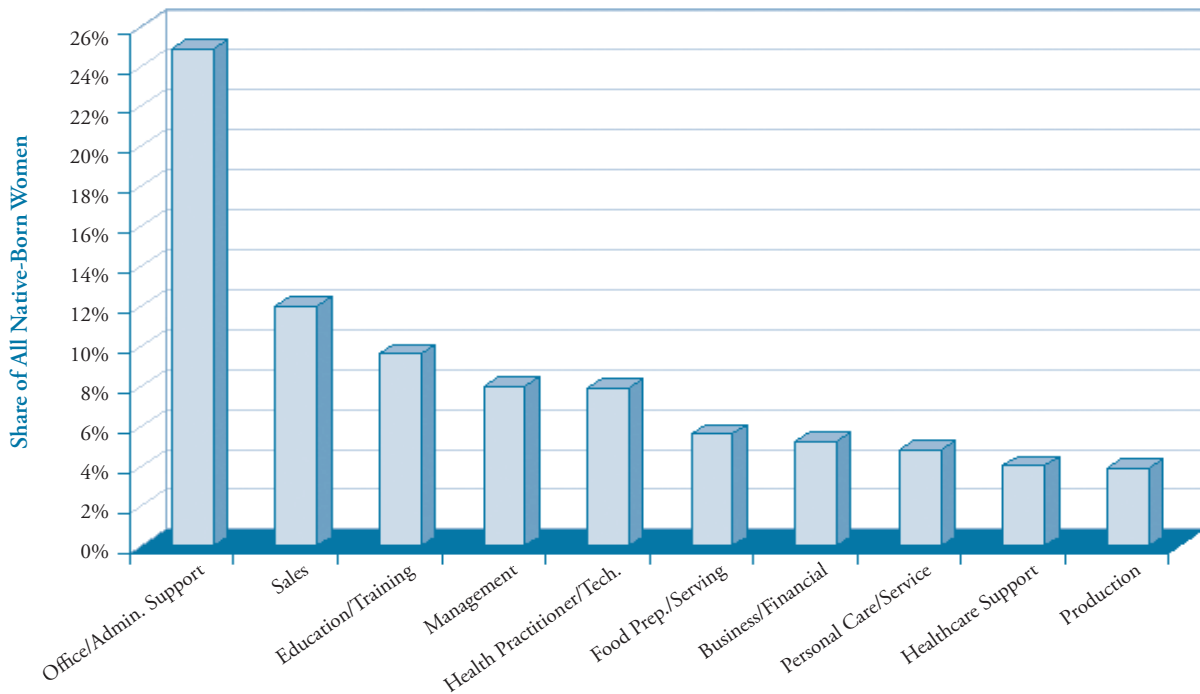
ONE FEMALE IMMIGRANT’S STORY

When 11-year-old Leonie Brooks immigrated to the United States from Jamaica in 1979 with her parents and siblings, she looked forward to a stability that her home country could not provide in the midst of volatile political events. As she anticipated her future, Leonie imagined a place with more ample employment opportunities that would await her following her education. She was quite fortunate. Her dreams led her through bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degree programs, and she is now Assistant Professor of Counseling Psychology in a U.S. university. She recently purchased her first house in the United States. Although she misses her home country, she has learned to straddle two cultures, and to use her position as a naturalized citizen to work for the rights of other Caribbean immigrants.

The experience of Leonie Brooks typifies a number of changing dynamics among women immigrating to the United States in the twenty-first century. Dr. Brooks represents the “new immigration” from non-European countries. In fact, Jamaica is one of the most common countries of origin for immigrant women; it is currently ranked thirteenth as a sending country of women to the United States. Like Dr. Brooks, as many as one-third of today’s immigrant and refugee women are from the middle-class, and are highly educated. Many already speak English, and are entering fields that were traditionally dominated by men. And today, Jamaican women boast one of the highest rates of employment among all foreign-born women in the United States.

Figure 14:

TOP 10 OCCUPATIONAL CATEGORIES FOR ADULT NATIVE-BORN WOMEN IN THE U.S., 2004



Source: 2004 American Community Survey

The leading category of employment for native-born women also was “office and administrative support” in 2004, but native-born women were more likely than foreign-born women to work in this sector (24.9 percent). Native-born women also were more likely to work in “management”. Foreign-born women, on the other hand, were more likely than native-born women to be employed in “building and grounds cleaning and maintenance,” “transportation and material moving,” and “computer and mathematical sciences” {Figure 14}.⁵³

Among the top-ten categories of employment for foreign-born men were a number of occupations that are traditional for men to hold, including “construction and extraction” (first place), “production” (second place), and “transportation and material moving” (third place). Foreign-born men were

more likely to have positions in management than foreign-born women, while foreign-born women were more likely to work in “sales and related” and “business and financial operations” {Figure 15}.⁵⁴

Women who are recent legal immigrants to the United States appear to have more experience in professional fields than the female foreign-born population as a whole. In FY 2004, a third (31.6 percent) of all employed women⁵⁵ legally admitted into the United States worked in “professional and technical fields,” followed by “service” (19.9 percent) and “operators, fabricators, and laborers” (13 percent). Only 13.8 percent of all women⁵⁶ who legally immigrated that year were homemakers, while 4 percent were unemployed {Figures 16 & 17}.⁵⁷

Figure 15:



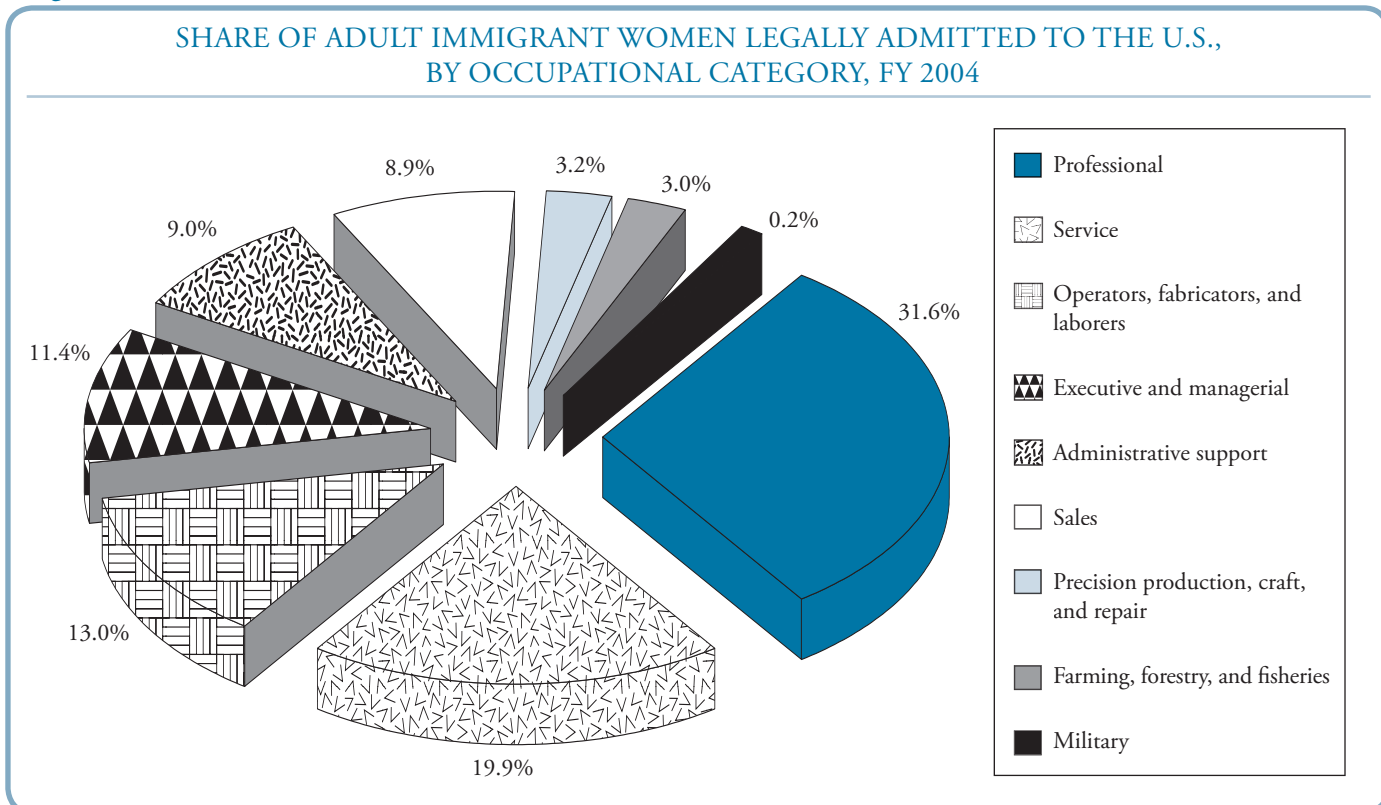
Source: 2004 American Community Survey

Figure 16:

LEGAL IMMIGRANTS ADMITTED TO THE U.S. BY GENDER AND OCCUPATION, FY 2004				
Occupation	Total	Gender		
		Male	Female	Unknown
Executive & managerial	31,689	21,811	9,876	2
Professional & technical	73,862	46,515	27,338	9
Sales	16,872	9,185	7,686	1
Administrative support	11,820	4,059	7,760	1
Farming, forestry, & fisheries	11,590	9,024	2,565	1
Operators, fabricators, & laborers	39,524	28,269	11,244	11
Precision production, craft, & repair	11,705	8,941	2,757	7
Service	38,566	21,365	17,190	11
Military	258	121	137	-
No occupation outside home	400,743	144,288	256,392	63
Homemakers	108,912	2164	106,742	6
Students or children	229,774	114,198	115,523	53
Retirees	4,443	2,093	2,350	-
Unemployed	57,614	25,833	31,777	4
Unknown	309,513	137,084	172,369	60
Total	1,346,885	574,950	771,706	229

Source: Office of Immigration Statistics, Department of Homeland Security, *2004 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, January 2006, "Table 6: Immigrants Admitted by Gender, Age, Marital Status, and Occupation Fiscal Year 2004."

Figure 17:



Source: Office of Immigration Statistics, *2004 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, Table 6.

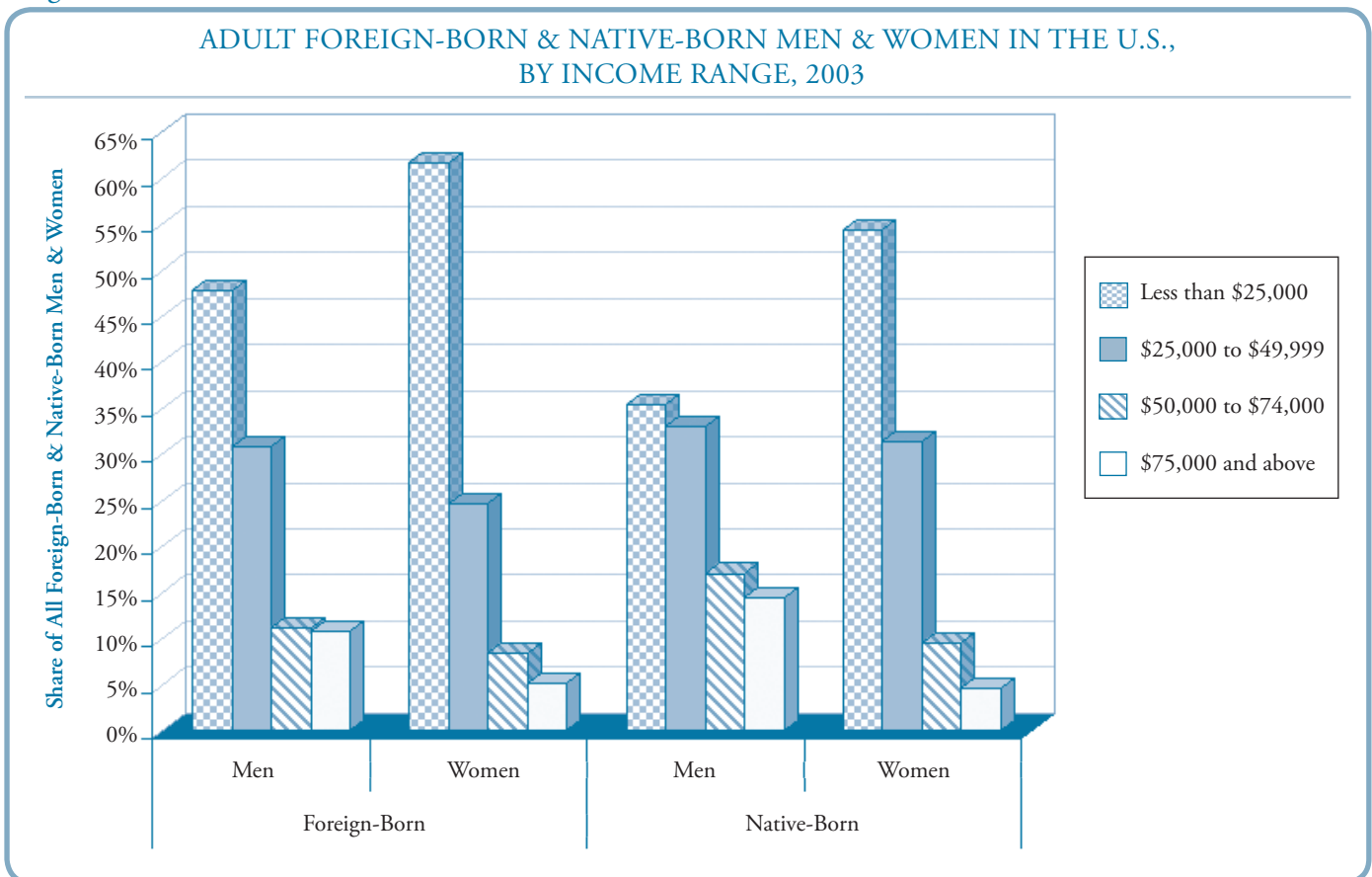
WAGES

In contrast to native-born women and all men, foreign-born women's earnings in 2003 were concentrated in the lowest income range. A majority of foreign-born women, or 61.7 percent, earned less than \$25,000. The percentage of native-born women earning less than \$25,000 was smaller: 54.4 percent. Earnings in the higher two income categories, however, show similar patterns for both foreign-born and native-born women: 8.4 percent of foreign-born and 9.5 percent of native-born women earned between \$50,000 and \$74,999. The highest income range, \$75,000 and above, was earned by 5.2 percent of foreign-born women and 4.7 percent of native-born women.⁵⁸ This suggests that at professional

levels, foreign-born women are earning competitive salaries with their native-born female counterparts.

Foreign-born men tend to earn more than foreign-born women, but less than native-born men. Among foreign-born men, 47.8 percent earned less than \$25,000 per year in contrast to 61.7 percent of foreign-born women. And 10.8 percent of foreign-born men earned \$75,000 and above, more than twice the proportion of foreign-born women in that income range (5.2 percent) {Figure 18}.⁵⁹

Figure 18:



Source: 2004 American Community Survey

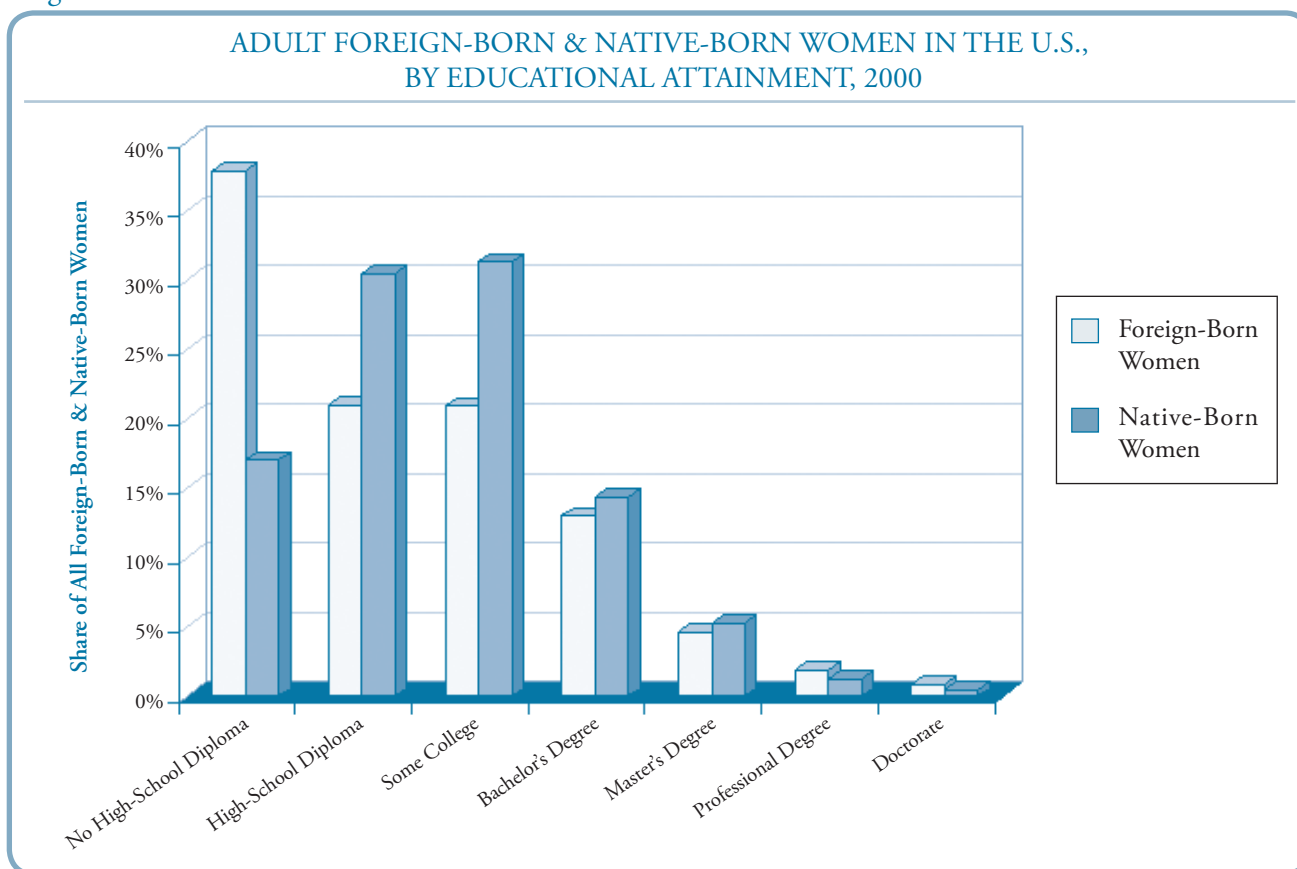
EDUCATION AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE ABILITY

Foreign-born women are much less likely than native-born women to have completed high school, but nearly as likely to have earned a college degree. In 2000, 37.9 percent of foreign-born women lacked a high-school diploma, compared to only 17 percent of native-born women. Conversely, 30.5 percent of native-born women had a high-school diploma but no college, compared to 21 percent of foreign-born women. However, 20.3 percent of foreign-born women had a bachelor's degree or more, roughly the same as the 21.4 percent of native-born women with the same level of education. Foreign-born women were about as likely as native-born women to have a doctorate (0.8 percent vs. 0.5 percent) or a professional degree (1.9 percent vs. 1.2 percent) {Figure 19}.⁶⁰

About 9 percent of adult foreign-born women, or 1.6 million, were enrolled in a school or college in 2000. More than three quarters of these (77 percent) were attending public institutions. Non-citizen foreign-born women were more likely to be pursuing an education than naturalized citizens. About 62 percent of foreign-born women in school or college were non-citizens, while 38 percent were naturalized citizens.⁶¹

English competency is common among both foreign-born women and men. In 2000, foreign-born women and men were nearly as likely to say that they spoke English “very well”: 31 percent of men and 30 percent of women. In addition, 23 percent of men and 20 percent of women reported that they spoke English “well”. At the other end of the spectrum, 11.7 percent of foreign-born women reported that they did not speak English at all (compared to 9.6 percent of foreign-born men).⁶²

Figure 19:



Source: 2000 U.S. Decennial Census

MARITAL STATUS AND FAMILY SIZE

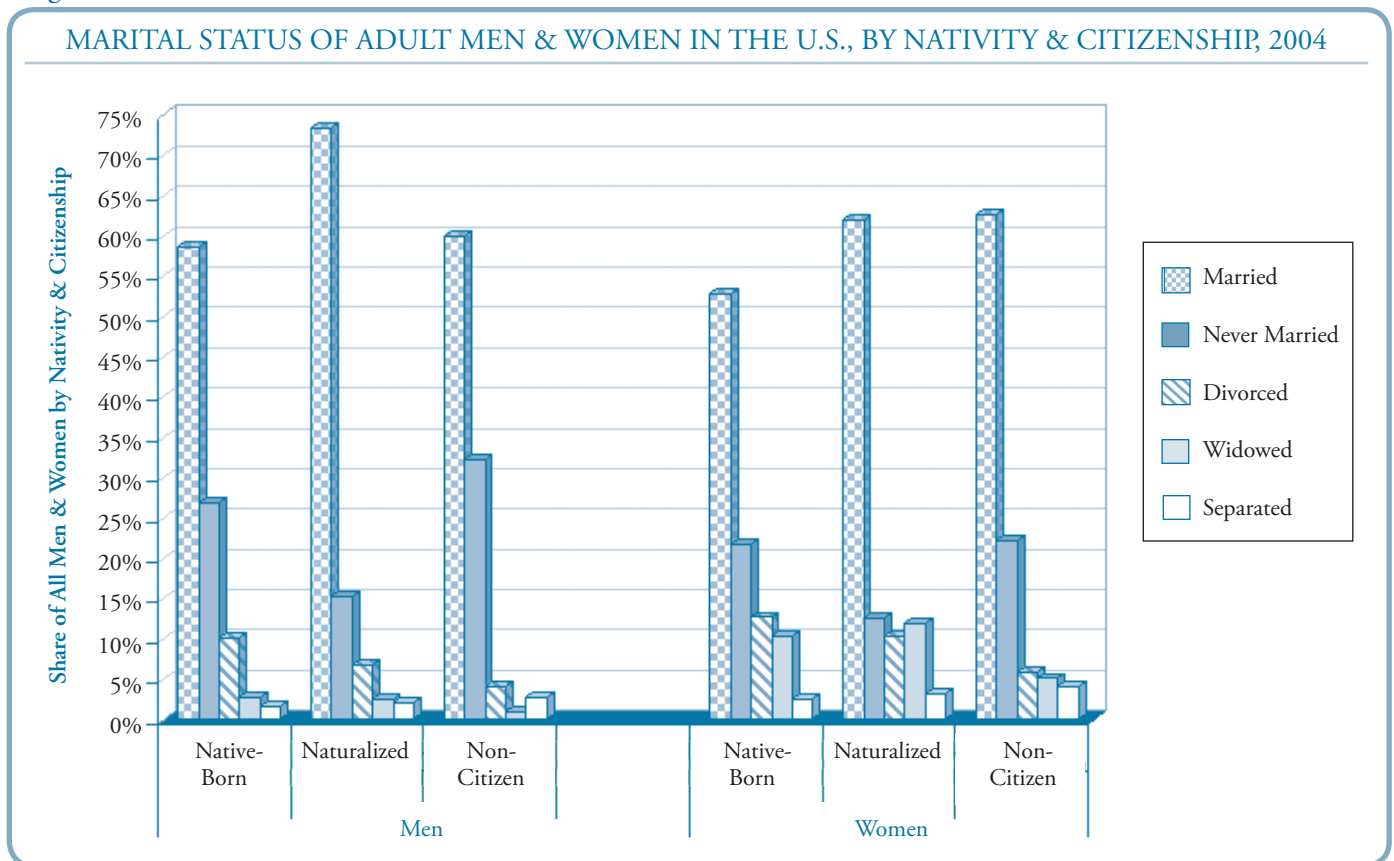
Foreign-born women today are more likely than in the past to be single and to have relatively few children. In 1920, for instance, only 14 percent of foreign-born women who were more than fifteen years of age were single. In 1900, between 38.9 percent and 43.9 percent of Irish, Danish, Norwegian, Bohemian, and Austrian-born women bore more than five children. Among Polish immigrants, the share was even higher, or 61.9 percent.⁶³ In contrast, in 2004, 37.7 percent of foreign-born women were not married, with just under half of these, or 17.7 percent, having never been married. And 43.7 percent of married immigrant women had no children, while another 42.5 percent had just one or two. Only 13.8 percent had three or more children.⁶⁴

Marriage rates are higher among foreign-born women than native-born women. In 2004, 62.3 percent of foreign-

born women were married, compared to 52.8 percent of native-born women. Foreign-born women who were not U.S. citizens were more likely to have never married than those who were naturalized citizens (22.2 percent vs. 12.5 percent). Higher percentages of naturalized citizen women, on the other hand, were divorced or widowed. Among foreign-born women who were naturalized citizens, 10.3 percent were divorced and 12 percent widowed. For non-citizen women, the rates were 5.1 percent and 5.9 percent, respectively.

Foreign-born women and men have similar marriage rates (62.3 percent for women and 65.5 percent for men), but women are much more likely to be widowed (8.4 percent vs. 1.6 percent). Foreign-born men are more likely than foreign-born women to have never married. Divorce and separation rates are slightly higher for foreign-born women than men {Figure 20}.⁶⁵

Figure 20:



Source: 2004 American Community Survey

CHANGING GENDER ROLES AND ASSIMILATION

In attempting to understand the immigrant experience, we must consider how that experience differs for men and women. Donna Gabaccia observes that adjustment or assimilation for women means something more than becoming an American. It is becoming an **American woman**. It implies adopting new roles that may be in flux at any given time. Immigrant mothers, for instance, were key contributors to the reproduction of their ethnic cultures by passing on once-maligned food traditions and other home-based cultural practices. Although these practices initially were denigrated by native-born Americans, today some have become incorporated into everyday American life.

In addition, the meaning of American womanhood has changed dramatically over the years. Today, it is acceptable for women to be in the work force. Earlier in our history, immigrant women were disparaged for working, even though it was necessary for the survival of impoverished immigrant families.⁶⁶ In a study of Mexican women in California, researchers found that living in the United States produced a shift away from traditional Mexican gender roles. Immigrant women often negotiate more egalitarian relationships with their husbands as they become more independent and involved in economic and political activities.⁶⁷

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Unfortunately, one aspect of the immigrant experience for some women is domestic violence. Foreign-born women suffer violence at the hands of spouses from their home countries and spouses who are native-born.⁶⁸ The risk of violence in the home for immigrant women is enhanced by the strain of immigration and the economic pressures that are common among newer immigrants. Immigrant women are not always aware that such violence is illegal and that they have rights to protection and services. Abusers often use the victim's immigration status as a means of control, reminding the victim of the threat of deportation

or loss of child custody. No national studies exist on the prevalence of domestic violence among immigrant women, but several local studies have documented the serious nature of the problem. A New York City study of intimate-partner homicide victims, for example, found that 51 percent of the victims were foreign-born and 45 percent native-born.⁶⁹ A study of Latina domestic-violence survivors found that 48 percent had experienced higher levels of domestic violence since they immigrated.⁷⁰

The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 1994 included unprecedented provisions for immigrants who are victims of domestic violence to receive aid, shelter, and public benefits. The bill has been very effective in stimulating and funding programs to address domestic violence in immigrant communities. The law gives victims the right to apply to immigrate legally, independent of any family members who may be sponsoring their immigration petition. In 2005, VAWA was reauthorized by Congress.

In addition, the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 created the "U" visa for certain immigrant crime victims. Yet five years after passage of the law, the Department of Homeland Security has not yet released the U visa regulations. In the fall of 2005, a coalition of three civil rights organizations and nine foreign-born crime victims from Arizona, California, and Texas filed a lawsuit against U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Included in the lawsuit were immigrant women who have suffered domestic violence. Victims charged that they had fulfilled the requirements of the visa, including cooperating with police investigations, but had not received U visas.⁷¹ The complaint states that the total number of victims in this situation is in the "hundreds or thousands."⁷² In the meantime, victims of crime can apply for "U nonimmigrant status interim relief" or "U visa interim relief," and may apply for employment authorization. At the moment, applicants are not eligible to become LPRs. The 2005 VAWA reauthorization requires the release of the U-visa regulations by July 2006.

CONCLUSION

The migration of women to the United States is characterized by two contradictory trends. On the one hand, over the past 20 years women have comprised a growing share of new legal immigrants admitted to the country, a trend which mirrors the feminization of migration in Europe, Africa, and Latin America since 1960. On the other hand, since 1970 women have constituted a declining share of the U.S. foreign-born population as a whole. This most likely is due to the fact that the hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants entering the country each year are predominantly male, although the numbers of undocumented women are on the rise. Reflecting the overall increase in both legal and undocumented immigration by men and women alike in recent decades, nearly half of all foreign-born women in the United States entered the country since 1990.

As with their male counterparts, today's immigrant women are most likely to come from Mexico, China, India, or the Philippines, and to settle in California, New York, Texas, or Florida. Women significantly outnumber men among immigrants from Germany, the Philippines, and South Korea. Conversely, men significantly outnumber women among Mexican, Salvadoran, and Indian immigrants. Immigrant women today are more likely than in the past to be single, to have few children, and to join the labor force. The highest rates of employment are found among women from Jamaica and the Philippines. Foreign-born women are much less likely to have graduated from high school than native-born women, but nearly as likely to have completed college and slightly more likely to have a doctor-

ate or professional degree. The top two occupations among both foreign-born and native-born women are "office and administrative support," followed by "sales and related," while foreign-born men are concentrated in "construction and extraction," followed by "production". About a third of newly admitted legal immigrants who are women work in professional fields.

Although changing gender roles have opened up new educational, professional, and personal opportunities for women in many parts of the world, immigrant women often find the United States to be especially liberating in this regard when compared to their home countries. However, gender disparities persist. Foreign-born women in the United States earn lower wages than either native-born women or foreign-born and native-born men. Among the recipients of employment-based visas, women are far more likely than men to be dependent visa holders as opposed to principal visa holders. And immigrant women are more likely than immigrant men to enter the country as immediate relatives of U.S. citizens through the family-based immigration system. Nevertheless, modern immigrant women in the United States—like modern native-born women—have entered a greater range of occupations and achieved higher levels of independence than at any time in the past.

Appendix:

FOREIGN-BORN WOMEN IN THE U.S. BY WORLD REGION & COUNTRY OF BIRTH, 2004

Region/Country of Birth	# of Women	Share of All Foreign-Born Women	Region/Country of Birth	# of Women	Share of All Foreign-Born Women
LATIN AMERICA - CARIBBEAN					
Total	7,748,336	49.3%	Samoa	4,165	
Antigua & Barbuda	12,047		Singapore	10,476	
Argentina	79,463		South Korea	479,756	
Bahamas	9,619		Sri Lanka	11,272	
Barbados	29,595		Thailand	80,914	
Belize	31,489		Tonga	7,175	
Bermuda	4,756		Uzbekistan	9,884	
Bolivia	35,665		Vietnam	512,379	
Brazil	132,490		Asia	13,505	
Chile	40,908		Other Asia Not Specified	4,011	
Colombia	243,757		South Central Asia Not Specified	6,836	
Costa Rica	41,233				
Cuba	446,747		WESTERN EUROPE		
Dominica	17,675		Total	1,764,734	11.2%
Dominican Republic	362,276		Austria	33,068	
Ecuador	144,897		Belgium	15,568	
El Salvador	414,658		Denmark	16,482	
Grenada	11,332		Finland	13,780	
Guatemala	232,188		France	77,756	
Guyana	127,794		Germany	400,935	
Haiti	211,227		Greece	81,531	
Honduras	144,690		Iceland	1,925	
Jamaica	317,179		Ireland	69,063	
Mexico	4,025,525		Italy	213,929	
Nicaragua	107,224		Netherlands	38,656	
Panama	52,517		Norway	16,620	
Paraguay	7,276		Poland	267,380	
Peru	169,542		Portugal	85,827	
St. Vincent & the Grenadines	15,625		Spain	38,182	
Trinidad & Tobago	120,645		Sweden	22,516	
Uruguay	20,644		Switzerland	16,668	
Venezuela	75,357		United Kingdom	354,848	
West Indies	23,132				
Caribbean Not Specified	28,082		EASTERN EUROPE		
South America Not Specified	11,082		Total	776,865	4.9%
			Albania	27,417	
ASIA - PACIFIC ISLANDS			Armenia	33,915	
Total	4,112,328	26.2%	Azerbaijan	1,702	
Afghanistan	22,060		Belarus	20,298	
Bangladesh	39,361		Bosnia & Herzegovina	58,663	
Cambodia	69,226		Bulgaria	18,355	
China	862,825		Croatia	19,478	
Eastern Asia NS	6,163		Czechoslovakia	36,111	
Fiji	17,669		Estonia	5,552	
India	599,147		Georgia	5,790	
Indonesia	42,575		Hungary	43,957	
Japan	222,384		Latvia	13,580	
Laos	98,489		Lithuania	20,621	
Malaysia	24,489		Macedonia	8,456	
Micronesia	4,655		Moldova	11,667	
Myanmar (Burma)	16,817		Romania	68,206	
Nepal	8,218		Russia	173,093	
Pakistan	95,225		Serbia	11,035	
Philippines	842,652		Ukraine	138,412	
			USSR	18,733	
			Yugoslavia	41,824	

Region/Country of Birth	# of Women	Share of All Foreign-Born Women
MIDDLE EAST - NORTH AFRICA		
Total	439,851	2.8%
Algeria	4,302	
Cyprus	3,323	
Egypt	37,808	
Iran	146,636	
Iraq	34,557	
Israel	46,851	
Jordan	26,250	
Kuwait	6,811	
Lebanon	45,082	
Libya	2,875	
Morocco	17,073	
Saudi Arabia	4,300	
Syria	24,277	
Turkey	35,160	
Yemen	4,546	
NORTH AMERICA		
Total	400,574	2.5%
Canada	400,574	
AFRICA		
Total	390,311	2.5%
Cameroon	4,362	
Cape Verde	10,858	
Eritrea	7,991	
Ethiopia	48,522	
Ghana	39,447	
Kenya	27,602	
Liberia	20,556	
Nigeria	63,026	
Sierra Leone	8,193	
Somalia	10,513	
South Africa	29,327	
Sudan	11,144	
Tanzania	6,142	
Uganda	9,267	
Zimbabwe	5,730	
Africa	39,424	
Eastern Africa NS	10,227	
Other Africa NS	22,228	
Western Africa NS	15,752	
OCEANIA		
Total	51,210	0.3%
New Zealand	9,845	
Australia	35,179	
Oceania Not Specified	6,186	
OTHER		
Total	25,123	0.2%
Europe Not Specified	16,539	
Americas Not Specified	8,584	

Source: 2004 American Community Survey

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- ⁴⁷ Nancy Foner, p. 95.
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- ⁵¹ Includes legal, architectural, accounting, computer, advertising, travel arrangement & landscaping professions.
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- ⁵⁵ This total excludes children, students, and retirees.
- ⁵⁶ This total excludes homemakers, children, students, and retirees.
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- ⁷⁰ Mary Dutton, Leslye Orloff, & Giselle Aguilar Hass, "Characteristics of Help-Seeking Behaviors, Resources, and Services Needs of Battered Immigrant Latinas: Legal and Policy Implications," *Georgetown Journal on Poverty Law and Policy* 7(2), 2000.
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The IPC's mission is to raise the level of informed awareness about the effects of immigration nationally, regionally and locally by providing policymakers, academics, the media, and the general public with access to accurate information on the role of immigrants and immigration policy in all aspects of American life. Other recent publications from the IPC are available on our website: **www.immigrationpolicy.org**.

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