Migration and Vietnamese American Women
Remaking Ethnicity
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One of the most important and dominant frameworks on immigrant adaptation in the United States is the assimilationist perspective (Gordon 1964; Hirschman 1983; Park and Burgess 1969). A central assumption of this perspective is that immigrant groups gradually become Americanized, that is, they shed their loyalties and connections with the traditional immigrant culture and community and become assimilated into the “melting pot” of America. In this process, women have been seen in two capacities. On the one hand, immigrant women, viewed as staunch supporters of immigrant traditions and culture, have been viewed as barriers to assimilation. Alternatively, they have been seen as important intermediaries or vehicles of integration into the dominant society (see Deutsch 1987:719–720). But regardless of the particular role into which immigrant women are cast, assimilation is viewed as synonymous with greater gender equality. Since immigrant ties are seen as a source of patriarchal oppression—as the group assimilates into American culture, immigrant women are expected to be freed from the shackles of tradition and male authority.

The assimilation model has been subject to a series of sharp and wide-ranging attacks in recent decades (Hirschman 1983; Morawska 1985). One of the fundamental criticisms has been that the characterization of the immigrant assimilation process as one of unilineal, progressive development from the “traditional” to the “modern” is far too simplistic. Instead, scholars have argued for a perspective that recognizes the uneven quality of modernization processes, and the ability of traditional values and institutions to coexist with modern ones. But perhaps the most serious criticism of the assimilation model is that it fails to take into account the distinct situation and experience of people of color within American society. The assimilation model was formulated with reference to the experiences of White European immigrants in the United States. As a result, it neglects the ways in which race shapes the adaptation of minority groups to the dominant society.

Feminist scholarship has both shared and contributed to the critique of the assimilation model. For example, the model’s dichotomous characterization of migration as a movement from the “traditional” to the “modern” has been brought under question by studies which show that migration may be detrimental rather than favorable to women’s status. In fact, rather than leading to greater gender equality, migration, like economic development, may result in losses for women, in terms of traditional sources of support and power in the domestic sphere as well as access to production processes and thus economic resources (Beneria and Sen 1981; Deutsch 1987). Feminist
scholars have also been sensitive to the assimilation model's neglect of racial oppression and its role in shaping the experience of minority groups.

In fact, much recent scholarship on immigrant women has focused not on assimilation processes but on the disadvantaged status of immigrant women within the dominant society. Terms such as "multiple jeopardy" and "triple oppression," signifying the complex intertwining of class, racial-ethnic, and gender oppression, increasingly dominate discussions of racial-ethnic women's experience (Brettell and Simon 1986:10; King 1988). As women, as racial-ethnics, and as inhabitants of the lower rungs of the social class ladder, racial-ethnic women experience multiple disadvantages in the dominant society. This emphasis on the marginal location of racial-ethnic women within dominant society structures has been accompanied by a shift in how scholars view the relationship of racial-ethnic women to their families and communities. These "traditional" institutions are not simply sources of patriarchal oppression. Rather, family and community represent modes of resistance to dominant society constraints, or vehicles by which the minority group struggles to survive (Catalifield 1974; Glenn 1986; Dill 1988). While immigrant women may struggle against the oppression they experience as women within the immigrant family and community, the oppression they experience from the dominant society as members of a racial-ethnic group generates needs and loyalties of a more immediate and pressing nature. Thus, immigrant women may remain attached to, and indeed support, traditional patriarchal family and community structures. This is due not simply to the entrenched cultural beliefs or cultural conservatism of the women, but also to the benefits that they gain from retaining these structures, given the multiple disadvantages they face in the dominant society. In short, for immigrant women, the traditional family and community are ways of surviving and maintaining cultural autonomy in the "new" society. The need to sustain family and community may take priority over the internal struggles against male dominance in the immigrant family and community.

In general, this view of ethnic affiliation—that it is a resource for coping with the dominant society—has become increasingly important in the scholarship on immigration, including studies that are not explicitly concerned with the gendered dimensions of the racial-ethnic experience. Thus many contemporary studies of ethnicity focus on the persistence and adaptive relevance of "traditional" immigrant affiliations (see, for example, Kim 1981; Morawska 1985; Portes and Bach 1985). These studies suggest that immigrant ties may actually be a vehicle for or a product of individual and collective modernization, rather than an impediment or barrier to modernity (Morawska 1985; See and Wilson 1988). Ethnic boundaries are seen as dynamic and situational, and there is an emphasis on the active part played by the immigrant group in generating and shaping group membership. To summarize, from varied and diverse currents in social science scholarship on immigrants, there has emerged a theoretical consensus of sorts about immigrant institutions, one that is critical of the assimilation model. For immigrant women and men, the immigrant family and community are sources of economic, political, and cultural resistance, vehicles for adaptation to the dominant society.

The emphasis on the notion of adaptation that has come to dominate much of the literature on the immigrant experience does, however, raise some critical questions. For one thing, the focus on the adaptive quality of the immigrant family and community has led to a neglect of the divisions and conflicts within these institutions. To see ethnic institutions only as vehicles of resistance to dominant society oppression implies a uniformity and consensuality of experience within the ethnic group. But to what extent is this true—do all participants benefit in the same way from ethnic solidarities? In recent years feminist scholarship has become increasingly critical of the concept of the family or household economy, which assumes that families act in unison and
agreement on their economic strategies (Beneria and Roldan 1987). This emphasis on consensus serves to whitewash the conflictual aspects of family life (Beneria and Roldan 1987). However, this critique of familial consensus has not been fully and adequately extended to the study of ethnic ties and institutions. This is so, despite the existence of many studies that document the conflicts and tensions between men and women that have been a part of the political struggles and social movements of racial-ethnic groups (Chow 1987; King 1988; Baca Zinn 1975). In general, it seems essential to acknowledge that women and men may gain vastly different kinds of benefits and rewards from ethnic resources, given the different statuses and powers of women and men in the immigrant family and community. There is evidence, for example, that the ethnic enclave economy, which has been celebrated by scholars as an example of how ethnic ties may function as a resource, confers quite different economic rewards on men and women (Zhou and Logan 1989).

Both sources of oppression—those within and those without—are important in an understanding of immigrant women’s experience. But a perspective that acknowledges both the oppressive and the supportive dimensions of the family and community leaves certain questions unanswered. How do immigrant women respond to this division, the “double-edged” quality and meaning of ethnic family and community in their lives? I suggest that it is important to see the immigrant family and community as contested and negotiated arenas. Immigrants play an important part in actively shaping and constructing their ethnic institutions. But these institutions are also gender-contested, that is, arenas of conflict and struggle between men and women. The processes by which the ethnic family and community are shaped and negotiated thus ultimately reflect gender divisions, as men and women clash over the question of how to define and construct family and community. In their struggles, they attempt to gain control of and shape the resources of family and ethnicity, in ways that enhance their interests both as members of the family and community, and as men or women.

The struggle between men and women to shape immigrant institutions will vary in its strength and visibility, depending on the balance of power between women and men in the group. This balance of power is deeply shaped by the comparative access of the immigrant men and women to economic, political, and social resources in the dominant society. Particularly when migration is concurrent with a drastic shift in the resources of women and men relative to each other, the gender-based struggle to control family and community may become especially visible. While men and women jockey to control family and community, to redefine it on their terms, they are also, of course, engaged in a conflict over gender relations—the place and power of men and women within the family and community. As family and community life are reorganized by men and women, their roles and relations also undergo change. Thus the study of change in immigrant family life, gender relations, and ethnic organizations must approach these spheres as deeply intertwined rather than as separate aspects of immigrant life. In my research on Vietnamese Americans, I found the impact of migration on family life and the status of women to be issues of major debate in the ethnic community. For Vietnamese Americans, the future of their family and gender relations has been tied to cultural identity—what it means “to be Vietnamese in America.” In other words, the importance and fervor of the debate about family and gender stems in part from the implications of these debates for the core of ethnic identity and meaning itself.

VIETNAMESE AMERICANS AND THE RISE IN WOMEN’S POWER

My research on the adaptive strategies of a community of Vietnamese refugees in Philadelphia revealed some of the ways in which women and men struggled and clashed with each other in efforts to shape the social organization of family and community life. From 1983 to 1985, I gathered
information on family life and gender relations through participant observation in household and community settings, as well as in-depth interviews with women and men in the ethnic community.

The Vietnamese of the study were recent immigrants who had arrived in the United States during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Most were from urban, middle-class backgrounds in southern Vietnam. At the time of the study, over 30 percent of the adult men in the households of study were unemployed. Of the men who were employed, over half worked in low-paying, unskilled jobs in the urban service sector or in factories located in the outlying areas of the city. Women tended to work periodically, occupying jobs in the informal economic sector as well as in the urban service economy. Eight of the twelve households had members who collected public assistance. Both the family economy and informal community exchange networks were important means by which the households dealt with economic scarcities. Family and community were of tremendous economic salience to the group, as they were important resources for survival in the face of a rather inhospitable economic and social environment.

As suggested by the high rate of the men's unemployment, settlement in the United States had generated some shifts in power in favor of the women in the group. Traditional Vietnamese family and gender relations were modeled on Confucian principals, which placed women in subordination to men in every aspect of life. A key aspect of the social and economic oppression of women in traditional Vietnamese life was the patrilineal extended household. Its organization dictated that women married at a young age, following which they entered the household of their husband's father. This structure ensured the concentration of economic resources in the hands of men and men's control of women through the isolation of women from their families of origin.²

It is important to note the deep-seated changes in traditional family and gender structures in Vietnam during this century. War and urbanization eroded the structure of the patrilineal extended household. While unemployment was high in the cities, men from middle-class backgrounds were able to take advantage of the expansion of middle-level positions in the government bureaucracy and army. Such occupational opportunities were more limited for women: the women study participants indicated that they engaged in seasonal and informal income-generating activities or worked in low-level jobs in the growing war-generated service sector in the cities. The transition from rural to urban life had generated a shift in the basis of men's control over economic and social resources. However, families relied on men's income to maintain a middle-class standard of living. Thus women remained in a position of economic subordination to men, a situation that served to sustain the ideals of the traditional family system and men's authority in the family. Restrictions on women's sexuality were important for middle-class families seeking to distinguish themselves from the lower social strata. My data suggest that families were especially conscious of the need to distance themselves from poorer "fallen" women who had become associated with the prostitution generated by the American military presence.

Within the Vietnamese American community of study, I found several conditions that were working to undermine the bases on which male authority had rested in Vietnam. Most important, for the Vietnamese men, the move to the United States had involved a profound loss of social and economic status. Whereas in pre-1975 Vietnam the men held middle-class occupations, in the United States they had access to largely unskilled, low-status, and low-paying jobs. Also, because of their difficulties with English and their racial-ethnic status, the men found themselves disadvantaged within social arenas of the dominant society. Compounding these problems was the dearth of strong formal ethnic organizations in the community that could have served as a vehicle for the men's political assertion into the dominant society.
As a result of these losses, the comparative access of men and women to the resources of the dominant society had to some extent become equalized. In contrast to the experiences of the men, migration had not significantly altered the position of the women in the economy. As in Vietnam, the women tended to work sporadically, sometimes in family businesses or, more commonly, in temporary jobs in the informal and service-sector economies of the city. However, the economic contributions of women to the family budget had risen in proportion to those of the men. I have suggested that in modern, urban South Vietnam the force and legitimacy of male authority had rested heavily on the ability of men to ensure a middle-class status and standard of living for their families. In the United States, the ability of men to fulfill this expectation had been eroded. Among the men, there was widespread concern about the consequences of this situation for their status in the family, as is revealed by the words of a former lieutenant of the South Vietnamese army: “In Vietnam, the man earns and everyone depends on him. In most families, one or two men could provide for the whole family. Here the man finds he can never make enough money to take care of the family. His wife has to work, his children have to work, and so they look at him in a different way. The man isn’t strong anymore, like he was in Vietnam.”

Such changes had opened up the possibilities for a renegotiation of gender relations, and were the cause of considerable conflict between men and women in the family and community. The shifts in power had also enhanced the ability of women to construct and channel familial and ethnic resources in ways that they chose. Previously I suggested that the changes in the balance of power between men and women generated by migration are crucial to understanding the manner and degree to which immigrant family and community reveal themselves to be gender contested. How, then, did the fairly drastic shift in the gender balance of power among the Vietnamese Americans reflect itself in the ability of the men and women in this group to influence family and community life? In the following section, I describe some of the ways in which gender interests and conflict shaped family and community life for the Vietnamese Americans.

FAMILY AND ETHNICITY AS GENDER-CONTESTED

One of the most intriguing and important strategies of Vietnamese American adaptation that I observed was the rebuilding of kinship networks. Family ties had undergone tremendous disruption in the process of escape from Vietnam and resettlement in the United States. Despite this, the households of the group tended to be large and extended. The process by which household growth occurred was one in which the study participants actively worked to reconstruct family networks by building kin relationships. In order for this to take place, the criteria for inclusion in the family had become extremely flexible. Thus close friends were often incorporated into family groups as fictive kin. Also, relationships with relatives who were distant or vaguely known in Vietnam were elevated in importance. Perhaps most important for women, the somewhat greater significance traditionally accorded to the husband’s kin receded in importance. Given the scarcity of relatives in the United States, such distinctions were considered a luxury, and the demands of life made the rebuilding of family a valuable, if not a necessary, step in the process of adaptation to the dominant society.

While important for the group as a whole, the reconstruction of kinship as it took place had some special advantages for women. One consequence of the more varied and inclusive nature of the kinship network was that women were rarely surrounded exclusively by the husband’s relatives and/or friends. As a result, they were often able to turn to close fictive kin and perhaps members of their families of origin for support during conflicts with men in the family. Another condition that
enhanced the power of married women in the family was that few had to deal with a mother-in-law’s competing authority in the household, because elderly women have not been among those likely to leave Vietnam.

The reconstruction of kinship thus had important advantages for women, particularly as it moved the Vietnamese perhaps even further from the ideal model of the patrilineal extended household than they had been in the past. But women were not simply passive beneficiaries of the family rebuilding process. Rather, they played an active part in family reconstruction, attempting to shape family boundaries in ways that were to their advantage. I found women playing a vital part in creating fictive kin by forging close ties. And women were often important, if not central, “gatekeepers” to the family group and household. Thus the women helped to decide such matters as whether the marriage of a particular family member was a positive event and could be taken as an opportunity to expand kinship networks. At other times the women passed judgment on current or potential family members, as to whether they had demonstrated enough commitment to such important familial obligations as the sharing of economic and social resources with kin.

Although women undoubtedly played an important part in family reconstruction, their control over decisions about family membership was by no means exclusive or absolute. In fact, the question of who was legitimately included in the family group was often a source of tension within families, particularly between men and women. The frequency of disputes over this issue stemmed in part from the fluidity and subsequent uncertainty about family boundaries, as well as the great pressures often placed on individuals to subordinate their needs to those of the family collective. Beyond this, I also suggest that disputes over boundaries arose from the fundamental underlying gender divisions in the family. That is, the different interests of women and men in the family spurred efforts to shape the family in ways that were of particular advantage to them. For the reasons I have previously discussed, the Vietnamese American women had greater influence and opportunity in the shaping of family in the United States than they had in the past. The women tended to use this influence to construct family groups that extended their power in the family.

In one case that I observed, considerable tension developed between a couple named Nguyet and Phong concerning the sponsorship of Nguyet’s nephew and his family from a refugee camp in Southeast Asia. Nguyet and Phong had been together with their three children (two from Nguyet’s previous marriage) for about seven years, since they had met in a refugee camp in Thailand. Phong remained married to a woman who was still living in Vietnam with his children, a fact that was the source of some stress for Nguyet and Phong. The issue of the nephew’s sponsorship seemed to exacerbate tensions in the relationship. Phong did not want to undertake the sponsorship because of the potentially heavy financial obligations it entailed. He also confessed that he was worried that Nguyet would leave him after the nephew’s arrival, a threat often made by Nguyet during their quarrels. Finally, he talked of how Nguyet’s relationship with the nephew was too distant to justify the sponsorship. Nguyet had never even met the nephew, who was the son of a first cousin rather than of a sibling.

Confirming some of Phong’s fears, Nguyet saw the presence of the nephew and his family as a potentially important source of support for herself. She spoke of how she had none of “my family” in the country, in comparison with Phong, whose sister lived in the city. She agreed that she did not know much about her nephew, but nonetheless felt that his presence would ease her sense of isolation and also would provide a source of aid if her relationship with Phong deteriorated. Eventually she proceeded with the sponsorship, but only after a lengthy dispute with Phong.

While the issue of sponsorship posed questions about kinship in an especially sharp manner, there were other circumstances in which women and men clashed over family boundaries. When
kin connections could not be questioned (for example, in the case of a sibling), what came under dispute was the commitment of the particular person involved to familial norms and obligations. One of my woman respondents fought bitterly with her older brother about whether their male cousin should live with them. Her brother objected to the cousin’s presence in the household on the grounds that he had not responded to their request for a loan of money two years ago. The woman respondent wanted to overlook this breach of conduct because of her extremely close relationship with the cousin, who had been her “best friend” in Vietnam.

Regardless of the particular circumstances, gender conflict seemed an important part of the family reconstruction process. Women and men shared an interest in creating and maintaining a family group that was large and cohesive enough to provide economic and social support. However, their responses to the family reconstruction process were framed by their differing interests, as men and women, within the family. Men and women attempted to channel family membership in ways that were to their advantage, such that their control over the resources of the family group was enhanced.

Gender divisions and conflicts also entered into the community life of the group. The social networks of the Vietnamese American women were central to the dynamics and organization of the ethnic community. They served to organize and regulate exchange between households. While “hanging out” at informal social gatherings, I observed women exchanging information, money, goods, food, and tasks such as child care and cooking. Given the precarious economic situation of the group, these exchanges played an important role in ensuring the economic survival and stability of the households. The women’s centrality to these social networks gave them the power not only to regulate household exchange but also to act as agents of social control in the community in a more general sense. I found that women, through the censure of gossip and the threat of ostracism, played an important part in defining community norms. In short, the relative rise in power that had accrued to the Vietnamese American women as a result of migration expressed itself in their considerable influence over the organization and dynamics of the ethnic community. Like kinship, community life was a negotiated arena, one over which women and men struggled to gain control.

The gender-contested quality of ethnic forms was also apparent in the efforts of women to reinterpret traditional Vietnamese familial ideologies on their own terms. In general, the Vietnamese American women continued to espouse and support traditional ideologies of gender relations as important ideals. For example, when asked during interviews to describe the “best” or ideal roles of men and women in the family, most of my respondents talked of a clear division of roles in which women assumed primary responsibility for maintaining the home and taking care of the children, and men for the economic support of the family. Most felt that household decisions should be made jointly, although the opinion of the man was seen to carry more weight. About half of those interviewed felt that a wife should almost always obey her husband. Even more widespread were beliefs in the importance of restrictions on female (but not male) sexuality before marriage.

While women often professed such beliefs, their relationship to traditional ideologies was active rather than passive and inflexible. In other words, the women tended to emphasize certain aspects of the traditional familial ideology over others. In particular, they emphasized parental authority and the obligation of men to sacrifice individual needs and concerns in order to fulfill the needs of the family, traditional precepts they valued and hoped to preserve in the United States. The women’s selective approach to Vietnamese “tradition” emerged most clearly in situations of conflict between men and women in the family. In such disputes, women selectively used the traditional ideologies to protect themselves and to legitimate their actions and demands (Kibria 1990). Thus, husbands who beat their wives were attacked by other women in the community on the grounds
that they (the husbands) were inadequate breadwinners. The women focused not on the husband’s treatment of his wife but on his failure to fulfill his family caretaker role. Through this selective emphasis, the women managed to condemn the delinquent husband without appearing to depart from “tradition.” In short, for the Vietnamese American women, migration had resulted in a greater ability to shape family and community life.

CONCLUSION

For immigrant women, ethnic ties and institutions may be both a source of resistance and support, and of patriarchal oppression. Through an acknowledgment of this duality we can arrive at a fuller understanding of immigrant women’s lives: one that captures the multifaceted constraints as well as the resistances that are offered by immigrant women to the oppressive forces in their lives. In patterns similar to those noted in studies of other racial-ethnic groups (Stack 1976; Baca Zinn 1975), the Vietnamese Americans presented here relied on family and community for survival and resistance. Their marginal status made the preservation of these institutions an important priority.

Like other racial-ethnic women, the ability of the Vietnamese American women to shape ethnicity was constrained by their social-structural location in the dominant society. These women saw the traditional family system as key to their cultural autonomy and economic security in American society. Migration may have equalized the economic resources of the men and women, but it had not expanded the economic opportunities of the women enough to make independence from men an attractive economic reality. The Vietnamese American women, as is true for other women of color, were especially constrained in their efforts to “negotiate” family and community in that they faced triple disadvantages (the combination of social class, racial-ethnic, and gender statuses) in their dealings with the dominant society.

Recognition of the role of ethnic institutions in facilitating immigrant adaptation and resistance is essential. However, it is equally important not to lose sight of gender divisions and conflicts, and the ways in which these influence the construction of ethnic institutions. Feminist scholars have begun to explore the diverse ways in which immigrant women manipulate family and community to enhance their own power, albeit in ways that are deeply constrained by the web of multiple oppressions that surround them (Andezian 1986; Bhachu 1986; Kibria 1990). Such work begins to suggest the complexity of immigrant women’s relationship to ethnic structures, which is informed by both strength and oppression.

NOTES

1. My definition of the assimilationist model includes its subvariations, such as “cultural pluralism” and “Anglo conformity.”
2. Some scholars stress the fact that the reality of women’s lives was far different from that suggested by these Confucian ideals. Women in traditional Vietnam also had a relatively favorable economic position in comparison with Chinese women due to Vietnamese women’s rights of inheritance as well as their involvement in commercial activities (see Hickey 1964; Keyes 1977). Despite these qualifications, there is little to suggest that the economic and social subordination of women was not a fundamental reality in Vietnam.
3. Hy Van Luong (1984) has noted the importance of two models of kinship in Vietnamese life, one that is patrilineal in orientation and another in which bilateral kin are of significance. Thus the flexible, encompassing conceptions of family that I found among the study group were not entirely new, but had their roots in Vietnamese life; however, they had acquired greater significance in the context of the United States.
4. Refugee resettlement in the United States involves a system of sponsorship by family members or other interested parties who agree to assume part of the responsibility for taking care of those sponsored for a period of time after their arrival.