

A New Generation of ‘Incorporated Wife’?

Making Sense of International Students’ Spouses in the US

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Responding to the feminist call to reconfigure the outlook of transnational moving, this article explores the gendered experiences of the international students’ spouses behind the booming international education industry in the United States (US). With 20 in-depth interviews, we examined how immigration and university policies feminize the spouses of international students and how they navigate this feminized role. We show that the categorization of spouses as ‘dependents’, by the Department of Homeland Security of the US, justifies and normalizes the discriminating policies towards the spouses, which introduce and perpetuate the gendered binaries of student/spouse, initiator/follower, independent/dependent, and public/private, during which the spouses are repositioned to the feminized half. That said, spouses demonstrate agentic contestations during this process. Particularly, we demonstrate that female and male spouses adopt different strategies to transcend the femininity conferred by this role: female spouses’ contestation is more alliance-based while male spouses tend to follow an individualist approach.

Keywords: International Students; Spouses of International Students; Gender; US; Migration

Introduction

This article focuses on the spouses of international students in the United States (US) and reveals how the structural restrictions from education migration transform their identities and domestic gender relationship. From Hilary Callan and Shirley Ardener’s publication of *The Incorporated Wife* to Cynthia Enloe’s endeavor to reconfigure the outlook of international politics through a gender lens, women have gradually gained more visibility in the literature of international politics and migration. While adopting a gender lens in migration studies spurred a wide range of research on women within

transnational moving — the feminization of migrant labor, transnational marriage, women under skilled-migration, and expatriate wives — academic research hardly has explored the plight of international students' spouses despite their growing in numbers along with the booming of international education (Coles and Fechter 2008; Fechter 2007; Griffiths and Joronen 2019; Gupta, Banerjee, and Gaur 2012; Ho 2006; Salaff and Greve 2004; Schaeffer 2013; Yeoh and Khoo 1998).

The spouses and children of international students in the US are classified as 'dependent' by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). This designation carries with it limited, gendered, and raced connotations that historically have been associated with women and African Americans (Hawkesworth 2012; Kim 2006). Such connotations materialize through a series of immigration and campus policies; for example, under the dependent visa, spouses of international students are ineligible to work or have access to the same institutional benefits as their partners. Previous studies on expatriate wives provided a close parallel — resemblances include the sojourn nature of their stay, visa restrictions, and the invisible and unrecognized incorporation of their labor (Fechter 2007). However, the spouses of international students are distinct in the limited resources and institutional support they receive. In particular, under students' graduate assistantship stipend, varying between \$20,000 and \$30,000 based on a survey by *Phdstipends*, spouses enjoy far less economic privilege compared to the stereotypical 'gin and tonic by the pool everyday' life of expatriate wives (Coles and Fechter 2008). Furthermore, the university provides less support for their adjustment than the employers of expatriates — pre-departure training and welcome parties are standard expatriate support packages that families of international students are not provided (De Verthelyi 1995; Fechter 2007). As Nicole, a Ph.D. student from Uruguay recounted:

‘We were banging our heads against the wall every day because nobody ever showed up to help us’.

This project takes a renewed look at spouses’ migration story through the feminist analytical framework, which views structural limitations and individual experiences as interdependent (Enloe 1990). We address two connected questions: 1) how do the federal and institutional conditions alter or perpetuate the existing gendered relations between spouses and students? and 2) how do spouses contest and navigate the reconfiguration of their living parameters under these conditions?. We begin with a review on the spouses of international students framed amidst the literature on education migration, especially the call for examining students’ social obligations, and the feminist concerns on the lack of gender analysis in migration (Enloe 1990, 2017; Erdal and Pawlak 2018; Kim et al. 2017; Purkayastha 2005). Subsequently, we elaborate on the sampling and interview approaches, followed by an overview of the state and university policies on the spouses of international students. While we primarily focus on the US, we also draw on studies from other countries to form a comparative perspective. Our analyses, with the examination of every step of the spouses’ journey (moving from their home country to residing in the US), show that their migrating process is penetrated by restrictive gendered assumptions that underscore the dependent visa policies and universities’ unwillingness to extend support to the spouses of international students. While these structural limitations eventually reshaped their identities and reordered their domestic relationship, they also generated spouses’ agentic contestation towards the ‘feminised’ implications of being a ‘dependent’.

Theorizing Spouses in Transnational Student Mobility

The spouses of international students are difficult to situate within current migration literature: they are non-immigrant, non-tourist, non-expatriate, and even ‘non-illegal’ (Myers-walls et al. 2011). As such, little research reports their experiences. The earliest work is a doctoral dissertation (Baldwin, 1970), discussing how the presence of spouses affects international students’ sojourn in the US. With the expansion of higher education, particularly the inflow of international students to developed countries, international students’ social obligations related to parenting and partnering have garnered some, almost limited, attention (Brooks 2015; Chiang 2014; De Verthelyi 1995; Geddie 2013; Mayers-Walls et al. 2011; Schwartz and Kahne 1993; Sondhi and King 2017; Vaez et al. 2015; Zhang et al. 2011). Resonating with the literature on student geographies on the students’ adjusting to university, especially the role of family, recent research on international students also shows that family responsibilities and marital status shape their experience to a great extent (Holdsworth 2009). As Brooks accounted, the mobility of international students is ‘strongly patterned by the social structures within which individuals and families are located’ (2015, 210). Against the traditional thinking of educational migration as emancipatory, many studies show that for female married students, especially those with children, studying abroad often resulted in the increase of housework burdens, as they lost previous support from parents or houseworkers. Quoting Lin and Kingminghae (2018, 8), Thai female married students almost ‘can’t wait to return’ due to the disproportional domestic labor they are shouldered while abroad with their partners.

Within the education migration literature, some studies extend the research beyond students and looked at the non-student partners, with one very similar finding: the international student’s spouse’s psychological health should be of concern. As

Myers-Walls and colleagues (2011) noted, spouses at US universities face multiple stressors because of decreased power and loss of professional role during migration. Language barriers, financial struggles, and disruption of social networks — particularly critical for families with children — further exacerbate the adjustment process (Kim 2006; Lo 1993; Mitrushi 2009; Salaff and Greve 2004). While the work ban associated with the US spousal visa is considered detrimental to spouses' adjustment (De Verthelyi 1995), even in countries where spouses legally are able to obtain work permits (e.g., Australia and Canada), the likelihood of continuing their previous profession is low (Ho 2006; Martens and Grant 2008; Yeoh and Khoo 1998). A needs-assessment of 76 wives of international students in Canada reflected the anxiety about not being able to work by highlighting an urgent need for spousal professional development programs (Martens and Grant 2008).

With the emphasis on spouses' psychological health and job-related needs, these studies are nevertheless disconnected from the structural and macro-level dynamics that have implications on spouses' lives (Kim 2011). We argue that although joining the student in his/her pursuit of higher education is often framed as a personal choice and experience, it is nevertheless a process mediated and penetrated by structural parameters, including state and campus policies embedded in restrictive gendered ideologies. And in turn, the functioning of these institutions is dependent on the spouses, who are unquestionably incorporated into the international education system yet remain as the 'forgotten half', both empirically and academically (Lei et al. 2015). To expose this interconnected relationship, we borrow the analytical framework from the feminist analysis of international politics and migration, particularly the analysis of how structural impositions shape and even control gendered relations in the domestic sphere (Brooks 2015; Cheng, Yeoh, and Zhang 2015; Griffiths and Joronen 2019).

The closest parallel to the spouse of international students within the migration literature is the expatriate spouse — both follow their high-skilled spouse overseas, often at the cost of their professional life (Coles and Fechter 2008). During most expatriates' assignments, the accompanying spouse is seen as a 'natural and inevitable condition' to stabilize and smooth the expatriate's transition by creating a home outside of their home country, and thus furthering the employee's productivity (Callan and Ardener 1984; Hinderman, in Coles and Fechter 2008). This *interdependence* between spouses and employment policies, in some cases, are further complicated by the state's visa policies, which inherently underscore how the gendered assumption of a woman's position in the private sphere normalize and sustain the restrictive state/employment policies (Enloe 1990). Griffiths and Joronen's note on Israel's international spouses illustrates this interconnection well:

The visa restrictions...thus tie women to motherhood in a specific way by necessitating that they take on the role of primary care giver and they order gender relations in households along the lines of mobility, financial (in)dependency, work permits and parental responsibility (2019, 8).

Compared with other female actors in the transnational moving — mail-order brides, sex workers, and domestic workers, for example — expatriate wives are undoubtedly privileged, exemplified by their Hilton suites, chauffeurs, morning coffee meetings, and pool parties in the afternoon (Coles and Fechter 2008; Momsen 1999; Nawyn 2010; Schaeffer 2013; Shidadeh 1991). However, beneath these luxuries are restrictions in agency — the hidden labor in mandatory party hosting, loss of professional identity and the incapacity to regain one, and feelings of 'being trapped in a golden cage' (Callan and Ardener 1984; Fechter 2007, 42). A feminist analytical framework guided us to explore the limited agencies hidden in a seemingly privileged group and examine the

gendered restrictions imposed on spouses. This framework views these impositions as beyond discrete and accidental, but rather systemic and problematic gendered repressions that sustain ongoing international politics and economics.

Taken together, the education mobility literature's slow move toward students' family/marriage calls for a feminist examination that goes beyond the micro-level realities of students and spouses, and recognizes the interdependence between them and the international education industry. This means, rather than seeing their experiences as 'private, trivial, apolitical' and therefore 'unproblematic and unworthy for serious investigation', we see them as highly embedded in gendered ideologies, and state and university policies (Enloe 2017, 116 & 165). By doing so, we aim to challenge the patriarchal imagination perpetuating in every spouse's case that 'they will find their own way of coping' and disclose how this 'coping' is inherently problematic and political (Enloe 2017, 109).

Methods

We conducted this project at a US public university with over 20,000 students, among which 2,800 are international students/scholars from over 90 countries. The university represents typical mid-size public universities in the US regarding its proportion of international students (over 10 percent). Particularly, international students comprise 60 percent of the graduate students in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) programs at this university. This proportion is relatively consistent with the national pattern whereby international students comprise 81 percent of the graduate students in Electrical Engineering and 79 percent in Computer Science (National Foundation for American Policy 2017). Recruitment of participants began at an international family event in November 2017, continued with our recruiting in graduate seminars and the international spouses' weekly meetings,

which also enabled the authors to observe spouses' interaction with each other and staff at the international students' office (ISO). Finally, we relied on snowball recruitment efforts — the early participants introduced our study to their spouses and friends.

Recruitment efforts yielded twenty interviewees in total: thirteen spouses (three males), six married international students, and the head of the ISO. We purposefully recruited both students and spouses, and both male and female spouses, to contextualize and compare their experiences (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1999). Among them, ten out of the thirteen spouses and three out of the six students were women — a ratio that reflects the disproportionate gender composition within the spouse group in general (Kim 2006). Seven of the interviewees were from Latin America, eight from East/Southeast/South Asia, four from the Middle East, and one from Africa. Both students and spouses were in their late 20s or early 30s — consistent with findings in both the US and other developed countries (Martens and Grant 2008). Most of the spouse interviewees were highly educated: all female spouses had at least a Bachelor's degree and four had a Master's. Interestingly, the only two spouses without Bachelor's degrees were male. Almost all student interviewees were Ph.D. students and received stipends through Teaching or Research Assistantships. The only two exceptions were postdoctoral fellows from Taiwan. Spouses' former employment was patterned by their education level. All but two female spouses were professionals (e.g., business consultant, graphic designer, researcher, and department manager). Only two interviewees had children: Martina from Colombia had an eight-year-old and Fatma from Turkey had three kids.

We conducted the semi-structured interviews in a café and started the interview by questions on participants' mobility stories, with follow-up questions to elicit deeper responses and encourage spontaneity. To further the welcoming environment, we chose to transcribe the interview by hand and analyze the transcripts later with auto-coding to

reveal major themes and then distilling with particular attention to the interplay of individual and structural factors. And to protect interviewees' identities, we assigned each a pseudonym in the paper. The interviews were conducted by the first and second author, both female graduate students, one Chinese and one Turkish. Echoing Patel (2017) and Besio's (2003, 2005) reflexive examination of researchers' positionalities with the interviewees, we noticed that interviewees' interpretations of our identities are highly context-based — both researchers experienced simultaneous 'us-ing' and 'othering' processes (England 1994; Patel 2017). When complaining about the university's international student policies, interviewees easily switched the subject into 'we' to account for our international identity. As Samuel reminded us, 'we need to ask them (ISO) what their primary mission is. They are not doing a very good job, right?' — something we wonder if he would share with an American researcher. In parallel, while female spouses were comfortable discussing 'domestic' issues with us based on our gender identities, they tended to be distanced by our English proficiency and the student identity. For example, Emily, a spouse from Taiwan, while the interview felt like a thrilling 'girls' day out, she also expressed her frustration for not being able to register for graduate courses like us. In some cases, we tried to strategize our identities to compensate for our otherness — we purposefully matched ourselves with interviewees sharing cultural and language closeness (Tastsoglou and Preston 2005). As England (1994) reminded, the fieldwork is a dialogical process, one that we experienced with constant negotiation of our 'otherness' and 'us-ness' with participants. It is within these particular conditions, though not fully knowable as Sidaway (2000) suggested, that our analysis of transcripts and the knowledge produced should be situated and read (Haraway 1988).

As with most studies, our project is subject to methodological limitations. Due to the university's limited record-keeping of spousal information, our sample size is limited, in both the number of interviewees and demographic variability. A more robust sample size would allow for more substantial analyses of the data and increase generalizability. Second, our study relied on interviewees' reflection of their experiences; retrospective recall can lose accuracy of events. Capturing these dynamics upon their arrival and having follow-up interviews would allow for a more accurate narrative. Third, most of the interviews were with one member of the international family. Having data from other members of the household would allow for a multidimensional understanding of the mechanisms that feminize the international spouse.

State and University Policies

Spouse visa policies vary across countries. For example, in Australia, the UK, and Germany, spouses of students are granted work rights; in other countries such as Canada or Japan, spouses are able to obtain an open work visa or work permit. However, under the current US immigration policy, options for work are very limited or do not exist for spousal visas.

Typically, full-time students studying in the US are granted an F-1 visa while their spouses and children receive an F-2 visa, which prohibits them from working or applying for a Social Security Number (SSN). Although some students/scholars receive the J-1 visa, a visa type for the exchange visitor program, they are typically funded by the scholar's government and their term of stay is shorter than an F-1 student. Different from the F-2 spouses, J-2 visa holders — spouse and children of the J-1 visa holders — are eligible to apply for a work permit and work full time afterward. While theoretically the F-2 visa holders are eligible to reapply for other visas by enrolling in a university or

looking for high-skilled jobs, it rarely happens. Major barriers to this option are the spouses already having obtained a degree from their home country (i.e., questioning the utility of multiple degrees) and the cost of tuition expenses, which amount almost twice of graduate students' annual salary. Nonetheless, without a US higher education diploma, the likelihood of acquiring a professional career that sponsors the skilled worker H-1B visa is scarce. In some cases, F-2 spouses choose to convince their partners to reapply for a J-1 so they can apply for a work permit with the attached J-2 visa, as was the case of Ashanti, a spouse with an environmental engineering master's degree. However, this decision is not without cost. Aamir, the head of the ISO, explained:

We do not encourage this. Students might be rejected for the J-1 visa and this would sabotage their chances of coming back to the US. Getting a J-1 also means they will lose the benefits attached to the F-1 visa, which includes the opportunity to work in the US after graduation under the Optional Practical Training (OPT) program.

Doctoral students in the US are mostly funded through Teaching and Research Assistantships with a working contract. Therefore, they are technically university employees with benefits such as healthcare and access to the campus resources (e.g., gym, counselling center) with discounted rates. Conversely, universities provide limited support to their spouses. While domestic students' spouses are equally discriminated under this policy, lacking this institutional support, while simultaneously being restricted by visa policies and other complications of moving to a new country, may render international spouses feeling invisible in the public space. During our interview with Aamir, he asserted the mission of his office is to serve the primary visa holder and, therefore, any support for spouses should be considered a bonus. In a recently published orientation pamphlet for international spouses, Jane Dunham noted that the inadequacy

of support for spouses is a widespread problem in the US and few institutions have developed family support programs (Dunham 2016). A glance over schools' website also shows that most universities fail to or do not bother to gather spouses' information, let alone recognize their needs. Some universities, such as Northwestern University, consolidate all dependent visa holders in the annual report without distinguishing spouses from children, a statistical approach adopted by the DHS. Some do not provide this information at all, including some prestigious ones such as Harvard University. In our case, the ISO could not provide the exact number of spouses and registered only four spouses' emails. Without systematic policies in place, students have to mediate the communication between the university and the spouse. In many cases, spouses complained that their partners failed to inform them of social activities, thus enhancing feelings of isolation in the new environment (Interview with Emily and Linda).

How do the state and university policies unfold through the spouses' lived daily experiences? In the following empirical section, we structured our findings based on a temporal order that emphasizes the changing gender relationship between the spouses and students in their transnational moving for higher education.

Negotiating with the Role as Dependents

Gender Relations at Home

Gender relations within a marriage are shaped by multiple factors ranging from cultural norms to earning potential (Qian 2017). In previous studies, participation in housework often serves as a proxy measure of gendered relations within marriage, such that women's higher education or professional attainment is positively related to men's participation in housework, thus a more equitable relationship (Qian 2017; Van Bavel, Schwartz, and Esteve 2018). As such, we asked the interviewees about housework

arrangements in their home countries to better understand if and how gendered relations changed within the partnerships after moving.

Instead of directly addressing the division of labor in the household, many interviewees first chose to highlight their similar educational/professional background with students. For some context, on average, the spouse group was highly educated — 90 percent of the high-skilled immigrants' (most likely former international students) spouses have a Bachelor's degree and 25 percent have a Master's degree (Kim et al. 2017). In our study, Ashanti met her husband during her study in the US and then went together to Germany for the Master's. Yang went to the same medical school with his wife — a doctoral candidate in Chemical Engineering. They reiterated they had full-time jobs or were pursuing a graduate degree before moving to the US, except Fatma, a mother of three. From environment engineer, consultant, lawyer, graphic designer, to corporation manager, spouses often recalled their pre-migration career with nostalgia during our interview. Taken together, working in multinational corporations, taking business trips, and being financially independent nurtured the spouses' pride in their work. For them, work seemed not only a means of living but channelling empowerment and self-assertion. Mia, a Colombian spouse, told us: 'I was an entrepreneurship advisor. I felt like I was doing an important job, helping others'. Emily, who used to work for a major Japanese company and speaks proficient Chinese, Japanese, and English, reiterated how much the company had invested in her with trainings abroad, promotions, and pay rises. Even for those who were still in graduate schools, like Janelle, accompanying her husband to the US seemed not to be something she was planning for: 'my study is about children's development... I like kids a lot. My goal is to have my own playschool... it is a place where kids learn by playing. I really like this idea'.

Mia's 'I was doing an important job' pride, Emily's promising future in a multinational company, and Janelle's 'my own playschool' plan distinguish them from women in previous migration studies, especially those who seek migration as an exit to economic or political difficulties. From an individualistic perspective without considering collective betterment, moving does not necessarily imply opportunities for them. As Ashanti recounted: 'I am still looking for jobs back in Bolivia even when I have moved to the US. There are so many opportunities back home with my engineer degree'. Although few, there were spouses that did see value in moving to the US. In Yang's words, moving to the US is his idea, rather than his wife's: 'I want to move here to prepare for the medical licensing exam and be a doctor in the US. My wife's student status will ensure we both are legal here'. Nonetheless, spouses in this study, especially the female spouses, do not identify themselves as 'dependent' as the DHS's term connotes. Rather, they represent a group of independent professionals who value equality with their partners and who fully translate their educational and professional attainment into choices in the private domain.

Except for the four couples who had not lived together before moving to the US, we discovered two types of housework arrangement: either the couple 'outsourced' the work or they divided it. In other words, they are deviants from the traditional marriage model of breadwinner and homemaker (Van Bavel, Schwartz, and Esteve 2018). Most spouses indicated their equally busy work schedule as the reason for such an arrangement. Mia explained: 'we were so busy back in Colombia. We just paid for the cleaning and we ate outside'. Some spouses pushed further and unfolded the gender rationale:

When we were at the master program, we did not need to cook, we just ate at school. I was raised by a feminist mom. My mom always says you do not need to

take care of the house. We each cooked for one week when living together.
(Interview with Ashanti)

Along similar lines, Samuel took up his role from his father: ‘it is a social thing that they think men as the provider of the family. I grew up only with my dad. When I was a kid, I did everything. I’m used to that (doing housework)’.

It seems, despite the difference in our interviewees’ homes of origin, spouse and student partnerships achieved a relatively equal relationship at home that involved shared household responsibilities. Underpinning these comments appears women’s equal or even higher educational and economic status (Bertrand et al. 2015; Chudnovskaya and Kashyap 2017; Qian 2017). This point is even clearer when comparing men and women’s transcript, during which we found men particularly emphasized their wives’ professional achievement while women mentioned less about their counterparts when asked about house chores. For example, both high-school-graduate husbands, Santiago and Samuel, credited their wives’ academic training as justification for their undertaking of the chores by defining their wives as ‘the smart half’ and themselves the ‘problem-solving half’. In other words, for men, their involvement in the traditionally feminized labor still needs to be *justified* and *explained* by women’s improving status rather than naturally practiced. And when doing so, they insisted on using traditionally masculinist terms such as ‘problem-solving’ for compensation.

While previous studies highlighted that housework arrangements are culture and ethnicity specific (Li and Kingminghae 2018; Sondhi and King 2017), our study suggests that within our research group, women’s elevated status in education and profession tends to single out this influence and allow for equalized housework division. Moreover, our study shows that males’ support of gender equality, reflected in

participation in daily and routine housework, is highly *conditioned* on women's elevated economic and professional status. Suggesting that once the condition is lifted, equality in the partnership could collapse.

Moving to the US as a 'Dependent'

Migrating for higher education is a process permeated with gendered dynamics. While student geography literature shows that domestic students' adjusting of college is also marked with identity disruption due to the distance from home and difficulty of constructing the 'new student' identity (Holdsworth 2009; Leese 2010), our case indicates that the identity disruption of spouses is far more serious — immigration policies and the university's failure to incorporate spouses into the higher education system together transform independent professionals into 'dependents', a term implying femininity and infantilism (Hawkesworth 2012; Kim 2006). These policies together rupture the established gender relations back at home and reintroduce the breadwinner/homemaker model by imposing and reinforcing the gendered dichotomy of student/spouse, independent/dependent, and initiator/follower.

A review of the seemingly gender-neutral expansion of higher education illustrates that it is more accurately read as the 'expansion of STEM/male students'. International students, particularly graduate students, are disproportionately distributed in the STEM majors: 44 percent of the international students in the US in the 2016-2017 academic year were enrolled in STEM majors, and that number increased to 49 percent in 2017-2018 academic year (See Figure 1). A Forbes report by Herman (2018) even estimated that by 2020 international students would take up half of all STEM Ph.D. students. This imbalance does not happen naturally. Instead, state policies have been heavily bent to accommodate universities' recruiting strategies, including the legislature

(81 FR 13039) of extending STEM graduates' OPT period to 36 months while the rest graduates 12 months. The US is not alone in its targeting of STEM graduates. In the recent amendments of Australia's New Skilled Regional Visas, the government further relaxed the eligibility for STEM applicants and increased the points awarded to them from the previous extra 5 to 10 points. Similarly, Canada's introduction of the Global Talent Stream program in 2017 shortened the STEM applicants' working visa processing time to two weeks, compared with the six weeks for others.

[See Figure 1]

This systematic preference for STEM students has severe gendered consequences as STEM fields are traditionally male-dominated worldwide. In 2018, women accounted for one-third of all international STEM students in the US (DHS 2018); in 2016, only 15.3 percent of Japanese STEM researchers were women; and Indian women made up 31.9 percent of the population in engineering and technology majors in 2016 (Bennett 2018). It is therefore not a coincidence that women dominate the international spouse population, as higher education in the US and other countries offer a better prospect for men than women. This gendered consequence is further complicated by the patrifocal tradition in some societies where women are expected to move along with their husbands (Brooks 2015; Lin and Kingminghae 2018). Reflected in our study, many recalled the decision of moving as almost unilateral by the (male) students for the sake of their education and career. In the case of Fatma, her sick mother and her pregnancy caught her in an extremely bad timing for moving. However, no negotiation was possible since her husband was the main provider of the family and a US degree would boost his career in Turkey. Similarly, Emily's husband was not willing to come back to Taipei upon graduation since 'his STEM background has

greater career development in the US'; she had no choice but to leave her career behind and join him. Despite the discontentment, both spouses recognized this decision as unavoidable and serving the family interests, defined mainly by the husband's career development based on the patrifocal norms in their society.

Adjusting to life in the US for spouses initially may be a disorienting and disruptive process that goes beyond simply losing one's self-worth (Zhang et al. 2011). It is a dynamic process that involves the spouse losing and/or embracing new roles, which often conflict with the progressive and emancipatory roles from home. During the interview, Samuel used a metaphor of 'life is in a pause' to define this status:

At first, we were both very excited. But after the excitement wore out, you ask yourself 'what am I doing here?' I can't work, and I feel life is in a pause. I gained so much weight like thirty pounds because of the depression.

The struggle and confusion about their own identities as spouses manifested during social activities when confronted with others' established and self-valued student identities; as Ashanti recounted:

When I started to go to the coffee hour, at first it is very hard to make impressions on them (students). They talk about their job at the university. Everyone is like I'm a Ph.D. student or I'm a Master student. I am only a spouse.

For many of them, the frustration of being a 'spouse' ('I'm only a spouse') stems from the lack of utility attached with this identity ('what am I doing here'). This feeling of being useless seems to be embedded within the structural legal, financial, and social constraints of being the spouse of an international student. Ranging from the gendered and partial citizenship to ineligibility to work or apply for an SSN, spouses face further exclusion from campus resources and spaces. For example, our study shows that spouses and children are charged around \$4,000 dollars per year for health

insurance, while graduate students, with the university employee benefits, pay \$200 dollars. Spouses are also excluded from the library, gym, counselling center, and orientation sessions. Notably, the aforementioned benefits and access extend to the spouse of other university employees. While the university was often called out for these miseries, it is at most exacerbating rather than the source of the problem. Aamir, the head of the ISO, complained:

This office is very limited in terms of its capacity. The fact is that it is very hard for us alone to push for institutional change. We don't have the authority to address issues you raised. Let me tell you, if spouses want to start a petition, me and the director of the graduate school will be the first to sign this petition.

In other words, rather than being independent, these impositions on spouses are multi-layered structures with the state allocating resource distribution at the university level. Underlying the state's dismissive education migration policy is the inherently gendered assumption of a patriarchal marriage model with men/students as independent agents and others (women and children) as dependents and feminized objects who do not require access to public/campus space (Mitrushi 2009). The presumable image of 'dependent' as feminine is ostensibly exemplified in the comment constantly received by Samuel, who has no children: 'oh so you are a stay home dad?' These discriminating policies and discourses eventually became a self-fulfilling prophecy:

There was a swimming competition at the gym. But I couldn't enter because I am not a student. Spouses of faculty members can join but not the spouses of international students. I got my library card a year ago... To borrow books, I need to pay some money. (Interview with Mia)

I felt so lost, bad, and restrained. I was more independent in Colombia. Here I don't know anything. I need my husband to ask where the grocery and the bus stop are...I feel like a little child. I don't like being dependent on him because he needs

the time for his things, he is doing a Ph.D. I was afraid to go out. I was afraid to get lost and don't know how to come back. (Interview with Mia)

I can't work and I can't study. I mean yes you can study but you don't have the money to pay for that. I feel really bad. I want to go out, but I don't have a car because we don't have the money to buy a car. (Interview with Ashanti)

Faced with the feminizing forces produced through the policies and as a response to the loss of their previous independent and professional identity ('I was more independent in Colombia' and 'I was afraid to get lost'), spouses gradually started to embrace the homemaker role. Contrary to Kim's (2006) observation that spouses are *forced* to assume the responsibility of childcare, we argue that this transitional process is more subtle as spouses in our study more or less justify it as a new mechanism to exhibit their 'usefulness' and reassert independence, especially for those former professionals. As Ashanti explained:

I want to feel useful at home so I clean. When he says it's his turn I say 'No, you go to study'! He is making money and I'm at least doing something by cleaning and cooking.

Martina's comment illustrates the same point:

He tries to help sometimes. I always told him to study and I will take care of the house. After all, his education is the whole purpose of us being here. I do not want him to be distracted.

As such, many spouses rationalize the adjustment of labor division since 'he is making money', or 'I do not want him to be distracted'. This 'voluntary' acceptance of the new role is therefore phrased as part of the deal — the deal of moving to the US for students' education and for the family's collective betterment. Though spouses might still

be grudge the loss of their professional identity, the embrace of the dependent role at least creates meaning in their lives.

With the evidence provided, the previous gender-equitable households change into those with gendered dichotomies of breadwinner/homemaker, student/spouse, and independent/dependent. While these changes reflect the resilience of spouses' gender roles, they also point to the systematically gendered process of residing in the US as a spouse. In turn, these dichotomous changes feed back into the system and sustain the state and university policies for their further recruiting of international students.

Contestation and Negotiation

The transition into a 'dependent' is not a linear process. Rather, it involves negotiations and contestations centered on pushing for visibility in public spaces and regaining at least partial independent identities. These contestations appear in behaviors such as spouses taking English and driving classes, looking for undocumented jobs (e.g., babysitting and freelance retail), volunteering, and reapplying for a J-2 visa. Notably, many female spouses' agentic contestation behaviors manifest through alliance and network with other coethnics or a religious community, which provide free exchange of knowledge, resources, and emotional support as resistance against formal institutions and to deliver unmet needs (Putnam 2000). While these communal interactions often proceed in private spaces, such as dinner parties, and often remain limited to coethnics or regional-based circles, they facilitate the quest for public spaces. For example, after taking the English class offered by a local church for two years, Mia achieved a successful professional upgrade from a housekeeper to an administrator on campus. The connection Martina built with other coethnic spouses also helped with her work permit

application, a resource the university failed to provide:

I got some information from the ISO... But they didn't offer me information on applying the work permit for J-2. Another spouse from Latin America helped me. I think the spouse meetings are great. Because we just share information that other people might not know.

These networks and alliances are not static. Rather, they gradually evolved from exclusive, homogeneous, informal, and private gatherings to more inclusive, heterogeneous, formal, and public associations. While personal and informal networks benefit personal necessity, they remain limited in forging a stronger bargaining position against formal restraints. Realizing that, some spouses requested the university to organize and make official announcements about the weekly meetings through their website, and provide a gathering space on campus. As such, the spouse group pushed their spaces to the public sphere with tangible results. More F-2 spouses learned about the work permit attached to a J-2 visa and thus started applying for it. More interactions happened between the spouses and university, which increased spouses' visibility on campus. This visibility at the institutional level is exemplified by the ISO's occasional, but unprecedented, posting of spouses' photos and stories on their website. Together, these contestations nurtured spouses' feelings of belonging to the community and sense of independence, which often grew along with the length of their stay as these contestations (e.g., language training and network building) started taking effect, albeit slowly.

Via our direct conversations with male spouses as well as inquiries with female students, we found male spouses represent a distinct pattern from the way female spouses contest their visibility. Their contestations are more individual-based and limited in the household rather than traditionally defined public spaces such as the

campus. Compared with female spouses, male spouses are ostensibly sensitive to the gendered assumptions attached to space. Previous work on gender and space shows that spaces can be inscribed with completely different gender meanings. For example, in Blunt and Rose's (1994) quoting of Marilyn Frye, the kitchen is unsurprisingly recognized as a feminized space while the bedroom is a male-dominated area. Correspondingly, male spouses in our research have their own social/gender map. To begin with, they distanced from spouse gatherings: 'those meetings are all attended by women and kids right? I don't think I would want to go'. Samuel's immediate link between 'women and kids' and the weekly meetings clearly conveyed the reluctance to be associated with such a space. For male spouses, these meetings seem to symbolize the traditional household space which contrasts the public sphere where men belong. During an international family event, Yang teased himself by saying 'ha I'm the dependent! Yes, it's me!' As he explained later: 'when people hear about the term "dependent," they always think of a woman. But I'm a man and maybe the only man here'. In other words, this gendered and feminized manifestation of 'dependents/spouses' positioned male spouses as the 'others'. Compared with female spouses, this 'otherness' further reduced their space for negotiation and contestation, as they simply cannot (or are not willing to) find alliances sharing their struggles.

Their gendered conception of space is also reflected in the household. For instance, Yang spent every day studying for the medical licensing exam in the library, while his first-year-Ph.D. wife tended to the housework: 'I am just too busy with my exam preparation'. Even for those who share some housework with their wives, their participation often remained limited to chores outside of the house:

I have lots of time. I take care of my car, I keep contact with some friends back in my county, I go grocery shopping, and I do laundry (in a laundry shop two blocks

away from the apartment). That's how I spend my time. My wife is very busy...I don't cook though because my wife is better with it. (Interview with Samuel)

In these cases, male spouses are not limiting their activities *in* the house but staying *outside* running errands, working, or studying — activities enabling their reaffirmation of the masculinist notion of home as private and outside as public engaged with productive work (Domosh 1998). As Van Bavel and colleagues (2018) suggested, men's increasing participation in housework needs to be enriched with discussion about what *kind* of housework in which they are involved. Our research shows that male spouses kept themselves away from the spaces with strong attachment of femininity such as the kitchen (Enloe 1990). For them, activities and spaces outside of the house attenuate the unease of being 'a stay home dad' or being associated with 'women and kids', and thus become spaces where male spouses exert agency to navigate and contest the role of 'dependent'.

Conclusion

This project expanded the gendered exploration of migration, particularly education migration, to an under-examined group that has been long invisible in the student/male-centered mobility literature. By using the term 'dependent', the state, along with the university, created a gendered migration experience for the spouses of international students through recruiting strategy, work bans, and inaccessibility to campus resources. We highlighted that state and university policies are inextricably linked, with the state directing the university's expansive recruitment of STEM graduate students without accounting for the gendered consequences. Reflected through spouses' daily lives, these policies wove a web that limits spouses' professional, economic, and social opportunities, eventually immobilizing them and restructuring their households into one that fits the 'breadwinner/homemaker' model. Although there were some

differences between the spouses' experiences, the commonalities across them revealed the influence of these multi-layered policies. Furthermore, by using a gendered analysis framework, particularly by bringing presumably neutral institutions and their interconnection with individual level stories for examination, we challenged the conventional argument that educational aspirations and especially student mobility to Western societies, necessarily progress gender relations. Rather, we called for more attention on how social structures across multiple domains (e.g., within the partnership, university, and state) together undermine gender equity within a well-educated and privileged household (Brooks 2015; Lin and Kingminghae 2018; Mahler, Chaudhuri, and Patil 2015).

With these implications, this study points to three areas for further research and policy improvements. It provides theoretical and empirical support for the creation of a more family-friendly and welcoming campus environment for international students, particularly considering the exponential increase of international students worldwide. With international education booming in other developed countries, future scholarship should include comparative studies of international spouses under different immigration parameters, both in academia and policy-making institutions. Finally, because of the exploratory nature of this project, future scholarship should engage with more systematic research projects, such as dataset building or survey, to identify the broader impact of discriminating international education policies across variety of aspects.

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