

Diversity Beyond Students: Families of International Students as Part of the Campus Community

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1. Introduction

Spouses and children of international students are defined as “dependents” under the classification of Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which implies limited, gendered and raced citizenship that historically has been associated with women and Black individuals (Kim 2006; Hawkesworth 2012). In 2016, the total population of “dependents” had reached 76,183 nationwide. In 2017 at the University of Delaware (UD), 402 international individuals were under this classification. Because they are mainly granted an F-2 visa, spouses of international students are not eligible for a work permit, a Social Security Number (SSN) or equal access to the social and campus benefits or resources as international students were afforded. Together, these institutional constraints form a feminizing process which relocates the spouses to the private domain and reinforces their dependences towards students.

The spouse’s categorization as noncitizen, nonimmigrant, non-tourist, and even non-illegal immigrant renders them hardly visible in either the migration or feminist literature. Current research on this “forgotten half” are mainly in psychology (De Verthelyi 1995; Chiang 2014; Vaez et al. 2015) and family studies (Mayers-Walls et al. 2011; Zhang et al. 2011). With an emphasis on individual level conditions, these studies are often disconnected from and dismiss the structural and macro-level dynamics (Kim 2011). Informed by the call from Chien-Juh Gu (2012) to debunk the underlying structure in disadvantaging women during international immigration, we argue that while bringing spouses to the US is often framed as a personal and thus individual level choice and experience, it is nevertheless a gendered process mediated by structural forces, that is, “a set of socially caused conditions” which include federal immigration laws, international education recruitment pattern, university’s inclusion policy and the omnipresent gender dynamics (De Verthelyi 1995; Kim 2011; Young 2011, 18; Zhang et al. 2011).

This study focuses on answering two connected questions: 1) how do structural institutions change the gendered relationship between international students and their spouses? and 2) how do

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spouses contest and navigate these differences? This study examines how the university, a presumably gender liberating institution, turns back the clock for spouses of international students, a social group hidden in the burgeoning international education industry.

2. Methodology

Gender is a relational concept and by including only women in our research, it is difficult to contextualize the gender dynamics (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1999). For that, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with both women and men as both students and spouses at the University of Delaware. For terminology clarity we identify current international students as “students” both before and after their arrival. The same coding rule applies to spouses, including both women and men. When discussing both students and spouses, we refer to them as “international family”.

To recruit participants, we organized an international family event in October 2017, visited the existing international students event hosted by the Office of International Students and Scholars (OISS), employed snowball sampling and recruited in person at graduate level classes. In the one-hour semi-structured individual interviews, we included seven umbrella questions, such as their stories of coming to the US, changes they have been through, division of labor and so on. In total, ten international individuals participated in the interviews: four female spouses, two female married students, three male spouses and one married male student (See Table 1).

Table 1. Biographic Information of Interviewees

ID	Gender	Education Level	Country	Status	Previous Occupation
1	Female	MA	Bolivia	Spouse	Environment Engineer
2	Female	MA	Columbia	Spouse	Entrepreneur Advisor
3	Female	BA	Columbia	Spouse	Graphic Designer
4	Male	High School	Brazil	Spouse	Software Engineer
5	Male	High School	Uruguay	Spouse	Radio Host
6	Female	Ph.D.	Iran	Students	Student
7	Male	Ph.D.	Japan	Students	Student
8	Female	Ph.D.	South Korea	Students	Student
9	Male	MD	China	Spouse	Surgeon
10	Female	MA	Philippine	Spouse	Student

Source: interviews conducted in Spring 2018

Interview transcripts were subjected to both content and text analysis. We first auto-coded the transcripts to reveal major themes and then further distilled these themes via text analysis with particular attention to the interplay of individual and structural factors. We acknowledge our subjectivity and are highly aware that our relationship to the project could influence the research results (Peshkin 1988). Two female students from the same Ph.D. program, one Chinese and one Turkish, conducted interviews. We believe that our international female student status was an advantage in gathering data from the interviewees, particularly from female students and spouses

who were more comfortable discussing “domestic” issues with us. However, we are also aware of the limit and power relationship created by our identity as international students with English proficiency, a privileged identity in the eyes of spouses with limited access to higher education in the US. With this in mind, we were very careful in negotiating our identity as both researchers and female students, making sure to create a comfortable environment for the interviewee so that s/he could talk freely about her/his experiences (Tastsoglou & Preston 2005). As an additional comfort producing measure, we often chose cafés to conduct the interviews and transcribed them by hand for a relaxing environment.

3. Main Findings

Our study found that the label of “dependent,” with its structural connotations and limitations, feminized spouses’ roles by turning them from “independents” into “dependents,” thus changing the gender relations between spouses and students. In addition, under the same feminizing process, which attaches the role of spouses with meanings of femininity, domesticity and infantilism, female and male spouses took different approaches to reconcile and contest the gendered difference. The following section proceeds to capture this dynamic with three major findings: 1) the independent roles for spouses in their home countries; 2) a transition to “dependent” spousal status when they arrive in the U.S.; and 3) gendered differences in response to spousal status.

1. Gender Roles in Home Country Both female spouses and female students in our research are on average well-educated with strong self-assertion and take considerable pride in their career. As some of them recalled, “I was an entrepreneurship advisor. I felt like I was doing an important job, helping others,”ⁱ and:

My study is about children’s development stage...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.ⁱⁱ

Pride in their career has been deeply internalized as part of spouses’ independent subjectivity, which severely challenged the traditional breadwinner/homemaker marriage model. For female spouses and students, their earning potential and professional achievement enhanced their bargaining power over housework. As a Colombian spouse explained: “we were so busy back in Colombia. We just paid for the cleaning and we ate outside.”ⁱⁱⁱ Similarly, the Bolivian spouse illustrated:

When we were at master program, we didn’t need to cook we just ate at school. I was raised by a feminist mom. My mom always says you don’t need to take care of the house. We (with her husband) each cooked for one week.^{iv}

Male spouses and male students’ reflections towards female spouses and students’ claim over independence are consistent with previous research on educational hypogamy—marriage in which the wife has higher education attainment—which implies a positive relationship between women’s absolute earning power with men’s participation in housework (Qian 2017; Van Bavel, Schwartz, & Esteve 2018). Male spouses, especially those whose wives have higher educational attainment, tended to particularly amplify gender equality when discussing their stories back home. Coincidentally, both high-school-graduate husbands gave credits to their wives’ academic training as

justification for their undertaking of the chores by defining their wives as “the smart half” and they are the “problem-solving half.”^v

While earning potentiality enhances female spouses and female students’ bargaining power over the share of housework, it is also important to note how gender norms come into play. Several spouses in our study refer to their belief in gender equality as directing their daily practices in house chores. The “feminist mom’s” education not only guarantees the Bolivian spouse’ pursuit of higher education (Master from Germany), it also shapes her identity as an independent woman who “don’t need to take care of the house” and thus an equal division of house chores with her husband (“we each cooked for one week”). Similarly, gender equality ideology also normalized the male Uruguayan spouse’s involvement with housework, as he explained: “it is a social thing that they think men as provider of the family. I grow up only with my dad. When I was a kid, I did everything. So I’m used to that (doing housework).”^{vi}

Without systematic data on the educational and occupational background of spouses in the university, it is hard to conclude a general pattern of gender relations between students and spouses in their home country. However, qualitative research is informative regarding how educational, occupational, and cultural backgrounds are often indicative of respondents’ elaboration on gender relations. Our findings further reinforce the positive relationship between women’s educational attainment and men’s participation in housework, especially when women have outdone men (Qian 2017; Chudnovskaya and Kashyap 2017). Strengthened by the professional empowerment of female spouses and the embedded gender equality ideology, husbands’ support of gender equality materializes not only in the pride paid to their wives’ career but also the participation in daily and routine housework.

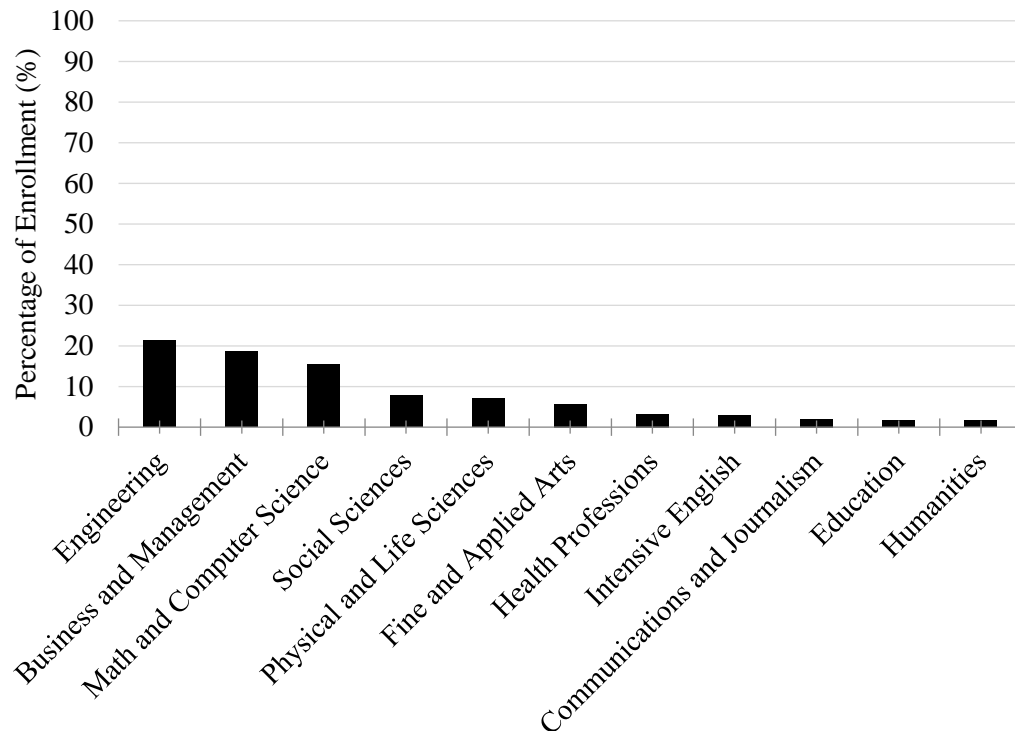
2. The Transition to a “Dependent” Rather than simply “being a dependent,” our research shows that the embodied meaning of “dependent,” including domesticity, femininity, and infantility, is produced through the interaction of multilayered institutions, including the international higher education recruitment’s preference of male students, immigration laws with the work ban towards spouses and university policies’ exclusion of spouses from public spaces. Together, they rupture the established gender relations back home and reintroduce the breadwinner/homemaker model by imposing the binaries of students/spouses, independents/dependents and initiator/follower.

The seemingly gender-neutral expansion of the higher education industry is rather more accurately described as the “expansion of international husbands.” International students disproportionately represent STEM majors; 44% of the total international college student population in 2016-2017 academic year are STEM majors (See Figure 1). Within UD, 56% of the international graduate students are in STEM majors. Since STEM fields are traditionally male-dominated, it is therefore not surprising to witness the feminization of international spouses. At UD, 67% of STEM students are males. Though we currently do not have the data on population of female spouses within UD, a national survey shows that in 2016, 64% of the international students’ spouses were females (DHS 2017). That means, women still constitute the majority of the “spouse” group, a term that is assumed gender-neutral (Kim 2006).

The feminization process starts upon the arrival of spouses, applying to both male and female spouses. Initially experienced as an identity disruption, the identity as a “spouse” conflicts with the progressive and emancipatory self. During the interview, the Uruguayan spouse uses a metaphor of “life is in a pause” to define this status:

At first we were both very excited. But after the excitement worn 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.^{vii}

Figure 1. Selected of Fields of Study in Academic Year of 2016/2017



Source: Institute of International Education (2017)

Struggling with identity manifests the most during social activities when confronted with established and self-valued student identities:

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 in the university. Everyone is like I’m a Ph.D. student or I’m a Master’s student. I’m only a spouse.^{viii}

For most of the spouses, the frustration as “spouse” (“I’m only a spouse”) comes from the meaninglessness attached with this identity (“what am I doing here”), which results from structural and inescapable legal, financial and social constraints imposed on the identity as “spouses.” Spouses are admitted to the U.S. under the classification of “dependents” with only partial and gendered citizenship bonded with a series of legal and formal constraints, including the ineligibility to work or apply for SSN and exclusion from campus resources and welfare. For example, our study shows graduate students receive healthcare benefits for \$200/year, while spouses and children are charged around \$4,000.

The university's policies further justify and reinforce the domesticity attached to the role of "dependents" by identifying the students as the "head of the household" and therefore has not collected the contact information of spouses, making them "invisible" in public spaces. This invisibility carries tangible policy implications: spouses are excluded from the gym, counseling center, orientation sessions and social events. Asymmetric access to resources further extends the spouses' dependency on the students and challenges the previous independent subjectivity of spouses and acts as an infantilizing force which in turn reinforces and reproduces the feminized and infantilized image of "dependents." Often, exclusion from the outside world intertwines with lowering of the economic status ("I don't have a car because we don't have the money"). While students are also part of the "we" discourse in experiencing the economic difficulty, the "student" identity inoculates them from the shock of isolation and exclusion.

Correspondingly, spouses automatically assumed the role as homemaker. Contrary to Kim's (2006) observation that spouses are "forced" to childcare, spouses in our research more or less justified this transition as compensation for the loss of work identity. For them, housework is the new mechanism to exhibit their "usefulness" and reassert independence ("I want to feel useful at home," as well as "I have lots of time...my wife is busy"). As such, the previous equal gender claims in the household is overthrown under the structural push for spouses to return to the private domain. The new relationship is built upon the breadwinner/homemaker, students/spouses, independent/dependent models (Zhang et al 2011). Notably, though this newly assumed role as homemaker to a certain degree enriched spouses' life in the U.S., it derives from a structure that assigns students and spouses to separate, hierarchical domains. As one spouse told us, her husband is rather guilty about her sacrifice and the guilty not only affects his health but he even considered quitting UD and moving to another country where they are both allowed to study and work.

3. Contestation and Negotiation Responding to the structural feminizing imposition, female and male spouses display different patterns of practices. As the "Other" in the spouse group, male spouses mediate the difference with two strategies: 1) distancing themselves from the female spouse group and 2) differentiating the *kind* of (house)work they are involved.

- 1) Female spouses' negotiation and agentic resistance is majorly enabled through alliance and network with co-ethnic or religious community, which provides free exchange of information, resources and emotional support which are otherwise absent due to the lack of support from the university. Realizing the exclusivity of these personal exchanges on parameters such as language and ethnicity, spouses made a request to the university to form weekly meetings open to all spouses. This platform is made public through the official announcement on school websites and the obtaining of a space on campus. With that, tangible results followed: more F-2 spouses learned about the work permit attached to J-2 visa and thus started applying for the J-2 visa to work; more interactions transpired between spouses and university which granted spouses more bargaining power in school policies and a sense of community was nurtured with claims such as "now I feel I'm a part of the American community."^{ix}

While the resistances of female spouses for public spaces is assisted by alliances and networks, male spouses choose to distance themselves from the spouse community as a way to transcend the femininity attached to the new role. To avoid comments like "oh so you are a stay home dad?"^x some simply reject coping with the tension by not attending social activities. While literature shows that men's mediation of a feminized role often includes purposeful distancing from females and allying with higher status men (Pullen & Simpson 2009), the

double disadvantages of male spouses—being both dependent and “alien” in the community—gives them little space for potential male alliance.

- 2) Instead, male spouses’ negotiation happens within the household. Trying to maintain the breadwinner role and thus the assertion of masculinity, both the Iranian and Brazilian male spouses continued working from distance for their business back home. The former Chinese surgeon identified himself as the initiator rather than follower: “I’m the one who wants to take the Medical Licensing Exam and move to the US.”^{xi}

Compared with the relationship at home, where male spouses admit their identity as “the problem-solving half,” the transition to a “dependent” amplifies the need for a masculinized identity (“I’m the one who wants to move to the US”) as compensation to the legal/social dependence to their wives and the invisibility in public spaces, spaces that were assumed to be a masculinized domain. For those who are not able to retain the breadwinner role, differentiating skills from “female spouses” in the household is another strategy. While female spouses automatically sent themselves “back to the wok” upon assuming the role of dependents, male spouses keep themselves away from it. The strong attachment of femininity to the kitchen and the association between women and food preparation remain strong (Enloe 2014). By arguing “she is better with it”^{xii} or “I tried but I can’t do it,”^{xiii} male spouses shirk the femininity.

4. Conclusion/Recommendations

In this paper, we expanded the exploration of citizenship to a group which has long been in a shadow, defined as non-immigrant, non-citizen, non-tourist, and even non-illegal immigrant (Hawkesworth 2012). Distinguished from other research, our study not only unpacks the structural and individual interplays underlying the spouse group, it also contributes to a broader understanding of the spouse group by including both female and male spouses. With that, this study proposes recommendations to the UD administration on how to expand the diversity discourse to include the spouse group.

Information: Gather the spouse’s contact when they register at OISS upon arrival or provide students the link for spouses to register before arrival, including email, phone number and address. Provide the spouses with equal access regarding information dissemination, such as hosting a formal orientation at the beginning of each semester or including them in the new international students orientation hosted by OISS. Furthermore, include them on the email list of OISS’s weekly newsletter and Office of Career Service’s newsletter.

Resources: Enhance spouses’ access to more campus activities and resources such as the counseling services provided by the Center for Counseling & Student Development, intramural sports leagues and tournaments by the UD Recreation and negotiate the access to Registered Students’ Organization (RSO) with the UD Student Centers. With the help from the Department of Risk Management, alternative health insurance plan consultation should be provided to enable spouses with more choices.

Participation: Conduct surveys on spouses at least biannually through OISS to evaluate their adjustments and perceptions of the campus climate. Increase opportunities for spouses to

interact with the community through mechanisms such as OISS's volunteer and interpreter recruiting or the provision of brochures at the OISS introducing local volunteering activities. Continue the weekly spouse meetings at OISS and encourage more participation through formal invitations, such as via email.

We hope that this brief will provoke more conversation from the university to enhance the exposure of spouses and the institutional impediments they face. With the population of international students reaching a new record in 2018, we hope a new record will also be made to provide their spouses an equitable and welcome environment.

ⁱ Respondent No. 2, interview conducted on Feb 5th, 2018.

ⁱⁱ Respondent No. 10, interview conducted on Mar 26th, 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ Respondent No. 2, Feb 5th, 2018.

^{iv} Respondent No. 1, interview conducted on Jan 26th, 2018.

^v Respondent No. 4 and No. 5, interview conducted on Feb 20th and 21st, 2018.

^{vi} Respondent No. 5, interview conducted on Feb 21st, 2018.

^{vii} Respondent No. 5, interview conducted on Feb 21st, 2018.

^{viii} Respondent No. 1, interview conducted on Jan 26th, 2018.

^{ix} Respondent No. 1, interview conducted on Jan 26th, 2018.

^x Respondent No. 5, interview conducted on Feb 21st, 2018.

^{xi} Respondent No. 9, interview conducted on Mar 6th, 2018.

^{xii} Respondent No. 5, interview conducted on Feb 21st, 2018.

^{xiii} Respondent No. 4, interview conducted on Feb 20th, 2018.

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