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Family Tightrope

THE CHANGING LIVES OF
VIETNAMESE AMERICANS

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CHAPTER FIVE

The Family Tightrope

GENDER RELATIONS

Tomorrow I will be home and someone will ask
 What have you learned in the States?
 If you want to give me a broom
 I'll tell you, I am a first class janitor.
 I wash dishes much faster than the best housewife
 And do a vacuum job better than any child
 Everyday I run like a madman in my brand new car
 Every night I bury my head in my pillow and cry
 In the States I learn the meaning of vastness
 But love here seems the size of a toothpick
 Such naturalness they appear like kids
 But my soul is aged by a thousand years.
 The speech art becomes a physical exertion
 The more you talk, the more muscle you get
 And your mother tongue is used only for cussing
 Or at best to pen verses on nights of despair
 The big lesson I learn since coming to the States
 Is this boundless craving for my land
 (*Cao Tan, "Tomorrow I Will Be Home"*)

THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE, particularly in its early years, is typically one that is imbued with a sense of uncertainty and liminality—of being in a dynamic state of transition. For Vietnamese Americans, especially men, changes in the relations of men and women were central to the experience of disorder that accompanied settlement in the United States. There was a widespread feeling that a breach in the world had transpired. This feeling found expression in a tongue-in-cheek description, recounted to me by several men, of the transformation in gender relations that had been brought about by the move: “In Vietnam the man of the house is king. Below him the children, then the pets of the home, and then the women. Here, the woman is the king and the man holds a position below the pets.”

A profound sense of loss is conveyed by this statement, with its suggestion of a dramatic reversal of the traditional Confucian sexual hierarchy. Underlying this perception of loss were the largely unanticipated challenges to male power that had occurred with migration to the United States. There had been a shift in the gender balance of resources, one that had shrunk the differential gap between the level of men's and women's access to and control of key resources.

This shift in the balance of resources between men and women was a source of tension and change in the relations of Vietnamese American men and women. However, contrary to what one might expect, the shift did not result in a radical transformation or restructuring of gender relations. While Vietnamese American women exercised greater influence in their families as a result of their relatively greater control over resources in comparison to the past, they did not use their enhanced power to challenge traditional conceptions of gender relations and family life. Instead, Vietnamese American women worked hard to incorporate the new realities of their lives into the ideological confines of the traditional family system. They walked an ideological tightrope—struggling to take advantage of their new resources but also to protect the structure and sanctity of the traditional family system.

MIGRATION AND THE GENDER BALANCE OF POWER

In certain ways, the move to the United States had resulted in greater losses for Vietnamese American men than for women. There was a sharper difference, for men, between their social and economic status in pre-1975 Vietnam compared to the United States. In pre-1975 South Vietnam, men had been in middle-class occupations, in sharp contrast to their position in the lower tiers of the occupational structure in the United States. Besides providing them with an income that supported a middle-class lifestyle, their occupational positions in Vietnam had meant that they had been relatively privileged in their dealings with government institutions and bureaucracies. In the United States, in contrast, men found themselves to be “foreigners”—disadvantaged in their dealings with institutions located outside the ethnic community. In general, I found among men a profound sense of alienation from the social institutions of their new homeland. Many spoke to me of experiences of powerlessness and loss of face in their contacts with U.S. bureaucracies and officials:

Americans look down on us, the Vietnamese, because we don't know about their culture, their language. For example, I went with my son-in-law to the bank to borrow money to buy a house. A man was there, he was a young man, I could be his father. He was very rude. My son-in-law didn't understand what he said so he asked him to repeat and the boy said, "Come back here after you learn some English," and he just got up and walked away. I just said let's go. But things like that happen all the time to us, it's difficult because we're not used to it. In Vietnam I could go anywhere and do anything. Here, nothing.

The loss of middle-class status and privilege that had accompanied migration of course affected not just men but women as well, since in Vietnam women had derived status and benefit from the occupational status of men. However, while both women and men had lost these former privileges, the losses had nonetheless effected a change in the position of women vis-à-vis men. Whereas previously men had through their occupational position held the key to middle-class status for women, in the United States this was no longer the case. Migration had worked to create greater equality between Vietnamese American men and women in their relative control of societal resources. In other words, relative to that of men, the level of women's control of societal resources had improved. As figure 1 shows, the extent of women's inequality, as measured by men's and women's relative control of resources, had shrunk with the move to the United States.¹

In a variety of ways, this greater equality permeated the relations of Vietnamese American men and women. Among both men and women, there was an acute awareness of the negative consequences of this greater equality for the self-esteem of Vietnamese immigrant men. This was suggested by a male informant in his midtwenties, who also identified several economic and social advantages enjoyed by Vietnamese refugee women over their male counterparts in the United States. His claim that women had fewer financial obligations to kin in Vietnam was, however, contradicted by women, both married and unmarried, who often talked to me about their struggle to send remittances to relatives in Vietnam.

The Vietnamese women, when they come here they have more opportunity, they become more active. The difference between Vietnamese men and women is that the women don't have the responsibility to support the

¹ It is important to emphasize that I refer here to the status of Vietnamese American women within the group rather than in comparison to women in other groups or socie-

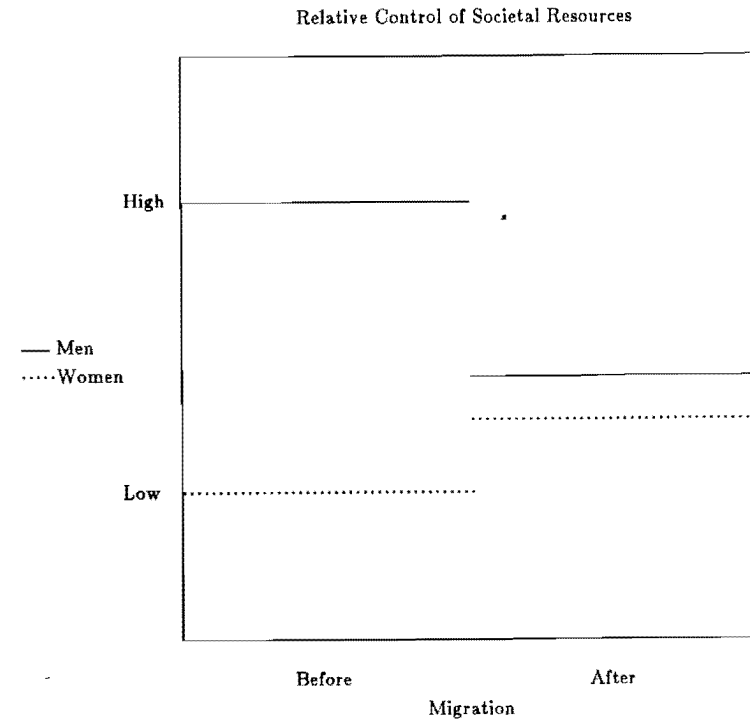


FIGURE 1. Shift in the status of Vietnamese American women

family back home. The women, they can get AFDC for a while if they have children, get some skills, take some classes. The men have to get a job immediately, because unlike the women, they have to send money to Vietnam.

Things also change because here women have more chance to go out and women get less discrimination from the local people than the men do. [Why do women get less discrimination?] I think the women are friendlier than the men, and the friendlier you are, the more opportunity you get. The men are also defensive, upset. They have the feeling that their dignity has been damaged, and sometimes they react very stupidly.

Both women and men were particularly cognizant of and concerned about the inability of men to fulfill adequately, as they had in pre-1975 Vietnam, the role of the primary economic provider for their families.

ties. As Janet Chafetz has suggested, "the concept 'sex stratification' refers to a comparison of access levels by the two sexes within a given society at a given time" (1984, 5).

During interviews, the negative repercussions of this inability for the status and authority of men in their families was often mentioned. As one man in his late thirties put it:

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. In Vietnam I felt I could always take care of my family, but here I know I can't.

Another male informant, who was in his early fifties, offered a similar analysis. But he also spoke pragmatically of the adjustments that were necessary for men to make in their relations with women as a result of the decline in men's earning power:

There have been a lot of changes. In fact, to anyone, whether you're in Vietnam or here, whether you're a man or a woman, it's the same. The women who depend on their husbands for money, those women respect their husbands. Now when they come to America and they can work, they have money, they can support themselves, they don't have to depend on the husband. So the husbands here should change the way they treat their wives and not keep the customs.

The decline in men's earning power and, more generally, in their social status, was central to the shift in the gender balance of power that had been generated by migration. There were, however, a number of other conditions that also contributed to the shift in the gender balance of power. In the following pages, I discuss three of these conditions: a high sex ratio, challenges posed by dominant U.S. culture, and an expansion in the scope and significance of women's homemaking responsibilities.

The High Sex Ratio

One condition that affected gender relations among Vietnamese Americans was a high sex ratio—a surplus of men over women, particularly in the prime marrying ages.² As Guttentag's and Secord's (1983) analysis of

the impact of sex ratios on women's status suggests, the surplus of men in the Vietnamese American community often appeared to be a source of dyadic power for women.³ In other words, women used their comparative scarcity to exercise greater power in their relationships with men. However, not all Vietnamese American women clearly benefited from the high sex ratio, the impact of which was highly uneven, differing markedly for married and unmarried women.

Young, single men in the community tended to be quite bitter about the shortage of young, available Vietnamese American women. For males who were unattached, the scarcity of Vietnamese American females meant that women had greater choice than men in marriage partners and could "look around" in a more leisurely fashion for the most desirable match. Men often spoke of how single women used the high sex ratio to search for the most financially lucrative match: "Here, because there are not so many girls, the men have to chase after the girls. And the girls choose the man with the most money. In Vietnam the girls were more honest and simple. They stayed with you because they loved you. But here, money and job are more important to girls than love."

Men's references to the preference of Vietnamese American women for "money over love" were in fact incessant (cf. Gold 1992, 123), reflecting the economic insecurities that the migration process had generated for men. One man in his forties, who had a wife and children remaining in Vietnam, spoke angrily of this: "If I say I love a woman, she will ask me if I have a lot of money in the bank and if I have a new car. So how do I have enough means to satisfy her? I came here to make money and help my relatives in Vietnam, and not to get together with her."

The young women that I talked to disagreed with such analyses, denying that women used the high sex ratio to their advantage. Nonetheless, some women informants did mention specific incidents in which women had taken advantage of the increased vulnerability of Vietnamese men in the United States: "The men say that the girls just want their money; that's not true. But it's true, some girls are like that. When I lived at — there was a man who was very ugly but had a lot of money. Twice, Viet-

Vietnamese refugee arrivals, men outnumbered women by more than two to one in the twelve- to twenty-four-year age group.

³ Guttentag and Secord (1983) also predict that the dyadic power accruing to the sex in short supply will be counterbalanced by the ability of the group with greater structural power (i.e., control over important societal resources) to limit and restrict the activities of the other.

² A high sex ratio (120 males to 100 females) among Vietnamese refugees is reported by Rumbaut (1989b, 158), based on his research in San Diego. There is also evidence that the sex ratio has been particularly skewed for Vietnamese Americans aged twelve to twenty-four. For example, the Office of Refugee Resettlement reports (1984, 10) that among 1984

namese women came and lived with him and then ran off with his money. He was so angry, the second time it happened he just came out and told everyone in the neighborhood how bad that girl was.”

Because of the high sex ratio, the consequences of ending a relationship were, in a certain sense, more damaging for men than women, for whom there was no shortage of future partners. According to my informants, the situation was almost a reversal of that in South Vietnam, where because of the war, eligible men had been in short supply in the decade or so before 1975. The scarcity of Vietnamese women in the United States meant that women were able to use the threat of leaving a relationship to push partners to meet their demands. In one specific case, a woman demanded that her boyfriend spend less time hanging out and drinking with buddies. In another case, a young man's fiancée threatened to break off the engagement if he did not start taking courses at the local community college or make some other moves toward acquiring a better-paid job. In a situation that involved a couple, Duyen and Ba, Duyen demanded that Ba reform himself if he wanted her to remain in the relationship:

Before we were married, Ba had many girlfriends, not just Vietnamese but American, Spanish. After we started going out, he liked to keep on seeing them sometimes. I heard from lots of people, “Oh, I saw Ba with that girl.” I was embarrassed. I said to Ba, this isn't Vietnam, you can't have so many girlfriends, there are no Vietnamese girls here who will go out with you if you act like that. So I said to him, this is your choice; if you don't stop seeing other girls, then I won't go out with you.

Although Ba was not pleased with these demands, he agreed to them. Like many other men, he was acutely conscious of the greater bargaining power that women had because of their shortage: “Vietnamese men have to chase after the women, do whatever the women want, at least until they get married. In Vietnam, I would never listen to a girl who told me what to do, I would just say goodbye and find someone else. It was easy to do that in Vietnam, because there were so many nice, beautiful girls.”

The high sex ratio had other, somewhat less explicit effects on the relations of unattached men and women. It deeply affected the social texture or ambiance of the social life of young, single men and women in the community. For example, in social gatherings, much of the public attention was focused on the women, highlighting their scarcity and “value.” My fieldnotes recording a party thrown by a group of young Vietnamese American males conveys some sense of the quality of public interaction between young men and women that I observed. Parties such as that de-

scribed below took place frequently in the community. Sometimes they were part of weddings, birthdays, or celebrations to mark the one-month birthday of a newborn child. But more often than not, they were organized with no specific occasion in mind. Although the guests of such parties tended to be young and single, they also included children as well as older and married persons.

The party was at one of the apartment buildings on Orchard Street, in the home of Lien and Hung and the four young men (friends of Hung) who were sharing the apartment with them. When I arrived at 9 P.M., about fifteen people were crowded in the small kitchen eating fried rolls, noodles, and potato chips. Hung's older brother and sisters, their spouses, and their children were all there. Eight-year-old Lan excitedly showed me the black lace gloves (“just like Madonna's”) that she had brought specially for the party. A steady stream of guests, mainly young men, poured into the kitchen. Men helped themselves to the cans of Budweiser while the women drank Coke or Seven-Up. One guest, dressed elegantly in a suit and tie, took instant Polaroid snaps and handed them around.

I went outside to the balcony overlooking the main street. The five or six older men at the party sat there drinking beer and talked about the possibility of starting a poker game. Later, a group of young men moved out to the balcony to smoke cigarettes and talk outside the din of the blaring music in the living room. Hung came out and urged everyone to start dancing. Dinh replied that there was no one to dance with, and he said, “Do you think we're gay, huh?” For a while, the conversation on the balcony turned to the cost and merits of the cars going down the street. At one point, a car driven by a young, attractive, blonde woman came down the wrong way on the one-way street. Two of the young men stood up, started whistling, and yelled, “Wrong way, wrong way, baby. Over here!” Everyone laughed except two of the older men, one of whom shook his head in disgust.

In the inside room adjoining the balcony, a large area had been cleared of furniture, for dancing. When Lien put on some Vietnamese music, three couples danced the cha-cha-cha, a dance that had been popular in Vietnam. On one side of the room there was a group of about twelve men drinking beer. Man and I talked about the small number of women in the room; he counted five unmarried women in the room. Man then called over his sixteen-year-old niece and asked her to invite some of her Laotian girlfriends from school so that there would be “more girls.” She said she would try, but their parents didn't usually let them go out at night. When Man put on a Michael Jackson record the dance floor became crowded. A group of

about ten children under the age of ten moved around wildly on one side of the room.

By about 11 P.M., the five unmarried women were dancing constantly. I talked to Patricia, who was in her late teens and had dropped out of high school recently and begun a beautician's course. Patricia, who was dressed in a silver-colored miniskirt with black sequins, told me that she never danced with anyone more than once or twice because if she did they would "get some ideas." She said that if you danced with only one Vietnamese guy, he and everyone else would think they were girlfriend and boyfriend. Our conversation was interrupted by Sang, who asked her if she wanted to dance. When she refused, he offered to bring her a fresh drink. While he left to get the drink, Patricia got up to dance with someone else.

I went into the kitchen where Dinh and some other males were drinking shots of Johnnie Walker whiskey. Dinh showed me the bottle, which he said had been full an hour ago and was now about empty. He said that it was the "Vietnamese custom," that when a man asked another man to drink, he couldn't refuse. So it was impossible to stop. A couple of the men turned to me and complained about the lack of women at the party, and suggested that I call up any women that I knew and ask them to come over. I told them I couldn't think of anyone. They talked about leaving and going to a bar in Chinatown. Man suggested they drive over to the Atlantic City casinos.

At about 11:30 P.M., a heated argument broke out between two of the young men about their relationship with Tia, a senior in high school. Khanh said that Tia was his girlfriend and that Duc had no business dancing with Tia all night. Duc claimed that Tia had told him she was not going out with anyone so Khanh shouldn't interfere. In the midst of the argument Tia left the party with her older sister. Both Khanh and Duc left at about the same time.

At about midnight, Suzy, an Amerasian (of Vietnamese and American parents) woman in her midtwenties, came to the party. I had heard stories before from the men (Dinh and Man) about her exceptional beauty. Suzy sat in the only armchair in the living room and talked to a couple of the men. After a while, Man and a few others came over to me and talked about how they didn't like Suzy. Man talked about how Suzy was like some of the Vietnamese girls here who acted "royal." The girls thought they were special because they knew that they were beautiful and that many Vietnamese guys wanted to go out with them. He also said that "girls like that are no good" and that nobody would want to marry them after a few years. He talked about how Suzy went out with the guy who had the most

money and the nicest car and then eventually left him for a wealthier suitor. Lien, who was standing with us, laughed and said it was true that Suzy had too many boyfriends but Man was just jealous of her because he didn't have a girlfriend. Another man there shrugged and said that no one wanted to marry girls like that anyway. I asked what he meant and Lien said that a lot of people wouldn't marry Amerasians because their mothers had been prostitutes in Vietnam.

Because an important underlying goal of these parties was to provide an occasion for young women and men to meet and to develop amorous relationships, the parties dramatically highlighted the fact of the high sex ratio among Vietnamese Americans. In parties such as that described in the preceding, men vied for the attention of the few available women. As a result, a striking dynamic of these gatherings was an emerging sense of rivalry and competition among the men, along with the ensuing tensions. The interactions between men and women were marked by acts of deference by men toward women. Women found themselves at the center of attention as men brought them food and drinks, asked them to dance, changed the music to suit their taste, and offered to drive them home.

This attention, however, was not entirely beneficial for the young women in that it tended to circumscribe their social activities. The focus of the "public eye" on women, combined with sexual rivalries among men, strengthened community monitoring of the sexual reputations of women. In general, a high value was placed by Vietnamese Americans on the virginity and fidelity of young women. Curiously enough, the importance of these values was often emphasized to me by those young, unattached women who had come to the United States without family members. These women often went to some lengths to make sure that in the absence of close family members, they had other guardians who could protect their sexual reputations. As one woman in her late teens, recently married, put it:

Dating for the Vietnamese here is similar to Americans but more conservative. Usually the girl doesn't go out with the guy the first few times he calls. If her family is here, then he has to meet them, but then it's serious. I didn't go out with my husband 'til I talked to him a few times. Before we got married, we wrote to our parents in Vietnam and they met each other. My parents wanted to find out if he was good or not. Some girls here, usually without parents, they just go crazy and get into a lot of trouble. I didn't have my parents here, but I listened to my friend's parents, took their advice, and tried to learn from them.

For another young teenage woman, her older male cousin had stepped into the role of surrogate guardian:

I don't think sex before marriage is good, because if the woman gets pregnant, she's in trouble. I know there are some Vietnamese girls here who do it, but I don't think it's common. The girls who do it are very Americanized. After coming here, I've changed a little bit, but not much. In Vietnam, girls and boys can't hold hands. Here I think, forget it, it's just a hand. But when I go out I always ask my cousin, "Can I go out with this person? And I'll come back at this time." Before I went out with my boyfriend, I asked him to come over to meet my cousin. I don't have to do that, but I don't want to change.

For those unmarried women whose parents were present in the United States, the supervision of their parents ensured that they did not develop a reputation for sexual promiscuity. At the same time, parents also sometimes encouraged their unmarried daughters to take advantage of their numerical scarcity by looking around and waiting for a partner who had good economic prospects. In part, such attempts by families to ensure that younger members made a "good" marriage choice grew out of a recognition that kin groups had a stake in the marriage decisions of the young, which could translate into either a drain upon or an extension of collective familial economic and social resources. An unmarried twenty-six-year-old woman talked about her family's "wait and see" attitude regarding her boyfriend: "My family liked Trac, my first boyfriend. He was quiet and polite. He worked at our store and my family knew that we liked each other. My parents told me, Trac is okay, if you really like him you can marry him. But we advise you to wait because there are a lot of Vietnamese men here, and some of them are smarter and make more money than Trac."

The high sex ratio entered into the lives of my married informants somewhat differently, although for this group too, it undoubtedly complicated the relations of men and women. Almost all of my married informants (both men and women) felt that migration had been an unsettling factor in their marital relationships. Dissatisfactions and conflicts in marriages were far more common than in Vietnam. According to men, these tensions grew out of the greater freedom and power of women in the United States. In women's accounts, marital conflicts were provoked by what the women saw as men's irrational jealousies. As one woman put it:

We have many, many fights; it's not good. I'm an old woman now, but when I go out somewhere, to the store, he says, "Oh, you went to see your

boyfriend, I know; you want to make love with the American men who have big cocks." He says that in front of the children; I feel ashamed. Many Vietnamese men here are like that, when they get angry they say, "just go with the American men who have more money."

Other women, too, talked of the jealousy and the propensity of their partners to compare themselves unfavorably with men of higher social and economic status, especially "American men." It was clear that the high sex ratio was viewed by Vietnamese American men as an additional aggravation to the other losses that they had suffered in the migration process. Much like their unmarried counterparts, some married men spoke of the high sex ratio as a source of power for women, because men had more to lose than women from the termination of a relationship: "Many Vietnamese men are afraid that their wives will leave them because it's easy here in America to get divorced. The man who gets divorced, maybe he will live alone for the rest of his life. I think it's hard for an old Vietnamese man to find a Vietnamese wife. But for the woman it's different; I think it's easier for her to marry again."

However, the impact of the high sex ratio seemed more symbolic than real for those who were married, in the sense that married Vietnamese American women faced a variety of social and economic pressures to remain in their marriages. In other words, although the prospect was greatly feared by men, women rarely initiated the ending of a marriage. Some of the social pressures that encouraged Vietnamese Americans to remain in unsatisfactory marriages were revealed by Nga during an interview. Nga and Vinh were having conflicts in their marriage. Although Nga had seriously considered leaving Vinh, she did not do so, in part because of pressure from kin. Like many other women, Nga feared the disruptive effects of divorce on her familial relationships:

The Americans, they get divorced so easy; they change their husbands like changing clothes. That's not our custom. But the Vietnamese, we don't think well of the man and woman. If a husband and wife don't like each other, they should still stay together because of their children. But sometimes Vinh says, do you want to divorce? Vinh doesn't care so much about the children. He can't find a job, but he gets angry when I go to work. He says I talk to other men at the restaurant and that makes him jealous. One night he called me at the restaurant and said I had to come home. I said I couldn't do that because I had to clean everything and close the restaurant before I came home. He came to the restaurant and started pulling me out, pushing me onto the street. I told him I wanted to divorce, and he started crying and said no, he doesn't want that. I took a bowl of water and threw

it on the floor and said, if you can put back the water in the bowl then I'll stay with you. But after that, I decided not to divorce. Vinh's younger brother lived with us at that time and he was upset. My children were very sad. Then my uncle and his wife in New York; they called me and talked to me. They wanted us to stay together; they said America is a new place and we have to stay together. They told Vinh to find a job and stop being jealous. But everything is the same. Vinh asks me for money all the time, and he gets angry when I don't give it to him.

Similarly, in another situation, a marriage on the verge of collapse was saved by kin who persuaded the woman to remain in the marriage. This particular case also illustrates the economic pressures that often underlie women's decisions to remain in unsatisfactory marital relationships. Lan had come to the United States with her children in order to join her husband Hai, who had left Vietnam a few years earlier. Upon her arrival, she found out that Hai had been living with a Cambodian refugee woman for some time. Hai refused to end his relationship with the woman and continued to visit her. Despite Lan's tremendous anger about the situation, she remained in the marriage. As the interview transcript suggests, her decision to do so was guided by the idea that it was important for her son to have his father around. But what is also revealed are the economic considerations that shaped her decision. A divorce from Hai would cut her off not only from Hai but also from his kin, who were an important source of economic assistance for her:

My destiny is bad; I have a difficult fate. I think Cambodian women have a lot of charms. After I came here, my husband said a man has several hearts; one stays with his wife, others wander to other women. I was always waiting for him at home; I cooked a meal and waited, like the woman waiting forever for her husband to return (*Hòn Vọng phu*).⁴ I wanted to leave him. But it's different for us, for the Vietnamese people, it's not like the Americans. I told my friends and my sister and they said no, I should stay with him because he's the father of my son. A son without a father is like a house without a roof. But still, I said, I'm going to leave him. I told Hai's brothers and they were upset. They said, how could I do that? All except one brother, he never liked me. Then I started thinking, if I leave Hai and his family, how can I live with my children? I know I'll get welfare but that's not enough. Hai's family, they give us food and money all the time. All I have is my sister, and she doesn't want me to leave Hai.

⁴ *Hòn Vọng phu* refers to a Vietnamese folk legend of a woman with her child, waiting for her husband to return; she waits so long that she eventually turns into stone.

As these two situations suggest, social and economic pressures from kin often compelled Vietnamese Americans to remain in unsatisfactory marriages. Although these pressures operated for both men and women, for women they served to mute the options potentially generated by the high sex ratio. Thus for my married informants, the effect of the high sex ratio was ultimately somewhat ambiguous in that it did not clearly empower women in their relations with men. What was clear was that references to this demographic condition sometimes served as a symbolic vehicle for the expression of men's frustrations. It also accentuated the greater fragility of male dominance and, more generally, the traditional family order in the context of the United States. But for unmarried women, the high sex ratio enhanced their value in the "marriage market,"⁵ thus giving them an immediate kind of power in their relationships with men. At the same time, the high sex ratio worked to strengthen the community's preoccupation with young women's sexual purity.

Cultural Challenges

Many of my informants felt that the most decisive challenge to the integrity of Vietnamese culture and identity in the United States stemmed from cultural forces. Among other things, "American culture" was viewed as extremely corrosive to traditional Vietnamese patterns of gender relations. United States culture affirmed the equality of men and women and also challenged appropriate norms of feminine behavior. There was much variation in feelings about these cultural challenges, depending on the age and social background of the informant. Reactions ranged from complete disapproval to some degree of endorsement of the perceived state of gender relations in U.S. culture. One of the most conservative reactions was voiced by Binh, a man in his early fifties, a former middle-ranking military officer:

In Vietnam, we accepted that men and women were different—both equally important, but different. Women and men dressed differently; talked and walked differently; women were different. Only the women who had no families smoked cigarettes, drank beer, wore clothes that showed their bodies. Women were devoted to taking care of their families, their children. American women are different, and the Vietnamese women

⁵ The marketplace metaphor has been used in theories of mate selection to explain patterns of homogamy or in-group marriage (Goode 1982). In the most explicit use of the metaphor, exchange theorists have hypothesized that people "trade off" their traits in the marriage market to get the most desirable partner or to "bargain" in the marriage market.

want to be like them when they come here. Sometimes I see the young Vietnamese girls here, they walk and talk in ways the girls would never do in Vietnam.

A younger male informant who had grown up in Can Tho (a city in South Vietnam) also expressed concern about changes in the behavior of Vietnamese women with the move to the United States. Once again, Vietnamese American women were chastised for imitating their U.S. counterparts: "Some of the Vietnamese women here are like Americans. They talk and laugh so loudly, you can hear them far away. I don't like that. The Vietnamese women in Vietnam are more honest. They have less contact with society, they're more isolated, so they don't try to imitate."

Such negative reactions to alleged changes in the conduct of Vietnamese American women came not only from men but from women as well. Dao, a woman in her early thirties, who had grown up in a coastal village in the south and had moved to the city in her teenage years, made the following comment; within the spectrum of opinions that I encountered, her reactions were more conservative than most others:

Even the clothes women wear here are different from in Vietnam. There they wear the baggy trousers, the *áo dài*; only the rich wear jeans and things like that. But here they wear anything. Some Vietnamese women, they want to be like the American women. I don't like the freedom of American women; it's too much. The way some American women dress is so bad, only girls who work in bars dress like that in Vietnam. And some women here, they act just like a man, smoking. American women are too loud, not shy, and they do things like kiss on the street.

Another woman, from Saigon and in her late thirties, also spoke with some disdain about the alleged changes in Vietnamese American women. But for her, as for many others, the most disturbing aspect of these changes was not so much their substance as the rapidity with which they took place. The speed of the changes was taken as a sign of an absence of integrity in the individual involved:

Women come here [from Vietnam to the United States], and they are mothers of the men. Many women change a lot, those women don't know anything, but they heard that it's "ladies first" here. I've even seen some young couples where the wife hits the husband. I think those women are looking up, and they don't want to look at their past.

Life here is ten thousand or a hundred thousand kilometers different from in Vietnam. I, myself, am exactly who I was in Vietnam, and I tell you

the truth. My friend who came here, in Vietnam she had to wear black pants and one leg was shorter than the other. She wore slippers, and she had to get a string to keep them together. But after she came here she started acting like the wife of the mayor.

Not everyone, however, agreed with the idea that women had changed or that these changes should not be welcomed. A vastly different response to the issue of changes in women's behavior came from Huong, a single woman in her late twenties. She angrily suggested that it was men rather than women who had changed; it was men who no longer fulfilled the norms of masculine behavior:

Here the women can do whatever the men do; they can go to school, work in the same kind of job, drive a car. The men who complain about it, they're the ones who don't act like a man any more. They come here, they get depressed because they can't stop thinking about Vietnam. And what do they do? They sit around the house and drink beer. They don't want to learn English, to go out and talk to people. Yes, I think it's the men who don't act like men any more; it's not the women who have changed.

United States culture not only challenged appropriate norms of male and female behavior but also cast doubt on the legitimacy of male authority. While my informants perceived a variety of social agents, including the popular media, to be implicated in this challenge, U.S. legal principles concerning family relations were seen to be at the forefront of this challenge to male dominance. The significance of these principles was dramatically highlighted to my informants by cases of police intervention into domestic quarrels among Vietnamese Americans. These cases embodied the absence of support for male authority in U.S. culture.

In three of the twelve households that formed my core sample, members told me that physical assaults by men on women occurred quite frequently in their homes. However, informants (both male and female) also felt that wife beating was less common among Vietnamese immigrants in the United States than it was in Vietnam. This was, in part, because such behavior was no longer "legal." Indeed, Vietnamese Americans were highly conscious of the illegal nature of wife beating, frequently mentioning it as one of the most important differences in the position of women in Vietnam compared to the United States. While I was conducting fieldwork, I heard of two instances in which women telephoned the city police for protection during physical confrontations with their partners. One involved Nguyet, a woman in her early thirties, who had been living with

Phong for six years, since her days in the refugee camp. She described the incident to me a few days after it occurred:

That time when Phong started hitting me I was so mad I called the police. He's crazy sometimes, if I just go out for an hour, he says to me, "Did you go to meet your boyfriend?" When he gets angry I'm scared that he might kill me with a knife; the Vietnamese men are like that. When Phong saw the police he was scared; he doesn't speak as much English as I do. The police came and asked him if he lived here, and to stop hitting me. The police told me they couldn't do anything because we lived in the same house.

The effect of the intervention of the police in situations such as this was to underscore for Vietnamese Americans the illegitimacy of traditional Vietnamese conceptions of male authority in the context of the United States. In the weeks that followed the visit of the police to Nguyet's home, the incident was widely discussed and recounted around the neighborhood where she lived. Both men and women expressed surprise at Nguyet's audacity in initiating contact with the "American police." On the whole, reactions to Nguyet's actions were ambivalent, among both men and women. In part, this ambivalence stemmed from the refugees' deep and historically rooted distrust of government and police officials. But it also reflected the fact that there was support, although certainly to varying degrees, for the right of husbands to chastise their wives physically under certain conditions. Not uncommon were the attitudes of a woman in her late thirties who spoke of how men were naturally prone to physical violence and of how such violence was justified in the case of the wife's sexual infidelity:

I said to my husband, if I really do sleep with other men like you say I do, then you can hit me. But there's no reason, so I get angry. Sometimes I say to him, what time do I have to see other men like you say that I do? I work all the time, at the company [shampoo factory], or I cook and clean. I don't have time to see other men. Men are different from women. If they get angry, they want to hit someone. That's the way men are. That's okay, if the wife does something wrong.

The ambivalence regarding police intervention also stemmed from concern about the potentially destructive consequences of such interventions for parental authority as well. There were men and women who pointed out to me that the intervention of the police into domestic quarrels could undermine not only the position of men in relation to women but also that of parents in relation to their children. Male authority and parental authority in the family were viewed in symbiotic terms, as suggested by a

woman in her late twenties, who commented disapprovingly on Nguyet's decision to call the police:

I don't like that she called the police, because we're Vietnamese and we should take care of our own problems, not ask the American police. [What do you think Nguyet should have done?] Phong has a sister here; Nguyet must talk to her first. Maybe the sister can help her. Nguyet did something bad when she called the police. I think the children learn from her that if their mother or father hits them, they can call the police. But if you don't hit the children, how will they learn?

The Expansion of Women's Homemaking Activities

In the Vietnamese American households I studied, it was women rather than men who were seen as the household caretakers—the people who held primary responsibility for making sure that the basic material needs of household members were met. As part of this responsibility, women performed the bulk of housework and childcare tasks. Although men sometimes babysat children, they rarely seemed to participate in such work as housecleaning and cooking. The one notable exception to this was in the case of households that contained no women, a situation that forced the male members of these households to perform household caretaking tasks.

But if for the most part Vietnamese American men's involvement with homemaking activities had not changed dramatically in comparison to the past, migration had affected Vietnamese American women's homemaking experiences in crucial respects. In the context of market economies, household caretaking involves not just the provision of services such as housework and childcare to household members but also the work of acting as intermediary or liaison between the household and social institutions that are located outside the household and contain resources that are critical to the well-being of household members (Gordon 1990, 12–13). For Vietnamese immigrant women it was this intermediary aspect of homemaking that had changed; it had expanded in scope and significance. Whereas in Vietnam, too, women had negotiated with social institutions such as government bureaucracies and schools on behalf of the household, in the United States this mediating work had taken on new dimensions. For one thing, in the United States, this work involved dealing with a wider range of complex, large-scale bureaucracies. These bridging activities had also become more difficult to perform because of language barriers and a lack of familiarity with U.S. bureaucratic

procedures. Indeed, it was perhaps because of the difficulty of such bridging work, and the feelings of marginality and powerlessness often accompanying it, that men were often willing and even eager to leave these tasks up to women.

For some households, dealings with utility companies were particularly irksome. Problems arose when utility bills were not paid on time because of money shortages or were misinterpreted because of language difficulties. Also, two households did not contain any members with bank accounts, so they sometimes postponed the time-consuming process of going to the post office and getting a money order. Problems with telephone bills were frequent because of the constant and open flow of neighbors and others into the households who did not hesitate to make long-distance calls. Partly because of this, the recipients of bills were often puzzled about the long-distance charges on their bills and wanted more information about them.

Women were compelled to deal with utility companies, as they tended to be the ones to manage the portion of the household budget that was allocated for basic living expenses. On a few occasions, I accompanied women to shops or to utility companies where they attempted to return purchases or get information about bills. At one time I accompanied Nguyet to the local office of a utility company. Nguyet and other family members had recently bought a house. But since the previous morning, they had had no electricity or gas in the house. As suggested by my field-notes, for Nguyet, playing the part of intermediary between the household and such bureaucratic organizations as utility companies was time-consuming and difficult work.

As we drove over to the office, Nguyet talked about how before they moved into the house she had spent all her time taking the bus all over town and arranging to have the utilities turned on. Luckily, her friend's teenage daughter had been able to help her, particularly in filling out application forms. She had called the electric company at the beginning of the summer, so she didn't know why they had turned it off. The same thing had happened to their Vietnamese next-door neighbor.

At the office, there were two long lines. We talked about which line to stand in; one was in front of a sign saying "bill payment," and the other, "information." I suggested the "information" line and Nguyet agreed. We waited for about twenty minutes. When it was our turn, the service representative said, "What can I do for you ladies?" Nguyet replied there was no electricity or gas in her house and the man said he would look into it. He asked for the address of the house but didn't understand Nguyet's answer.

After Nguyet's second try I gave the man the address. After about five minutes he returned and said that their records indicated that we had not made any payments over the past three months, and we should have responded to the several bills and notices that had been sent to the house. Nguyet took out a thick sheaf of papers from her handbag and started searching for the bill, and after a few minutes I searched with her. The service representative looked on exasperatedly. There appeared to be no bill in Nguyet's papers. I asked the man about what needed to be done to get the service resumed. He replied that we could pay now or fill out a form requesting deferred payment. I explained this to Nguyet, after which we went to another line to fill out the necessary form.

I also found that it was women rather than men who most often dealt with the health-care system on behalf of the household. Indeed, women were widely acknowledged to be the health-care "experts" so far as both U.S. doctors and the more traditional Sino-Vietnamese medical practitioners (*đông y sĩ*) in the community were concerned. Thus on a few occasions, I saw men turning to women for information when they needed to consult a doctor. Once, when everyone in a household of five single men was quite ill, one of the men called his sister to help them consult a doctor. The men waited for several days for her to return from an out-of-town trip because, as they told me, they had no idea how to get medical attention. The sister, however, knew all about hospitals and doctors because her children had been sick so many times.

The prominence of women in negotiating with the health-care system was viewed as a natural extension of women's homemaking activities. It was in the process of taking care of children and others in the household that women were compelled to deal with medical practitioners. The structure of the public cash assistance system also reinforced the tendency of women rather than men to become the health-care experts. Many Vietnamese American women with young children received medical care, both for themselves and for their children, through AFDC or other public assistance packages. Social service agency workers sometimes helped women to become familiar with the bureaucratic procedures of the public assistance and health-care system. Women's greater intimacy with the health-care system was fostered in other ways as well. For some families, childbirth marked their first sustained contact with U.S. doctors. The process of giving birth, including pre- and postnatal care visits, forced women rather than men to have direct contact with doctors and hospitals and thus acquire some fluency in dealing with the medical establishment.

Although it was far less exclusively the responsibility of women, Viet-

name American women also participated actively in the task of finding housing and dealing with negligent landlords. Once again, women dealt with landlords in an effort to fulfill their domestic caretaking responsibilities. On several occasions, I saw women attempting to contact landlords to demand home repairs. In a building that housed several Vietnamese American households, the problems of peeling paint, uncollected trash, and inadequate heat grew exceptionally severe one winter. Some of the Vietnamese immigrant women in the building took on the job of calling and badgering the landlord to fix the problems. After the landlord failed to respond, one of the women spoke about the situation to a social worker with whom she was acquainted. The social worker, through complaints to the mayor's housing office, was able to pressure the landlord to provide more heat throughout the winter, although the other complaints of the residents remained unanswered.

In the effort to fulfill the demands of their domestic caretaking responsibilities, Vietnamese American women relied heavily on the support of female friends and kin. Most women were part of female exchange networks that were centered around kin and neighborhood ties. While hanging out at informal social gatherings, I observed women exchanging food and material goods of various sorts as well as money to help one another with emergencies or unusual expenses. Women viewed the lending of money as an important source of economic security, as it obligated the borrower to the lender in ways that could prove useful in the future. For Dao, a woman in her early thirties with three children, the monthly struggle to pay household bills intensified when, after a family quarrel, her brother left for New York. Dao turned to women friends to make up for the financial gap created by the loss of her brother's income. She spoke of how she knew she could rely on one friend in particular, to whom she had lent about \$200 when the friend had a baby and had needed money badly. Dao spoke to me of how it was wise to give money and other goods to people because they would then be obliged to help you out later.

Women exchanged not only money and material goods but also such tasks as childcare and cooking. They traded information on where to find good buys on food and other items for the household and on how to cope with and maximize gains in dealings with welfare and social service agencies, hospitals, and schools. The women also shared knowledge of available jobs and other income-generating opportunities, as suggested by my fieldnotes recording a visit to the neighborhood Vietnamese American hairdressing establishment. The store was run by a Chinese-Vietnamese woman who had been a hairdresser in Vietnam. She had yet to obtain

the necessary license, and so she ran her business in the basement of her house, which was located on a busy street. Trang, one of the assistant hairdressers, had invited me to visit her there in the midafternoon, a slow time for customers. Her sister and a number of friends were also visiting her at the time:

One of the women talked about how she badly needed money to send to her sister and mother in Vietnam; her welfare payments were not enough to do this. She needed to find some work, but she didn't know where to look. Trang's sister said that her cleaning job at a downtown hotel was a good one, she could take her over there and introduce her to the supervisor. Another woman said that she sewed clothes at home and that might be better because then she would still get welfare. The woman who was looking for a job questioned the two closely about the wages she would receive by working at the hotel and sewing clothes. Trang then broke in to say that she might also consider working at a Vietnamese restaurant—there was a new one in another part of the city, and Trang knew the owners well.

As suggested by the preceding, in a variety of ways, ranging from the exchange of money loans to information about jobs, women's networks helped them to meet the demands of their household caretaking responsibilities. I have suggested that migration had expanded the scope and significance of these responsibilities in that women were more heavily involved than before in the work of mediating between the household and large-scale, complex bureaucratic institutions containing resources valuable to the household. But a caveat must be attached to this assessment: it would be extremely misleading to suggest that in Vietnam, women were completely confined to the domestic sphere or that they had not had direct contact with large-scale bureaucracies or institutions prior to settlement in the United States. Nor do I wish to suggest that Vietnamese American men never engaged in dealings with bureaucratic institutions outside the ethnic community or even that women occupied a position of substantial dominance over men in the extent of such dealings. My point is, rather, that there had been a relative shift in the involvement of men and women with such institutions. Women's contacts had grown, whereas those of men had shrunk.

The expansion in both the scope and significance of women's home-making activities both reflected and contributed to the overall decline in the resources of men, relative to that of women. Despite the fact that negotiating with bureaucratic organizations on behalf of the household was onerous work, it was also a process that ultimately equipped women

with valuable skills, which were a resource for women in their efforts to exert control over household affairs. But the disruptive impact of these enhanced skills on traditional gender relations was curbed by the manner in which the expanded homemaking activities of women were viewed and defined by my informants. In Vietnam, women's domestic caretaking responsibilities had carried them into a wide spectrum of activities, ranging from managing household budgets to running businesses. The variety of tasks that had traditionally been associated with women's homemaking made it relatively easy for Vietnamese Americans to see the new activities of women as simply another dimension of women's homemaking tasks. It was, after all, the responsibility borne by women for meeting essential household needs that led them to negotiations with stores, hospitals, social service agencies, and so on. Women's homemaking responsibilities had simply stretched to include the complex tasks of negotiating with bureaucratic organizations that held resources and services that were necessary to the functioning of the household and the well-being of its members. These tasks were easily defined as part of the job of looking after the household. They had become part of the larger body of women's "invisible" work, the work that had been traditionally referred to in Vietnam as "the work with no name" (*việc không có tên*).

On the whole, migration to the United States had impoverished the social and economic resources of Vietnamese American men relative to those of women. In comparison to Vietnam, particularly in the pre-1975 era, there was greater equality in men and women's control of social and economic resources. The high sex ratio, cultural challenges, and a shift in the scope and significance of women's homemaking activities all reflected and deepened men's losses. The shifts in the gender balance of power had set the stage for deep-seated changes in gender relations. But women's responses to their improved control of resources were ambivalent in certain respects, in ways that reflected the complexity of their relationship to the traditional family system.

WOMEN AND THE TRADITIONAL FAMILY ORDER

Vietnamese American women often spoke to me about the importance of preserving Vietnamese family traditions in the United States and of not assimilating into the familial behavior of people in the United States. When I questioned women about exactly what it was that they valued about Vietnamese family traditions, they invariably compared the close

family ties of Vietnamese men and children to the looser and more distant ties they observed among families in the United States. The close familial ties of Vietnamese men and children were fostered by the prescriptions of the traditional Vietnamese family system, according to which men and children were obligated to orient themselves and their activities toward the kin group. Women feared the disruptive effects of settlement in the United States on men's and children's obligations to their families. These fears, while especially pronounced among those who were wives and mothers, were also present among other women, who anticipated the familial ties of men and children to be significant to their lives in the future.

Women feared the weakened familial ties of men and children for several reasons. For one thing, the potential defection of men and children threatened the cooperative household economy and such practices as patchworking. Thus women often expressed support for those elements of traditional Vietnamese family ideologies that articulated and buttressed the economic obligations of men and children to their families. For example, Vietnamese American women spoke approvingly of how according to the dictates of Vietnamese culture, in contrast to those of U.S. culture, men were expected to devote themselves, at whatever personal cost, to provide economically for their families. A young unmarried woman made the following comment: "I respect my father a lot because he worked hard to support the family. After 1975, he worked at three jobs to make money for the family. I think that's one difference between American and Vietnamese men. Some American men, they don't take responsibility for the family."

It is worth noting that women, both married and unmarried, continued to value men's breadwinning obligations despite the decline in men's ability actually to fulfill this obligation. Frequently however, women viewed the inability of Vietnamese refugee men to provide economically for their families as a temporary aberration, a transitory phase in the process of adjustment to the United States. It was expected that in the future, men would regain their ability to generate income—an expectation that was strengthened by the inclination of some households to invest in the vocational training of adult male (rather than female) members. In short, women valued the economic contributions, both actual and potential, of men, and they identified the familial economic obligations of men as an aspect of the traditional family order that they wished to preserve.

Traditional Vietnamese family ideologies upheld not only the economic obligations of men to their families but also those of children. As part of their filial obligations, children were expected eventually to provide economic resources to parents and other family elders. It was in fact

partly this strong expectation of future payoff that led households to make considerable financial investments in the education of the young. For many households, it was the achievements of the young that were the key to moving up in the socioeconomic ladder of the United States. Thus Vietnamese American mothers, along with other kin elders, feared the prospect of vitiated ties between children and their families because it jeopardized familial socioeconomic aspirations.

But the trepidation of women about the weakening of children's familial bonds was driven not just by economic considerations. Underlying it were also deep-seated concerns about the erosion of their authority, as mothers, over children. The attenuation of parental authority meant a loss in the ability of mothers to exercise control over children's lives, in matters ranging from modes of dress to such important life decisions as marriage. In fact, when asked about the greatest drawback of living in the United States, Vietnamese American mothers invariably expressed fears about the loss of control over their children:

The biggest problem of living here is that it's difficult to teach your children how to be good and to have good behavior. The children learn how to be American from the schools, and then we don't understand them and they don't obey us. The customs here are so different from our culture. The children learn about sex from TV. Maybe American parents think that's okay, but for me that's not okay because I know the children will learn bad behavior from watching TV. Also, I worry that when my children grow older they won't ask me my opinion about when they have girlfriends and they get married.

The deep-seated anxieties of Vietnamese American women, particularly those who were mothers, about the erosion of parental authority also found expression in their ambivalence about the protection offered to them from domestic violence by the U.S. legal system. As I have mentioned, although many women felt positively about the illegitimate quality of wife beating in U.S. society, there was also widespread concern that the intervention of the law into family life detracted from the authority and rights of parents to discipline their children as they chose. In a historical study of domestic violence in the United States, Elizabeth Pleck (1984) describes similar attitudes among European immigrant women in the early part of the century. These immigrant women welcomed the greater rights and authority accorded to them by U.S. legal institutions, but they also resented the intrusion of the state into their authority to discipline their children as they chose. Their ambivalent attitudes regard-

ing police intervention into episodes of domestic violence, like those of Vietnamese immigrant women, highlight the complexity of women's position within the patriarchal family order (Gordon 1990). This was an order that assigned women to a position of subordination to men but also gave authority and power to women in their relations with children. The latter was one aspect of the traditional family system that Vietnamese American women were reluctant to relinquish and that was threatened by egalitarian modes of family life.

All these considerations led Vietnamese refugee women to express considerable general support for the maintenance of traditional Vietnamese family relations in the context of the United States. However, Vietnamese American women were not simply staunch supporters of the traditional Vietnamese family system. That is, women's support of the system did not preclude them from working to improve their situation within it or to soften the force of male authority. This became apparent to me as I observed women attempting to protect and support the struggles of individual women against men in their household using traditional family ideologies, interpreting them in ways that were to their advantage. Women's ideological manipulations emphasized the fluid and multifaceted quality of traditional Vietnamese family ideologies as well as the duality of women's relationship to the traditional Vietnamese family system. Women strove both to preserve this system and to moderate their position of subordination to men within it.

Vietnamese American women who were having conflicts with men in their households sometimes brought these conflicts to the attention of women kin and friends. While hanging out at various places where women informally gathered, I observed women talking of such conflicts. One case I heard of involved a woman named Thuy and her husband Chau. Chau had been severely beating Thuy for some time. Following a particularly violent incident, Thuy's sister, Dao, appealed to her close women friends for help with the situation. Together, the women condemned Chau, not only for his acts of violence but also for his lack of commitment to providing for the family. A former military officer, Chau had been largely unsuccessful in finding work in the United States. Among other things, the women described Chau as "a bad father."

Several women were gathered at Dao's house. Dao brought up the situation of her older sister, Thuy. She said she hadn't wanted to talk about it before, but now it was so bad she had to talk about it. Thuy's husband, Chau, was hitting her often. The other day, Dao had to take Thuy to the

hospital, when Chau had hit Thuy on the face. One of the women said, "What about Chau's brother? Does he say anything?"

Dao replied that the brother had told Chau to stop it. But nobody really cared about what the brother said; certainly Chau didn't. The brother was very old. He did nothing but eat and sleep. And he hardly talked to anyone any more, he was so sad to leave Vietnam. Dao started crying, saying that if her parents were here, they could help Thuy.

Dao's neighbor said that maybe Thuy should leave the husband. That wasn't a bad thing to do; when the husband was so bad, the woman should leave the husband. Chau didn't even take care of the children; he wasn't a good father. He also hit the children, even the smallest one, who was only three years old. No good father would do that. Dao said that yes, that was true, Chau wasn't a good father. He also didn't like to work and have a job. Thuy had talked about leaving Chau, but she was scared because she thought maybe Chau would come after her and the children. One of the women said that she would appeal to her brother, who was Chau's friend, to talk to Chau and tell him "not to make trouble" for Thuy. Several other women mentioned people they knew who were in some way associated with Chau. They all said they would talk to these people about Chau. Someone remarked that Thuy was "a good woman" who took care of her children and family, in contrast to Chau, who was "no good."

Dao and her friends were an important source of support for Thuy. Largely through gossip, the women were able to bring pressures to bear on Thuy's husband. The women's exchange networks that I described earlier also functioned as gossip networks. Chau found his reputation among kin and friends to have been affected by the rapidly disseminated judgments of the women. In conversations with a number of men and women about the situation, I found that Chau had been ostracized, not only by the women but also by male friends and relatives. Chau left the city to join a cousin in California. There were no legal divorce proceedings, but the marriage had been dissolved in the eyes of Vietnamese Americans in the neighborhood. Thuy and her children continued to live in the city, receiving help and support from family and friends. Chau, in contrast, severed almost all relationships in the area.

The process by which women collectively worked to sanction Chau was one in which they engaged in a selective interpretation of traditional Vietnamese family ideologies in order to garner support for Thuy. In other words, to legitimate their support of Thuy, women interpreted these ideologies in ways that they chose, emphasizing certain elements and ig-

norning others. The women supported Thuy in breaking ties with her husband, a course of action that conflicted with beliefs about women's familial obligations as well as ideals of family unity and solidarity—central dimensions of the ideology of family collectivism that I have described earlier. But in Thuy's case, women worked to create an interpretation of the situation in which her husband Chau was responsible for the breakup because of his lack of commitment to the collective welfare of his family. He had not fulfilled his obligation to provide economically for the family; he had abused his paternal authority. Thuy, in contrast, as suggested by the women, was faithfully upholding her familial obligations. Through their selective mobilization of traditional family ideologies, the women were able to support Thuy but also to present themselves as the moral guardians rather than challengers of the traditional Vietnamese family system.

There were other instances in which women stepped in to protect the interests of female kin and friends who were in conflict with men, most often husbands, in their families. These situations involved not only domestic violence but also disputes between women and men over various sorts of household decisions. In one situation that I encountered, Lien was supported by female kin and friends in her decision to seek employment despite the objections of her husband. After completing six months of training in haircutting, Lien had her second child. She planned to leave the baby in the care of her aunt while she worked as a hairdresser in Chinatown. Lien's husband objected to her plans, feeling that it was important for her to stay at home with the baby. While Lien agreed that it was preferable for her to remain at home, she argued that her husband's frequent bouts of unemployment made it necessary for her to go out and work. With the support of other women, Lien's aunt intervened in the couple's dispute in a powerful fashion. At a gathering of friends, Lien's aunt discussed how she had talked with Lien's husband and emphasized to him that Lien was not deviating from traditional women's roles but merely adapting out of necessity to economic circumstances. Because of the gossip that ensued, Lien's husband found himself under social pressure to accept Lien's decision to work.

In another case women mobilized neighborhood opinion against a man who forbade his wife to see her brother, whom he disliked. Ha, a woman in her early thirties, had been living in the city with her husband and their children. Some time ago, Ha's brother and his four children had arrived in the city from the refugee camp to join Ha. Ha described the household atmosphere as tense and uncomfortable during this time. Her husband,

Nhat, was in “a bad mood,” because he was not able to find a suitable job. Nhat and her brother had been fighting constantly over small matters. Because of these problems, after a stay of two months, the brother and his children moved to another apartment in the area. Ha went over to see her brother frequently, usually every other day. She often cooked for her brother’s children, and sometimes she lent her brother small amounts of money. Nhat resented Ha’s involvement in her brother’s life and eventually told her to stop visiting them. Ha became incensed and told women kin and friends that she would divorce Nhat if he did not allow her to take care of her brother. Although women kin and friends discouraged Ha from leaving the marriage, they also attempted to change Nhat’s behavior and attitude toward Ha’s relationship with her brother. The women were able to muster considerable support for their position. Because of their efforts, Nhat felt social pressures from kin and friends to allow Ha to maintain a close relationship with her brother. The women suggested that Nhat was violating the foremost value of family solidarity; they used the ideal of family unity to condemn Nhat’s behavior.

It is important to note that although they were extremely powerful, women’s groups were not always successful in their interventions in family disputes, particularly when they encountered opposition from their male counterparts. In one such case, a group of women supported the efforts of a member named Tuyet to dissuade her husband from purchasing an expensive car with household savings. Tuyet told women friends that the purchase of the car would significantly postpone their plans to buy a house. Despite the gossip that followed and the women’s disapproval of his actions, Tuyet’s husband went ahead with the car purchase, supported in his decision by male friends.

In all the cases I encountered of a group of women intervening on a woman’s behalf, the process by which the groups attempted to influence the outcome of disputes was similar. Women collectively derived influence from their ability to interpret situations, define who was right or wrong, and impose these interpretations through gossip and the threat of ostracism. In the process of collectively constructing responses to disputes between individual men and women, women drew on elements of traditional Vietnamese family ideologies, such as family unity and the economic obligations of men to their families. What was revealed by this process was the active relationship of women to these ideologies as well as the malleable quality of these ideologies.

But although Vietnamese American women often used traditional Vietnamese family ideologies to support the struggles of individual women, they were careful to do so in ways that did not seriously challenge or

undermine the traditional family system. Above all, women remained committed to upholding the normative obligations of men and children to the kin group. As part of this commitment, women also affirmed the obligations of women to their families. In fact, the women’s gossip networks that I have described sanctioned not only men but also those women who were thought to have seriously violated their familial obligations—by, for example, neglecting their domestic caretaking responsibilities. Women seemed especially harsh in their judgments of those among them who displayed signs of sexual promiscuity and infidelity. In such cases, women did not hesitate to condemn the woman involved and sanction her through gossip or ostracism.

In summary, the traditional Vietnamese family system—an intricate, crisscross configuration of ideals and beliefs about family life—was one that was generally supported by women. Women’s support of this system reflected the power that it accorded them as mothers as well as its centrality to the collectivist household economy. The collectivist household economy, which women (and men) saw as central to their ability to survive and to achieve potential socioeconomic mobility, was organized around and legitimated by the traditional family system. The traditional family system, for example, obligated men and children to contribute economically to their families. Particularly in the context of a precarious economic environment, Vietnamese immigrant women valued the ability of the traditional family system to support and legitimate men’s and children’s familial obligations. In short, the continued material salience of family ties in the United States helped to preserve the meaning and attraction of the traditional family order for women.

Besides reinforcing women’s dependence on the collectivist household economy, there were other ways in which the economic environment that surrounded my informants worked to circumscribe the extent of change in the relations of men and women in families. In the section that follows I explore Vietnamese immigrant women’s waged work experiences. In a variety of ways, the structure and quality of Vietnamese American women’s employment experiences reinforced rather than challenged gender inequality in the household.

WOMEN AND WAGework

The characteristics of the paid work that Vietnamese American women performed were such as to create continuity and minimize the separation between women’s paid and unpaid work experiences. The absence of

clear boundaries between women's paid and unpaid work had important consequences for gender relations. By minimizing the disruptive effects of women's wage employment on their domestic caretaking activities, it stifled the impetus for renegotiation between men and women concerning the gender division of household labor. The absence of a separating line between waged work and homemaking also gave women's paid work an invisible quality, one that allowed it to be defined by Vietnamese American women and men as work that was secondary in importance compared to that of men.

The paid jobs that Vietnamese American women performed, located in the lower tiers of the service sector or the informal sector, were often seasonal or unstable in their duration. Somewhat ironically, this quality gave these jobs a certain flexibility for women. That is, the instability of these jobs allowed Vietnamese American women to engage in waged work and also to meet their domestic caretaking obligations by alternating between periods of employment and periods of unemployment during which they could turn their attention to meeting pressing household needs. Given the insecurity that was inherent in their jobs, women felt few compunctions about quitting their jobs when family demands were pressing. It was also a relatively easy matter to find similar work later, given the fairly limited competition for such low-paying and low-status jobs. As a result, it was common for Vietnamese American women to move in and out of the labor market and specific jobs, often in response to various needs and emergencies at home. Lien, for example, alternated her wage-work with periods during which she withdrew from paid employment in order to take care of her child. Lien had quit her cleaning job in a downtown restaurant a few months before giving birth. She remained at home for about eight months, but when financial difficulties at home became severe (her husband Hung was unemployed), she began working at a Chinatown grocery store. Although the wages were below the minimum, the job was convenient because she could take the baby with her to the store. During this time, she also worked on weekends as a waitress at a Vietnamese restaurant owned by friends. Six months later, when the baby began requiring more active attention, Lien quit working outside the home for a four-month period. Following this period, she began working at a shampoo factory located just outside the city. She was able to leave the baby in the care of her sister-in-law during this time.

As this brief description suggests, Lien was involved in a cycle of paid work that took her into a variety of paid jobs that were nonetheless fairly similar in their low paying "dead-end" qualities. She continuously moved around, alternating between unemployment and low-paying jobs in the

service and manufacturing sectors and in the informal and ethnic enclave economies. Her movements in and out of paid employment were triggered by immediate financial or childcare needs. This strategy of fluctuating employment minimized the disturbance caused by Lien's waged work to the fulfillment of her domestic caretaking responsibilities. For example, it lessened the need for a renegotiation, between herself and her husband, of childcare responsibilities. The structure of employment was such as to allow for a bypassing of any such renegotiation of the household division of labor.

Besides instability, much of the waged work in which Vietnamese American women were involved was also characterized by proximity, both spatial and social, to their unpaid domestic labor. Spatial proximity was particularly pronounced in the case of home work—in informal sector work that was performed at home. Because this kind of work was done at home, it was highly interwoven, in women's experiences, with their unpaid domestic work. Women who sewed garments at home, for example, often simultaneously took care of young children, in addition to doing cooking, cleaning, and other housework. Like many other immigrant women, they used home work "to reconcile the responsibilities of domestic care with the need to earn a wage" (Fernandez Kelly 1990, 184). During a visit to her home, an informant named Xinh talked to me of the advantages of home work. Among them was the opportunity that this kind of work gave her both to meet her domestic caretaking responsibilities and to generate income:

In the corner of Xinh's kitchen there was a large, black sewing machine, surrounded by neat piles of materials. Her brother-in-law and sister-in-law pulled up with a van outside the building. They had been downtown to pick up the week's batch of orders and materials from the garment shop. Xinh and her sister-in-law divided up the materials. The work consisted of sewing collars and sleeve hems on shirts.

Xinh told me that the manager of the garment factory was a man from the Philippines who was well known in the neighborhood because he employed many Vietnamese refugee women to sew at home. When she had arrived in the United States, her sponsor had helped her to find a cleaning job at a downtown restaurant. But she had quit after four months because she was spending so much money on bus transportation, and she had heard from friends that her welfare benefits might get cut off if she continued working. She also quit because by working at home instead she could cook and take care of her children at the same time. She usually made about \$80 a week from sewing at home, often with the help of her sister-in-law.

When Vietnamese American women worked in family businesses—businesses collectively owned by households or kin groups—the line separating employment and household life was even harder to discern. In fact, some women who worked in family businesses told me that they did not “work,” despite their long hours of labor in the family business. They saw such work as part of their domestic caretaking obligations—a perspective that was reinforced by the fact that they were generally not paid a wage. In family businesses, the continuity of women’s work experiences was also fostered by the informal and familial conditions of the workplace. Thus for Suong, a fifty-eight-year-old woman, a mother of seven and a grandmother to six children, her work in the small ethnic grocery store owned by the family was considered, both by herself and by other family members, an integral aspect of her domestic responsibilities rather than something separate from them. Suong worked at the store most of the day, assisting customers, cleaning, and doing inventories of goods. She usually had a number of grandchildren with her, because her daughters-in-law, while at their own jobs, left their children in her care. The informal conditions of the workplace allowed her to combine such “family work” with taking care of the store. Indeed, in many ways, with Suong working at the store, the locational center of many household activities had moved from the house to the store. The school-aged children of the household would always stop at the store for a few hours after school. Here they would chat, get snacks, and help their grandmother. In the evenings, household members would often sit at the back of the store and watch Vietnamese-language movies on the VCR while waiting for customers.

Also contributing to the continuity of women’s paid and unpaid work experiences was the fact that the content of their work in both spheres was similar in certain respects. In her study of Japanese immigrant women, Evelyn Nakano Glenn observes (1990, 368) how *issei* (Japanese immigrant) women’s roles in both employment and family life were “defined as service to another.” Similarly, for Vietnamese immigrant women, the paid jobs in which they worked, especially those in the service industries, drew on such domestic skills as cooking, cleaning, and sewing. These similarities in substance created continuity between women’s experiences of employment and domestic caretaking.

By minimizing the disjuncture between women’s paid work and domestic caretaking, the structure and quality of Vietnamese American women’s employment helped to maintain established gender relations in the household in important ways. The attributes of women’s employment

were such that they did not compel a renegotiation of the established division of household labor. By allowing women’s paid work to be seen as secondary in importance to that of men, these qualities also had a preserving rather than challenging effect on the relations of men and women. In short, women’s employment did not challenge the structure of household life, especially the established division of labor between men and women. Instead, the gendered structures of employment and the household reinforced each other (Glenn 1990, 368).

There were other reasons why the wagework of Vietnamese American women had minimal disruptive effects on established patterns of gender relations. For those groups of immigrant women for whom paid work is a new experience, the experience of employment, by creating a sharp disjuncture between the past and the present, may provide a powerful impetus for renegotiating gender relations. For Vietnamese American women this was not the case—the vast majority of my adult female informants had engaged in wagework at some point in their lives in Vietnam. Moreover, the structure or quality of women’s employment in Vietnam had been fairly similar to that of their experience in the United States. In Vietnam, women’s employment had been sporadic, with women turning to wagework during those times when household financial needs were urgent or exceptional. Much of women’s employment had been part of a family enterprise or in the informal sector, involving small-scale trading activities. Finally, women’s wagework had usually been viewed as transient and of secondary importance, in comparison to that of men. In all these respects, there was much continuity in the structure of women’s employment in Vietnam and the United States. What this continuity did was lessen the disruptive effect of women’s employment in the United States on the established structures of family life.

CONCLUSIONS

Vietnamese Americans had experienced a shift in the gender balance of power due to changes in men’s and women’s relative degree of control over social and economic resources. This shift in power was viewed and experienced by men and women differently, depending on their age, marital status, and socioeconomic background prior to migration. However, a general consequence of this shift was the presence of a deep and widespread sense of malaise among Vietnamese American men about the state of gender relations in the United States. Related to this uneasiness was an

CHAPTER FIVE

increase in conflicts and tensions in the relations of men and women in households, which reflected the enhanced ability of women to challenge the authority of men in the context of the United States. More than ever before, idealized notions of the household as a consensual and unified entity were being shaken by widespread and visible conflicts among household members.

However, changes in the relations of men and women had a conservative quality to them, in part because Vietnamese immigrant women themselves were deeply concerned about preserving the basic structural and ideological parameters of the traditional Vietnamese family system. Like many other groups of economically vulnerable women in the United States, Vietnamese American women worked to limit changes in family life because they valued the economic protection and support that was an integral aspect of the traditional family system (Ehrenreich 1983; Klatch 1987; Stacey 1990). Like their Cuban and Dominican counterparts, Vietnamese immigrant women also aspired toward a middle-class life-style, one in which the men were the primary breadwinners and women the homemakers (Fernandez Kelly and Garcia 1990; Grasmuck and Pessar 1991, 155). These middle-class aspirations encouraged Vietnamese Americans to view the shift in the gender balance of power as a temporary phase, one that would be followed by the social and economic prominence of men over women once middle-class status was restored. Such expectations helped to curb women's impetus for engaging in a radical restructuring of family life. However, as Grasmuck and Pessar (1991) note in their work on Dominican immigrants, for Vietnamese American women these expectations may be difficult to sustain in the long run, particularly if the attainment of middle-class status is elusive and men continue to be unable to fulfill their primary breadwinner responsibilities effectively. Furthermore, even in the event that women's expectations are fulfilled and male power is restored, the period that I have described—one in which men and women have relatively equal control over resources—is likely to leave a permanent mark on the relations of men and women. In other words, any changes in gender relations generated by this period are unlikely simply to be discarded in the future. As Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo observes (1992), behavioral changes generated by phases in the migration process that call for a departure from traditional gender arrangements are unlikely simply to disappear when conditions of normalcy return.

Vietnamese American women also supported the traditional family system because of the power it gave them, as mothers, over children. Al-

though the patriarchal family order is often viewed simply as one in which women are oppressed by men, my materials suggest the need to see this order in more complex terms, as one that is composed of multiple relations. As Linda Gordon eloquently puts it (1990, 182), this order is one in which “mothers . . . are simultaneously victims and victimizers, dependent and depended on, weak and powerful.” As I have described, Vietnamese American women saw maternal authority and power to be threatened by U.S. society. U.S. society impinged on their rights as parents over children, in particular their rights to discipline their children as they chose. But what was in many ways a far bigger threat was the potential cultural defection of the young, fostered by the powerful forces of cultural assimilation in U.S. society.