Routledge Handbook of Indian Transnationalism

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From students to spouses

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This chapter explores how gender shapes Indian labor transmigration. While there has been a larger proportion of men emigrating out of India for work historically, women are a vital component of transmigration as workers and spouses. Women make up half of all international migrants, but there are gender differences in the motivations, channels, and limitations that characterize their movement. Family formation and household duties influence the career paths that women choose and are highly indicative of women’s ability to work outside of the home or the country. While Indian women overwhelmingly migrate as part of marriage or family reunification policies, work opportunities also create new pathways for women’s global movement (Mishra 2015, 73). The line between the categories of worker and wife is blurred through the invaluable labor that women perform within transnational Indian households, even though it often is not recognized as labor.

In order to examine the role that gender plays in transnational labor migration, I start by reviewing literature on women who move abroad as students and through “women-led” labor channels, such as domestic work and nursing. These circuits have paved avenues for Indian women to move between India, Australia, the Gulf countries, Europe, and North America. I examine also women’s roles as global information technology (IT) workers who travel on assignments abroad or for new positions. In the second part of this essay, I focus on IT migration between India and the United States to consider how family reunification and women’s unpaid labor in the household supports Indian transnationalism and community formation more broadly.

Migration and gendered employment

While there has been substantial scholarship on Indian men’s migration for educational opportunities, women’s stories are often missing or seen as exceptional (Amrith 2011; Baas 2010; Gollerkeri and Chhabra 2016; Hune and Nomura 2003). Some notable historical accounts of women traveling overseas for schooling have been well documented. Pandita Ramabai and Anandibai Joshee, perhaps among the earliest documented Indian woman travelers, came to the United States in the 1880s (Chakravarti 2014). Caroline Wells Healey Dall compiled Joshee’s life stories and her travel abroad in a biography in 1888. Dall relates how Joshee
set sail from Calcutta on her own in 1883 to travel to New York City, purportedly making her the first unconverted, high-caste woman from India to undertake such a journey. Joshee came to the United States to study medicine and enrolled at the Women’s Medical College of Philadelphia. She graduated in 1886 and is considered the first Indian woman to receive a graduate degree in the United States (Dall 1888).

Her cousin, Pandita Ramabai, also sought medical training overseas after working as a social reformer in India. She traveled to Britain to start her studies, along with her young daughter, Manorama Bai. She eventually went on to the United States to join Joshee. While there, she translated textbooks and gave lectures around the country on the status of women in India. Ramabai’s daughter would eventually follow in her footsteps, both by studying in England and the United States and by becoming a missionary and social reformer.

While fewer in number, Indian women began to move as students as well, enrolling in U.S. universities and colleges, often as undergraduates as well as graduate students. There is a long history of Indian migration for education. When the British controlled most of the Indian subcontinent, many Indians used the relationship to migrate to the United Kingdom or other colonies to pursue education and training. In the United States, Ross Bassett (2016) has shown that the U.S. government and institutions, such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, helped mostly elite Indians come abroad for higher education starting from the 1880s. On the Indian side, Sandipan Deb (2004) recounts the role that key institutions have played in facilitating Indian student migration, particularly the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs). The networks created by IIT alumni helped Indians move abroad and establish themselves overseas. However, immigration restrictions in the United States, such as the Chinese Exclusion Acts of 1882 and subsequent legislation, severely limited Indians from immigrating. Moreover, vice laws that prohibited the migration of unmarried foreign women cut into the numbers of women who could travel abroad to study.

After the immigration policies in the United States changed in the 1960s, Indians began migrating in even greater numbers to pursue education abroad. In the late 2010s, Indians made up the second largest group of international students to come to the United States, though women still only comprised of about 27 percent of international students (Sondhi 2015). Debalina Dutta (2016) and Roli Varma and Deepak Kapur (2015) have shown that women, even when they have studied abroad, are not necessarily relieved of the gendered expectations to return to India to marry and start families. However, time abroad can open up avenues of employment after marriage. Thus, women’s transnational migration as students plays an important role in their desire and ability to pursue economic opportunities in the future.

**Domestic work abroad**

Beyond migration for education, there are certain sectors in which Indian women have been the primary drivers of migration. In particular, Indian women’s migration for work in the caring or reproductive industries has created networks between India and places such as the Gulf countries of the Middle East, the United States, and Canada. Two major fields account for these women-led migrations: domestic work and nursing.

Indian migration to the Middle East has a long history, as S. Irudaya Rajan and K. C. Zachariah (2013) have explored in their historical account. However, with the expansion and rising wealth of oil-rich nations of the region, there has been a voracious need for foreign labor (Azhar 2016). Since 1973, Indians have flowed to the region in ever-greater numbers. In some countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, Indians make up between 23–30
percent of the population and are predominantly concentrated in semi-skilled or unskilled labor (Pethiyagoda 2017). Women who migrate to the region tend to find employment as domestic workers. The history of women’s migration for work to the region is complicated; as Praveena Kodoth (2016) has pointed out, the 1983 Indian Emigration Act has created new hardships for women who are permitted by the Indian state to migrate as domestic workers. The act requires close scrutiny of women who seek to go abroad but does little to protect women who might find themselves in exploitative conditions.

Even though Indian domestic workers are predominant in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, they are undercounted or, in some cases, omitted from official tallies of migrants to the region, which adds to their vulnerability (Pethiyagoda 2017, 90). The International Labor Organization estimates that there are more than 2.1 million foreign domestic workers in the region, and a great many of them come from India (ILO 2013). The kalafa system in Kuwait, for instance, requires that workers must have a fixed sponsor/employer while in the country, which makes it difficult for workers to find work in a different household or industry (Jarallah 2009). Moreover, as Pardis Mahdavi (2013) has argued, women’s vulnerability as domestic workers also leads some to enter into sex work or to be trafficked to other regions without their consent.

At the same time, the terms of Indian migration to Gulf countries are highly regulated and do not offer easy opportunities for permanent affiliation through residency or citizenship, even though some Indians have worked and lived in the region for decades (Vora 2013). Nonetheless, for some Indian women workers, as Attiya Ahmed’s (2017) study shows, migration abroad offers a break from the past and allows women to develop a new sense of self away from established kinship networks. The journey and settlement (even if only temporary) in a new land with different customs and cultures can produce unexpected effects, such as greater numbers of Indian Christian or Hindu women converting to Islam.

**Nursing and caring labor**

In contrast to domestic worker migration, nursing and skilled caregiving employment opportunities have afforded Indian women the chance to explore new pathways abroad that can lead to long-term affiliations in host nations and drive family reunification. Sujani Reddy’s (2015) historical account of the evolution of the nursing profession in India traces the complex factors that led Indian-trained nurses to emigrate to the United States. Showcasing the ways in which women were far from passive or dependent migrants, Reddy argues that women actively sought out nursing education and training to improve their global mobility. As “women in the lead,” these women have become symbolic of the opportunities and institutional access that come with migration out of India (Reddy 2015, 5).

At the same time, there are stigmas tied to caste and religion associated with nursing that persist in India and the diaspora. Seen as “unclean” or polluting work by Hindu majorities, the field is heavily dominated by Indian Christian women. With its long association with British Empire-era missionaries, nursing continues to be seen as work performed by those who occupy the longer rungs of the Indian social order (Reddy 2015). Despite these stigmas, Irene Hardill and Sandra MacDonald (2000) and Sonali Johnson, Judith Green, and Jill Maben (2014) have shown also that while nursing has long been woman-dominated around the world, certain caregiving labor shortages in places such as the United Kingdom, Canada, the Middle East, and the United States have spurred a new wave of young women to enter nursing, with the hope of migrating out. Marie Percot’s (2006) study of Keralite nurses in Gulf countries specifically points to the desire that nurses have to gain financial independence but shows also that they...
seek greater autonomy away from gender- and family-based restrictions. Leaving India for work becomes one such avenue for achieving those goals.

In most cases, Indian nurses are women who migrate on their own or before their spouses or other family members. As a result, they do not easily fit into the stereotypical model minority narratives that are grounded in the idea of the heterosexual nuclear family driven by male employment. As Miriam Sheba George’s (2005) ethnography of South Indian nurses shows, many women are the catalyst for family reunification even as they face derision because they are the primary or sole breadwinners who are seen as displacing traditional gender and social norms. Nonetheless, caregiving professions still hold considerable draw for young women seeking to venture out of India and to create transnational links.

Global IT workers

Though in fewer numbers than Indian men who migrate for work, Indian women also make up a significant portion of the world’s global flow of information technology workers. As Parvati Raghuram (2004) and Namrata Gupta (2007) have argued, IT work has increasingly been viewed as ideal work for women. Gupta refers to this trend as the “feminization of science,” led partly by parents encouraging their daughters to pursue STEM fields to increase their marriageability. Debalina Dutta’s (2016) study of Indian women engineering students reveals that the decision to study engineering or pursue science is highly shaped by parents’ rather than by individual student desires. Moreover, for Indian women who face enormous pressure to marry, working in the STEM fields fits within gendered and cultural assumptions associated with appropriate work–life balance (Radhakrishnan 2009).

Family pressures can work to keep women from advancing within IT firms also, as women are less likely to move abroad for short-term assignments or take on roles that would demand more working hours because of their domestic responsibilities. As a result, Indian women with degrees in information technology, software development, and computer science are more likely to remain in India in lower-tier IT jobs, even though the work they do is often transnational in scope. As Reimara Valk and Vasanthi Srinivasan (2011) and Carol Upadhya and A.R. Vasavi (2006) have shown in their studies of women IT workers in Bangalore, gender is a major determinant in what kinds of career pathways are available to workers. Moreover, women tend to be concentrated in certain fields such as quality control, testing, and support, which are seen as auxiliary or second-tier to male-dominated aspects of software development, such as back-end coding, architecture, and design.

When women do progress in the IT field, they are valued for the “soft skills” they possess in addition to their technical prowess (Ghosh and Chanda 2015; Adya 2008). They still must adhere to gendered codes, even while demonstrating “flexible aspirations” or positioning themselves as modern, global subjects who retain traditional values tied to Indian domesticity (Vijayakumar 2013). Even when they do have the chance to migrate, Smitha Radhakrishnan (2009) argues that ideas about the “new Indian woman,” or appropriate demonstrations of femininity and domesticity, still shape how Indian women view work and their identities, particularly when they are living abroad and away from family and kinship networks. Moreover, women IT workers in the United States often consider their time abroad as way to gain valuable work skills but also to enjoy freedom away from their family and social networks in India, even though they face family pressures to marry and start families (Bhatt 2018). Beyond gendered and cultural expectations, women still face restrictive immigration policies in their host countries as global IT workers, as Sareeta Amrute’s (2016) research on Indian IT workers in Germany suggests.
While education and employment opportunities have been two major avenues for Indian women’s labor migration, another unrecognized stream of transnational gendered labor comes through family reunification policies. Globally, the ability to form a family has been recognized as a fundamental human right since the United Nations’ 1948 Declaration on Human Rights. The United Nations’ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights goes further and notes that the family is the “the natural and fundamental group unit of society” (United Nations 1966). From these international legal codifications, family reunification has been viewed as a key component of transnational migration.

In the Gulf countries, family reunification can be harder to achieve because of restrictive immigration and citizenship policies that preclude many Indians from permanent settlement (Vora 2013). In Western nations such Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, family reunification has been a major driver of women’s migration through spousal and extended family sponsorship. While Indians had historically flowed to the United Kingdom, particularly in the post-Independence period when they were heavily recruited as laborers, the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962 and Immigration Act 1971 severely limited new entrants. However, family members of already-resident immigrants were allowed to settle in the country.

In the same time period that the United Kingdom was curtailing Indian immigration, policy changes in the United States and Canada made migration to North America more appealing. As Kerry Abrams (2013) has traced, the United States has held contradictory views on family reunification as part of changing immigration policies historically. On one hand, European immigrants were granted relatively unrestricted immigration rights through the mid-19th century. In the same period, Chinese and other Asian migrants were encouraged to come to the United States to help meet the needs of the nation’s burgeoning rail, fishing, and timber industries (Bhatt and Iyer 2013). On the other hand, with rising backlash against these “unassimilable” immigrants, the Chinese Exclusion Acts of 1882 and the immigration acts of the early 20th century that created the “Asiatic Barred Zones” worked to limit new Asians and specifically sought to curtail women’s migration (Takaki 1989; Lee 2015). The impulse behind these measures was to encourage laborers to go back to home countries to marry and settle, rather than remain in the United States long term (Sohoni 2007).

The Immigration Act of 1990 further expanded opportunities for worker- and family-based migration with the creation of the H-1B visa program. The H-1B program is an employment-based visa system that encourages the temporary migration of workers in the technology,
education, health-care, and finance fields. Since its inception, Indians have dominated the visa program: nearly 70 percent of all H-1Bs go to Indian nationals, and 85 percent go to men (Bhatt 2018). Even though it is considered a temporary and “non-immigrant” visa, the program allows employers to sponsor workers for permanent residency, which makes it a very appealing pathway to residency, and even citizenship, for foreign workers. This program has contributed to the large numbers of Indians now living in the United States. As of 2015, 2.4 million Indian immigrants lived in the United States, making them the second-largest immigrant group after Mexicans.

Worker-based programs have expanded the Indian population, as have family reunification policies. While family reunification programs in the United States have allowed permanent residents and naturalized citizens to sponsor family members (often on immigrant visas intended for settlement), the H-1B program allows temporary workers to also bring over immediate family members through the H-4 visa. This visa has been used by H-1B workers to sponsor spouses and children (under 21 years old) to accompany them to the United States. The holders of this visa historically have been unable to work, as it is considered a “dependent” visa. However, changes to the program made under President Obama’s administration in 2015 allowed qualified H-4 visa holders, who were filing for permanent residency, to receive “employment authorization documents” (EAD), which are temporary work permits. That right to work has been challenged since Donald Trump took office as president in 2017. For many professionally trained Indian women, H-4 work authorization offers a much-coveted way to find employment in the United States, and about 100,000 EADs have been granted so far. Even with the EAD, H-4 visa holders face many challenges in the job market, and their authorization to work is still tied to their spouse’s H-1B visa. In practical terms, this means that if the H-1B-holding spouse loses his work visa, the H-4 visa holder would also lose her ability to work as well.

As a result, the H-1B program has created a new category of housewives who are either forbidden or restricted in their ability to work. By inviting spouses of temporary workers to migrate, while limiting their ability to work, immigration policies create a surplus of migrants whose unpaid or underpaid labor is subsumed by the household or other sectors. Scholarship on South Asian immigrant communities has illustrated the key role that women play in providing free or low-cost labor to family or ethnic-specific businesses (Dhingra 2012; Hewamanne 2012), in helping with acculturation (Nayar, Hocking and Giddings 2012), in building and supporting community institutions (Manohar 2013), and by caring for the family and households (Bhalla 2008). In the next section, I explore how women’s gendered labor in the household also helps maintain a transnational system of professional IT labor.

### Transnational housewives

Since 2008 I have conducted more than one-hundred interviews with H-1B and H-4 visa holders who live, work, and move between India and the United States. Considering that the H-1B program is so heavily used by young men to work abroad, there are considerably fewer women who come as IT workers. However, women make up nearly half of the H-1B program as dependents and are impacted by the policies that govern the visa program.

There are advantages and disadvantages to migration through the H-1B program. On one hand, H-1B workers can bring their families to the United States immediately, whereas green card holders face a waiting period before their immediate relatives can immigrate. On the other hand, the work restrictions that spouses face on the H-4 dependent visa can be a hindrance to the family unit. Many H-4 visa holders have high levels of education, often in engineering or
STEM fields, and hope that they will be able to work abroad after getting married to an H-1B worker. However, there is no guarantee that spouses will be able to find a company to sponsor them after they migrate, and many are stuck on the dependent spousal visa until the family can successfully gain permanent residency.

In my study, many H-1B men asserted that they wanted a bride who had the potential to work, but they also admitted that having their wives at home was a sign that they are capable of providing financially for the family unit on their own. This sentiment is echoed in India, as Carol Upadhya and A.R. Vasavi (2006) report in their study of IT workers who prefer wives who will leave formal employment after marriage. More recently, the 2016 Centre for the Study of Developing Societies and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (CSDS-KAS 2017) survey of Indian youth revealed that even as the Indian economy and workforce becomes more globalized, younger generations of Indian men hold highly patriarchal attitudes about marriage and family life. The CSDS-KAS study found that 51 percent of participants believed that women should be obedient to their husbands, and 41 percent thought that women should not work after marriage (CSDS-KAS 2017).

In the case of H-1B/H-4 visa holders, women are therefore conscripted into the role of the “transnational housewife” (Bhatt 2018). I use this term to highlight the social and caregiving roles played by women in the home that allow men to be ideal global employees. My use of the term *housewife* is derived from Marxist feminist understandings of the unpaid and gendered work done in the household to produce workers who are able to meet the needs of late capitalism. As Gillian Hewitson argues, this non-waged work is an “essential component of the development of future citizens, workers, and taxpayers” (2003, 266). However, much of this work is systematically devalued and characterized as an extension of women’s “natural” roles as caretakers rather than as foundational to capitalism itself. Maria Mies (1986) famously argued that this rendering of women’s work as “non-economic” positions women (and their labor) below men economically and socially. By dividing labor according to gender roles, men are able to accumulate capital in their roles as “breadwinners,” who are free to sell their labor precisely because women, as housewives, are not free to do the same. Among H-1B families, this division of labor is functionally enacted through immigration policies that obscure the true cost of labor power.

Since most H-1B workers migrate as single young men, they tend to save on expenses by living with roommates and learn how to manage cooking and cleaning on their own. However, after marriage, the combined retreat of women from the workforce along with migration amplifies the reproductive roles that women play at home. This shift from paid employment to the home, and the corresponding losses in financial independence and career security, has been characterized as “de-skilling” (Man 2004) “cumulative disadvantage” (Purkayastha 2005) or “re-domestication” (Yeoh and Willis 2005). Parvati Raghu ram (2004) argues that women’s exit from the labor market “do[es] not arise out of the particularities of women per se, but out of social norms that limit women’s mobility and social expectations around their contribution to and responsibility for undertaking unpaid reproductive labor within the household” (170). Even when H-1B visa holders’ spouses are able to work, the burdens of household labor do not shift significantly. Women’s workloads are often multiplied when they work outside of the home, particularly if they have children.

However, H-4 visa holders’ social reproductive work benefits individual families, as well as communities in the host country. As “custodians of culture,” transmigrant women play a pivotal role in ethnic-specific organizations and often take on the task of transmitting cultural norms and values to future generations. At the household level, the gendered labor that women provide allows transmigrants to maintain connections to family, friends, and networks in India,
while also creating homes abroad. In their roles as transnational housewives, Indian women host informal social gatherings for other transmigrants as well as for religious and cultural celebrations, maintain relationships with dispersed relatives, and engage in informal sector work such as cooking, sewing, childcare, or teaching arts, language, music, and dance. This emphasis on social reproduction grows out of traditional assumptions about gender roles and household labor but also operates as a vital form of cultural maintenance and transmission for migrants who may engage in multiple moves or have to recreate communities in new settings (Kõu and Bailey 2017; Mallapragada 2017).

Professional volunteers

Beyond the unpaid but economically valuable work that women provide in their homes and communities, H-4 visa holders offer their unpaid labor to companies, businesses, and educational institutions. As part of “intensive mothering” (Hays 1996), transmigrant women devote considerable time, money, and personal resources toward parenting children. As they take on the role of household managers, transmigrant women also are expected to act as key conduits for their children’s educational success, particularly when they are restricted from building their own careers or pursuing personal development. While volunteering for schools may be an extension of their social and gendered roles as mothers, Indian women also take on culturally specific tasks in their children’s schools. Recounting efforts to establish an “Asian Parents Link,” one of my study respondents noted that she became involved in her child’s school as way to use her skills in communications and program management, even though she could not formally work. As result, she worked to help translate school documents into a variety of Asian languages and to find opportunities to better incorporate parents with limited English-language skills into school governance.

As H-4 visa holders wait for their families to move through the immigration process or to find an employer to sponsor an H-1B visa on their behalf, others turn to certification or degree-seeking programs to maintain and build new skills. Many women look to further their education, despite often being highly educated already, in order to bolster their resumes and rejoin the job market. As my study shows, women sought degrees and certifications in areas ranging from business administration, social media, program management, and coding languages such as C++ and JavaScript. Others moved out of technical fields to pursue degrees in nonprofit management, preschool education, and many other fields. While women were serious about these programs, they also viewed them as a way to demonstrate that they were able to compete in the U.S. job market.

The disconnection that H-4 visa holders experience from the formal job market has costs. Feminist sociologist Pamela Stone (2007) has argued that when women take a break from the labor market for family or other reasons, they face substantial challenges with re-entry. H-4 visa holders are doubly disadvantaged as immigrant women, as employers are reluctant to start a new immigration process to hire them. Generally, women who are employed before exiting the labor market are more likely to re-enter and find work more quickly than women who have not worked previously (Berger and Waldfogel 2004). Women who do not have substantive previous work experience have a much harder time finding work after employment gaps. Among the H-4 visa holders in my study, most did not work in the United States, even though they may have worked in India before migrating. Many of these women were also limited in their employment prospects because of family obligations or because their husband’s jobs were prioritized over their own ability to work. Moreover, the majority of H-4 visa holders had been educated in India and found it difficult to have their degrees recognized.
in the United States, so they found themselves competing with U.S.-educated graduates who were more desirable as employees (Arbeit and Warren 2013).

Women on the H-4 visa still desired opportunities to put their skills to work, even if they could not be formally employed. By volunteering for smaller companies or taking on unpaid internships, H-4 visa holders sought to show that they had useful talents. They hoped to demonstrate that they could manage a project from beginning to end or to gain some experiences that could be translated to a resume line item. In one case, Radmila (name changed for anonymity) had a degree in computer science and had been working in Chennai. After getting married, she moved to join her husband in Seattle. Initially on a H-4 visa, she pursued an accounting degree and became a certified public accountant. However, because of her visa status, she had difficulty finding an employer who was willing to sponsor a work visa for her. Eventually she was able to work as a volunteer accountant while waiting either for her husband’s H-1B to be converted to a green card or to find an employer willing to apply for a worker visa on her behalf.

While volunteering offers women a way to stay connected to the job market, it can also take advantage of women’s labor and is not as valuable as paid employment. Another H-4 visa holder, Revati, spent substantial time seeking unpaid work. She was unable to find a formal internship but eventually offered her time to a local company just to have the chance to stay engaged. She recalls, “I worked at the organization for two projects. The last project which I did was designing curriculum for new people and also did all their visa processing and everything.” Even though her work was more of a full-time job than a volunteer experience, she was resigned to her exploitation: “Yeah, that is the way it is though. They can just ask you to do anything and you will do it because you want the experience.” As Ann Vogel and Iain Lang (2006) have argued, many facing a “crisis of work” have been driven to accept unpaid or underpaid work in the name of gaining experience and to stand out in a crowded job market. Thus H-4 visa holders are often willing to work without economic gain because they anticipate a future pay-off. Without a doubt, companies benefit from this source of free labor, as they are willing to give women the chance to work without any of the guarantees or benefits that come from employment.

**Anchors and displacements**

In addition to the labor they provide to local companies and institutions, transmigrant women also act as an anchoring force for the global IT industry. As H-1B workers become integrated into the work teams and environments of their host companies, they become expensive to replace. Companies have an incentive to maintain a stable workforce in the highly competitive IT industry, which is often characterized as having a skilled labor shortage. Since the H-1B is an employer-sponsored visa, it becomes very difficult for workers to move to another company that is willing to sponsor a visa on their behalf. Therefore the “temporary” worker program can actually work to stabilize technology workforces, while also providing an easily retractable flow of labor when needed. Moreover, H-1B workers are less likely to seek employment or move back to India if they have dependents at home, making them more likely to stay with their employers.

In the contemporary moment, the transnational Indian family must also navigate new terrain as future settlement or migration has been thrown into question by changing immigration policies in the United States. While some H-1B families ultimately decide to return to India after living abroad, others wait until they are able to receive citizenship or decide to permanently live in their host countries. Others go back for periods of time but then choose to return to the United States or elsewhere for new opportunities. Others do not have such choices: some
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are forced to return if they lose their jobs or something happens to the primary visa holder. There are also intergenerational issues as some children of H-1B workers are beginning to “age out” of family reunification programs after turning 21 years old. They must either apply for a foreign student visa or potentially return back to India despite having lived in the United States for long periods, or nearly all, of their lives. In that sense, the transnational housewife must also be prepared to coordinate and oversee the relocation of the family, as well as plan for the future needs of any children in H-1B families. In that sense, the gendered labor of the transnational housewife becomes essential to both maintaining equilibrium in the global IT industry, even when the individual family may be thrown into imbalance and must start over in a new location.

**Conclusion**

The H-1B and H-4 visa program allows temporary workers to migrate abroad with their immediate family; however, the visa restrictions that accompany family reunification inscribe a patriarchal household that presumes men are breadwinners, while women are homemakers. The work that women provide at home and in their communities sustains transmigrant households and also allows men to dedicate themselves to their jobs. The dependency enforced on transmigrant spouses makes it difficult for them to participate in the public economic sphere, and most find themselves laden with domestic responsibilities and reproductive work. Women’s unpaid and voluntary labor, however, is not economically neutral and works to sustain transmigrant households. Many participate in entrepreneurial self-development with the hope of moving into the formal workforce, while others embrace their roles as transnational housewives whose labor makes capitalist divisions of labor possible. Even while reinforcing women’s roles as caretakers and non-earning members of the family unit, the unpaid labor of transnational housewives subsidizes the wages of Indian guest workers and supports a system of transmigration globally.

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