

Meditations on the Year 2020: Policy for Women

Elaine H. Kim

PROFESSOR, ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

Census projections suggest that in 25 years our communities will be larger, more diverse, more dispersed, with gender configurations quite different from what they were in the days of the Chinese, Filipino, and Korean American "bachelor societies." If immigration continues at present rates and numbers, the Asian American population will be several times larger than it is now. Also, if present trends continue, we will probably not see again the geographical concentrations or the gender imbalances of the era before the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965. Projected population data give us reason to believe that by the next generation, Asian American women will no longer belong only to a small number of mostly East Asian nationality groups, but will hail from all over South and Southeast Asia as well. Ultimately, because of cultural, generational, and socioeconomic diversities, soon we may no longer be able to talk about Asian American women as a group; thus, we will need to focus in depth and in detail on the specific needs of particular communities of women.

It is impossible to predict how shifting global power relations will help shape Asian American communities in the future. The pending end of British control of Hong Kong has already profoundly affected the Chinese diaspora, and we can only imagine the effects on Asian emigration of normalization of relations between the U.S. and Vietnam or reunification of the Korean peninsula.

We do know that between 1970 and 1990, rapid industrial growth in “little Tiger” Asian societies—Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan—resulted in changes in the characteristics of emigrants rather than an actual decrease in emigration. For example, by the 1990s, South Korean immigrants to the U.S. no longer hailed from either the highest castes of the educated and urban elite or the lowest rungs of the socio-economic ladder as they did in the decades between the Korean War and the closing of the Immigration and Naturalization Service’s professional and technical preference categories in the mid-1970s. As the gap between South Korean and U.S. living conditions narrowed through the 1980s, emigrants were increasingly from the lower middle and working classes and sponsored by relatives already in the U.S.

Although economic conditions in Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, and Hong Kong are certainly pegged to those in the U.S., the gap between living standards in the U.S. and those societies can only be expected to decrease. Therefore, we can expect to see more lower middle-class and working-class immigrants from these areas in future years.¹ At the same time, U.S.-based corporations’ ever-deeper reach into lower-wage labor markets in South and Southeast Asia can be expected to stimulate increasingly extensive immigration from those countries.

The notion of the “immigrants’ ladder,” supposedly climbed in succession by Northern, Eastern, and Southern Europeans, followed by racial minority immigrants from Asia and Latin America, appears to have always been a cruel hoax. Otherwise, how can we explain the fact that through the decades, despite the much-touted “bootstrap-model minority success story” mythology, a large proportion of Asian American women continue to be trapped in low-wage jobs, such as garment work, which still pay only a dollar an hour? Low-wage employment enclaves, such as garment factories and electronics assembly plants, which require fast turn-around and local research and testing, are likely to persist within U.S. borders. By the year 2020, we can expect to find more and more Bangladeshi, Burmese, Cambodian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Thai, and Indonesian as well as Vietnamese, Indian, and mainland Chinese women working in these enclaves. What may change by the year 2020, then, is the ethnicity and socioeconomic backgrounds of Asian immigrant women, rather than the numbers of immigrants or the framework for their labor in the U.S.

Empowering Asian Immigrant Women Workers

To address the needs of Asian immigrant working women, language programs must be developed to facilitate their empowerment and aid in their struggle against a host of difficulties. In the probable absence of far-reaching systemic reform, we can expect that Asian immigrant women workers will be forced to continue battling against low wages, poor benefits and working conditions, and lack of affordable health care, childcare and housing. Moreover, many predict an increase in anti-Asian violence in the next 25 years. Asian immigrant women workers, as a group with the least access to power, can also be expected to face increased sexual harassment and violence both in the workplace and in society at large. Organizing among limited-English-speaking women workers is extremely difficult, for obvious reasons. Yet the women may continue to be blamed for not standing up for their rights, voting, being counted in the census, and filing claims and lawsuits. None of the existing programs that could facilitate services to Asian immigrant women workers has sufficient language capability even to meet the needs of Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese-speaking women at the present time; if current conditions remain unchanged, what will Bangladeshi and Indonesian women face in the year 2020?

Needless to say, empowerment cannot be accomplished by simply providing language services within existing institutions. There must be simultaneous efforts to strengthen the connections between them and other immigrant working women. Such connections can take the form of wide-ranging grassroots education and exchange programs that challenge the roots of ethnocentrism and racial biases of all kinds.

While there are many shared concerns among all Asian American women, priorities may differ according to socioeconomic status. It is important to realize that because English-speaking professional women are the ones most likely to be seen and heard from, theirs are the issues that are the most discussed. For example, tax credits for childcare may be an important issue for Asian American mothers working in the law profession, but safe, high-quality, affordable childcare itself is a far more pressing need among Asian immigrant women workers. Thus, while sexual orientation, sexual harassment, redistribution of household labor, and reproductive choice are important issues to all Asian American women, limited-English-speaking immigrant women in low-wage,

unskilled and semi-skilled employment as hotel room cleaners, electronics assemblers, home health and food service workers, and garment factory operatives are typically more concerned about wages, benefits, and working conditions than about the issues highest on the agenda for middle-class Asian and other women.

Middle-Class Women: Opposing Relegation to a “Buffer Zone”

Although we can expect the persistent clustering of far less visible Asian immigrant women in marginal self-employment and in low-wage factory and service-sector jobs, it is certainly probable that by the year 2020 there will be many more U.S.-educated Asian women working in the professions and in public and private sector middle management employment than in the past, when *de jure* and *de facto* segregation barred Asian Americans from such occupations.² Like other American women of their class, Asian American women in the professions will no doubt need to mobilize to protect themselves from both discrimination in salary and promotion and sexual harassment in the workplace. And like other middle-class American women, they will probably have to continue struggling against being forced to choose between professional and personal fulfillment and between social approval and freedom to express intellectual talent, different sexual orientations, and non-traditional values with regard to marriage and motherhood.

Unique to Asian American middle-class women may be relegation to a “buffer zone” similar to the “middleman” position Asian Americans are characteristically described as occupying between Anglo Americans and other communities of color. Asian American women must consciously challenge the racial sexualization of their social roles as decorative and serviceable gatekeepers. Asian American women in management and the professions in particular will have to guard against being positioned in a “no-woman’s-land” as token women of color. As a wedge between white women and women from African American and Latino communities, Asian American women can be forced into mediating between those who have the power to make the rules and those who are oppressed by them. Whether as newscasters, attorneys, or middle managers, Asian American women could be positioned to serve

as apologists for and explicators, upholders, and functionaries of the status quo.

Similarly, Asian American women will have to be wary of benefits that accrue to them from the oppression of other groups. Some women may gain individual social mobility by taking advantage of the popular view of Asian American women as more compliant than other women and more competent than men of color. But if the relations of power are not transformed, Asian American women will remain dependent and vulnerable to resentment from all sides unless they refuse to be used against white women in a battle against feminism, and unless they refuse to be pitted against men of color to mask the perpetuation of racism.

One of the ways in which the middle-class Asian American woman can resist the "gatekeeper function" would be her strong commitment to place first priority, in whatever work arena she occupies, on the needs of the most disenfranchised people of her community. For Asian American women who think of community in terms of gender and ethnicity, at the present these would be limited-English-speaking poor women, especially women in Southeast Asian refugee communities.

Given that the category "Asian American" is a political construct rooted in the coherence of effects of race-based treatment of Asians in the U.S. rather than in actual cultural or psychic affinities, it may take a great deal of effort for members of some groups to place high priority on the needs of people of other linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. Indeed, cultural nationalism may continue to flourish among individual national groups, as it has until now among immigrants of color in the U.S., because it has historically given meaning to lives of toil, making it possible to endure the indifference and antipathy of the dominant. My hope is that feminist ideas will take ever stronger hold among Asian Americans.³ Besides transforming what can be spoken within families and communities, feminist ideas can help demystify the reductiveness of nationalisms (just as thinking on nationalisms has helped reveal the limitations of feminisms).⁴

Community Leadership and Advocacy

Despite persistent and intransigent obstacles, Asian American women from diverse socioeconomic strata have historically refused to

allow themselves to be passive objects of history. Instead, they have insisted on complicating the scenarios of existing relations of power. This is particularly apparent in ethnic community leadership and advocacy. Except in recent immigrant and refugee communities, where men can become "leaders" because they are men rather than because of their talent or virtues, women—many of them educated, middle-class women—occupy a high proportion of directorships in grassroots community-based agencies organized to protect the welfare of members of the community in the arenas of civil rights, equal employment, labor rights, health and mental health, childcare, and care of the elderly. Asian American women have also been active in the crucially important but frequently under-recognized arena of cultural production, as writers, visual artists, and performers whose work invigorates the struggle for self-definition. Rooted in direct opposition to the indifference, hostility, and manipulation emanating from mainstream institutions, this work has helped protect many Asian Americans from both material and psychic violence, creating the basis for ongoing resistance to the forces that threaten to dehumanize and divide the members of the community.

Clearly the work of Asian American women in positions of community leadership and in artistic production needs support and encouragement, particularly in light of government abandonment of public services since the early 1980s, since which time more and more responsibility and fewer and fewer resources for social services have been passed on to community-based organizations. Government neglect of community services has meant more women assuming community leadership positions, since the rewards and power traditionally associated with these positions have greatly diminished.

Thus Asian American women community leaders have had to face the economic recession with ever-diminishing public sector support for education, affordable housing, employment services, health and mental health services, protection for victims of domestic violence, legal assistance for the poor, and childcare facilities, not to mention the critically needed language resources for limited-English-speaking members of the Asian communities. Obviously, we need to voice our collective insistence on the use of public resources for the public good.

Support for Asian American women's leadership requires recognition of the full worth of these women as individuals. Some Asian

American women who have assumed positions of leadership within the ethnic community have commented that they are tolerated because community advocacy is viewed by many Asian American men as an extension of family service. Lingering contradictions rooted in deeply embedded sexist tendencies in our communities need to be addressed. For example, we need to unmask and dismantle the ways in which sentimental glorification of women's sacrifice for family limits the development of their full potential as human beings. While it is understood that for people of color in the U.S., the family has often been the only real refuge from racism, we need to be vigilant against the danger that it will also function as one of the *loci* of oppression for women. Asian American women cannot be empowered as long as only *their* worth—as opposed to Asian American men's worth—is measured *primarily* in terms of service to and sacrifice for others.

Bringing Women's Concerns to the Center of Public Policy

Most policy studies have focused on women in the interest of "the nation" and as a side aspect of the family. Policy-makers have devoted much study to women in terms of their service to the state: thus, the emphasis on reproduction, fertility, and labor.⁵ Few policy-makers have ever paid attention to what women would like, from youth to old age, to help them realize their full potential as human beings and not just as childbearers, caretakers, and workers in the service of the state. Only a few middle-class, mostly Anglo women have been able to focus from time to time on what they would like for themselves.

Women have traditionally been regarded as repositories of inherited notions of value. As such, they have been blamed in both Eastern and Western patriarchies for everything from their own disenfranchisement to their role in creating self-centered sons,⁶ to national "crises" such as the so-called disintegration of "family values," to global issues such as sexually transmitted diseases and overpopulation. All women, and most certainly the women with the least access to social power, must become full political beings and not be allowed to suffer blame for social problems they had little part in creating. It makes no sense for Asian American men to blame Asian American women for racism and the problems created for them by racism. Instead of attacking and criticizing Asian American women writers and newscasters for impeding them, Asian American

men should join forces with the women in an effort to dismantle the hierarchy of values and the structure that perpetuates racial exclusivity and inequality.

While diverse populations will probably continue to employ the category of "Asian American" as a political strategy to defend against racial inequities and injustices, class- and ethnic-specific issues will need to be addressed more substantively. Certainly nominal aggregation has resulted in neglect of the neediest and most disenfranchised Asian American women. But at the same time, Asian Americans, and Asian American women in particular, must be freed to think ever more globally during the next 25 years. No one can afford not to think about the epidemic spread of sexually transmitted disease, the global environment, or the links between ourselves and human suffering, wherever it occurs in the world.

Asian American women will need to continue to deconstruct, demystify, and debunk the deeply embedded racist and sexist discourses that sidestep and scapegoat us as raced and gendered beings. We must continue our efforts to generate new discourses, with the goal of nothing less than recreating ourselves and building a new world in which violence and exploitation will remain only as words describing a distant past.

Notes

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1. At the same time, we may see middle- and upper middle-class immigrants in search of alternative life styles. In the future, we can expect that the search for increased personal options will figure increasingly into the Asian woman's decision to immigrate to the U.S. Now that people in Asian "NICs" generally feel that they can feed their families, those who decide to leave for the U.S. and elsewhere tend to be people in search of business opportunities and life style alternatives. In previous decades, women who immigrated to the U.S. from affluent Japan were quite often single women who had passed the standard age of marriage in Japan. We might see a significant increase in educated, middle-class single women immigrants from Taiwan, Singapore, and South Korea in future years. At the same time, working and settling down in the U.S. remains an attractive option for elite women from India, the Philippines, and other South and Southeast Asian countries.

2. Of course Asian immigrant women have never been entirely relegated to low-wage employment. While some highly educated women from Asia have become visible in professional and managerial employment sectors, if race discrimination and lack of directly transferable skills continue to prevent Asian immigrants from large-scale employment in U.S. jobs commensurate to their education and job experience levels, they will probably continue to seek out ethnic-specific economic niches, such as self-employment in small businesses.
3. Strengthened by their location on the interstices of race and gender discourses and by their exposure to discussions of gender and power that will surely be taking place in the U.S. as well as in Asian societies, undoubtedly Asian American women will increasingly question and challenge at least traditional Asian patriarchal attitudes and practices.
4. One vivid example of how class and feminist analyses together might help us transcend the limits of nationalist thinking comes to mind when we compare the South Korean nationalist outrage at the use of Korean women as prostitutes ("comfort women") by the Japanese military government during World War II with the current role of South Koreans in Nike-licensed factories around Jakarta. Three-fourths of these plants are managed by South Korean concerns, which provide most of the machinery and raw materials as well as all of the managers. The layer of male South Korean management supervises female Indonesian assembly line workers, who labor in 100 degree heat, breathing air reeking of paints and glues, for 20 cents a day. Awareness of the complexities and contradictions suggested by this picture makes it difficult for Korean feminists to look long to Korean nationalism for self-definition.
5. Policy-makers have sometimes studied women of color in terms of their "service" to prevailing racial ideologies, suggesting interventions in what they define as "cultural practices." Thus, in keeping with the self-congratulatory Western view that Asian American families and communities are more patriarchal than the dominant culture, some have asserted without any concrete basis that domestic violence is more pervasive in Asian American than other American families.
6. Here of course I am referring the habit of attributing the perpetuation of patriarchy primarily to mothers who spoil their sons, tyrannize their daughters-in-law, and unquestioningly accept patriarchal attitudes and practices.