MARRIAGE, MIGRATION AND IDENTITY: NARRATIVES OF ASIAN INDIAN MIDDLE-CLASS WOMEN ON DEPENDENT STATUS

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department

of Sociology

University of Houston

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Arts

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By

Praveena Lakshmanan

August 2015

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory research critically examines identity negotiation and reconstruction among contemporary middle-class Asian Indian women as they transition from employment in India to a dependent H4 visa status in the United States. Most of these women have work experience prior to migration; however, moving to the U.S. on a dependent visa status restricts numerous activities that these women may engage in, including employment. This research evaluates whether and how Indian women incorporate their occupational roles in India to negotiate and reconstruct their identities in the United States. Through in-depth interviews with twenty Asian Indian women currently on a H4 visa and living in Houston, Texas, this research identifies the commonalities and differences that exist in the process of identity construction. Using an intersectionality framework and by discussing the narratives, I present a detailed understanding of what identity means to these women and what resources and capital are being used to navigate the shifts and changes in identity. My research shows that while negotiation and/or reconstruction of identity is complex given it exists at the intersection of marriage, migration, cultural beliefs, transnational ties, role exits and gender expectations, it is also dynamic with time and is a culmination of the influences as well as the impacts of multiple formal and informal social institutions. Within the theoretical structure of reflexive modernity thesis and role exits, I weave together the emerging themes to map the process of identity negotiation and reconstruction by Indian women on a dependent (H4) visa status.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER

LIST OF FIGURES

For
Kumaru, Amma-Appa, and LokiMojo

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

One November evening at an Indian wedding in Houston, Texas, I stood with a couple of friends munching on food and making conversation, with music in the background and the backdrop of people greeting each other. And then I heard a woman say with a tone that I can only describe as a mix of amusement and perhaps frustration, "I can hear silence; I can hear the food digest in my stomach." As I heard these words, I turned back to see who was there. After an awkward stare followed by an almost inadvertent "Hello," I found myself engaged in a discussion with a couple of strangers. Leena had arrived in the United States about eight months ago and did not like it here. She explained that the first few months flew by and she enjoyed seeing and learning about new places and meeting her spouse's friends. But now that her husband goes to work, she said she is bored being alone at home and has nothing to do; she used to work in India and was independent, but feels lost in the U.S. For an immigrant spouse like Leena who is unable to work, Bragun (2008) notes that America may seem like a "golden cage" - although the individual lives in a country of presumed opportunities, most opportunities are beyond reach. Like a "bird in a cage", the individual is allowed to stay in the United States, but cannot do much more than that (2008:938).

Leena is one of the numerous Asian Indian immigrant women who are on a dependent visa (H4) status in the United States. As classified by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, the H4 status is a "nonimmigrant classification for dependent spouses and children of a temporary worker" (U.S. Department of Homeland Security). According to a preliminary report from the U.S. Department of State, in 2013 approximately 96,753 H4 visas were issued worldwide, with 71,953 (74.3 percent) of H4 visas being issued to Indians;

1

this makes India the number one 'sending' country for dependents on H4 status[1]. Moreover, this appears to be an increasing trend given that in 2012, 67.3 percent (53,877) of H4 visas were issued to Indians from a total of 80,015 issued worldwide.

The objective of this research is to explore broadly the experiences of Asian Indian women on the H4 visa status, focusing on the process of identity negotiation and reconstruction in response to migration. More specifically, my research question is: How do Asian Indian women on H4 status in the United States navigate and reconstruct their individual and social identities as they transition from employment in India to a dependent H4 visa status in the United States? I examine this by using in-depth semi-structured interviews with Indian women on H4 status in Houston, Texas.

In this chapter, I provide some basic background information on dependent spouse (H4) visas followed by a discussion of the importance of this study.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON DEPENDENT SPOUSE VISAS: "H4 VISAS"

According to the 2010 Census, about 3.4 million South Asians[2] live in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). While there was a presence of South Asian/Indian immigrants in the United States prior to 1965, it was the 1965 reform of the Immigration and Nationality Act that initiated the influx of a large number of South Asians to the United States (Bald 2014; Bhatia 2007; Dasgupta 2006). Particularly, the legislation permitted entry to the United States on the basis of special occupational skills and family reunification. This resulted in a huge inflow of professional South Asian men in the fields of engineering and medicine on temporary work permits (H1B visas) to the United States. Subsequently, many married women followed their spouses on a dependent status, or H4 visas (Bald 2014; Balgamwalla 2014; Bhatia 2007; Dasgupta 2006).

Dasgupta (2006) notes:

> Under the family unification preferences set up in 1965, a woman who enters the United States on the basis of her marriage is defined as a beneficiary of her husband's immigration status. She does not exist in law as an autonomous person. Immigration law deprives her of her agency because she cannot, under ordinary circumstances petition the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] for immigration status on behalf of herself (P.84).

While provisions for skill-based labor immigration in the United States existed for years, it was the Immigration Act of 1990 that assigned visa categories based on specific skill sets and education. The H1B category, a nonimmigrant visa status, "allows employers to bring their employees to live in the United States and later sponsor them for permanent residence" (Balgamwalla 2014:33). This category is largely comprised of educated professionals working in a specialty occupation, dominantly technology and engineering. In most cases, dependents of H1B visa holders are their spouses and are typically women. Little is officially known about the characteristics of dependent visa holders because data is seldom collected on them, with much of the current statistics primarily gathered on H1 visa holders. Researchers therefore have to rely on anecdotal evidence because relevant data on non-immigrant spouses is sparse (Balgamwalla 2014:34).

The H1B holders are eligible to apply for permanent citizenship in the United States and it can be expected that most H1B holders obtain permanent immigration status and thereby citizenship over a period of time. Most Asian Indians on H1B status follow this route and do apply for permanent immigration status, as it is beneficial to them socially and economically. By extension, the dependents (H4 visa holders) also are part of this process of acquiring permanent immigration status. While the temporary non-immigrant H1B visa bestows the "right to work" to its holder, no such right is granted to the spouse through the

H4 visa. To Balgamwalla (2014), this effectively means that the spouse is confined to the home with practically no avenue to pursue gainful professional goals, in addition to being restricted socially. This has led many within the South Asian expatriate community to call the H4 visa an "involuntary housewife visa" (Balgamwalla 2014:35). Discussing issues related to H1B skilled workers and their spouses, Banerjee (2012) argues, "visa policies for skilled-workers and their families create oppressive structures both at work and home."

On February 24, 2015 the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) announced that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) will be "extending eligibility for employment authorization to certain H-4 dependent spouses of H-1B nonimmigrants who are seeking employment-based lawful permanent resident (LPR) status" effective May 26, 2015. According to this, once the principal visa holder (H1) has his/her Form I-140 (Immigrant Petition for Alien worker) approved as part of the green card process, the H4 dependent spouses are eligible to file the application for employment authorization per procedures. The USCIS press release states that this is one of the many ongoing initiatives "to modernize, improve and clarify visa programs to grow the U.S. economy and create jobs." The press release also notes, "It helps U.S. businesses keep their highly skilled workers by increasing the chances these workers will choose to stay in this country during the transition from temporary workers to permanent residents. It also provides more economic stability and better quality of life for the affected families."

While it can be argued that that this new rule will ease some tensions among this particular group of visa holders, the results are yet to be seen. As noted by Banerjee (2015b; 2015c) in her article in the Ms. Magazine blog "the regulations now pave way for, but do not guarantee more options." Thus, the immigration system of the United States poses great

challenge to the women accompanying their spouse, details of which are outlined in the following section.

RATIONALE AND IMPORTANCE OF THIS STUDY

My experiences as an immigrant who migrated to the United States post-marriage on a J2 dependent status, and the impacts this has had on personal and professional life, is a driving force behind my interest in this area of research. There are many reasons why this research is important at this point in time. First, sociologically, the new immigrant women and 'women of color' is an increasingly important area of study especially with a growing immigrant community in the United States. Also, there exists scarce sociological literature on Indian women as new immigrants and their experiences both with the United States and transnationally (for exceptions, see Banerjee 2012; Radhakrishnan 2011, 2009; Purkayastha 2005). As such, it becomes necessary to know how Asian Indian women as new immigrants make sense of previously held roles in India and whether these experiences are incorporated into new roles and identities that they assume or redefine for themselves within the United States.

My personal observations have been that once they quit their jobs and migrate to the U.S., these women tend to disassociate with their more successful Indian counterparts (who continue to do well professionally) as well as their U.S. counterparts. Literature on role exits also point to the existence of "mutual disengagement" between the exiter and the group the individual exits from (Ebaugh 1988:182). This disassociation may only get worse through time as it becomes more difficult for them to return to the work force as time passes, even if they are allowed to work. Similarly, this dependent status could become a pattern in the long-term, independent of employment status. These long-term consequences are speculative and

largely unknown. Potential long-term impacts on immigration, future generations, and gender role definition consequently remain uncertain.

Second, the increasing divorce rates amongst Indian men and women who are married to non-resident Indians are a statistical fact (Narayan 1995). This is not surprising given adjustments to a very different lifestyle, and an imbalanced and highly dependent relationship. The plight of women, in particular, on dependent status is difficult as it is; dependent status in combination with a bad marriage is exponentially worse. Related to increasing divorce rates is lack of clarity around divorce laws surrounding such marriages, many times complicated by jurisdictional issues. My observations on the growing number of meet up groups, forums, and Facebook pages that provide support for women on this status indicate that, given the restrictions they have, women on dependent status are coming up with alternatives to keep themselves sane and adjust to their life situations.

Third, it is important to understand personal and social identity as it is the reformation of identity that possibly provides security or stability for the woman on H4 status during the transition between roles, culture and adaptation as immigrants. Also, as stated earlier while it can be argued that eligibility to apply for Employment Authorization Document (EAD) may ease the transition of women who qualify, it is highly dependent on individual cases. Eligibility to apply does not necessarily guarantee receipt of an EAD or a job, post-employment authorization. Further, this option of applying for a EAD is only applicable for certain individuals on a H4 status. That is, this also largely depends on whether or not the company/organization of the primary visa holder sponsors permanent residency or for that matter, whether the primary visa holder is able to negotiate or convince the company he works for to sponsor permanent residency (given that this is the route that is taken by most

South Asians on a H1 visa status). So, the question arises whether being eligible to apply for an employment authorization alone is sufficient for women who arrive in the United States on a H4 status. Given that the gap in participating in the workforce may range from two to six years, it is important to maintain the skill set that one possess from the professional standpoint. Personally, it becomes important to keep oneself active and sane given the numerous layers of changes that present themselves as a result of marriage, migration, occupational exit and motherhood. Hence it is important to understand how are these women negotiating their sense of self. Also, it is important to know who are these women on H4 status, where in the larger South Asian or Indian community can they be located, what do they look like, how are they integrating with the mainstream, how are they navigating the shifts in their personal and professional lives, and finally, how are they maintaining their sense of self?

There is also no sociological literature on Asian Indian women in Texas, specifically in the city of Houston. The dramatic increase in racial/ethnic diversity in the Houston region, the consistent increase in the percentage of Asian since 1990, and the ongoing population change in the region due to migration, makes Houston phenomenally important (Emerson, Bratter, Jeanty, and Cline 2012).

Therefore, this exploratory research is an attempt to understand the opportunities and the constraints faced by Indian women dependent visa holders as they redefine their identities in the United States, particularly in and around Houston. I believe that integrating these research findings to the existing work on immigration, gender, race, and culture will be invaluable in contributing to future studies that aim to evaluate assimilation patterns, gender role expectations, socialization, family dynamics, and the impacts of transnational ties among

the Indian diaspora in the United States.

Outside of its contribution to the field of sociology, this research will help raise awareness in the Asian Indian community about H4 Indian women and issues related to them. It will also sensitize the larger community both within and outside of the United States towards the situation of women on H4 status and their struggles for survival and their needs for sustenance. This research could also be helpful for advocacy groups and organizations working toward protecting the rights of women on dependent status. It also will provide insights on the transition of new immigrant women and their experiences living in the United States, thus helping facilitate programs that groups and organizations should or could focus on so as to integrate the new immigrant population to both the ethnic and mainstream communities in the United States.

SUMMARY AND CHAPTER OUTLINE

In this Chapter, I provide background information on the H4 visas and also discuss the importance of this research study. In Chapter Two, I review literature to detail what is known about (1) the context that Indian middle-class women are currently facing in India; (2) the experiences of Indian women in the U.S., and; (3) what is known about women on H4 visas. I draw upon the literature on migration (with emphasis on South Asian migration), gender, labor and feminist theory. I also provide an explanation of the theoretical frameworks that inform my research and discuss how I use them for my analysis using a grounded theory approach. Chapter Three outlines the research methods employed in the study. I present aspects of data collection and techniques used in this qualitative study by describing the research design, sampling technique, sample recruitment, research relationship and the interview process. In Chapter Four, I present my observations and findings. Chapter Five

engages in a discussion based on the findings and also highlights the theoretical/conceptual categories that emerge in this research. In Chapter Six, I summarize the findings and reflect on the study to conclude how this research contributes to the existing sociological knowledge. I also offer suggestions and outline recommendations that can be used by organizations/ institutions as they work with Indian women on H4 status.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This research is situated at the intersections of the studies on gender, migration, labor and culture. Sociological studies on Indian immigrants largely focus on ethnic identity and gender (Mehrotra and Calasanti 2010), identities among second generation Indians and children of immigrants (Inman 2006; Farver, Narang, and Bakhtwar 2002; Patel, Power and Bhavnagri 1996), racial identity (Kibria 1996), and religious identity (Kurien 1999). A large part of the research on South Asian women focuses on re-definition of gender roles within the family context or examines the question of cultural belonging for this particular group of women who speak English but still are non-American women of color (Ganguly 2001; Gupta 1999). However, there is little or no research on Indian women as new immigrants and their identity negotiation processes, with the exception of Banerjee's (2012) sociological research, which partly addresses issues on construction of self and gender identity as impacted by the H4 visa regime.

Studying individual and social identity of immigrant Indian women in contemporary society necessitates taking into account the changes that have taken place in immigration and, consequently, the assimilation and identity negotiation or reconstruction patterns of the South Asian community. It also demands taking into consideration the changes in India's economic, political, social and cultural status, as well as changes and development in women's position both within the family and at the workplace in India.

The following literature review is based on identity and role exits as the overarching theme within the scholarship on gender, immigration, and labor. I also borrow from feminist literature so as to create conversations of the same with the sociological literature on

migration, gender, labor and class. In the broader sense, I attempt to integrate feminist literature to the study of migration in the context of contemporary Asian Indian women.

I look at literature on Indian women in India so as to understand the contemporary Indian woman and their association with identity. Then, I draw upon existing studies on identity and role exits about immigrant communities in the United States. On the premise that experiences of other South Asians in the United States should have common themes with Indian immigrants in the United States, I also review studies about South Asians in the United States and their immigration experiences. The first part of the literature review examines how Indian women might navigate identity within the context of H4 visas by discussing what is known about (1) the context that Indian middle-class women are currently facing in India; (2) the experiences of Indian women in the U.S.; and (3) what is known about women on H4 visas. The second part of the literature review evaluates prior research on immigrant identity construction/reconstruction in general, as well as how gender and nationality affect these processes; including what is known to date about South Asian immigrants and identity. This is followed by a brief discussion on the gaps in literature that this research attempts to fill.

In addition to the research of other scholars, the study by Indian sociologist Belliappa (2013) on modernity and middle-class Indian women's identity has largely informed and influenced my understanding and frame of analysis of the Indian middle-class working women and the theoretical orientation for this research study. The theoretical understanding of this research is also rooted in Ebaugh's (1988) work on role exit and is discussed towards the end of this chapter.

Identity as Situational and Fluid

My understanding of identity for this research has been influenced and shaped by works of women of color feminists and immigration scholars in sociology. The term identity is much debated by scholars, however there is a general agreement that identity is situational, complex, and fluid (Chaudhry1998; Buijs 1993; Alba 1990). It cannot be examined from a solely single view; it has to be studied at the intersection of multiple factors. And, this is especially true for Indian middle-class women on H4 status in the United States. As Buijs (1993) states, "as immigrants, their identities are complex and mobile; that is, it spans across borders rather than established in the context of a particular location" (6), and hence it is highly likely that the aspects of their identity negotiation and reconstruction is rooted in the history/values of India combined with an attempt to adopt certain values from the American society, particularly the American South. Second, since Indian women in this research will be from different regions within India, with different educational backgrounds and work experience, belonging to different levels within the middle-class status and probably follow different religions, these differences need to be accounted for while understanding their identity reconstruction.

Third, these women are non-American women of color or, in other words, women from the "non-western" world. Hence it becomes important to understand their identities by including "specifications" and taking into account "contextual" factors (Mohanty 1991). I draw upon the work of Giddens (1991) to identify how Indian women on H4 status produce their own narratives of the self and the specific interpretations of their role exits that they engage in as these women transition from employment to unemployment as they migrate to the United States. Therefore, in this research identity refers to "the individual self, which is

reflexively understood and worked upon by the individual through self-monitoring and self-reflection" (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991). Chaudhry (1998) points out, "Flexibility becomes a key to survival, as women of color self-consciously take up and discard various identities for various lengths of time and in different contexts as an oppositional tactic to power structures" (47) and I recognize that Indian women might project different identities as a narrative of self as they confront multiple ambiguities and contradictions in their journey of migration to the United States.

Referring to the discourses of "respectable modernity" and "individual choice and responsibility," Belliappa (2013) argues:

> Indian women's professional and educational choices are strongly influenced by their families' class position and the emotional and cultural capital that the latter can invest in them as well as their own efforts. While all women have access to opportunities created by globalization, their capacity to realize these opportunities depends in their position within the middle-class and other structural factors (P.113,166).

The author concludes that the identity of middle-class Indian women is reflexive and constructed through collective effort under "unequal relationships of power, social gaze and cultural discourses" (Belliappa 2013:113,166). It is quite possible that women on H4 visas are also influenced by the social gaze while navigating identities.

In order to understand the factors involved in the construction of identity, in the following sections I explore the situational factors that might generate a reflexive identity process for Indian women on H4 visas. In particular, I examine their location as middle-class Indian women, immigrants to the United States, and dependents on H4 visas.

The Indian Middle-Class Women and Identity

The term "middle-class" is a highly contested one and is interpreted in many ways. According to Radhakrishnan (2009), quite in contrast with what the term "middle-class"

often implies, scholars have found the Indian middle-class to be an ideological construction (199). With respect to the Indian subcontinent, "the category of middle-class may be sub-divided economically into upper, middle and lower strata, [however the] middle-class identity is not only based on income" (Belliappa 2013:11). Recent research on the impacts of globalization in India and within Indian information technology industries have engaged in critical discourses on the Indian middle-class by documenting the changes occurring within this class and its identities in relation to consumerism, transnational capitalist economy, nationalism, culture, etc. (Belliappa 2013; Dickey 2012; Radhakrishnan 2011; Nadeem 2009; Mirchandani 2004; Mankekar 1999). Drawing distinctions between India's "old middle class" and the "new middle-class," it is noted that the "old middle-class" is a group that has "inherited the cultural capital necessary for success in the globalized economy from their families" (Belliappa 2013:53) and the "new middle-class" has been defined as "a social group which is able to negotiate India's new relationship in the global economy in both economic and cultural terms; in economic terms as the beneficiaries of the material benefits of jobs in India's 'new economy;' and in cultural terms by defining a new standard that rests on the socio-symbolic practices of commodity consumption" ([Fernandes 2000] Dhawan 2010:46).

The increased diversity in social, economic, cultural and political values, as well as in income, occupation, community, caste and regional belonging within India's middle class creates complexities in understanding this group and its identity. On the one hand they represent uniformity in certain values -- that is, they have shared values and produce hegemonic discourses. On the other hand, they represent contradictions, particularly in ideological issues, as a result of the diversity, which is often attributed to the varied

education, social, regional, and cultural backgrounds and to individual socialization (Fernandes and Heller 2006). Often the identity of India's new middle-class is "associated with consumerist lifestyles," economic achievements and its ability to integrate with global cultures and markets (Bhatt, Murty and Ramamurthy 2010:129). It is this new middle-class that has not only accumulated but has established several forms of social, cultural and economic capital "through education, fluency in English and access to technical and professional qualifications as well as more tangible attributes such as a cosmopolitan outlook, the ability to interact with people outside of one's caste group, exposure to metropolitan lifestyles and familiarity with a broader range of cultures and languages" (Belliappa 2013:51). According to Dickey (2012) who examines the meanings and experiences ascribed to being in the middle-class in urban South India, "the awareness of others' critical gaze is heightened by these actor's consciousness of their own roles as social spectators" (591). That is, "economic, social and cultural capital interact in numerous settings" where there exists a need to convince and retain the social, cultural, and economic perception of what others think about this middle-class (Dickey 2012:591). Thus this ability to accumulate and maintain capital has expanded access to privilege within India and increased mobility both nationally and internationally among the "new middle-class." Finally, it is important to note that though the Indian middle-class is constantly undergoing changes in the era of globalization and modernity, most values that they possess are either rooted in or have evolved from the colonial history of India.

Within the multilayered and complex nature of India's "new middle-class," how are women positioned, what are their experiences, how do they navigate identities and what is it to be a contemporary Indian woman in India? Literature shows that the lifestyle and the

trends in consumerism among the "new middle-class" called for increased financial

contribution — one of the reasons why women chose to go outside homes and seek

professional lives so as to support the needs of the family. However, even this has changed

over time and in the present day, an ever increasing number of women are expected to

receive education and seek professional careers more as a result of their personal aspirations

and family support. Belliappa (2013) points out that it was the autonomous women's

movements that sought social and legal justice against rape, dowry, domestic violence, etc.

and the trends in consumerism that have led middle-class families in India to encourage and

support their daughters to attain education and establish themselves in professional careers

(61,63). Education and career became more important to the new middle-class women than

marriage, within a "culture where neoliberal policies fueled the consumerist aspirations of

the middle-classes on one hand and regressive religious forces were undermining the rights

of women on the other" (Belliappa 2013:63).

     Additionally, individual households or women aside, a wider phenomenon emerged

through popular media on the image and role of women in the early nineties. In her

ethnographic study, Mankekar (1999) examines how television viewing in India has shaped

woman's place in the family, community, and nation, and the crucial role it has played in the

realignment of class, caste, consumption, religion, and politics. Specifically, popular media

projected women as strong, highly self-motivated and capable of maintaining their dignity

and family honor, all while preserving her traditional role and her sexual modesty. Thus, not

only does there seem to be a change in what women want, but also a change in perception of

the role of a woman by the Indian society at large (Mankekar 1999).

     Professional employment is additionally incorporated into the construction of the new

Indian woman as an important marker of her modernity ([Belliappa 2006; Sunder Rajan

1993]; Belliappa 2013:65). The saturation of women in higher levels of professional jobs and

the emergence of iconic and overachieving women at the workplace have further exemplified

the woman of the new middle-class (Radhakrishnan 2009:197). The idea of the "new" Indian

woman synthesizes the concepts of the ideals of a modern woman as well as her older more

traditional counterpart. That is to say that she imbibes the autonomy and freedom of a post-

liberalized and global world, yet with a unique aspect of being tied to traditional family and

cultural milieu. Quoting Rajan (1993), Fernandes (2001) states, "the trajectory of a

globalizing India has produced images of the "new Indian woman," one who "must attend

her national identity as well as her modernity; she is Indian as well as new" (156). Thus, an

Indian woman is very much expected to perform the traits of modernity alongside

traditionalism. For the "new Indian women," such expectation comes along with the need to

balance both personal and professional life. Thus, Belliappa (2013) states that the "middle-

class Indian woman's presence in the labor market is both a matter of choice and

compulsion" and women are "conscious that their participation in professional life and in

public discourse indicates the nation's modernity and therefore take pride in their presence in

both arenas" (94,135). Although labor force participation for many women is a route towards

empowerment and individualism, it should not be misunderstood as freedom from family

ties. In most cases it serves as a tool for negotiation and "strengthens their embeddedness in

reciprocal obligations within their families," thus suggesting that middle-class Indian women

"subscribe to values of reciprocity and mutuality in their homes in order to succeed within

the individualistic culture of the workplace" (Belliappa 2013:135).

      While the position of women in society is arguably a barometer of the progress of a

society, Indian women still view themselves as "custodians of tradition as it carries a certain amount of prestige, honor and a certain level of protection from public life" (Belliappa 2013:166). Further, Belliappa (2013) asserts that Indian women bridge the gap between cultures by continuing to celebrate traditions like old religious rituals, while at the same time they discard ones that they consider "superstitious and bigoted" and thereby create "a sense of continuity with the past in the face of globalization" (166). Indian women in this respect stand unique as they do not look for individualism, rather encourage close family ties. Thus the psyche of a new middle-class Indian woman is to really perform the role of a "superwoman" who strives to succeed professionally yet maintain a healthy balance with her familial responsibilities, culture, and traditions (Dhawan 2010). Dhawan (2010) emphasizes that middle class women protect patriarchal structures like marriage by making it a personal and individual issue, and effectively excluding much of the possibility of a public discourse in the form of "questioning" (56).

Middle-class women in India thus go through much of the anxiety that comes along with managing both of these roles effectively. While these problems may not be specific to only Indian women, any guilt or anxiety that stems from performing any of these two roles at a level less than ideal is possibly exponentially worse with Indian women given the weight they put on personal family life. As noted earlier, Dhawan (2010) calls this role as that of a "superwoman". It is likely that this makes many of these women navigate away their individuality in favor of starting a family. By extension, in addition to self-motivation, a married Indian woman's continuance in employment, especially post childbirth could possibly be attributed to support from kin, both immediate or in-laws or other institutional support like affordable maids or day care (Belliappa 2013; Dhawan 2010). Thus, with the

emerging new middle-class, Indian women seem to be set center stage. Their positions are set to be strong in the face of a globalized world, yet tempered by their own desire to walk a fine line between family and life.

Thus numerous research studies on Indian middle-class women allude to the fact that the identities of middle-class women are attained from confidence outside the home, such as workplace and commitment to family – and it is the collective gaze of family and community that influence the construction of distinct self-identities with the right balance of modernity and tradition.

Indian Women in the United States

Having reviewed literature on the identity of contemporary middle-class Indian women, in this section I review literature to understand what is known about the experiences of Indian women in the United States. The identity of Indian women living in the United States is defined, in part, by her role in the family and the local ethnic community at large. While this possibly does not exclude her identity in a professional setting, her success and identity are not driven by them, as it might be for the men. In the "The Habit of Ex-Nomination," Bhattacharjee (1992) argues:

> The space of the Indian woman is best examined through the private spaces constructed by the Indian immigrant community [and] it is in this space that the immigrant bourgeoisie guards what it perceives to be the nation's cultural essence against contamination by dominant western values. It is here that the immigrant bourgeoisie steadies itself in the face of changes in a foreign country. This private space appears to be defined at two different levels "the domestic sphere of the family" and the extended "family of Indians" which is separate and distinct from other communities. It is in these spaces that the immigrant bourgeoisie recognizes the woman; in the private individual and the private sector it recognizes the man. (P.178-179)

The significance of what determines the identity of Indian men versus women is perhaps best conceptualized under a scenario when those expected roles are betrayed. That is, since an

19

Indian woman's identity is determined within the family and community, a woman without a job will perhaps have limited impact on her identity as compared to a woman who has deviated from being a 'good' mother or a wife, or at least compared to the yardstick as imposed by the Indian and the ethnic community.

Outside of role expectations, Indian women themselves struggle with their identity. Even women from the middle-class with significant educational and professional training find it challenging to define their role in the United States. While this subset of women are professionally driven, they face challenges in their effort to perform their familial and cultural roles while adjusting to a new country. For instance, many middle class women who share common social and educational backgrounds as their professional male counterparts transition to full-time domestic duties when they come to the U.S., with their professional goals and aspirations taking the backburner. These women may be convent-educated with views that intersect the life of an independent woman in the west as well as traditional characteristics of an ideal Indian wife. A transition wholly to the domestic life on their arrival in the U.S. thus seems counter to their beliefs, yet not surprising since at the end, they come to the new country following their husband even though they might cite other reasons (Bhatia 2007:103-104). Within an "arranged marriage" setting, this uncertainty plausibly gets worse as getting to know the husband is part of the new adjustment process and a busy professional life is not ideal for doing that. Balagopal (1999) states, "The added element of getting to know and live with a new person in addition to leaving their country to come to the United States may have delayed the establishment of their careers" (166).

Immigrant Indian women thus face the adjustments to a new marriage, a new country and cultural setting, dependency on the husband, loneliness, and lack of confidence in getting

little things done because of different institution and social mechanisms. Bhattacharjee (1992) details a lot of these issues, including the issue of dependency, stating "An Indian woman's immigration status is often contingent on her husband's sponsorship because she usually enters the United States as his wife. Her dependence on him for legal status adds to her vulnerability and is a threat that her husband often does not hesitate to use to his advantage." (178). In some cases where a woman successfully transitions to the new society, she keeps her newfound freedom discrete and separate from the community. As Devji (1999) mentions, "Foreign-born women who brought the 'old' values with them have adapted, or are struggling to adapt, to the new freedom and sense of themselves as a sexual being that Western society offers" (192).

Literature documents the varied experience of Indian women living in the United States. Most project one commonality – the struggle; the struggle to find identity, to assimilate, to communicate or the struggle towards more independence. These struggles seem wide and pervasive and only exponentially increase with a bad marriage. The social gaze of the Indian immigrant community constructs an expectation of a traditional Indian woman, and abandoning the spouse is a disqualification (Bhattacharjee 1992:177-178). Bhattacharjee (1992) makes the rather emotionally charged point that a woman who does leave her husband, even if it is to escape abuse, is rendered with no legal status, home, money, or any semblance of a sense of community (177-178). On the other hand, in her research on gender ideology of graduate students from India at an American university, Subrahmanyan (1999) concludes there are clear differences in the way men and women perceive the need to hold the family together, and the ways in which that goal can be accomplished. Women in Subrahmanyan's (1999) research who came to the United States as graduate students, wanted

to pursue a career and not sacrifice that "enroute to getting married" (74). While these women were beginning to think about their identities and roles they were largely confused – they wanted to challenge the idea of patriarchy and at the same time also wished to retain the image of the woman as created by the nation – India. Additionally, while there were some women in Subrahmanyan's (1999) research who were even willing to give up full-time careers and pursue part-time ones, they were confused and fully aware that they were going to be unfair to their own sense of self if they did that (75).

As set forth by the literature, it is evident that the expectations and the image set upon Indian women greatly influence their decisions about what they should or should not do, even if they are away from their homeland. Additionally, their sense of self is also greatly controlled by this image of the woman that is constructed in India and followed by both citizens residing in India and Indians in the United States. In addition, the changing dynamics of class as well as the identity of the new Indian woman, coupled with the expectations of maintaining a balance between tradition and modernity, change the process and experience of migration.

Indian Women on H4 visas

As previously noted, many Indian women follow their husbands to the United States after marriage primarily on a dependent visa. This section outlines what is known about South Asian and Indian women on H4 visas. With regards to Indian women, often many on dependent status tend to come from middle-class or upper middle-class backgrounds with an Indian bachelors or masters degree (Ruiz 2013). Most women also have work experience, however moving to the United States as an H4 visa holder restricts numerous activities that these women could engage in, including employment. Being unable to work on the

dependent visa status, these women are reliant on their spouses for even their basic day-to-day needs. As a result of their immigration status, individuals on H4 visas are not eligible for a social security number, which in turn causes numerous issues for even obtaining a driver's license (with some states denying issuance of driver's licenses for H4 visa holders) or opening an independent bank account, building credit history, etc. Additionally, the ability of women to control their immigration status, work outside the home, obtain a divorce, retain custody of their children and escape domestic violence is [inadvertently] curtailed by the U.S. immigration regulations for the dependent visa category (Balgamwala 2014: 25-26; Bragun 2008).

I have observed that online forums and other social media platforms are flooded with information on how H4 dependents cannot lead a normal life. The issues and concerns of being on a dependent status are many, leading to loneliness and isolation, mental illness, domestic abuse and other socio-psychological challenges. For example, DAYA, an organization serving Houston's South Asian survivors of Domestic Violence and sexual assault, notes that most South Asian victims of domestic abuse in Houston are women who are on dependent visa status (the spouse being the primary visa holder) (Parameswaran 2014). Bragun (2008) observes, "The employment prohibition takes away more than the money-making capacity of H4 spouses--it also suppresses their ability to meaningfully function in society by restricting their ability to participate in daily transactions with third parties" (951). Exploitation and abuse of H4 dependent spouses does not occur only within the confines of the household, that is, opportunistic employers also misuse the status of H4 dependents to mislead or trick them into providing free labor. The immigration policy outlines that the H4 visa holder is eligible to work in the United States if a petition is filed on

her behalf and she is granted permission for nonimmigrant work authorization. As women on H4 look for alternative pathways to broader economic and social participation, volunteering becomes one such option. Bragun (2008) contends that the mere possibility of an H1 visa would make it easy for companies to leverage this fact to get work done without pay (955). The quest for the American Dream and the socio-cultural values they possess, might motivate young Indian women to leave their careers, get married and move to the United States with their spouses.

Particularly in sociology, Banerjee's (2012; forthcoming 2015a) work on Asian Indian men and women, families, and globalization of labor and Purkayastha's (2005) research on Asian Indian women and skilled migration, are among the few contemporary works on the immigrant Asian Indian community. Banerjee's (2012) research studies "how visa policies intersect with gendered migrations to shape the everyday lives of the migrant families in the private and public spheres." Documenting the experiences of male high-tech workers and female nurses and their families, Banerjee (2012; 2015a) argues, "while the dependent visa policy uses gender-neutral language, the policy is framed by gendered assumptions that view work and family as two separate and binary spheres: the male provider and the female homemaker/caregiver." Balgamwalla (2014) also similarly asserts, that the H4 visa does not simply impose legal and economic dependence but also a form of "state paternalism" wherein their individual rights are only recognized if they become victims (2014:70). Bhatt (forthcoming, N.d.) also contributes to understanding women on H4 visa status by examining their "role in maintaining the contemporary global information technology migration system." That is, she examines "how women's work and roles within the household make the conditions for flexible work possible for H1B visa holders." Bhatt

(forthcoming, N.d.) alludes to the fact that all discourse relating to the role of women in information technology is limited to women as programmers, while the far bigger role that women play is their role as wives. In essence, by doing this, they are creating conditions that make it possible for the global technology migration system to be viable. Accordingly, how these conditions that Bhatt (forthcoming, N.d.) refers to, are maintained through time is largely a function of how women negotiate or construct their identity or decide to perhaps re-construct it. The increasing levels of dialogue within this demographic, how they manage their frustrations and struggles on dependent visas; all within the wider context of a continuously changing Indian middle class views will inevitably be a significant determinant of the viability of the global technology migration system. Thus it follows that understanding how Asian Indian women immigrants construct identity in the first place is very important.

The Question of Identity Construction/Reconstruction: Immigrants within the United States

In the prior sections, I examined the findings of empirical research on the identities and experiences of women in India, Indian immigrants in the United States, and women on H4 visa status. In this section, I begin to examine what is known about women and migrations as well as how Indian women on H4 status might navigate and reconstruct their identities by discussing the literature on immigrant identity construction. Central to this research is the contemporary work on migration such as Alba's (1999,1990) and Waters' (1999,1994,1990) research on identity shifts and their implications. Although these scholars have focused on racial and ethnic identities, their analyses of contemporary migration and its impact on migrants provide a general idea of how immigrants might navigate and negotiate their identities. Alba (1990) emphasizes that symbolic ethnicities are easily reshaped in

response to different situational contexts and social need. Waters (1999) describes ethnic identity as a social category that individuals actively decide to adopt or stress—a personal choice (Waters 1990).

Bhatia (2007) uses these concepts to evaluate how first generation Indian immigrants construct meanings about race and ethnicity, leading to formation of selfhood and identity among this community. Bhatia (2007) states, " the post-1965 suburban Indian diaspora have both created and transformed social networks, circuits of capital and commodities, and cultural practices and rituals in the country of their settlement and their home" (222). Although highly educated professionals and skilled workers have had both economic and professional success, they have had to make immense compromises in their daily lives and this has affected their identities in many ways. Despite financial success and professional stability, most first generation Indians have not assimilated completely in the United States, but have developed "hybrid" identities (Bhatia 2007). On the other hand, alluding to Bhattarcharjee's (1992) work, Dasgupta (2006) argues:

> The [Indian] immigrants transferred skills learned in independent India to their new environment, a transnational process…to promote a sense of belonging to the United States and even though they faced discrimination in the United States, it did not shake their faith in abstract liberal citizenship. In India, they were its primary beneficiaries. Having never had to examine their class, gender and caste privileges, they represented themselves as the universal. On coming to the United States where they were confronted with their racial and national difference, the immigrants sought to restore their habitual power to name everything while remaining unnamed themselves thus leading to ambiguities in their identity (P. 53-54).

Thus while both Bhatia (2007) and Dasgupta (2006) allude to ambiguities and subtleties relating to identity construction, there exists nuanced yet significant difference in their analyses. While Bhatia (2007) points to the existence of multiple identities being driven by issues related to assimilation and adaptation, Dasgupta (2006) stresses that any ambiguity

stems not from the assimilation process, but the overall focus on emphasizing belongingness

and acquiring citizenship as compared to focusing purely on enforcing the Indian identity.

Further, some immigration scholars argue that for women particularly, the process of

migration imposes constraints as well as provides freedom/liberates them from patriarchy in

some situations (Menjivar 1999; Kibria 1990). Some others state that migration presents

women with increased economic opportunity and an egalitarian cultural environment

(Grasmuck and Pessar 1991). Scholars also note that there are differences in the adaptation

process, where women tend to adapt faster than men to the values and norms of the new

country (Mahler 1999; Menjivar 1999).

In her work on highly qualified Asian Indian women, Purkayastha (2005) states: "the

accounts of the women on dependent status clearly indicate that focusing on the migration of

highly qualified ''individuals'' fails to capture the complex ways in which women are

disadvantaged" (194). She argues that not only do these women have to confront barriers in

work, community, and family so as to reconstruct their lives and careers, but they also suffer

cumulative disadvantage (2005:195). They are not acknowledged as highly skilled laborers

and are by default given the designation/recognized only as a "wife" by the law thus

belittling their professional lives (2005:186). Along similar lines, discussing women on H4

visas and their construction of self, Banerjee (2012) notes:

> … the collective experience of shame and alienation among women prevents the
> women from forming a bond of solidarity or even a social support system for each
> other because the shame and alienation catalyzes a coping strategy based on silence.
> The struggle to cope with or change one's situation immediately becomes an
> individual struggle, subject to one's own individual responsibility. ….collective
> experience of shame and alienation disrupts the hegemonic narrative of the U.S. being
> a leader in women's rights because it challenges the western discourse of "third world
> women as universal dependents" (Mohanty, 2003). The accounts of angst and even
> anger clearly show that the Indian (third world) women participants did not consider
> themselves as naturally dependents. In fact, they actively resisted the label, even as

they experienced "collective trauma" and crisis of self and identity. American visa regimes shoehorn independent, educated women from India into roles that the women's rights movement in the U.S has fought to leave behind (P.127-128).

Banerjee (2012) examines the nuances of the dependent visa status to conclude: "Each of them try to find individual ways to negotiate and survive the rules, from illegal work, to going to school, to motherhood, to alcoholism, to leaving their husbands or never joining their wives" (2012:165). In contrast, I strive to contribute to the understanding of who are these women who come on a dependent status, what they do and how they manage/negotiate their identity and transition to lawful permanent residents as a derivative of their spouses, and where can we situate them within the larger community of Asian/Asian Indians within the United States, especially in Houston and its surrounding regions. My research extends Purkayastha (2005) and Banerjee's (2012) work by examining how different or similar are the experiences of Asian Indian women living in southern U.S. to that of Purkayastha (2005) and Banerjee's (2012) findings, and also by advancing theoretical concepts on the identity of Indian women on H4 visas status.

Literature on immigration and race that documents Asian experiences focuses more on migrants from East Asia and not on South Asian migrants (Le Espiritu 2008; Portes and Zhou 1993). Even cross-disciplinary studies specifically on South Asian immigrants are not consistent in attributing the causes of ambiguities in identities (Ganguly 2001; Bhatia 2007; Dasgupta 2006; Dasgupta 1998). Furthermore, there is little research that focuses on effects of role exits and patterns of identity reconstruction among Asian Indian women. Additionally, research on gender and immigration and gender and labor fails to discuss whether and how exit from an occupation and from other roles within the domestic sphere as a result of marriage and migration impacts the performance of individual and social identity among

Indian women. Further, there is no sociological research on how gender and nationality affect these processes of identity reconstruction among Indian women on dependent status. Most women on H4 status are invisible as they are politically non-existent and have no ability to voice their concern about claiming their basic rights — the right to be self-sufficient, which translates to the right to work (Bragun 2008). Women on dependent status remain largely invisible within their own national-ethnic as well as the mainstream community in the United States.

Importantly, this research will fill the gap in sociological literature about contemporary Indian middle-class women and their experiences in reconstructing their identity despite unfriendly U.S. immigration policies. Also by engaging and incorporating feminist understandings my research will add to the existing few works on migration and gender that integrate feminist theories. As Nawyn (2010) explains, within sociology little is known about "why people migrate (theories of migration) and how migrants improve their standing in the host country over time" from a feminist perspective (759). She recommends that gender should be analyzed as "a system of power relations that permeates every aspect of the migration experience" (760). Thus, another contribution of this research is the understanding of the unique gender relations and dynamics, which surface in relation to identity of Indian women on H4 status. My research also takes into account the pre and post migration experiences of women on H4 status. This research critically examines the identities of Indian women within the United States as they transition from being employed in India to being a dependent in the United States, and also by evaluating whether and how Indian women incorporate their occupational roles in India to negotiate/reconstruct their identities in the United States. Thus, this study covers a complexity that has not been adequately

documented in existing literature. Even where it is talked about, the coverage remains somewhat restricted ignoring the aggregate impacts of all the factors like social perceptions or gaze (Bhatia 2007). For instance, in India the professional lives of women are a symbol of the class status of the family and values of reciprocity and mutuality within family is successful as a result of the working status of the women. There is no reason to believe that these factors will be any less important in a new country. I also attempt to evaluate how all this influences the daily negotiations and what are the transformations and constraints faced when women are possibly just confined to the home and confront the expectations of a new society both mainstream (American) as well as the ethnic/Indian community in Houston, Texas and surrounding areas.

In lieu of the understandings on the current Indian middle-class as well as the South Asian/Indian immigrant community in the United States, it can be said that the "new" immigrants from India present different characteristics in comparison to the immigrants who arrived in the United States earlier. These "new" immigrants are more ambitious, consumer oriented, and more mobile, and hence it becomes important to study the complex nature of their identities. Specifically, as women form an important part of the family structure as well as the Indian nationalism, it is sociologically imperative to understand how they forge their identities and the nature of these and the connections with various factors in their lives within the present moment of modernity and globalization/transnationalism.

Based on my review of the literature, in this research I anticipate that the narratives of Indian women about their experiences would lead to findings suggesting that Indian women's identity reconstruction is a collective effort — that is, their identities will be largely influenced by transnational ties with family and friends, irrespective of individual

motivations and aspirations. Second, women will possibly resort to motherhood/starting a family sooner than what they would have if they participated in the labor market, as a means to create an individual and social identity for themselves. While Indian women on H4 visas might network with other Indian women within the United States/Houston to create a sense of solidarity in managing their issues around identity and living in the United States, it is likely that they will also associate with their network of women in India in search of self worth, self –fulfillment, and as a means to counter struggles with emotional and cultural roots. They will possibly adopt the identity that is most suitable for them in the particular circumstance, which I believe will result from collective ideas as projected by her spouse, family and friends. As discussed in the next two chapters, my interviews and observations do confirm the above stated anticipated findings but comprise of different levels of complexities. Thus, this research presents a detailed understanding of what contemporary Indian women on H4 status think about identity, what does identity mean to them, what resources/capital are being used to navigate the shifts and changes in identity and how is it being done, at the intersections of cultural beliefs, transnational ties, role exits, gender expectations and in the context of Houston and its surrounding regions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I address my research questions by situating them in the framework of role exit and reflexive modernity thesis; that is, Ebaugh's (1988) theory on role exits and Gidden's (1991) theory on modernity and self-identity. Indian women on H4 status undergo multiple shifts in their identity in response to migration, and their narratives of self and their experiences can be situated at the intersection of numerous factors both in the private as well as public sphere. As a result, a combination of these theoretical orientations is necessary due to the way in

which they assist in understanding the different aspects of the identity negotiation and reconstruction process among Indian women.

Role Exits

Using the "perspectives of role analysis" and "combining the insights of structuralists and interactionists," Ebaugh (1988) identifies four stages to understand the "conditions under which role exit occurs" (Giovanni 1989). Ebaugh (1988) defines role exits as "the process of disengagement from a role that is central to one's self-identity and the reestablishment of an identity in a new role that takes into account one's ex-role" (1988:1). Through her analysis on occupational exits, family exits, ideological group exits, and exits from stigmatized roles, Ebaugh (1988) describes the four stages as "first doubts," "seeking alternatives," "turning points," and "creating the ex-role." She concludes that the dynamics of disengagement is a complex process involving many shifts, with the shifts in a person's own sense of self-identity being the most important (Ebaugh 1988:181). Also, "disengagement [from groups] has the consequence of reducing the exiter's sense of solidarity and commitment to the group and also of challenging the exited to establish new ties and a new sense of self" (Ebaugh 1988:182). Ebaugh (1988) also notes that individuals have to manage the "impact of role residual or the holdover identity derived from previous status" (1988:182). These insights not only inform my research question, but also will help investigate the influence of transnational role exits on recreation of self and social identities.

While Ebaugh's (1988) theory on role exit has been used to understand role exits among athletes (Drahota and Eitzen 1998, Steir 2007), college faculty (Harris and Prentice 2004), religious roles (Bromley 1998), and others, critics argue that it is important to understand the contextual factors influencing role exit processes (Wacquant 1990:401).

Borrowing Ebaugh's (1988) understanding on the role exit process and incorporating "context factors" will contribute towards examining how the recreation of identities for Indian women is affected as a result of their occupational role exit. While I use the concept of "role exit" to guide the understanding of identities, I use Ebaugh (1988) definition of role exits with amendments in the context of Asian Indian women on H4 visas. That is, since the participants of this research could attribute different roles as central to self-identity, I refrain from generalizing and assuming that their occupation in India is central to their self-identity. Given the diverse family, educational, regional and occupational backgrounds of Indian women, it is expected that each individual would have a unique experience exiting their family and occupational roles voluntarily or involuntarily, and any of the family and/or occupational role can be central to their construction of self-identity. This understanding of role exit will also facilitate knowing how transnational experiences are integrated into the process of identity reconstruction by Indian women on dependent status within United States.

Giddens' Self Identity and Modernity

In combination with the idea of role exits, the concepts of reflexivity of modernity, reflexive project of the self, and the narrative of the self are key to understanding the identity reconstruction of Indian women on H4 status. Giddens (1991) defines self-identity as a person's own reflexive understanding of their biography, rather than as a set of traits or observable characteristics. That is, self-identity has continuity; it cannot easily be completely changed at will, but that continuity is only a product of the person's reflexive beliefs about their own biography (Giddens 1991: 53). Giddens (1991) has named this process of continually defining self as "The Reflexive Project of Self." However, to understand the "Reflexive Project of Self" it is important to know the concept of "Reflexivity" and

"Reflexivity of Modernity" as this is what extends to the "Reflexive Project of Self" as discussed by Giddens (1991). "Reflexivity" refers to the idea of being able to evaluate the consequences of a choice and use this knowledge while choosing. That is, if one gains new knowledge, then one might have to or want to reevaluate the choices so as to defend the choices in relation to the knowledge available about the effect of those very choices. If one cannot defend the choices made, then it is not valid. Hence, knowledge becomes core of "Reflexivity of Modernity." Giddens (1991) states, "The reflexivity of modernity operates not in a situation of greater and greater certainty, but in one of methodological doubt. Even the most reliable authorities can be trusted only "until further notice'"(84). Further, Giddens (1991) points out, "The reflexivity of modernity extends into the core of the self. Put in another way, in the context of a post-traditional order, the self becomes a reflexive project," to state that the "reflexive project of the self" is a consequence of the "reflexivity of modernity" (32).

Giddens (1991) states, "We are not who we are, but what we make of ourselves" (75). By this he means that "the reflexive project of the self" is a continuous process and the reflexivity here indicates that a choice is not a decision alone about how to act, but also it is about who to be. In the case of Indian women on H4 status, if they choose to enact one of the many identity choices that are available to them, then they need to know how the choice of assuming a particular identity will affect them in the near future in different circumstances and whether they are content with what the consequences of the chosen identity might be. In the event that they do not like the outcome of adopting a particular identity, then they need to reevaluate the choice based on the knowledge they have about the consequences. The reflexivity of this process indicates that choices are evaluated on the basis of the effect of the

choice and the way this choice affects who an individual is.

According to Giddens (1991), "Narrative of the Self" is central to self-identity. That is, the "Reflexive Project of the Self" is organized through the "Narrative of the Self." Giddens (1991) states, "The self is reflexively understood by the individual in terms of his or her biography" (Giddens 1991:53). In other words, the "Narrative of the Self" is a way of understanding who an individual is in terms of different stories in their lives. "It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self" (Giddens 1991:54). The "Narrative of the Self" not only assists in evaluating the choices made and the impact of those choices, but it also helps plan the future. That is, the "ideal self" is what keeps the "narrative of the self" going forward. Giddens (1992) defines the "ideal self" as the "self as I want to be" (68). According to Giddens (1991), though an individual might have different stories that may highlight different aspects of his/her life or personality, there still exist factors that remain constant in all of those stories and it is this that distinguishes and provides a unique character to the individual. "A person may make use of diversity in order to create a distinctive self-identity which positively incorporates elements from different setting into an integrated narrative" (Giddens 1991:190).

Using Giddens' (1991) conceptualization of Self Identity and Modernity in relation to Indian middle-class women, Belliappa (2013) indicates that for Indian women in her research, the social gaze of the community at large as well as cultural context impact reflexivity in addition to the individual, in essence, creating a situation where "reflexivity occurs within the framework of an unequal balance of power within relationships" (166). Not only does the concept of reflexivity require understandings from social, historical and

cultural contexts, but also needs reframing so as to account for the complexities of class, gender, ethnicity and other structural factors. It also demands sensitivity towards the intersection of these factors (Belliappa 2013:166). Belliappa (2013) also notes that reflexivity in an Indian woman is continually changing with their surroundings and is also impacted by their history, ethnic, racial, class and cultural background. Thus, Belliappa (2013) emphasizes that their reflexivity per se is different from the one described in the Reflexive Modernity Thesis given that "women exercise their reflexivity within the structural inequalities of gender, class, ethnicity, race and geography, which enable or limit their choices" (166).

It is the importance of this concept in relation to Indian women that Belliappa's (2013) research raises that I seek to further explore in this research study along with the incorporation of the understanding of "role exits" and its impacts on the negotiation and reconstruction of identities among Indian women on H4 status.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In view of the literature review and theoretical concepts, my primary research question is: How do Asian Indian women on H4 status in the United States, particularly in Houston and the surrounding regions, reconstruct their individual and social identities as they transition from employment in India to a dependent H4 visa status in the United States?

Within this broader question, I examine the following issues:

1. What are the daily lived experiences of women in India pre- and post- marriage?

2. What is the daily experience of living in the United States like for Indian women on H4 status?

3. How do Indian women engage in identity negotiation and reconstruction, and what

factors aid or hinder this process?

4. How are their identities linked to their experiences in the homeland and also to their previous occupations?

5. Do Asian Indian women on a H4 status have the privilege to reconstruct their own identity post-migration? Do they have the freedom to choose their identity or is it imposed/influenced by structures such as family, governments and others?

6. How do cultural beliefs, transnational ties, role exits and gender expectations intersect to create different experiences in the recreation of Indian women's individual and social identity?

CHAPTER III

METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

The following chapter details the method and methodology adopted for this research. Particularly, I discuss the research design, sample recruitment, data collection and analysis procedures that best address the research questions. I also present the research relationship to explain theoretical and methodological insights in the subsequent chapters.

In this research, I employ qualitative methods to explore the identity negotiation and reconstruction process among Indian women on H4 visa status. Maxwell (2013) notes that qualitative studies are best suited to gain an understanding of the contexts within which participants act, the influence of the context on actions, the process by which events and actions take place, and to develop causal explanations (2013:30). Also, for research such as this, which is exploratory in nature, a qualitative approach will help increase understanding by acquiring detailed information of personal experiences, which is difficult to attain through surveys/questionnaires used in quantitative studies. Prominent scholarship on immigration and identity within sociology use interviews to study the process and mechanism of identity within diverse groups (Belliappa 2013; Mehrotra and Calasanti 2010; Kurien 1999; Kibria 1996; Waters 1994, 1999). A qualitative method will help trace the process of change (perception of self and performance of identity) caused as a result of migration across national borders, changed cultural expectations, and other life moments and experiences in the lives of Indian women on a H4 status in the United States.

This study utilizes a grounded theory methodology for analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Since data are collected through in-depth interviews, using grounded theory for analysis helps generate theories that are grounded in the data. This

research is inductive in nature and the data collection, analysis, and interpretations proceeded in an interdependent and iterative fashion (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

This research also uses the intersectionality framework to explain "power relationships and interpersonal interactions" with respect to this particular group of women (Crenshaw 1991). That is, the intersectionality framework is used so as to be inclusive of the influence and impact of multiple layers of micro and macro social structures, culture, migration and patriarchy on identity negotiation and reconstruction for Indian women on H4 visas who are unable to be part of the American labor force as a result of the visa policies. Using the intersectional lens assists in analyzing the experience of these women, the impacts of being married-on a H4 visas status and the complex nature of systemic forces both within their family and in public spaces that Indian women have to confront or adhere to in their day-to-day living. Additionally an intersectional analysis provides insights into how different roles adopted by Indian women of varied ages, having different ethnicities, religious adherence, belonging to different regions in India with diverse educational and professional backgrounds intersect to create varied experiences in the recreation of their own individual and social identity. As Mohanty (1991) notes, referring to the works by Western feminist writers, analysis of third world women must be "contextual" and should include "specifications" — and thus the above mentioned factors cannot be separated from the women on H4 visas when we are talking about their identity. In particular, through the intersectional lens I attempt to answer how do patriarchy, gender, culture, class and migration overlap while occurring simultaneously with identity and the women's own views within this context.

Research Design

The goal is to understand how individual women frame their own identity and the meanings they associate with their identity, primarily in response to their occupational exit and also to other socio-cultural factors. Hence, this research study is designed to examine the mechanisms of identity negotiation and reconstruction among Indian women on H4 status and the strategies they use. In-depth individual interviews using a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix D) were conducted to collect data on the mechanisms of identity reconstruction and the influence of the contributing factors, so as to situate these immigrant women and their identities not only within the larger population of immigrant women but also within the Indian diaspora in the United States, particularly in and around the Houston region.

Interviews with twenty (20) Asian Indian women who met the study's inclusion and exclusion criteria, as discussed in the next section (population and sample) were conducted. The in-depth interviews have helped confirm and disprove developing themes and deconstruct theories on identity, and meaning making, in the context of this particular group of women.

Population and Sample

The population for this study includes Asian Indian women on H4 status across the United States. As set forth in the introduction, approximately 71,953 individuals in the U.S. are on H4 dependent visa status, the majority of whom are women (U.S. Department of State). Due to geographical constraints, the sample for this research is drawn from Indian women on H4 status who reside in Houston and its surrounding neighborhoods. The distribution of Indian women on H4 status in Texas and the exact number residing in

Houston is unknown. According to the U.S. Census (2010), Indians and Pakistanis make up 18 percent of the 280,000 Asians living in the Houston metro area, making this community one among the four largest Asian communities in Houston. While there are no specific numbers available for Asian Indians and Indian Americans in Houston, they have a significant presence across the Houston metro area. The extensive presence of Indians and/or individuals of Indian origin in Houston, Texas is signified by the existence of: The India House, India Culture Center (ICC), Network of India Professionals (Net IP), the Indo-American Chamber of Commerce, three Indian newspaper publications, over three Indian radio stations, and over 50 organizations among others that solely serve the Indian/Indian-American.[3]

From the twenty women who were interviewed, fourteen women reside within the city of Houston, whereas six live in neighborhoods/neighboring suburbs such as the city of Sugarland, Stafford, Katy and Pearland. The sample of twenty (20) participants was drawn from Houston-area women who meet the following inclusion criteria:

1. Asian Indian women currently on a H4 visa status.

2. Residing in the U.S for at least a year on the H4 status.

3. Have a year or more of work experience prior to coming to the United States.

Exclusion criteria include:

1. Women who are accompanying their spouses on secondment to the U.S. were excluded from this study, as the duration of stay within the United States would likely be short and as a result substantial information on identity reconstruction cannot be obtained. Furthermore, the temporary nature of the stay could further complicate the process of identity construction and would not reveal details about the meaning making process that this study intends to

document.

A sample of twenty participants was selected given that the data collection seemed to have reached saturation point as indicated by redundancy in the information collected (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Patton 2004). In other words, after twenty interviews, the data collected did not seem to provide any new insights on specific categories and /or on relationships within/between these categories. Second, the number of participants for this research was also guided by the limited time, the objective and the exploratory nature of this research. Third, the geographical limitations, the access to the sample and the response rates for participation contributed to the final sample size of twenty.

Sampling Technique

Given that the precise location of Indian women on H4 visa status in and around Houston is unknown and not many openly discuss their immigration status, purposive and snowball sampling was the most appropriate to gain access to the group. Snowball sampling for this project involved multiple referral chains, so as to increase the diversity of participants and avoid sampling only from a single social network. Furthermore, since it was necessary to establish some degree of trust so as to gather information pertaining to identity, employing the snowball sampling technique assisted in not only initiating contact but also in building a rapport with the interviewee as well. Snowball sampling also helped in navigating through some of the distrust issues during the sample recruitment process.

Briefly, using both snowball and purposive sampling helped increase diversity in the sample, ensured that participants met the inclusion and exclusion criteria and helped establish some level of trust and comfort with the participants of this study.

Sample Recruitment

I adopted multiple recruitment strategies so that the sample is not skewed and biased from recruiting through a single referral chain, thus increasing the likelihood of sample diversity. Sample recruitment was an ongoing process through the duration of the data collection process. The Asian Indian community in Houston is close-knit and, within this community, it is common for one to associate with members of a similar background. The community hosts social gatherings often and it was quite likely that women on H4 status associate with many other women on a similar status through these gatherings and other social networks. Post the University of Houston Institutional Review Board approval, I first placed recruitment flyers at Indian grocery stores between January 31, 2014 and February 14, 2015 and then again around mid-March (Appendix F). Flyers were placed at eight locations: four in Houston, two in Sugarland and two in Katy. While initially there was no response, within three weeks of placing the first flyers there were about eight inquiries regarding participation.

As the response from placing the flyers started to slow down, I posted the recruitment script extensively on social media, specifically on Facebook (Appendix E). Before posting the recruitment script on specific facebook groups, I first joined the groups and after a couple of days and in some weeks, I posted the recruitment script on these groups where members were predominantly of South Asians and/or Indians. In groups where permission was required to post materials, I obtained the appropriate authorization from the group facilitator before posting the recruitment scripts. The recruitment script was posted in thirty-five groups on Facebook that included groups particularly on women on H4 visas, Houston area South Asian and Indian organizations, University of Houston system groups, etc. The first

interview conducted for this research study was a result of the response received through the Facebook posting. Interestingly, a high number of men made the initial contact in response to the flyers and Facebook posts. Concurrently, I also sent emails to twenty-two individuals within my network. Further, in an effort to recruit participants for the study, I also spent a lot of time in parks and apartment complexes where there was a presence of an increased number of new Indian immigrants.

Twelve of the participants were recruited as a result of my daily walks and networking within apartment complexes with a significant presence of Indians. Access to apartment complexes was achieved by connecting with friends who lived there as well as information received through some of the research participants who indicated the presence of large number of Indian immigrants, specifically women on H4 visas in the community. Some research participants also facilitated conversations with prospective participants. As I was conversing with a prospective participant in one of the apartment communities, an elderly Chinese lady mentioned with a wry smile, "Come here in the evenings between 4.30 and 7pm — you can talk to many of these women. They get their children out to play. As the clock strikes 7:00 all of them run away into their homes with their children. You will find no one."

The above-mentioned recruitment strategies formed the first phase of my sample recruitment. In the second phase of the recruitment process, I visited and spent about five hours each week for about forty-five days at grocery stores. Initially, I visited the grocery stores during weekdays, however was unsuccessful in recruiting participants. Subsequently, I visited the grocery stores on weekends and ended up initiating conversations. I also spent about two hours once in two weeks at religious institutions, and attended cultural and

religious South Asian/Indian social gatherings in an effort to recruit participants. Here too, appropriate permissions were sought where necessary.

Almost all initial conversations required subsequent follow-up in order for me to build trust and have intimate conversations. Only four out of the twenty participants in this study are individuals whom I have known at a personal level from before and therefore did not require time for follows-ups or for building trust. In almost all cases where I did not know the participant beforehand, I followed up on the initial contact at the grocery store or at a social gathering with an email and then a brief telephonic conversation. The time that elapsed between initial contact until an interview actually occurred ranged between a minimum of two weeks to a maximum of six weeks in some cases. Once the trust was established, the interview went rather smoothly. I was invited to their homes to conduct interviews, offered coffee/tea and was welcomed to their lives without any hesitation expressed.

The exercise of building trust had to be done not only with the women who were the prospective participants of my study but also with their spouses. In fact, it was only when I had managed to build trust with the spouse (men), that women would entertain me for even a casual conversation; conducting an interview was not a possibility at all prior to gaining the approval of the husband. In a way, the spouses acted as "gatekeepers". This was true in all the cases where recruitment was done through grocery stores, social gatherings, parks, apartment complexes and places where I did not have any prior contact with the woman. Given the scope and purpose of this particular thesis, I do not provide more details on spouses as "gatekeepers" here and will pursue elaborating on this in future writing projects of this research. In instances, where women were contacted first, they were enthusiastic and

eager to participate, but on follow-up would refuse, stating that their spouses did not agree to them participating in the research study or the spouses did not give them permission to participate. In fact, there were even cases when I was called to a public location for an interview, such as the apartment complex business center, but the participant would not show up. On follow-up, some women stated the lack of consent from their husbands while the others did not answers phone calls and/or respond to emails. A total of thirty-seven women either gave the reason that the husband did not grant consent to participate or did not show up for the interview.

The third phase of the recruitment process was that of snowball sampling. I followed up via emails and /or telephonic calls with the twenty- two individuals within my network to whom I had sent emails in phase one. Some of the participants also spread the word on participation in the study as well as connected me to individuals within their network. Even this phase comprised of follow-ups on a regular basis both via email and phone. While follow-ups did consume time, setting up interviews was much faster in this phase of the study.

By using varied recruitment strategies for this research, I ensured that the information I gathered comes from diverse perspectives. With respect to the diversity of participants, the women in this research study represent six different linguistic groups and are from the northern, southern, and western regions of India. All the participants self-identified as belonging to the middle-class, with some of them alluding to change in status due to migration to the United States. Even with regards to educational background and work experience the women in this study portray diversity as they have been engaged academically and professionally either in the fields of engineering, medicine, humanities, management, or

media. Further, while religion was not a criterion for recruitment, except one, all other participants identified themselves as Hindus.

Interviews

The main purpose of the in-depth semi-structured interviews was to gather information, cultivate understanding and advance theories on Indian women's identity performance in the United States. Data were collected between February 07, 2015 to April 14, 2015 and was resumed again between May 20, 2015 until June 25, 2015. Prior to participating in the study, all participants completed a consent form that informed them of their rights as human subjects and indicated that their identities/personal identifiers will remain confidential (Appendix C). The follow-up email and telephonic communications served as a platform for the interviewees to seek clarifications on any specific questions that they might have about their participation and the research study in general.

As stated earlier, almost all interviews were conducted at the homes of my interviewees, with the exception of seven. One interview was conducted via skype, one at a grocery store, one in my car, two at parks, and two on the University of Houston campus. Interviews were conducted at homes as most of the interviewees expressed their own homes as convenient and a comfortable space for conversations. Also, since the women I interview are on H4 visa status and belong to a family where the spouse is the only earning member in the United States, many did not have access to a personal vehicle for transportation. Additionally, because of their migration to the United States, the women were also uncomfortable using the limited public transportation available in Houston and the surrounding areas. Hence, a public location that was closest to the participant was chosen for the interview with those who did not want the interviews to be conducted in their homes.

The interviews were open-ended and carried out in a conversational style. All except two interviews lasted for between one hour and an hour and twenty minutes. The other two interviews lasted for about two hours. All interviews were conducted in English with the exception of two that were conducted in Hindi because the interviewees mentioned they were more comfortable sharing their stories in Hindi than conversational English. Additionally, in some interviews participants did use Hindi to communicate specific expressions and feelings. While all participants of this study were expected to have worked in India (inclusion criteria), it was logical to assume that every participant would be conversant in English because it is not only the de facto national language but also is widely used as a primary language for professional communications within India. Those interviews where Hindi was used for communication have been translated to English during transcription. However, to maintain the authenticity of what was being communicated I have used quotes in Hindi and provided the translation for the same during data analysis and in the results/discussion sections of this research.

All interviews were audio-taped[4] with consent. (Appendix C). To an extent, audio recordings did ease the environment, enabling me to focus more on the interview process and make the respondent more comfortable to share their experiences. It also enabled me as a researcher to make observations on words, body language and other behaviors that were necessary for the purposes of this study.

The purpose of the interview was to gain information, compare and contrast women's life in India and in the United States, and to examine how their day-to-day living contributes to their sense of self and identity. The interviews covered content that enabled the examination of the feelings, perceptions that the women experienced, and the actions they

perform in day-to-day living. This was achieved by first gathering information on demographics and following them with open-ended questions. The in-depth interviews followed the semi–structured interview schedule and subsequently transitioned to conversation/discussions pertaining to identity negotiation/reconstruction in the United States (Appendix D). In some instances, women were uncomfortable to converse as they noticed the recorder on. In such cases, I started to speak to them about things that were not necessarily pertinent to this research and once the conversation picked up, I would go back to investigating questions pertaining to this research. In other instances women would just answer in one-liners to the question posed and I found it challenging to gain insights into their lives. In such scenarios, I asked them questions on their hobbies or about their favorite movie — and when they started gaining confidence in sharing more about their interests and themselves, I would drift the conversation towards the information that was important to capture for the research goals. It is to be noted that even if the women were in their homes or in their comfort spaces, almost all of them appeared to be guarded in terms of what they communicated. For example, often women would stop during the interview and ask me, " is it ok for me to say this", " I hope this is what you want to know", " I think I told you too much", " you are not going to write about this .. right?" and/or "I spoke too much…. I should have not said that."

Another interview strategy that I adopted was to engage the participant to speak about herself from various positions. That is, to understand the restructuring of identity, I posed questions in a manner where self-presentation of the interviewee could be captured from different perspectives. For example, I asked questions such as "How do you feel to be an Indian in the United States?", "As a woman how do you feel living here?" These questions

yielded varied responses — from the perspective of a homemaker; an ex-labor force participant; from the perspective of a woman with certain family, cultural and traditional values; from understandings developed from a specific national and /or sub-national loyalty; and, in some cases a response from the perspective of a newlywed who has recently immigrated to the United States and is excited to begin a new phase in her life. These different perspectives gave rise to different themes or a sequence of topics that was discussed further in detail during the interview. One such theme that came up was the manner in which individual women negotiated or bargained differently with their spouses to create or maintain their sense of self. These responses have also been used for analysis of the mechanisms of identity reconstruction with respect to the individual self and as a product of socio-cultural interactions.

Field Notes

In addition to recordings, documentation in the form of field-notes were taken during and immediately after the interviews as deemed appropriate. After every individual interview, notes about the interview setting and interview process were documented as well. Specifically, the participants' responses to questions, particularly the use of body language and other non-verbal cues, events that occurred during the interview, and my impressions and response to the interview were noted. More often than not, I noted these details in my car as soon as I left the interview venue. Also, in many of my interviews, the interviewee shared specific insights and talked at length after the recorder was stopped. As a matter of fact, many a times the post-interview conversations have provided information that I was hoping to seek during the interview. While participants agreed to be audio-recorded, some of them appeared to be reluctant in sharing their stories. Hence note-taking immediately post the interview has

helped tremendously in providing thick descriptions to situations as well in the analysis of data. These field notes were hand-written first and then later typed in an electronic file.

Furthermore, almost all of my interviewees welcomed me to their homes, provided wonderful hospitality and by the end of the interview engaged in long conversations about various topics ranging from household chores to politics, religion, power and gender, and Bollywood movies and entertainment. Some women also discussed research methods and related it to their professional experience outside of academia.

Data Analysis

Each individual interview was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Interviews and other audio-recorded verbal interactions were transcribed when they were collected. I used the qualitative software Atlas ti for the coding and analysis of the transcripts. Reconciling my handwritten notes with recorded narratives helped identify patterns in the data. Because I utilized the grounded theory methodology, as my analysis progressed the initial patterns in data further evolved. For the initial six interviews I first prepared a coding matrix to identify the patterns, however later transferred this information onto the Atlas ti software. Open and intermediate coding was employed. Once the coding of the remaining data started, the codes evolved and the meaning of each code and its occurrence within a particular emerging theme could be seen. These codes also helped generate memos with the addition of each interview and observation data. Through constant comparison of the experiences of each of the twenty women, their shared experiences were identified, noted, and then categorized. Thus identifying themes and investigating them was a continuous process of this research study. The constant comparisons helped understand the details of the relationship between and within codes and themes. As comparisons and analysis were being conducted some of the

codes changed. The code list based on the emerging themes further helped analyze the occurrence/co-occurrence of the themes. As suggested by Maxwell (2013), I also make use of a coding matrix to identify patterns and possible links between the themes that emerge and theoretical categories based on my literature review. This has helped me to consolidate the data as well as maintain my notes, codes, and memoranda. The data have also been checked and rechecked through the study for validity threats. Transcriptions, coding and data have been stored electronically in password-protected files.

One of the challenges of data analysis was that of my research status and affiliation to the group of women that I study. I discuss this in greater detail in Appendix B.

Ethical Considerations

I ensured that all research participants had full knowledge of the purpose of this research. As stated in the sample recruitment section, post-initial contact with prospective interviewees, email and telephonic conversations were exchanged where details on the research and research abstract was shared not only with individual interviewees but also with their spouses when necessary. Thus numerous opportunities to clarify any specific questions before the interview were provided. Additionally, consent for participation was obtained prior to the interview (Appendix C). The consent document indicates that there are no direct benefits from participation, confidentiality with respect to the identities of the participants will be maintained, and participants have the option to withdraw from the study at any time. Last, but not the least, I have also been careful that the interviewees are not being exploited by any means; that is, their time and inputs are valued, and due credit given for their contribution to this research.

Research Relationship

As a first generation immigrant from India and having lived in the United Status as a dependent, I have been interested in understanding the experiences of Asian Indian living in the United States. Specifically, my personal experiences have stirred in me an interest to make sense of the various shifts that immigrant women face in their journey of moving across national borders, especially as a result of marriage, the spouse's employment, and career aspirations and opportunities. In this research, I position myself as an insider-outsider because of my belonging, experiences, and current status. My country of citizenship, common socio-cultural values, and history of being on a dependent status due to a marriage creates similarities with my participants and consequently makes me an insider. Yet, my current status as a student (independent visa status) and my experience in living in large cosmopolitan areas in India and the U.S. would make me an outsider. Women from India who come to the United States after marriage come from many regions and socio-cultural milieu from within India distant from mine. Even if there are similarities, my longer experience of living independently in the United States would push me more to be an outsider rather than an insider.

I see significant advantages to positioning myself as an insider-outsider. When managed carefully, the insider aspect helped me recruit, establish trust with respondents, and contextualize understanding of cultural narratives among others. At the same time, the outsider aspect helped weave a certain level of distance between the research participants and me, which was necessary to keep my research free of any potential biases.

In assessing the challenges of an insider position, Belliappa (2013) in her ethnographic work states, "the Southern feminist academic researching her own culture

stands under a double-edged sword" (2013:6). To paraphrase, Belliappa (2013) alludes to the fact that many Southern feminist researchers studying aspects of their own culture claim that while research outcomes could be hugely beneficial to set the record straight, their work could also be misconstrued as biased. The reason for such a perception of bias could be two-fold: (1) the tendency of people to cast doubt given the natural inclination of a researcher to deliberately glorify oneself and the group, and (2) the possibility that pressure from the group to send a signal that is more positive than reality would filter through the research process. Belliappa (2013) questions the veracity and ethics of such a claim since it seems overloaded with the presumption of expertise purely based on ethnicity (6). Bhatia (2007) also widely discusses the struggle a researcher has to confront when studying his/her own community and points to the friction he had to address with respect to accountability and representation of his participants' culture, identities, and voices which were shared by him as well (70).

Although, my position is that of an insider-outsider, which is different to Belliappa's (2013) in her work, I agree with the author in questioning the potential biases of a researcher investigating her own culture and the expected projection of the culture. Although my identity as a student of sociology may or may not hold much value to my participants, I still come across as an insider because of my belongingness to India and due to the similarity of being classified as a "non-immigrant" or a recent immigrant with no family in the United States. I was susceptible to the challenges that Minha (1989) refers to with respect to shifting my position between being an insider and an outsider to the research, even though my research is accounting for identity reconstruction within the United States. This is because identity performance and reconstruction among Indian women on H4 visas is being studied

in the context of culture, gender, migration and transnational ties, that in the broader sense represents my belonging with respect to the nation. Although my position as an insider-outsider to this research does pose challenges, I believe that it is this position that allows for the documentation of "difference and sameness" of the process of identity negotiation and reconstruction and not "difference as a synonym for a separate and authentic non-white self" (Belliappa 2013:7). Based on the interview experience and observations, in Appendix B, I outline the details of how my participants viewed my position and the implications that it has had on my analysis.

Validity

A crucial concern is my influence as an insider-outsider to the population that is being studied. As suggested by Maxwell (2013), since it is not possible to completely eliminate the researcher's influence, I have been aware of my position and have attempted to use it productively during analysis of the data gathered (2013:125). As stated earlier, I believe that the recruitment process and the use of semi-structured interviews has helped develop positive rapport with my interviewees and has also helped negate the pre-judgement of what is and is not important from my end as a researcher. Validity checks have been conducted using rich data, and searching for discrepant evidence and negative cases (Maxwell 2013). Also, since the interviews were narrative in nature, the process provided the opportunity to clarify and check my interpretations with the respondent. Also, my observations and notes add to the data collected, thus making the data rich in details and reducing threats to validity. That is, by confirming my interpretation of the participant's response, clarifying my observations with my research participants during and immediately after the interview and also by looking for specific deviant data, I have ruled out specific validity threats. Furthermore, through

multiple methods of sample recruitment and detailed data collection (interviews and field notes) I have ensured that the quality of data gathered and analyzed is not only maintained but kept authentic as well.

Limitation and Generalizability

This study examines the experiences of Indian women on H4 status, including studying the mechanisms that are at work in identity reconstruction through narratives of individuals (women) who belong to different sub-nationalities, have different educational, socio-cultural backgrounds and varied life experiences. As such, the study captures a great deal of variation in experiences of Indian women on H4 status. Nonetheless, identity negotiation and reconstruction might vary based on their experiences in the home country and their ethnic community and its culture here in the United States. Given that the data collection is geographically limited, it is expected that the experiences of women in reconstructing their identities on a H4 status in Houston could vary from the experiences of women on a H4 status in other parts of the United States.

Given that there was only limited time for the completion of this research, data collected from the participants is a reflection of their experiences at a certain point in time. It was noted that some participants are not even aware of the identity changes occurring in their lives and may begin to think about the topic after the interview of this study. In such cases a complete picture about identity negotiation and reconstruction may not necessarily be obtained from the individual and thus such cases could possibly serve as a limitation of this study. Furthermore, this research does not take into account the experiences of men on H4 visas and also the heteronormative nature of this research is a limitation — which in turn impacts generalizability.

Having said this, this research does provide insights into how Indian women on H4 status, particularly residing in Houston and its neighborhoods, attach meaning to their identities and how their identities or notions of their identities intersect with patriarchy, gender, culture, class and migration. Also, because of its exploratory nature, I anticipate that this study will contribute towards developing new theory as well as hypotheses for future research on H4 visa holders.

Sample Characteristics
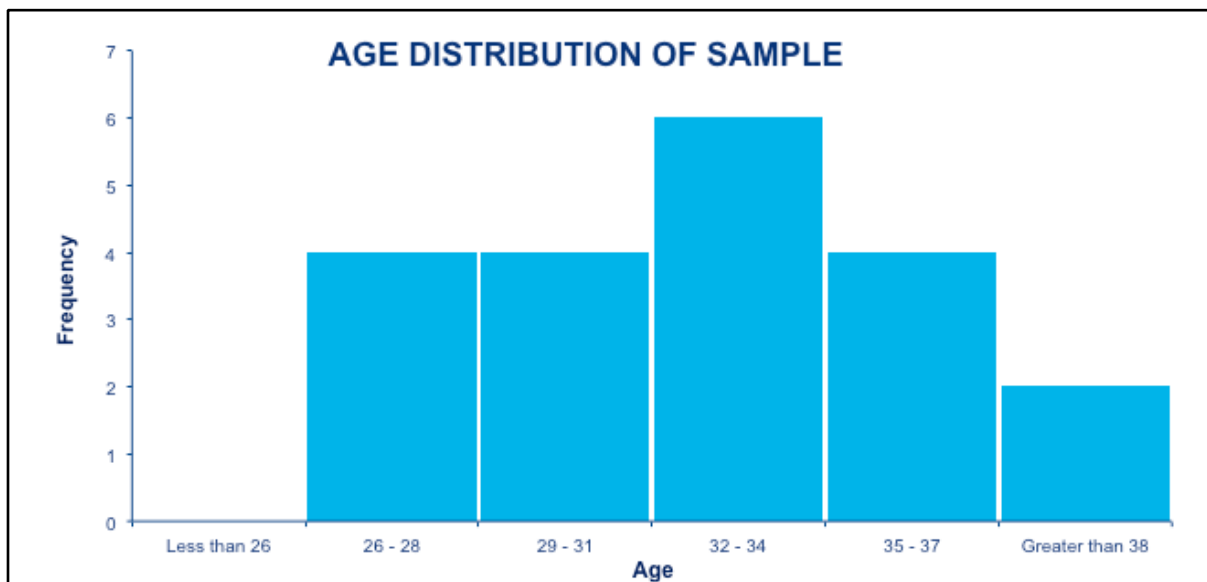
Figure 3.1: Age distribution of research participants

As reflected in Figure 3.1, 90 percent of the participants are in the 26-37 years old age bracket. The remaining 10 percent (two) were both 39 years old. The mean age of the research participants is 32 years. Approximately 35 percent of my participants are from the Southern part of India, another 55 percent are from the Northern and Western regions of India, roughly evenly split between the two. While these three regions represented about ninety percent of the sample, the remaining 10 percent came from the Central and Eastern regions of India. Further, all except one of my participant grew up within India. The one

participant, Neetu, did her schooling in the middle-east and then subsequently relocated to
India with her parents to complete her college education.
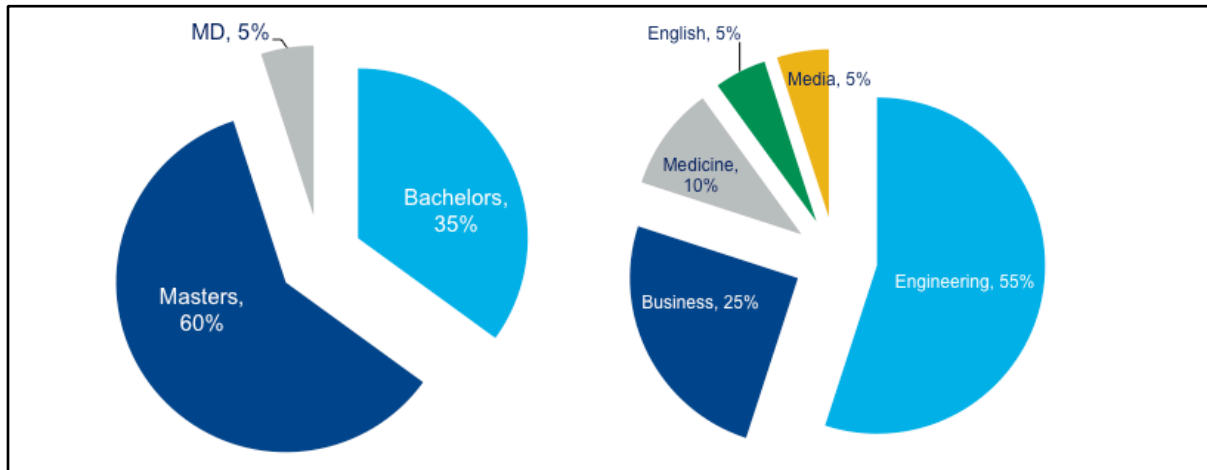
**Figure 3.2: Percentage of Level of Education and Field of Study among research
participants**

As reflected in Figure 3.2, 100 percent of my sample had at least a bachelor's degree
and 65 percent had a masters level degree (including one who holds a MD). In terms of field
of study, predominantly 80 percent of the sample had a degree in business or engineering,
engineering being the dominant segment. A good portion of the remainder were individuals
with a background in medicine and/or a related field.

As shown in Figure 3.3, seven out of twenty women had four years of work
experience with five in the five to six year bracket and another five in the two to three year
bracket. The remaining three participants have one to two years of experience. Only two of
my participants had work experience outside of India; while the others had worked only in
India. That is, all of my participants with the exception of Ritu and Neetu, traveled outside of
India for the first time only after marriage to come to the United States to accompany their
spouses. Ritu worked in Singapore for close to two years, whereas Neetu worked in Dubai
for a year and also visited the United States prior to her marriage to meet her then fiancé,

now husband, and her elder sister. Only three out of twenty women have family (i.e.

immediate siblings, first cousins, or other relatives) in the United States but not in Houston.
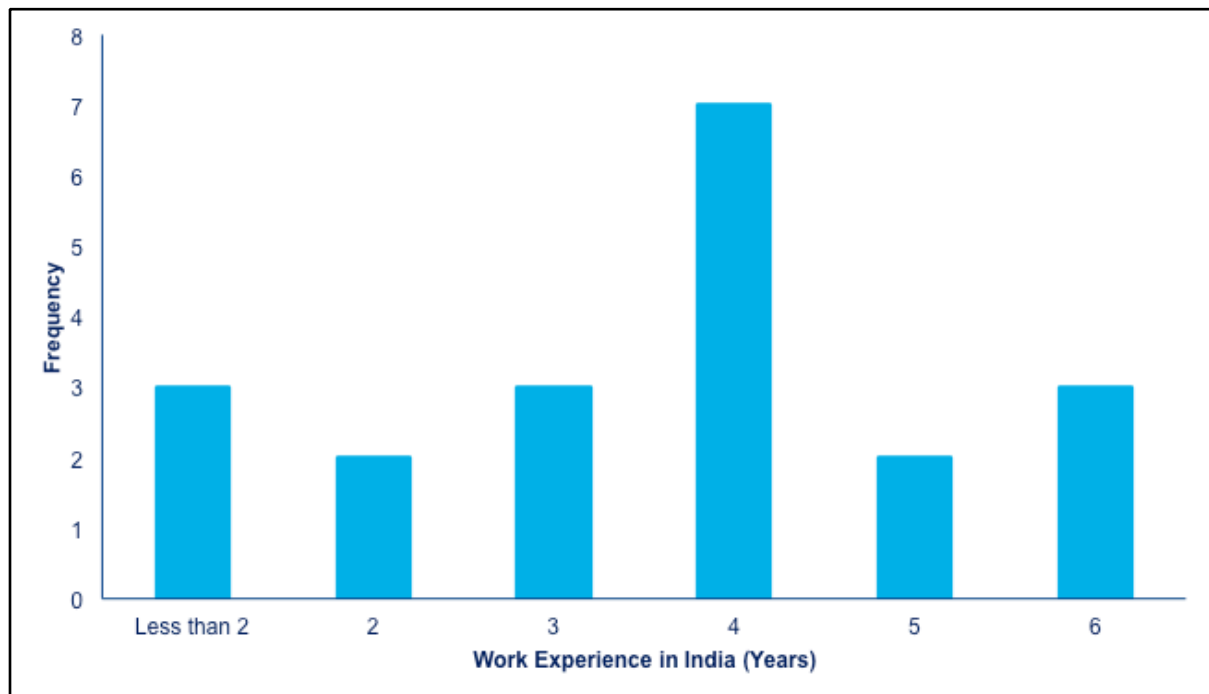
Figure 3.3: Distribution of number of years of work experience of research participants in India

With respect to marriage, more than 50 percent of my sample has been married for six

to ten years (Figure 3.4). Another 35 percent have been married for two to five years. The

remaining two participants are on either extreme – one was married for about a year and the

other has married for eleven years. For fifteen out of twenty participants, the husband is from

the same city/region as the wife. Except for one of my participants, Jayshree everyone else

had an arranged marriage. Jayshree dated her spouse for a couple of years and later, with

appropriate approval from parents and elders, had an arranged marriage. Out of the

remaining nineteen women, only one, Nipa, knew her spouse for thirteen years before

marriage. Nipa and her husband were childhood friends. For everyone else the spouse was a

stranger before marriage. Also, only Ritu's is an inter-community and inter caste arranged marriage.
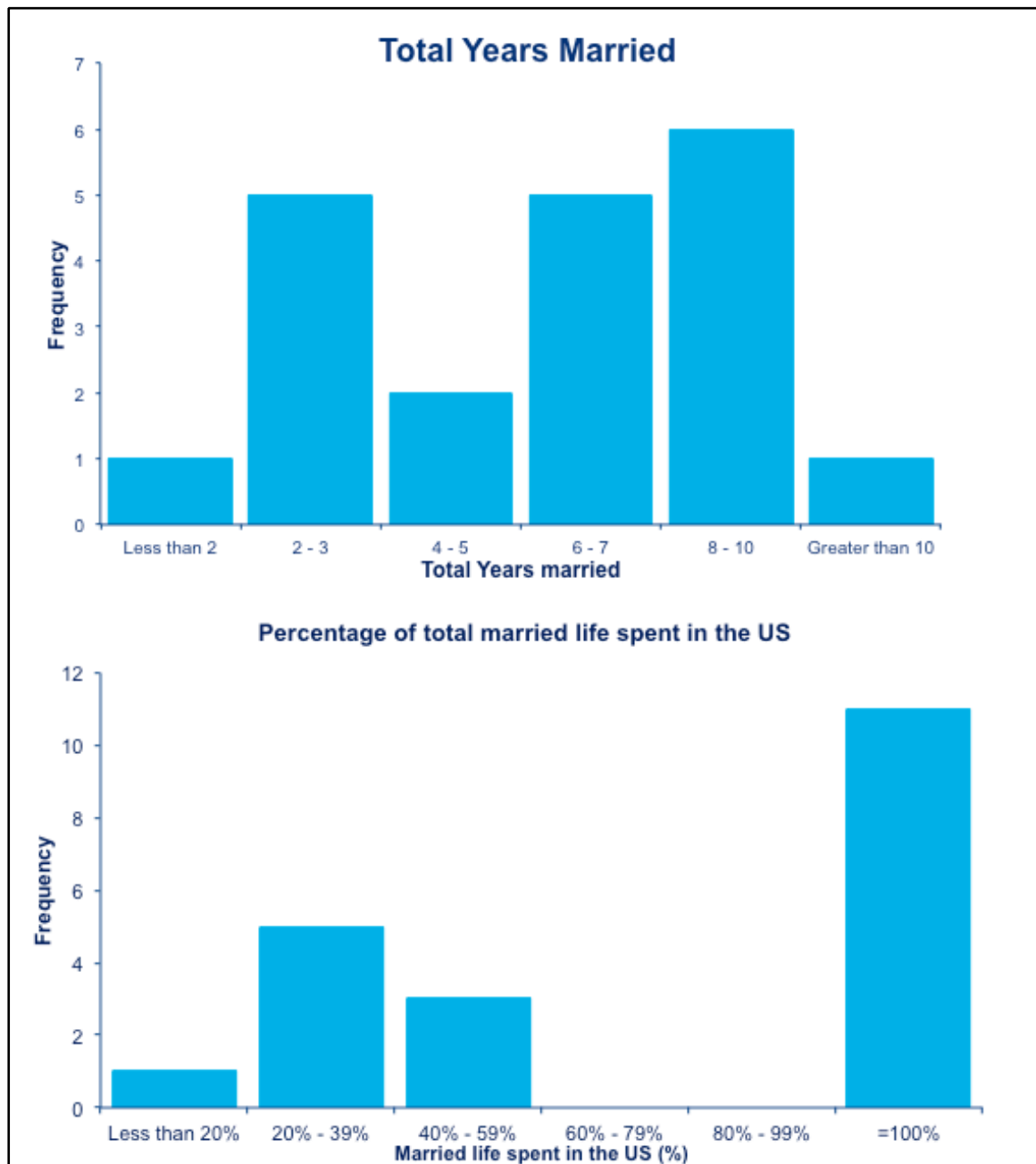
Figure 3.4: Total number of years married and the percentage distribution of married life spent in the U.S.

A closer analysis suggests that more than half of the women from my sample have spent all their married life in the U.S., with most of the remaining having spent anywhere between 20

to 60 percent of their married life in the U.S. Nine out of twenty participants stayed in India between two to seven years after marriage; before migrating to the United States. Further, roughly 70 percent of the women have kids.

In 85 percent of the cases, the husband came to the United States directly to work on a H1B visa. That is, they did not pursue higher education in the United States and then transfer to an H1B status. Only three women, Nipa, Amna, and Priya's husbands, have studied in the United States and subsequently are pursuing jobs on a H1B status. The spouses of the remaining seventeen women came from India to the U.S. on a H1B status and the women either followed them in a few months or both came together to the U.S.

As far as religion is concerned, all of my interviewees self-identified as being a Hindu except for Amna, who self- identified as Sikh. And for class, with only one exception, Sita, everyone self-identified as middle or upper middle-class. Sita identified as belonging to the lower middle-class.

Appendix (A) outlines profiles of each of the twenty women in this study.

<div align="center">**CHAPTER IV**</div>

<div align="center">**RESULTS**</div>

In this chapter, I present the findings of this research. I begin by examining and

discussing the women's narratives around the reconstruction and negotiation of their identity

in the context of their upbringing and lived experiences. In essence, I track their journey

specifically their life in India before marriage and after marriage, their living experiences in

the United States and their perceptions and their sense of self through time. Therefore, the

results are presented under three broad categories, Living In India; Living in the United

States and Identity.

Living in India

Looking at me from across the table in the little seating area at one corner of the

grocery store, Priya spoke about what her typical weekend was like in India prior to getting

married.

> I used to take my two-wheeler out early in the morning, ride around for hours, do
> grocery for my mother, get bank things done for my father and hang out with friends,
> before I returned home for lunch. This was how my typical Saturday mornings was
> every week. After lunch with family, I used to again take my two-wheeler and meet
> with friends, go out for movies or just spend time in the park. *(after a brief pause)*
> Then once I got back home by 7pm, I and my father used to watch television together.
> My siblings used to join in and all of us would sit down on the floor in a circle to
> have dinner. The days my grandmother visited us — she would join in, even cook for
> us at times. On Sundays, my cousins who lived close would come by and we'd spent
> the rest of the day eating, singing, sleeping and making merry. Weekends would pass
> by so quickly. I was responsible for many things outside home and liked taking that
> responsibility and getting things done. There was a sense of freedom. Never have I
> felt the same sense of freedom after moving to the United States … - Priya

Priya came to the U.S. within three months of her marriage to accompany her spouse who, at

the time, was completing his education at a university in Texas. With a wry smile and wiping

a tear from the corner of her eye, Priya continued to reminisce: "I was most comfortable

wearing a salwar and a loose kameez on top. I could ride comfortably in that as well. I miss

wearing those and feeling comfortable here in the U.S."

Like Priya, eleven other women expressed how they experienced a different sense of

freedom in India. Echoing Priya's emotions, Megha explained:

> I lived away from my parents for part of my education and for work too. It was fun. I
> lived in a hostel while I was studying, and then for work rented a house and lived
> with roommates. There was so much flexibility in the way I lived my life then. There
> was immense flexibility in what I should be doing or not, even when I stayed with my
> parents, except for certain things. But overall, there was this sense of liberation…. It
> cannot be expressed in words. In spite of the various restrictions imposed by parents,
> there is still space to stretch around and do things the way I want to do…wear the
> clothes I want to…just be the way I want to. Among many other things…

Family

All of my research participants came from nuclear family structures. Growing up, the

women in my research received active support and involvement from family. While almost

all of them had the liberty to choose the type and level of education they should pursue, there

was a considerable amount of monitoring and/or nurturing involved. Many parents wanted

their daughters to either pursue engineering or medicine; but at the same time were not

comfortable with the daughters having to take up a job outside of the city that they lived in.

Amna, who is a computer engineer, states:

> My father is a business man. He gave me the choice to choose any field that I wanted
> to study, however when I told him that I wanted to take up management and become
> an entrepreneur, he quickly said no. He insisted I take engineering. He explained that
> as an experienced business man himself, he finds it very difficult to give time to the
> family. He said he expected me to give ample time to my family both before and after
> marriage. I did not want to do engineering, but now I have done it— it was only
> because of my father's insistence.

The majority (85 percent) of the participants had one working parent throughout their

childhood with their mothers mostly homemakers. One thing all of them experienced was the

constant motivation and encouragement from their mothers to go outside of the home and

work. Some mentioned how their mothers would emphasize the importance of experiencing the world, the independence and confidence it would help build. Others stated that financial independence was the key to a successful marriage. And still others stated that employment would be a constant source of encouragement to keep going in life, irrespective of any familial troubles. As one of the participants mentioned, quoting her mother: "It will open up avenues to think about other things beyond family, which will contribute to your individual well-being and then, as a result, impact family life positively."

Mothers also mentioned to their daughters that having a steady monthly income would help maintain value for themselves in the marital relationship. It will serve as a cushion for expenses once a child is born. That is, the girl (now as a mother) will be able to buy things for her own baby if she desires to do so. She will not need to ask her husband for money for the smallest things. This will also help relieve a lot of tensions from the husband's mind, thus forging a healthy marriage and maintaining its stability. As Reshma narrated:

> My mother always insisted me and my sister to join the workforce. She used to tell us that the only option we had was to go to work. She was not happy at all when I quit my job for marriage. My father insisted that I work on preparing for the wedding and since it became difficult for me to handle both the wedding prep and the office workload; I decided to quit. I also knew that I had to come to the U.S. in a couple of months, so I did not think twice before quitting the job. But my mother used to constantly give me different suggestions to retain the job. More than me, she wanted the job and she was very upset when she learned that I, along with my father, had made the decision that I will no longer work till I get married. I had to convince her that I would come to the U.S. and then try to look for a job. Even today, my mother brings up this topic and states that I should have worked something out with my company with respect to a transfer or a project in the United States.

Similarly, Megha stated:

> Based on what my mother advised, I did not quit my job for marriage. I did take about a week's leave. I had worked with my immediate supervisor and the human resources on getting a project assignment in the U.S. so that I could be working even after the marriage and migration to the U.S. If it was not for my mother, I would not have even thought about this option. She always wants me to work, it does not matter

whether the work is small or big. Her belief is that earning at least some amount of money for yourself will go a long way in balancing the marital relationship.

Education and Work

As indicated in the characteristics of research participants, all interviewees have a Bachelors or Masters degree from India. Many of them moved away from their parents to a different city so as to pursue their education. They lived in hostels where food was served and hence had no responsibility of cooking. Those who lived with their parents while studying also did not have any other responsibility than to study. Everything in terms of financial and other needs were met by the parents. Some women who studied in a different city ended up coming back to stay with their parents while they were employed or took up employment in the same city as their parents, because the parents wanted them to be with them. Some others moved away in different cities for work. Especially those with engineering backgrounds were away from their parents for work for at least the duration of the entry-level training. A few never moved away from their parents' home for work or for education. Irrespective of whether they lived with their parents or not, all the women had their individual bank accounts and they operated this account themselves. Some even actively took interest and initiated investments on their own, but for a majority of them investments and other bigger money related transactions were facilitated and/or taken care of solely by their father.

In a couple of cases, women moved back from different cities to where their parents were living to be able to meet potential grooms that their parents would find. The fact that both parents and the girls could meet the groom was partly the driving factor for the research participants to stay in the same city as their parents. More importantly, meeting a boy alone in another city was not a sought after option. Thus, the woman had to come from whereever

she was to where her parents were over the weekend and often this would be a huge commute. Hence, women either quit their jobs and pursued further education and stayed with their parents, and/or settled for a lower paying job in the same city as their parents so as to ease the process of finding potential grooms and subsequent marriage. This process was described by Nipa:

> I was so tired in having to commute every weekend back and forth that I decided to do my Masters. I did not want to study, I was happy working away from home. But this whole process of meeting with the prospective groom in arranged marriages was physically and mentally affecting me. I was drained… I had gotten tired of traveling in the bus close to seven hours one way. Leave on a Friday after work and then over the weekend meet the guy and his family, and start towards where I used to work Sunday evening and go to work on Monday. It just was not worth tiring myself so much. - Nipa

Similarly, when I asked Megha how she spent her weekends in India, she looked at me in amusement and quickly responded: "With boys… (pause)….I had to meet with prospective grooms! They will not come and meet me, because my parents did not live in the same city where I worked. So I had to travel. My social life over the weekend was travel, meet the groom and come back. I did this was for almost two years."

On being asked to tell me about their work, colleagues, and work life in general, many women responded with enthusiasm. They were elated to talk about their work. Almost everyone loved their work profile and the flexibility within the company to move up in hierarchy. With the exception of three, almost everyone else, on average, worked for nine to twelve hours each day. Nine out of twenty participants held only one job during their time in India. Of the remainder, seven held two jobs, two worked at three jobs, and one worked at three places alongside running her own media entrepreneurial setting. All of my research participants enjoyed the competition at the workplace and stated that the workplace environment fostered different values in different areas of life that they were not used to

growing up or were not exposed to. For those who switched jobs, they did so because of a better pay package or convenience in location and for better opportunities.

Six women mentioned that working with men at the workplace was easier than with women. For example, Anita said: "There was no other woman in my team. I was the only one. While it was an uncomfortable environment in the beginning of the project, few weeks down, working with men was very encouraging. They have so much professionalism. Communications were straight-forward, nothing petty. This experience has made me very tough." Jayshree and Ritu recollected a similar experience like that of Anita. Two women, Priya and Seema, did not have a good experience with their immediate supervisors who were men, and favored working with women as immediate supervisors.

For almost everyone, going to work was a natural progression after their education. What mattered to some and their families was the location where they would work. Some families wanted their daughters to be home and hence work in the same city where they lived. While some others let their daughters work with companies that presented the best opportunity. As noted above, for most families the period of work experience was the time to look for a prospective marriage alliance for their daughters and hence they preferred that the daughters stay in the same city. Diya stated, "I had a couple of job offers outside of Kerala. My father did not give me the permission." On being asked why the permission was not given, she said:

> ……you know right.. How it is-- We are girls, it's not good for girls to stay away from the family before marriage. If something goes wrong it gets talked about in the community and then it becomes difficult to find an alliance. I worked outside Kerala, in Bangalore after my marriage because I moved there with my husband.

On another note, Nitya exclaimed with frustration:

> …..education is a qualification for marriage. It's a passport to marriage! If I was not

educated I would not get an educated groom. Everyone demands a bride who is as educated as the groom, if not more. So work, no work does not matter much!! I have a Masters and I was working at a good position as well. No one cared what my work was or what will happen to my professional life if I get married.

Barring one, all participants expressed similar opinions regarding education merely being a qualification to find an appropriate suitor. Overall, although the educational and work experience of these women differed, the similarities lie in what each one of them gained through education and work. Especially with respect to work, almost all of them stated that working was a great learning opportunity; they reinforced the fact that working gave them the opportunity to see and experience a world outside of their family cocoon that they would have missed out on had they chosen not to work. About 50 percent of the women in my sample quit their jobs in India because of marriage/for marriage. About six women worked in India after their marriage and subsequently quit jobs either due to pregnancy, childcare, or migration to the United States.

Marriage and Spouse

While most of the research participants quit their jobs for the marriage preparation, some of them moved to a new city within India and restarted work only to have to quit again during pregnancy and childcare. Nine out of twenty participants spent a good amount of time after marriage in India. In terms of their married experience in India, while some of these women did get help from their mother-in-laws during pregnancy and/or childcare, most household responsibilities were still performed by them with little to no involvement of the spouse. That is, the husband did not help with grocery shopping, cooking, laundry, etc. However, almost all women had maids to perform cleaning work, which is a common practice in India.

With respect to financial decisions within or pertaining to the domestic sphere, almost

everyone agreed on having decisions made with mutual understanding. Although the women earned and had their own bank accounts, finances pertaining to investments were handled by men and pertaining to the household were handled by women with monitoring done by men. Most women did perform duties such as going to the bank and withdrawing cash, and attributed being comfortable because of the familiarity with the banking system in India. Also, when it came to their personal needs or the children's specific ancillary needs, the women took charge. Looking back, women now feel that their spouse worked longer hours in India as compared to what they do now here in the U.S. Occupational roles of spouses of the participants included, but were not limited to, engineers, information technology professionals, physicians, and management professionals.

Except for three of the interviewees, others had not done any family planning but stated that if they had planned for a family in advance or were a little smarter about it then they would have been in a better situation today. All the women received much information about married life and marriage from their mothers, and almost all indicated that adjustment and being passive and subservient would be the key in maintaining the stability of the marriage. While all of my participants did not agree to the information that was passed on by elders in the family about the role of women in marriage, many indicated that they worked their way, accepted the values and norms that they agreed with, and created new boundaries for themselves and their spouses to ensure a successful and stable marriage.

Social Life

Family, friends, office colleagues, and relatives comprised a part of the social life of women in India, particularly before marriage. For most of those who stayed away from family, weekends involved visiting parents so their social life was restricted to weekday

evenings where some went to watch movies with office colleagues and some others went for dinners with friends and/or office colleagues or roommates.

For those who did not have to commute over weekends, they spent weekends exploring the city, going to clubs, and attending workshops (such as photography, hiking, etc.) and networking with individuals outside of work colleagues. Partying and running errands were also part of the weekend routine. Some who had relatives in the same city went and visited with them over the weekends.

For those who worked and stayed in India after marriage, life changed considerably in the sense that they had to adjust to the new lifestyles that were followed by their in-laws and/or spouses. This meant that social life was restricted in some ways. Either because they were newly married or were visiting their in-laws after a period of time, these women spent a lot of their time outside of work and home with relatives and family rather than with friends. They did meet with friends and did have a social life, however the frequency and the time had reduced considerably.

Further, for some who had kids immediately after marriage and who also stayed in India, they did not have a social life at least in the initial few years after pregnancy. Meeting with friends and keeping in touch with office colleagues was reduced drastically. Among the participants who had kids in India, most of them quit their job during or after pregnancy to care for their kids. This was because they were either living in a different city than their parents/in-laws who could otherwise care for the child, or because the women confronted health issues related to pregnancy. Few women went back to work after a couple of years post childbirth.

The Decision to Move to the U.S.

The primary reason given for the decision to come to the United States was better opportunities and increased financial stability. While most of the women agreed that the decision was made jointly, a good subset also expressed that they did not want to come to the U.S. This was especially true of women whose spouses were not in the U.S. at the time of the marriage and came to the U.S. for employment after the fact. For others, they got married knowing that their spouses were in the United States. The women who did not want to come to the United States stated several reasons, but one of the main reasons was that they did not want to leave the convenience that India and the city they lived in offered both personally and professionally. However, women had to make a harsh choice either for the benefit of their spouses, their children, or the marriage as a whole.

For instance, Lata is an MD who worked in a private hospital. She did not wish to come to the U.S. However, her spouse had passed on the opportunity to work in the U.S. about three times before, due to other family obligations. Additionally, both Lata and her husband, even by combining both their salaries, were finding it difficult to financially sustain one child's education. Lata states:

> We wanted our kid to go to an international school but the expenses were beyond our capacity. If this is the case for a child's third grade education, how do we sustain and mange to educate our two children? Hence, despite knowing that I have to do my residency all over again to practice or work in the U.S., I decided to do it. Hence, I have left my nine-month-old child..my second child.. with my in-laws in India until I can finish the steps and apply for residency.

For Nitya it was fulfilling her husband's dreams that forced her to make the decision to come to the U.S.:

> We had everything settled in India, our children were settled too. There was no difficulty or any hindrance. We were living a comfortable life. However, my husband always wanted to come to the United States, but due to some reason or the other he

missed receiving the opportunity in his company. But when he got offered to be on a project that was going to be in the U.S., he was excited and did not want to let it go. It was very difficult for me to make the decision. I had to think about the kids too, they missing their father etc. So I decided to give up my career and come with him to follow his dreams. You know how it is in India, the U.S. is glorified; so when my husband got the opportunity and I said a no, everyone including my siblings, parents, in-laws started pressuring me stating I was not taking the right decision. In fact, I had no choice other than to say a yes and accompany him. If I would have stayed there with the kids all by myself — everyone would have made my life difficult.

On the other hand for Reshma, the decision to come to the U.S. was based on career opportunities for her husband as well as for herself. Specifically, Reshma first came to the United States in 2007 on an H4 status, however her husband took up an assignment in Japan (where she could work) in May 2008 because he saw that Reshma was suffering due to not being able to work and being alone at home. They lived in Japan for two years and returned back to the U.S. in February 2011. They thought this time things would get better for her personally, however she faced the same problems once again that she had faced the first time she was in the U.S.; the only difference was now she had a child. Both her husband and Reshma decided to move back to India and in December 2012 returned to India in the hope that Reshma would be able to get back into the workforce, would be close to family, and thus would improve health wise. While in India, Reshma applied to entry level, mid level and all types of positions and even to consultants — only to be disappointed. The gap in her employment had affected her employability in India at a higher position, and her age was a deterrent to getting employed at an entry-level position. Both Reshma and her husband, along with their children, returned back to the U.S. in January 2015 and now hope that they can get their citizenship here. She states,

> Consultants in India refused to take my resume, stating I had more than a year's gap. They say even if we take your resume, we will not distribute it to companies as it gives the companies a wrong impression about our firm and we lose the credibility of recommending good candidates. It's the issue of our image in the market. I also did

directly apply to companies and go for interviews. More than one time I was told that I was too old for the position and the company prefers taking in younger candidates. It did not matter whether I applied for entry level or mid -career professions. I have about six years of experience, but also do have a gap— I understand that. I am ready to start all over again from an entry level, but if companies give the response that I will not get along with the younger candidates and they think younger candidates are best suited for their company - I have no say. I have been disappointed many a times for two years. Both me and my husband were heartbroken and finally we sat down and thought that the best way around all of this would be to focus on one person's career and success — and it was his that was going fairly well and so it was best to nurture his career rather than struggling with mine. With a heavy heart I decided that it was best to go back to the U.S. At least his career will be set and maybe eventually at some point I can restart mine. I hope I do not face these issues again when I start looking for jobs in the U.S.

Summary: Living in India

While the research participants come from different parts of India, have different cultural backgrounds, and belong to different sub-ethnic groups, their lives in India was universally typified by advanced educational degrees, satisfying work lives, and active social lives be it with family, friends, or peers at work. Yet the undertones of a patriarchal society are exemplified by the prioritizing of marriage over all other matters. These patterns not only set the backdrop and tone of the identity of these women when they were in India, but also have influence on the lives of women throughout migration and in the identity negotiation and reconstruction within the United States, as is discussed in the subsequent chapter.

Living in the United States

As I walked up the stairs of her apartment community towards her unit, I could smell flowers. As I walked further, I saw a beautiful spread of greenery with pink, yellow, and white flowers that seemed like daisy, bougainvillea, and another plant that I could not identify. Amidst the flower-pots and other plants that were neatly arranged in the small patio-like space which was the entry to the door, was a pink children's bicycle. I knocked at the door. I had vaguely created an image of her in my mind from the numerous telephonic

conversations I had with her, by her last name, by the way she spoke to me over the phone, and much more. I waited for a few minutes and knocked at the door again. Wearing a yellow blouse and a black and white printed ankle length skirt and a smile, she opened the door. But as I looked at her, I could hardly suppress my disbelief given that her appearance did not fit my preconceived notions of how she would look. She stepped outside and we sat in a corner of the patio to start our conversation. Nupur stood out among my participants because she had not only dismissed the stereotype for how an Indian woman should be, but also was very different in her way of life as compared to the other women in this research.

For her, religion and spirituality was the way of life and she loved gardening. She pointed out to me, "I have attained what I have to in life and my sole purpose is service to the lord." Nupur, like many other participants in this research, has a Masters degree and close to seven years of work experience in India. She has a daughter and quit her job to immigrate with her husband who works in the information technology industry in Houston. She has carved out a path to reconstruct her identity in quite a different way as compared to the other women in this research. Nonetheless, Nupur did experience a crisis like many other participants during her initial months in the United States.

Initial Experience: The first few months in the U.S.

For more than half of the women from my sample who have spent all their married lives in the U.S., the initial experience of living in the U.S. was attractive in some ways and disappointing in others. Neetu shared:

> I was hardly married for eight days that my husband left for the U.S. I joined him after three months. He had set up the home with the things that was absolutely needed and left the rest for me to bring. I was excited to be here. But after a couple of days, I found it disappointing since I could not go out without a car nor did I have any friends to talk to and even if I went for a walk, I would see no one around. Not seeing people around freaked me out initially.

Similarly, Amna commented:

> I was excited to be in the United States. I had heard so much about this place. My husband had studied here and was working when we got married. He had quite a network of friends. I thought it would be fun to meet with and get to know people and make friends. But most of the times I found myself alone in a room full of people. I had not imagined making friends would be so difficult in the U.S. I never did anything - I was always home, within the four walls until my husband returned. Initially things were fine. It seemed like I was in the adjustment phase but soon I realized that I was having adverse physical and mental reactions, specifically losing weight and often getting irritable. My husband took me to the doctor and I was diagnosed for depression. I didn't know this would take such a toll on me.

On the other hand, Nupur claimed:

> I was relieved to be in the U.S. I was working and doing household chores without a break in India. It's been years since I had a break or time for myself. First my education, then work, then marriage and more work, then the kid and more work-- it seemed never ending. The surroundings did not bother me. I was happy to be home, not bothered by anyone, not having to do anything. I always realized that I was not satisfied with my work and the way I led my life in India. Moving to the U.S. was a prompt decision, and it has proved to work well for me. Everyone else around me, my husband, parents, in-laws were worried that I cannot work on a H4 visa status and they pushed me to study here so that I at least could meet people and get to know the place around. I did enroll for masters here, but after doing almost all of my courses for about almost two years I decided to quit and I did. My husband was shocked that he had spent so much money and I did not even complete the degree. I wanted to be at home and see what I could do in my life that would give me satisfaction and that's exactly what I did. I googled for temples and other religious institutions in Houston and visited many till the time I found the one that suited me the best. Now I have found my peace, my calling.

For Manvi, who had been married for multiple years before she came to the U.S.,

things were particularly tough:

> Adjusting was a difficult experience. Not only did I have to adjust but I also had to make sure that my kids are fine. My husband also did not know anything much about this place. He was here for the first time as well. My kids fell sick, we did not know where to take them, whom to reach out to, neither did we know how insurance works. The company where my husband is employed did not provide any assistance or information either.

A few other women echoed Manvi's concerns regarding navigating the medical system in the

U.S. Kusum shared:

> I got pregnant with my first kid within a few days of coming to the United States. My husband and I were staying at a hotel at the time and looking for apartments. We had no idea how things work here and since my husband did not know anyone at work he was hesitant to reach out to anyone with questions. If I think about those initial days of my pregnancy and the fact that there was no doctor to go to —it still gives me jitters.

For the remaining women, while there were adjustment challenges they acknowledged the fact that it would have been the same in almost any other scenario where one immigrates to a new country. According to many participants, what was most shocking was not having people around on the streets and the fact that to commute to places one required a car or had to rely on public transportation, which was not well connected within Houston. Finding the appropriate schools and getting to know how the education system worked here was another challenge that women with kids faced. A large number of participants also pointed to the fact that these initial struggles have not only restricted the level of involvement within the household but this has also fueled certain levels of fear and thereby has also kept them from going out of their comfort zones and engaging in activities all by themselves. They feel that this apprehension will stay with them for a long time in near future.

Pursuing Education in the U.S.

Figure 4.1 shows the relationship between number of years in the U.S. and whether women are pursuing or plan to pursue further education. Priority in education seems to change and occur in phases; that is, during the first year in the U.S. women do not want to pursue education. By the second year 50 percent want to and the rest do not want to with a slight variability (decrease) after the second year. And by the fourth and fifth year almost all of them want to pursue education. This pattern could plausibly be the result of multiple factors,

the two main reasons being isolation and dependency, and the responsibility of children.
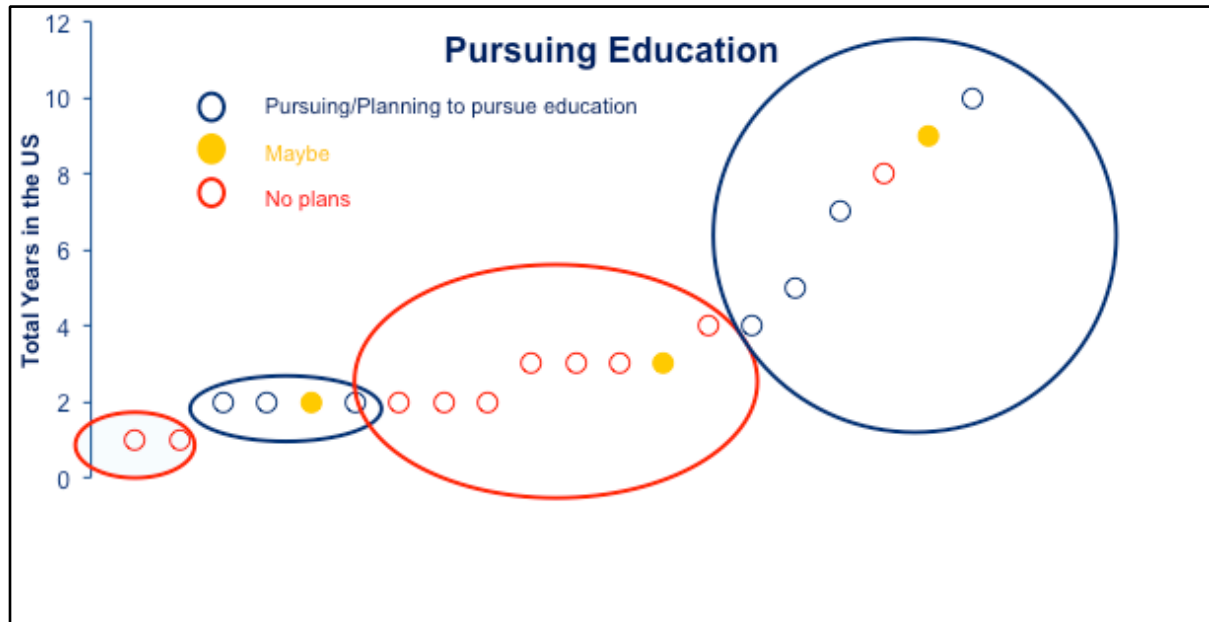
Figure 4.1: Plans to pursue education and number of years in the U.S.

The first year is a year of adjustment – to a new country in almost all the cases, to a new marriage in some other cases. For some participants, children become an important aspect of the adjustment process outside of the individual. By the second year, many participants reported isolation and dependency taking over and since women do not have other alternatives, they likely choose to pursue education either to keep themselves occupied or to increase their knowledge/skills for entry into a career path in the United States. This is especially true for women who do not have children.

However, for women with children the scenario is a bit different. Most women in my sample almost immediately came to the U.S. when they got married. Furthermore, a majority of these women who have had children did so within 1-2 years of coming to the U.S. These women thus tend not to prefer to pursue higher education since they are preoccupied with motherhood. Given little support or help available, childcare becomes the sole responsibility of the women. Especially for women with more than one kid, a significant portion of their

time is devoted to the children and their care. By the fourth or fifth year, these women start feeling the isolation and dependency, as the children now start going to school and they are left alone at home with nothing much to do after completing household chores. Hence it can be seen that women start to talk about pursuing education after about four to five years after their first child.

Additionally, as 65 percent of the women have a Masters degree, many did express that they were not interested in pursuing education or any more advanced degrees. For instance, Sapna noted:

> I have a Masters in Engineering from India. I also do have work experience. What's the point in pursuing a Masters again? In fact, why should I do it? Just to get a job or to claim that I have Masters from the U.S.? It's just not worth, so much money will go into it, so much of time and effort will go into and still there is no guarantee whether I will receive a job given the job market. Also, I am restricted with respect to where I look for a job. Since my husband is here in Houston, I have to look for jobs only here. And then if we plan to have another kid— everything will go haywire!

Anita had a different take on pursuing education. She not only pursued a Masters of Engineering but did a MBA as well in the U.S. She shares:

> My husband used to work offshore and hence I used to be alone for weeks together. I did not know anyone here. For a couple of days, I did meet with some of my husband's colleague's spouses — the only individuals I knew. But I realized our wavelengths don't match and I stopped hanging out with them. I used to watch television but got bored by it too. Soon I went into depression. That's when my husband suggested that I pursue my education and he would monetarily support it. Then I decided to. I completed my Masters in Engineering and was on the optional practical training (OPT). But once I maximized on the number of days I could work on an OPT, no company was ready to sponsor my H1B visa. I did not want to get back on the dependent status and hence I decided to pursue a MBA in the hope that I would get a job post completion. After completion, I could not do the OPT this time, because on a F1 status one can make use of the OPT only once. I still did not get a job and am back to the H4 status now. I was able to do this because I have no children. I am not sure whether I should pursue another degree now.

Nipa also viewed obtaining additional education as important. She states:

> I and my husband decided that I should pursue a Masters here despite having a

Masters from India only because, in the future having a U.S. degree could boost my chances of acquiring a job if and when I look for one. Right now, I have the time and my husband has the money to put into my education. Once we have a child that might not be possible. This was the best decision now.

Work

While all the research participants were aware that they will not be able to work on an H4 visa, what they did not have a sense of is the intensity of the impact on personal life due to the status. Some of them were not aware that one could pursue one's education on a H4 status. Many were unclear on the regulations pertaining to volunteering on an H4 status as well. For example, Priya indicated, "I did not know we can study on a H4 status." Similarly, Ritu shared:

> I thought it would be ok to be at home and not do anything. I thought I will take a break, relax and then maybe think what to do. I knew about the H4, my love for my husband put my thoughts on what I can or cannot do on a H4 status outside of my priority list. ….It's so difficult to get a nice guy whom you like and your personalities, attitudes gel with each other. When we spoke to each other, we liked each other and the marriage happened. So thinking about the H4 actually never happened. It was a natural way to be with your husband—so job, no job, visa status and other things did not matter. I became blind to everything else, except for my husband and marrying him.

Reshma and Sujata had shared similar thoughts as Ritu.

More often than not, the little they know about the H4 visas is conveyed to them by their spouses, who in turn receive the information from either friends or legal advisors in their respective companies. Jayshree who is currently on a H4 status stated:

> I learnt a lot about what I could do or not do on a H4 status when I was on a H1 status briefly. This was when I was employed and had to do the paperwork for H1 myself, since the company that I was working with was a pretty small enterprise and had not previously facilitated the sponsorship of an H1. I believe one needs to know how you can work your way out when on a H4 status.

Jayshree has been very active with volunteer work in Houston. She has not only used her prior educational and professional experience to volunteer for organizations but also has co-

curated an exhibit as well, with funding from local organizations in and around Houston. For some who are interested in volunteering, commuting becomes a problem since they do not have access to a personal vehicle and public transportation is scarce in Houston. To be spending money on private cabs and other service becomes expensive, given that they are part of a one-member earning family. As an alternative, some women pursued their hobbies at home and turned it into an informal entrepreneurship – so as to engage with individuals beyond their spouse and his network.

When asked whether or not they knew about President Obama's Executive Order (modernization of visa regulations) and provisions for H4 visa holders, almost all mentioned they were aware of the new rule. However, a majority of them were disappointed because they are not eligible to apply for the Employment Authorization under the new rule at this point. This was because their spouses were not yet eligible or had not started the Green Card process yet. Only two women (Jayshree and Nitya) were eligible to apply and one (Neetu) already had received her employment authorization when the interviews for this research were being conducted. Neetu had managed to acquire a work from home position a couple of days before her interview with me and was extremely elated by it: "While they are paying only a minimal amount, at least I can look forward to being occupied for a good amount of time during the day. The problem of not having friends to talk to remains though!!", she shares.

Marriage, Family and Domestic finance

As indicated before, only three out of twenty women have family in the United States, but none of them have family in Houston. So in a majority of cases, when women referred to family it comprised their spouse and children (for those who had children). Predominantly,

while talking about marriage and family, the women shared narratives on their relationship

with their spouses and how it had evolved over time. Women openly discussed their spouses,

but at the same time also remained guarded. For example, Sapna shared:

> My husband yells at me for increased electricity bills. He thinks because I am home, I
> am the only one consuming the electricity the most. He refuses to believe that when
> he is at home, his consumption of electricity is high as compared to that of mine. It's
> the same with cell phone bills too, it becomes big deal if I use some extra minutes.
> We have arguments over these things for days together. I did not think things such as
> this would be an issue when I got married.

While Sapna started to share more on their arguments, she quickly stopped to correct herself

and stated, "He is not this bad, I think I am over exaggerating."

Similarly, Sita shared some criticisms of her husband:

> Anything I do or try to do, he responds by saying you are useless. He yells at me,
> does not give me money when I need to buy something for our daughter or for
> myself. He time and again states that I should not go out by myself because I do not
> know anything because I am useless….. I am tired of listening to this every day. This
> is affecting my daughter too. It is time for us to enroll her in school, but when I look
> up online and tell him these are the schools we should go to, he shouts. He says I do
> not know anything and hence should keep quite. He will go and inquire about the
> school. But I know that he cannot inquire….. about the school since he is at work the
> whole day and comes back late in the evening and on weekends the schools are
> closed. I do not want my daughter to be in my situation when she grows older

Within minutes, however, I found Sita defending her spouse. She said, "… [H]e is a nice

man. Maybe he has lot of work pressure. I can't say anything much about the situation.

Maybe I am the one who is bothering him with too many questions because of my curiosity.

Maybe I should keep quiet. It's my fault. What else can I do?"

Similar to Sapna, a couple of other women did share that there were arguments over

electricity and telephone bills, however they did not express concern over the same. Almost

all of them were respectful about their spouses and had good things to say except in a few

instances. Some were extremely appreciative of their spouses and their efforts towards them.

For instance, Reshma was grateful that her husband's job demanded that she travel to international locations. Reshma accompanied her spouse in his travel assignments. In this reference, she states, "If it was not for the travel that my spouse took up through his work, I don't think this marriage would have sustained."

Along these lines, Nitya stated:

> While I was pregnant with my second child, there were many complications. Neither my parents nor his could come to visit us and help us, due to their visa issues. My husband not only took care of our older child, he did all the household chores, looked after my needs and me and worked as well. He would lose money if he did not go to work, so never has he even skipped a day of work during that time. He's done a lot for me.

Anita shared:

> I lost my father unexpectedly a few years ago and we could not go back, because of some issues with my spouse's H1visa. So as a dependent I am tied down to those issues too. Not being able to see my father affected me a lot …it still does (tears filled her eyes). But…he, my husband really took… care of me at that time. He has been a great support….

All participants expressed concern over the very notion that they may not be able to travel back to India in the event of an emergency if there were issues with the primary visa holders' H1B status.

Further, it is interesting to note that almost 70 percent of the husbands share household responsibilities in the U.S. as compared almost none in India. In fact, many men pursued their passion for cooking here. For example, Seema stated, "He loves to cook. He is the one who cooks here at home. I help him with cleaning the dishes and cutting vegetables - basically all the prep work is done by me. He cooks well, better than me." Nine other participants had the same opinion. Some others added that their spouses help them with laundry and cleaning the homes over the weekends as well. Often grocery shopping is always done together over the weekend. All of my interviewees did express that in the U.S., their

spouses did share more household responsibilities that involved cooking, cleaning, taking care of children among others, when compared to that in India. Especially women who stayed in India with their spouses for quite some time before migrating to the U.S. emphasized this fact.

With respect to domestic finances, almost none of my interviewees took part in or played a role in financial decision-making. This was not shared and was solely handled by the husband. Because the women do not earn their own money, they felt they did not have a right to discuss and make decisions about finances within the household. Reshma expressed this common idea among participants, stating "I do not bring in any money be it for myself or for both of us, and hence I do not feel I have the right to take part in financial decisions concerning the home. Whatever, he says, I follow." Similarly, Sneha stated:

> He does not tell me anything with regards to the money, all I know is how much he earns. He takes care of everything from paying the bills to grocery. I do not know how to ask him whether I can share the responsibility or pay bills online, I do not earn you see.

Amna also conveyed this idea, indicating that she had little discretion over how to spend money, "We discuss how our monthly spending should be, where he states what needs to be done or not— however, I do not make the decisions since I do not have an income."

Of course, it cannot be assumed that earning money will give them this access and right, however participants expressed that earning money does give them the liberty to at least voice for their rights in cases where equal partnership on financial decisions do not exist. Women felt that earning their own money gave them the autonomy to spend the money either for themselves on personal items or for their kids. Almost all of the research participants had a joint bank account with their spouse. Some did indicate that there is minimal use of the debit card that they have because they hardly step out without their

spouses and they refrain from using it on purpose as they have to be accountable to their husband at the end of the day.

Also, it is to be noted that Nitya and her spouse were the only ones from my research participants to own a home. Everyone else lived in rental accommodations.

Daily Living

Descriptions of typical days for those with children and those without, for those enrolled in school and those who are not, were quite different. None of my research participants who have children are enrolled in school, so a typical day is comprised of getting up in the morning, getting breakfast done for the spouse and the child/children, getting the children ready for school, working alternatively with the schedule of the two children who are in different age groups, and dropping the child off at school. In the case where the second child is at home, the participant described spending the day caring and entertaining and feeding the second child. They would then pick children up from school and prepare dinner. Manvi and Nitya shared similar stories about their day-to-day living. Manvi explains:

> I have no time to even wash my hair and take care of myself, by the time I am done with taking care of the needs of the first child, it's time for the second. My first one goes to school, so when he is away, I have to keep the second one entertained and take care of his needs. By the time the first one gets back from school, I have to make sure both of them don't fight and mess around with things, in addition to taking care of other chores at home.

Nitya states:

> Both my kids love to play and are attached to each other, the first goes to school and the second does not. I have to make sure the first child gets his homework and other school-related work done, so it is necessary for me to plan the schedule of the second child accordingly. My elder son is part of a lot of activities outside school, so picking and dropping him also consumes a lot of my time. During these times I have to prep for my second child so that she is engaged while my son takes part in his activities.

With respect to driving skills (Figure 4.2), 40 percent of the sample knew how to drive or were currently learning how to drive in the U.S. And the remaining 60 percent did not know how to drive. Nitya had just learned how to drive a couple of months before this research interview because she was finding it difficult to transport her kids and rely on others to do it for her in the absence of a personal vehicle as well as not knowing driving. As reflected in Figure 4.2, there seems to be a very strong relationship between the number of years spent in the U.S. and whether these women knew or were in the process of learning to drive. Barring one exception all women with less than three years of living in the U.S. did not know how to drive. Even in the case of the exception, she was only just learning how to drive. Similarly, all the women with more than four years of experience either knew how to drive or were learning how to drive with only one exception.


Figure 4.2: Total numbers of years in the U.S. and Driving skills as possessed by research participants

For those women without children, participants reported that the day can get pretty frustrating with nothing to do if they do not keep themselves engaged. Activities on a typical

day involved getting up in the morning, preparing breakfast and packing lunch for the spouse, and either watching television, talking to family/ friends back home, sleeping, cleaning the home, and/or waiting for the husband to return in the evening. For those who have managed to pursue their hobbies or are preparing to pursue education, they engage themselves in reading, painting, exercising, dancing, gardening, and other pursuits. However, it is very difficult for women to get through the day if they have not cultivated a passion or a hobby for themselves. As Amna states:

> I struggled a lot to get through the day. I used to enjoy sleeping a lot in the very beginning, when I had come to the U.S. but over time I was done with it. I used to get up at noon, prepare some lunch, watch television, get ready and my spouse would be back from work around 6 pm. We used to have dinner, talk, watch a movie or two and go to bed. But once I fell ill and got diagnosed with depression, my spouse encouraged me to start working out at the gym and I did so. Now my spouse goes really early to work — I think he gets to work by 4 am, I get up by 8am, go to the gym for about two hours and follow this up with some yoga. I prepare food and then paint for a few hours. By this time my spouse is back home. He gets back home between 2pm and 3pm. We have lunch together and we go out almost every day for walks and fresh air. It feels good now.

Sneha, who completed her boards for dentistry, shares:

> I have no time. I need more hours. I have been preparing for the boards and taking care of my son for the last few years. Now that I have finished my boards and am applying, I need to prepare for my interviews and clinical tests. I need to be precise in my clinical tests and hence need to practice a lot. I have my equipment set up at home, so once I finish my household chores I get to practice. Towards the evening, I take my child out for a walk and get ready for dinner.

> For Lata, her days are busy in taking care of her son, getting him to school, preparing for the USMLE steps (a three-step examination for medical licensing in the United States) and talking to her in-laws from time to time during the day. This is because Lata has left her nine-month-old baby with her in-laws in India for them to care. She is practicing transnational mothering so that she can make time to study and prepare for her exams, in addition to taking care of household chores and caring for her first child and the spouse.

For Nipa and Megha, since they are studying, their typical day involves going to school, getting school-related homework done, coming back home and preparing lunch/dinner and taking care of other household chores. Nipa's friend drops her to school and picks her up since her spouse gets busy at work and cannot step out often. On the other hand, Megha's husband drops her at school when he goes to work and picks her up from school when he returns after work. Megha did try taking the public transportation, but has not had a successful experience with it and therefore she avoids taking public transportation.

Many women, with a few exceptions, do not interact with anyone else apart from their spouse on a day-to-day basis. At the most, if they have children, they talk to the mothers of other children as they take their child out to play. But here too, there is clustering based on ethnic backgrounds that I briefly discuss in the next section.

Social Life

When it comes to social life in the U.S., with six exceptions, a majority of participants did not describe having an active social life. That is, their life either revolves around their spouses, children or family in India. Even with the few exceptions, only a handful (only two) claim that they have a social life outside family. On a day-to-day basis these women interact with only their husbands in person. Of course, there is minimal interaction with individuals such as the community maintenance person or the mailman on a case-by-case basis, but outside of that there is little to no interaction. In the case of Nipa, Nitya, Megha, Jayshree, Sneha and Anita, their active engagement in volunteer work, hobby classes, or enrollment in school serves as a platform to interact with other individuals outside of their spouse.

The other participants did not report engaging in spaces where they can interact with

others without their spouses. Some do claim that they take their children outside of homes within the community and engage in conversations with other mothers, but they did point out that this normally was for a very short duration or highly dependent on their children and their play activities. Amna, who does not have a child, states:

> I did try stepping out in the evening in the hope that I could talk to some of the women who bring the children out in this community. But no one wants to talk. I did try a couple of times. They all will talk only if you have a child. Also, people assemble in groups. I have many a times seen people from a certain region in India only talk to each other. They do not engage in conversations with individuals outside their regional community. Does this happen everywhere?

Anita and Megha expressed the same concern. Megha added, "Because I attend school, things are better for me; I get to talk to individuals. But I feel awkward to interact with people from India. They all get together based on where they belong. It was never like this in India. I do not know what is happening and why?"

Kusum also explains:

> Everyone comes to stay in this apartment community stating many Indians live here and so it will be an easy transition, easy to make friends, good for the kids when one comes here from India. My husband and I were told to look for apartments here when we were looking for homes, so we decided that we would come here because it will be nice to be in a community where there are many Indians. But things are different here, not many people talk to each other. It is very difficult to make friends. Women don't even acknowledge you. I first thought maybe there is a language issue but later realized that it is because women like to be with people from their state. This is the worst place I have seen. Women with children do not talk to women without children. I have seen women come and try to talk when we are standing with our children, but if they don't have a child with them, the woman with a child ignores her. There have been times I have been shocked by this behavior. I try to talk but feel extremely bad - on individual woman's reaction. Even when women are together they talk only about food, children or gossip about their in-laws.

It can be argued that interaction with other individuals is a function of language and individual language skills. All of my research participants are educated in and proficient in English. Two women did point out that they were not comfortable with conversational

English and were working on it. Outside of these two women, the other women communicated with me in English and seemed comfortable with the language and communication. Hence, language was not the problem that caused limited interaction outside of spouse.

A few of my research participants claimed that their interactions with others were limited not only because they do not step out of their apartment communities, but because occasionally there are also restrictions placed on them by their spouses. For instance: Seema states that her husband has informed her that it is not safe for her to walk around outside of their apartment community since there is no one around. In addition, he has heard from his colleagues that the neighborhood is not a safe place to be walking and therefore he is fearful of her going out all by herself. It is to be noted here that Seema does stay in a very affluent part of Houston, which is busy with people walking around, shopping, and corporate offices for a good portion of the day. Hence the source of fear expressed by her spouse that Seema is alluding to remains unclear and unexplained.

When probed further on daily interactions outside of the spouse and whether being on a H4 status affected interaction with others, a majority of the women felt that the H4 status did not affect their interactions in most cases. However, they did refer to the fact that sometimes it did create a moot point in conversations, particularly at either their spouse's official events or any other social/networking event they attended. Neetu explains:

> You know how it is, whenever you meet with someone… get introduced for the first time, the first thing many ask is: What do you do for a living? And the conversation continues. When I tell people that I am a homemaker and looking for opportunities — the conversation invariable ends there. Some ask what kind of opportunities are you looking for? ….. But it does not go beyond. I have tried this on many occasions.

She continues:

I did not imagine I would be in such a position. I have studied and worked outside of India and have been with and among Indians as well as individuals from other regions…countries from around the world. I did my masters in UK. I did not face such problems…making friends...really… Now I have only acquaintances here, at best. I have learned to be a loner. No one wants to do only a girls' night out. No one wants go out. Even if they do they want to be home before their spouse return back home from work. I wonder, where is [it that they do] what they want to do?

While the H4 as a status was not posing a hindrance in personal interactions within the U.S., some women faced issues as a result of them not working with family members in India. For example, Sita shared:

My father is a farmer and mother a homemaker. My sister and I are the first ones in the family to be educated and it was with a lot of difficulty that my father paid for our education. My parents hoped that we would become engineers and subsequently work and earn money and live a comfortable living. Now that I have come to the U.S., it is a big thing for the family because no one has ever been outside India. But at that time they did not think I will not work in the U.S. Now that I don't work, every time I talk to my parents or I go back to India to visit my relatives and everyone around keep questioning and bothering me and my parents. They say what is the point of education when you are sitting at home? See your father worked hard for you —he could have put that money elsewhere. My parents are uncomfortable too because of this questioning; they cannot show their face to anyone. My parents fought with the family to get us educated.

A few women stated that it was difficult for them to explain the reasons for not being part of the labor force to family members in India. Manvi explained:

They do not understand these regulations. Even when you explain, they get back at you stating that you are not smart enough. Look at how your friend is smart and has found a way to work. Family or even friends fail to understand that different visa status has different implications. There is a constant comparison with individuals who portray they are doing very well in the U.S. to people in India, even if these individuals are not doing well in the U.S. So family and friends in India begin to think you are incapable. They think by sitting at home and not contributing financially, not only am I being lazy but I am also taking advantage of my spouse being nice man.

Sneha expressed that being on an H4 was a problem only when the office that she volunteers for wanted to pay her for her service. She had to refuse the payment because of the restrictions placed by the H4 visa status. The only individuals that almost all of these

women talk to or interact with are their husbands' friends and their spouses. There too women pointed out that the groups are based on which company the husband works for. Because a spouse's networks are his colleagues in the company, there is hardly any diversity in the kind of individuals they meet with. Sometime it becomes difficult to converse because they have to guard themselves. While these are the husband's friends and their wives, they are colleagues as well. Accordingly, many participants explained that these were more of a professional relationship than personal. Women also mention that given the similar situation of the wives, there is some common conversation but again there are limitations to it. Almost all women in this research, with the exception of Jayshree and Sneha, do not have their individual friends or friendships or networks that they have established for themselves outside of their spouse. For example, Reshma expresses, "I don't know what to talk and what not to when I meet with his colleagues, or for that matter let's say even with the colleague or so-called friend's wife. What is appropriate and what is not is always a confusion." Manvi expressed similar confusion regarding these relationships.

Furthermore, with respect to friends and colleagues in India, many women are in touch via WhatsApp. Most of my research participants indicated that they were not active on Facebook. And when asked about the forums that exist to support women on H4 status, some of them indicated that they diligently follow them and they have been helpful to receive some updates, but others stated that with the exception of one or two groups they only talk about food or people issues and sometimes that can get quite depressing. They also pointed out to the fact that most of these groups are administered by individuals either in the Bay Area or Northeast and if they have meet ups or any other similar meetings, it is always organized in that region of the country; they mentioned that they were not aware of anything happening in

Houston. Women also referred to things being very "pretty" all the time on Facebook, as a reason for their passive engagement with this particular online platform. They mentioned many times it is common to see only the best being portrayed on Facebook groups. For example, Nidhi notes, "Some of the Facebook groups have women posting what they cook for their husbands all the time…..and then there is the wife expressing love to her husband on his birthday,…(laughs)… on their anniversary,….as if they don't stay in the same home." On the same lines, Jayshree sarcastically joked, "What should I say now…I cannot live without Facebook. Everyone is out there….posting pictures of new clothes, new car, new pet…..new this and new that….and suddenly one fine day you see their love for their fathers, mothers… and everyone else. Seems like there is no other space to express feelings…."

Almost all of them talk to their families in India on a daily basis and also receive suggestions on how to lead a successful married life from time to time. Those who do not have children state that conversations about having a child at the right time are emphasized. Some of them also indicated that they planned on having a kid, only because their parents and extended family advised them to do so since they had free-time and were not working. For example, Priya shares:

> I had my first child in 2011, almost after five years. There was too much pressure from my parents and in-laws. They kept telling me why don't you utilize your time now when you are not doing anything to have a child. You can go to work after that. You do not know whether you can do anything at the moment or not so it is best to plan a family.

Anita described similar pressures to have a child:

> It's a natural process isn't it? … I have undergone so much stress just to figure out where I want to be with respect to my career… I studied… Did two different Masters in the hope that I shall be independent financially. But things did not work out. Now I do want to have a kid, but because of all the stress from the past couple of years, it has affected my body negatively. Even if I do want to conceive, I am unable to. I am working on it. No one seems to understand that. There is so much push and pressure

from the family… I can't even begin to tell.

In terms of forging friendships in the United States, all the women except Jayshree, irrespective of whether they went to school or did volunteer work, emphasized that building friendships was difficult here. As Diya put it, " people are disconnected, be it Indians or non-Indians." Not being able to forge friendships seemed to be the biggest concern for many of my research participants.

Some participants said there is no space for intellectual stimulation or conversations. Neetu missed an official meeting to engage in a conversation with me. On receiving a call from her workplace, she rescheduled the meeting. I offered to wait until she finished the telephonic meeting, however she stepped into the other room for a couple of minutes and got back to me saying, "I hardly get to talk to anyone, the way we have been communicating, and hence the meeting can happen some other time." She mentions, " I lacked intellectual communications with individuals and this is something that I am looking for."

Emphasizing their sense of social isolation, when asked who they would contact in the event of an emergency if they could not reach their spouse, 70 percent said 911. Anita voiced her fears over the lack of connections, saying: "What will I do if something was to happen to husband? Where will I go… that's what I fear everyday… it's my biggest fear." About fourteen participants expressed the same concern.

A closer analysis of the data suggests that there is almost a perfect correlation between the women who mention 911 as the emergency contact and women who cite that they have no friends outside of their spouse's network. Only three, Nipa, Jayshree and Nitya, mentioned that they would contact their spouse's friends or their wives. This could be attributed to the fact that Jayshree and Nitya are active in community initiatives, that is

Jayshree through her prior experience of having worked and through her volunteer experience has built a network. Nitya, through children's activity clubs that she regular conducts for her own children and those from the neighborhood school, has managed to cultivate a community that she can fall back on in times of need. However, with respect to Nipa, it can be said that she relies heavily on her spouse's friends even for day-to-day transportation. Nipa is from an ethnic community that is closely knit in the United States and this serves as a huge factor when in need. Nipa states, "You know us Gujarati's, we are everywhere. If anyone needs any help anytime, there are people to help. Even if I do not know anyone, but am looking for support. I can always go to my community and ask for support. No one will say a no."

With respect to participation and involvement with the larger Indian, Indian American, and/or the ethnic community in Houston, almost none of the research participants feel they can engage with the larger Indian community at this point in time. There were three exceptions: Jayshree, who worked in an ethnic entrepreneurial organization; Sneha, who has family friends who are an active part of the Indian American community in Houston; and Nipa who states she can rely on her ethnic community. For those women who did not feel engaged with the larger community, there were a couple of reasons that were cited. First, while there are numerous South Asian social gatherings in and around Houston, many of the research participants were not aware of these social gatherings. Almost all of them did feel that the social gatherings catered to a particular class of individuals and it was not really inclusive or pertinent to "fresh off the boat" (i.e. newly arrived) immigrants. While the research participants did attend festivities, celebrations and other cultural gatherings — they did not feel that these provided a platform for mutual engagement/ interactions. Like Anita

noted, "you attend the event with a few people you know or just with your spouse and then you come back home… Who are these other Indians? .. I do not know." Ritu and Manvi had the same comments as well.

Second, women with children also noticed this disconnect between themselves and Indians who were better established in the U.S. They indicated that it is not very often that parents or women who have been in the U.S. for many years connect with other Indian immigrant women who have migrated to the U.S. recently. As an extension to this conversation, women also raised the issue of belonging and how they felt in terms of their belongingness to India and the United States. This was also discussed during conversations pertaining to identity and hence I have provided a detailed description in the section on Identity.

Summary: Living in the United States

While, the journey of these women to the U.S. is a story of patriarchal, the adverse implications are only magnified through the difficult lived experiences of the women in the U.S. Isolation and depression seem commonplace, only mitigated by familial responsibilities like childcare and spousal support, with even those factors absent in some cases. Inactive social lives in a wider context of the American and Indian migrant society add to the hackneyed lives of these women with some mitigation for a subset of women due to cultural differences. The overarching theme remains one of struggle in stark contrast to their lives back home. In addition, there seems to be an intertemporal component wherein the seriousness of these issues remains inextricably linked to the length of time in the U.S., specific situation in terms of pregnancy among others. Perhaps the most unfortunate part of

this story is the delinkage of certain ties or familiarity to India at the same time as

participants obviously wrestle in their new domicile.

Identity

In this section, I explore findings related to my research question regarding how

Indian women on H4 status perceive their own identity within the United States. The results

were extremely varied among the participants of this research. While there was no one single

answer or narrative to the sense of self or identity, to varying degrees there were overlaps in

the responses presented by the women. For some, it was more about meaning making and

creating an understanding of self; for some others it was about taking different roles and

meeting expectations of those roles. For a few others, it was about the flexibility to make

decisions and experiencing the privilege of having choices, and in instances exercising those

choices. And for some it was about inspiring and taking control of their sense of self through

experiences of the past — to create a more refined personal identity. For a couple of them it

was all of the above that facilitated their individual identity and as an extension their social

identity.

As an extension to the question on what do you identify with the most, I asked my

participants, "If I were to say this is your identity, what would it be? Can you explain?...What

is important for your identity?" After some initial responses, I probed further to ask the

participant --what did identity mean to them and/or what was their understanding about it?

To this, six out of twenty women responded that identity for them currently is about getting

to know who they are and their significance within the household and outside. Diya states:

> I am reevaluating myself now. With marriage, moving, and a kid - life has become so
> busy….I did not even think that an identity was important for me. Now when my kid
> goes to school, I sit at home and wonder, who I was as an individual and how I have
> transformed? Is what I am doing really important to me or am I just fulfilling the

expectations of my family… or maybe society. I think identity to me is getting to know myself and my purpose….

Anita explained with a sense of frustration:

> …[F]orget having power of the household, I have no power over myself or to even choose whether I should have power or not — so having power is a far-fetched thought. I have made peace with the situation. You have to go through such phases in life. Isn't this what life is supposed to be — ups and downs? Of course I do think to myself — what if I had not quit my job, what if I had not married, maybe things would have been different. I would not be talking to you today. I would be a different person today. It's not the visa status…..I think it's the institution of marriage and what our (Indian) culture promotes — especially the values by which we girls in India are bought up. Don't come too late in the night; if people come to know that you are coming at midnight every day, whether it's from work or from a party, who will marry you? So everything is about marriage. Even…you study to get married. If you don't study, then who will marry you?….For me identity is knowing my role; not as what society or people want me to do… but knowing my role the way I want to know it. Having this self-confidence to be myself, to do and acquire things I want to do….that is my identity.

About ten of the interviewees mentioned that having a choice is important for the sense of self and that's what contributes to their identity. For example, Ritu explains:

> There is no choice I have now. Having the choice to do multiple things — whether related to eligibility to work or with respect to making friend…you have a choice. When there is a choice, you make a decision and when you make your own decision… you feel a sense of self…you feel you have identity. Now my life decisions are made by my spouse… or my decisions are a result of what parents want me to do as a woman, a wife. So there is no choice, I have to pick and choose from so there is no sense of self…. everything is just a routine.. Someone has written it for me and I am following. I have not written it myself…

The remainder described identity as a characteristic that sets one individual apart from the others. For example, Kusum stated:

> I think it's very complex. But to simply talk about it — I would say identity to me is cultural values that I share, common characteristics that I share with others around me such as lifestyle, tradition, education, etc. While I share common characteristics — the difference in these …[characteristics] that is emphasized form my identity. And now to me it is the "stay at home" factor ……that is emphasized the most in any interaction that I have with individuals outside of my spouse. So this forms my identity.

According to Seema being inferior to her spouse — that is, lacking the power to exercise her own rights as a result of not working -- contributed to her lacking a strong sense of self. She believes that she has no power within the household and the chores she performs can be acquired by anyone in the form of paid labor. And because she does not feel valued for the household chores she performs and neither does she have a role to play in decision-making, Seema feels that she lacks individual identity.

For Sita, being employed is the only way to attain power and build her identity. She states she feels degraded and humiliated by her husband's verbal taunts irrespective of whether he states that in a fit of anger/rage. Similarly, Jayshree explains:

> If there is no respect within the household, there will be none outside — and that's what is happening. There is no recognition for the various roles that a Indian women plays within the household and as a result there is lack of recognition outside as well. A Indian woman does not have a identity of her own within the family— because socially and culturally that's what has been transmitted since decades. There is no point blaming the visa regulations. How everything functions is also largely dependent on how much importance is given for women in a society.

Many of these women rejected some aspects of the traditional norms and values that they and their families practiced in India. Specifically, the women indicated that they do not comply or agree with all of the norms and values that they have grown up with. This means that migrating to the U.S. has actually provided them the opportunity to reject some norms and values which they do not agree with, thus helping them create an environment that is most comfortable for themselves within the household. It is this comfort that they create for themselves which helps forging or reconstructing their existing identity in a new space. A few women also pointed out that negotiating and reconstructing their identities in the U.S. also is largely influenced by how the Indian immigrants, Indian American and the larger American society view "the family (husband and wife)" of new immigrants. Therefore, it can

be referred from these narratives that the new immigrant family operates within the gaze of different patriarchal structures that includes the Indian/Indian-American community and American society.

Nupur's narrative is an exception to the gaze of patriarchal structures. She has rejected the stereotypical portrayal of identity of an Asian Indian woman. She has carved her own part and states that not many individuals identify with her. She comments, "I am happy the way I am. I know people do not identify with me, they do not want to include me as one among them. I am different and I am happy and satisfied knowing I am different." Further, she states that by disregarding and rejecting the varied influences and pressures in her life, she has gotten closer to the lord and it is through the strong association with her lord and spirituality, she's found her identity.

I also asked participants their top three choices of the categories they most identify with, from the following choices: Immigrant, Wife, Homemaker, Mother, Dependent, Indian, or Something else. Almost 70 percent chose "Indian" as their top choice. From the remaining 30 percent, except for two all others identified with "mother" as their top choice. The third most predominant choice of identity was "wife". Only two women said "something else", and they identified as being a student. Few identified with "homemaker", but just one identified as an "immigrant."

An interesting result emerges wherein the majority of these women have Masters level degrees in engineering and business with an average of six years of work experience, but within the U.S. all of the prior experience and education does not figure in their sense of identity. It is quite possible that the sense of dependency and lack of any professional paid employment changes how they identify themselves when asked directly. The fact that 70

percent of my participants identified as being " Indian" over the other categories that were presented to them is suggestive that women attempt to find identity in not their personal or professional experience but in their nationality. On the other hand, it is quite possible that they have internalized the nation's image of women to such an extent that when they are away from their home country, the image of women as the nation's representative overpowers their previous experience and education as their identities. Another reason could also be that women enforce their "Indian" identity because they find it difficult and/or problematic to integrate and assimilate in the United States.

While a majority of them chose Indian as what they identified with the most, women also shared the conflict they encountered while assessing their belonging to India and the United States. Almost all the research participants disclosed that they feel they do not belong to India neither do they belong to the United States. A reason for this was the progress of many of their peers and counterparts in India, which the women felt they could not match because of their prolonged status as "dependent and unemployed" in the U.S. Participants feel they have been captured in time — that is, they are still in the process of getting to know the American culture and are not able to catch up quickly enough given their access to only limited or no resources since they spend a majority of their time within their homes by themselves or with their spouses. And since they have come away from India, they have left behind what they know of the values, culture, and other socio-cultural aspects. So now, when they go back to India, they are lost because of the rapid social, cultural and economic changes taking place in that region of the world. This conflict of belonging has affected women adversely in the context of negotiating their personal and social identities within the United States.

Further when probed whether being employed was important and the reasons for being employed other than financial stability, all the research participants except for two noted that financial stability was not the primary reason for them to be a part of the labor force. After exiting their previous occupation in India and migrating to the U.S. after marriage (in some cases), participants indicated that they have come to realize that within the United States and especially in Houston an employment helps facilitate and maintain balance in personal and social life. Women alluded that they believe participation in even a part-time employment with minimal pay would initiate the process of gaining self-confidence, remove self-doubt, and gain motivation and intellectual stimulation. Employment would also help in keeping them away from imagining and building unnecessary thoughts such as uncertainties over the future, overanalyzing comments from spouses, in-laws and friends, as well as thinking negatively about life in general in the context of their present situation. Additionally, many participants also believed that employment will provide them the opportunity to network with individuals from diverse backgrounds and to know, live and experience the culture in the U.S.; especially the Southern culture as well as open up their lived experience and hopefully help them cherish the Houston experience. Women with kids emphasized that even regular employment with minimal pay would elevate their status to their kids; that is, it will facilitate in helping them be a better role model to their kids outside of being a mother and a homemaker.

When asked about how they introduce themselves with specific categories of people, all of them insisted that they did introduce themselves only by their first names and would use their last names only on a case-by-case basis. That is, only when introducing themselves to their husband's supervisors the women use their spouse's names or reference and in almost

all other cases -- be it individuals who are classmates, employers, or friends -- only the individual name is used. Women also indicated that there has never been situations where they had to make an effort not to be identified as a dependent or to be identified as a dependent. All of them retained their maiden names and last names; some used hyphenated names per convenience.

At the same time, eight out of twenty interviewees were also using their legal status, that is their position of being on a H4, as a source of freedom to get a sense of what they wanted to do in life, to create the identity that they could not pursue wholeheartedly when in India given the family values and norms. They state that it is their education and the migration that have given them this opportunity, because they themselves would have never made the effort to take a break from work or their daily routine in India to figure out whether what they were doing is really what they wanted to do. For example, Amna mentions:

> I would have never valued the importance and the effort that goes to household chores, had I not been in the U.S. on an H4 visa. I would have not even understood the value of having people around me all the time. We take too many things for granted in life. This time that I have got because I am on an H4 status is a time that I am learning and unlearning many things that I took for granted or did not value…..for now let my husband do what he is supposed to do as a husband….I will think what I need to do.

Similarly, Sneha states:

> I always wanted to have my own dental practice. I dreamt of it. I never could accomplish the dream when I was in India either because dentistry as a profession is saturated there or because my parents wanted to me to get married. Being on a H4 has given me the time to think about how I should plan my career trajectory so as to achieve my dreams. I have made use of this time. I planned for my professional as well as personal life. I had a child, have given the National boards and applied for dentistry programs. I am waiting to hear from schools. Once I receive an admit, things will fall in place. Being on an H4 has given me the time and opportunity to pace myself, reflect and then move ahead.

As indicated before, Nupur also acknowledges that it was because of the H4 status that she

had the free-time to evaluate and understand what would be most satisfying for her personally and professionally.

Many women shared that individuals, such as husband's coworkers, acquaintances, friends or the larger community, do not understand their position of being on an H4 status. Women state that for many individuals what is of concern is whether one works or not. The research participants feel that if one is not working, it is either good or bad from the other individual's perspective. It is good because then as a woman you get time to adjust and know the new culture. It is bad because you have educated yourself so much, spent your parents' money, and have little to show for it. Either way, the women indicated that they feel pushed aside and excluded. A majority of the participants noted that what is forgotten is that just being at home, doing household chores, and taking care of children as a routine can be very frustrating for educated women. As a result, women on H4 status are taken for granted, their work within the household essentialized and as individuals made invisible. As a consequence of this, the process of identity negotiation and reconstruction with this particular group of women gets layered and complex.

Another important aspect of understanding how women on H4 status negotiated and reconstructed identity was through the views of some of my research participants about other women on H4 status. Specifically, women who came across to me as confident and ambitious also often were critical about other women who around them were on H4 visas. For example, Sneha mentioned, "You will find many women who just don't want to do anything. They just want to be at home, cook for their spouse and wile away their time watching television." Jayshree also had almost identical views of women on H4 visas. Similarly, Anita said "they are simply lazy you know." After further conversation, participants also implied that women

from particular ethnic backgrounds are lazier than the others. These narratives indicated that there was a certain level of intolerance towards other women who were not as ambitious and/or career-oriented as them, or that they were perceived as not smart enough to strategize their individual persona and/or career path themselves**.** Further, these assumptions also suggest a sense of dislike and, in effect, support the existing stereotypes towards women from certain regions in India, specifically those who belonged to Andhra Pradesh.

Summary

The process of identity reconstruction amongst the sample of women on H4 status paints a picture sprayed with the struggles of living in the U.S. and yet mixed with colors of hope, aspiration, maturation and possibly realization. Within a generally pervasive story of difficulty and dependency living in the U.S., while some find their calling in life, some find opportunity to break free from traditional norms. Until that materializes though, identities like nationality take over arguably a stronger sense of self grounded in past education and experience that is more personal and perhaps permanent.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The goal of this research was to explain how Indian women on H4 visa status negotiate and/or reconstruct their identities as they transition from gainful employment in India to unemployment in the United States. By discussing their day-to-day experiences in both India and the United States, specifically in and around Houston, Texas one can begin to make sense of the patterns of the identity negotiation and reconstruction process. The lived experiences of women in India and then subsequently in the U.S. serve as foundations to understand and trace the complex nature of identity construction among this group of middle class and educated women within the United States in the context of multiple role exits. Therefore, within the theoretical structure of reflexive modernity and role exits, this discussion elaborates on the emerging themes and weaves them together to map the process of identity negotiation and reconstruction.

Twenty women from India currently on a H4 visa status in the U.S. shared their life stories, including growing up in India, education, profession and professional life, marriage, migration and living in the United States. Using a grounded theory approach, this research has traced the process of change (perception of self and performance of identity) in the lives of these women caused by role exits, migration, changed cultural expectation, and other life moments and experiences. The results of this research not only confirm some of the existing knowledge on identity of Asian Indian women (as discussed in Chapter II) but also expands the understanding about the intersections and overlap of patriarchy, gender, culture, class and migration with the reconstruction of identity among women on H4 status. This research has facilitated the understanding of how Indian women's identities are collectively influenced

and impacted by family before and after marriage, and how women negotiate these collective influences at different points in time alongside migration to the United States. Thus, the narratives of these women indicate and confirm that identity is situational and fluid.

The pre- and post-migration experiences of these women are evidence of the push and pull factors that the women shuttle between to maintain a balance in preserving traditional norms and values as well as adapting to modernity as they create their identities. While women are aware of the shifting dynamics of their sense of self within the context or marriage and migration, they do find it difficult to preserve this balance between modernity and tradition due to responsibilities attached to a particular role they may be performing at a given point in time.

What is distinct about this group of women and not highlighted in the existing literature is that they are continually making an effort to find ways to give structure and meaning to their lives, specifically to create an identity that incorporates what they have left behind in India both professionally as well as personally. While their immigration status does not present an ideal situation for them to emotionally and economically thrive within the United States, these women nonetheless sought to develop their personal interests, independence, and individuality within the context of the situations in which they currently live. The excerpts on family, social life, work, and marriage from the narratives of the research participants that are discussed in the previous chapter are evidence to this. I explain this further in this chapter as I discuss the emerging and dominant themes on identity construction process.

Reflexive Modernity and Role Exit

Drawing upon Gidden's (1991) concept of Self Identity and Modernity and Ebaugh's (1988) theory on role exit, I found that women on H4 visa status in Houston, Texas and its neighborhoods constantly associate and disassociate from their occupational roles in India as they shift their identities in relation to personal circumstances and people (family and society). Belliappa (2013) points out that the Indian woman's reflexivity is a collective project different from the one described in the reflexive modernity thesis as it is "grounded and contextualized by the specificities of history, ethnicity and culture" (164). My research reveals similar findings in the emergence of self among Indian women on H4 status. Belliappa (2013) emphasizes the reflexive modernity thesis in the context of her research participants who are middle-class Indian women employed in India. For my participants, who are educated middle-class Indian women unemployed in the United States, holding onto the views of the family (family where they were born and raised as well as matrimonial family) and fulfilling their expectations was an important aspect of their identities. At the same time, they also emphasized their individual choices in the construction of self. Thus, women on H4 visas reflexively construct identities as a result of collective influences and they adjust to make choices about the identity that they want to emphasize at a particular time and space. While they are doing so, professional continuity as a priority does take a back seat for a brief period of time. Developing personal identities becomes more important than professional identities. Women reflexively make sense of their previous occupational experiences and draw upon them individually, but seek to conform the values and norms in relation to the collective influence of their families as well as those put forth by different formal and informal institutions -- an important one being the American government and its immigration

policies. The sense of self is quite different from what is described in the reflexive modernity thesis. For my research participants, reflexivity is rooted in culture, marriage, patriarchy, transnational ties and role exits. While my research participants do seek independence and the liberty to make choices, their ties with the spouse, family in India, and their values seem to be very strong. So when families recommend the role of a mother as being important, in order to nurture and maintain ties many of my research participants abided by the recommendations; some by putting aside their own priorities and ambitions. Some others entered into a negotiation so as to bring back their sense of freedom that they experienced while they were employed in India.

For example, Sneha, who had completed her education in dentistry, worked as an assistant to a practicing dentist and also as an assistant professor at a dental school in India, before getting married. Her dream was to have her own practice in India. However, she migrated to the U.S. with her spouse on a H4 visa. She waited for a couple of months but when she realized that she cannot do much without a certification in the U.S., she wanted to go back to India and utilize the time that according to her was being wasted. She proposed to her husband that she return to India for a few months to evaluate how she can pursue her dreams of setting up a practice. Her husband was uncomfortable with this idea. Sneha states:

> When I told him…I want to go to India as I am not doing anything here….He was shocked. I think it scared him. He thought that his wife will never come back again to the U.S. and he suggested that I think about doing my boards here. He said he will provide the monetary support that I need…

At the time when Sneha had arrived in the U.S. and spent a couple of months here, her association to her professional role as a dentist and thereby her dreams were important to her and therefore she chose to express her view. However, on agreement with her spouse, she decided to stay back in the U.S. and work towards building her dreams here. At the same

time, she also made the decision to meet the expectations of the family – that of having a baby. So in this particular instance, while Sneha emphasized her previous occupational role that was central to her identity, she also made the choice to opt for motherhood keeping up with traditional expectations of her identity. The strategy used by Sneha to express her individualized choice and further negotiate with her spouse, ensured that she was successful. She conformed to the traditional norms of being a mother, thereby a "good wife" and "good woman." And this, in turn, assured support from her family and spouse in the long run. This is not the case with all participants; some have been unsuccessful in negotiating their individual choices, thus making themselves vulnerable. Sneha's example is also clearly indicative of the "patriarchal bargaining" that many of these women on H4 visas engage in so as to negotiate and/or construct self. The "patriarchal bargain" theme is discussed in further detail in a subsequent section of this chapter.

Another example is of Jayshree who is a media professional with extensive experience in India. For her, her occupation was central to her identity in India and so while she exited the professional role in India, she had only exited from a particular geographical space. She transported her identity as a media professional to the U.S. and, despite being on a H4 status, she continued her work, sustained her professional identity and honed her skillset through volunteer work. Further, so as to feel the sense of freedom and the access to choice that she had when in India, she negotiated with her spouse to be in an environment distant from him. And, in a space distant from that of her spouse, she developed her personal, professional, and social identity within the United States. She did confront questions and criticisms from her family in India regarding her decision to move away from her spouse, however she strategically negotiated this by agreeing to visit her spouse once in two weeks

and also by constructing a timeline for her to achieve what she wanted. For her, this was a process; that is, she first pursued her education while being with her spouse and then moved further to make this decision.

Jayshree performed the roles of a daughter, daughter-in-law, and a wife with dedication so as to sustain the support from parents, in-laws and her husband. As she states, "I had to put an extra effort to make sure they were happy with me. I did a lot of things, which I normally would not have done. I knew I had to do it—if I have to have my way in doing what I want to do." While there may be many women who choose this route so as to reconstruct their identities in a space that is foreign and new to them, support from families is an important aspect and it could be said that the level of support that Jayshree received was different and an exception when compared to that received by the other participants of this research.

Further, fusing Ebaugh's (1988) concepts on role exit and Giddens' (1991) narrative of self, I state that women on H4 status exit simultaneously from a multitude of roles and also enter different roles as they migrate to the United States. And these exits and entries are voluntary as well as involuntary. They exit not only from their occupational roles but also from their roles such as daughters and daughter-in-laws and enter into roles as wives (which is dominant is most cases), home-maker, etc. While they may not necessarily exit these roles completely, the significance of these roles temporarily diminishes to more dominant roles, such as "wife". So alongside the shift in the reconstruction of self-identity, as a result of collective influences, they also experience the stages of the role exit process as described by Ebaugh (1988). Although their occupational exit may not be central to their identity at the time of exit, women do experience the stages of first doubts, seeking alternatives, the turning

point, and finally creating the ex-role as they transition from being independent to a dependent, in different contexts. To elaborate, the identity that the research participants emphasize at a particular time and space is largely influenced by 1) their caste, which creates a specific type of cultural values in the lives of women while growing up and living with their parents; 2) the local, regional and national image of a woman that my participants have internalized; 3) the norms, values and the expectations of the family they are born into (in some instances, the expectation from the father is different from the expectation of the mother); 4) the expectation of the matrimonial family after marriage, and 5) the gaze of extended family, friends and other networks. While migration is added to these factors, the need to conform and integrate to the new society along with the expectations of the new network and other factors sway the identity negotiation and reconstruction process. In addition, getting to know and adjusting with the spouse in the case of arranged marriages is an important aspect that cannot be ignored in this process.

Ebaugh (1988) notes in her research that most exiters were aware of the social approval of an exit and the level of approval was rooted in cultural norms and internalized by individuals making the exit (201). My participants were aware of their exits immediately after they exited, and as they created narratives of self, they did know and were aware of the social approval around the exit from the incumbent role. For example, many research participants exited their professional lives for marriage and they were all confident about the social approval of exiting an occupation for the purpose of marriage. However, the participants go through the stages of role exit at a different point in time and space only when they have migrated to the U.S. and are reconstructing identity given their circumstances and

the regulations of the H4 visa status. It is within this context that the following patterns of identity formation arose.

Who Am I?

Identity of the new middle-class Indian woman living in India

To understand the group of participants in this research, their past life experiences and sense of self is of paramount importance since the identity that they are reconstructing after migration to the United States is relative to their initial sense of individuality which ultimately guides their preferences. As stated in prior sections, the participants of the research come from different regions of India, different cultural and sub-ethnic groups, yet their lives in India were universally typified by advanced educational degrees and an active social life, be it family, friends or peers at work. The existing literature emphasizes that although the new middle-class in India is a diverse cultural and socio-economic group, the group shares uniformity in values that support hegemonic discourses (Fernandes and Heller 2006; Belliappa 2013). The educational qualifications and the subsequent pursuit of employment by my research participants align with the discourses about India's middle-class families and the position of young women within these families. The educational qualifications and the professional experiences of the participants are evidence to Belliappa's (2013) claim of the encouragement and support to daughters to establish themselves professionally by middle-class families.

The narratives of my participants demonstrate that most of these women chose to opt out of their career paths to pick marriage. And this seems to run counter to Belliappa's (2013) finding that education and career became more important to the new middle-class women than marriage (63). However, at the same time this fact also remains consistent with

the conclusions of Dhawan (2010) as well as Belliappa (2013) that Indian women choose to encourage family ties and internalize their role as "custodians of tradition.". As noted in the literature review, it is this duality of empowerment and independence coupled with strong family ties that has led scholars to address the middle-class Indian women as being a "superwomen" (Dhawan 2010). Yet many of these "superwomen," according to Dhawan (2010), choose starting a family and thereby navigate away from their individual career pursuits. While "superwoman" is emblematic of aspirations, these choices signify practical realities. This seems to be entirely consistent with my observations going back to the choice my research participants have made between professional careers and an arranged marriage.

To choose marriage over professional career comes at a point in time when women are in the process of giving shape to their sense of self. Irrespective of whether the women live with their parents or away from them, as they start pursuing their professional careers in India, they are exposed to life beyond the boundaries of protective families. Consequently, they develop greater individuality and self-confidence at their work-spaces. A couple of participants also expressed that working in an environment that was different to what they had experienced in life so far, provided them the opportunity to be aware and distinguish right from wrong with respect to traditional norms and values and directed them towards being critical about their own understandings of their culture. While this is taking shape, they quickly trade this identity away to get married, in effect becoming the bearer of the family's prestige by way of participating in the system of arranged marriages, which in itself is patriarchal. And here marriage becomes central to their sense of self, which also enables them to be part of Indian society and protects them from being framed as a deviant. Other reasons for marriage included increased socioeconomic security and stability, as well as

possibilities of upward mobility. The exceptions to this approach involved women who strategize and bargain for more time into the institution of marriage, but those who do not succeed end up marrying in their early twenties soon after their education. The power to bargain and the level of approval here is variable based on patriarchy within the household and outside. This also depends heavily on the form of patriarchy that exists in the lives of these women given their caste, region, socio-economic status and contributions to the family.

Therefore, for the participants of this research, their sense of self in India primarily involved a balancing act between modernity and tradition. In summary, their response to the question "who am I" seemed to communicate: I am the modern woman who balances modernity, individuality with my tradition and belief in family, and sometime I choose one over the other not because I want to, but because I have to.

Patriarchy and the Grand Bargain

Belliappa (2013) asserts that a combination of consumerism and the consequent need for two-income families, along with autonomous women, lead families to support education and professional careers for their daughters (63). My research both counters and supports this point. While consumerism may certainly be a factor, education and a successful professional career are seen as a pre-qualification to marriage – a notion that supersedes other factors. That is, education and professional career is not an end in itself but a means to prolong patriarchal themes only supported by the choices women make in their effort to prolong "traditions" and family life. Mohanty (2003) argues that Indian women are constructed as Indian wives, Indian daughters, and Indian mother-in-laws and are defined by and within the patriarchal structures, rather than being located just as wives, daughters or mother-in-laws with the patriarchal family structure. My participants mention how their mothers in particular

encouraged them to be independent financially and this is testimony in opposition to patriarchy in the context of the experience of the women in the specific family with the already existent patriarchy, to lesser or more degrees. Thus the grand bargain that my respondent group makes, in essence, seems like one made to conform to patriarchal expectations. The word "tradition" seems to be the bargaining chip that makes women trade away their professional lives for a marriage. Other factors like pursuit of the American dream or increased financial security quite plausibly remain contributing factors, but are not directly obvious from their narratives since their narratives are in the context of their current experience on H4 visas.

One of the dominant themes in the narratives of the participants was that of patriarchy and the patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti 1988). Kandiyoti's (1988) patriarchal bargaining framework is particularly useful to describe how these middle-class Indian women who are recent immigrants to the U.S. construct an environment that is conducive to negotiating and reconstructing their identities. According to Kandiyoti (1988), "patriarchal bargain" or "bargaining with patriarchy" refers to a women's decision to "strategize within a set of constraints" (275). In Kandiyoti's (1988) words, "Different forms of patriarchy present women with distinct "rules of the game" and call for different strategies to maximize security and optimize life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance in the face of oppression" (275).

Given their backgrounds, research participants used different strategies and mechanisms to bargain with the existing patriarchal structure in their lives, be it in India or the United States. And, as noted above, this is not something that they engaged in post

migration; the trade-off has early beginnings and is evident in their choices pertaining to arranged marriage.

While arranged marriages in India are patriarchal in nature, the type and level of the patriarchal influence varies depending on the caste and region. With globalization and modernization, arranged marriages are comprised of flexibility including the autonomy given to women to choose the husband. All women in this research who have had an arranged marriage had the liberty to choose their spouse from numerous options presented to them by their families. They chose their spouses after communication and conversations over a period of time. So in a way, participants bargained with patriarchy by choosing the right man for themselves and thereby establishing a sense of equality. However, their narratives indicate that while these women got into the institution of marriage assuming a sense of equality; they have not been able to sustain the bargain. Coming to the United States as a derivative of the spouse's visa status seems to be the first blow to this sense of the equality that the women had assumed and/or established.

At the same time, it was patriarchy as an external force and the social gaze of the society that pushed them towards marriage once they completed their education and attained some professional experience. Once married, the women confronted different patriarchal cultures as they crossed local and regional borders and went into a new home, the matrimonial home. The multiple patriarchal cultures and structure become increasingly complex when these women migrate as dependents on H4 visas. Banerjee (2012) argues that the visa regimes emphasize the patriarchal structures, specifically that of women's role within the household and the men's role in the workforce. And it is within these circumstances that Indian women engage in a bargain to gain security, independence, power

and position within the household, which later when achieved translates into independence and position outside of the household. This also feeds into boosting their identity reconstruction and negotiation process.

For women in this research, given that the majority of them quit their jobs to accompany their spouse to the U.S., they use this sacrifice to bargain for power, position and maintain stability within the household as well for their social networks. As women reflect on their previous roles, they realize that the bargaining power they had at that point in time because of their ability to support themselves financially no longer exists and, therefore, they work on performing new roles effectively, so as to be in the position to bargain with the patriarchy and recreate their identities. They employ different strategies to bargain within the constraints they have. For example, as mentioned earlier, Sneha very well knew that if she returns back to India for a longer time-frame, it will not be accepted by her parents or her in-laws. However, she still told her spouse that she was thinking about going back so as to see how she could fulfill her dreams. By agreeing to conform to the family expectations and her spouse's desire for having a child, she had her husband agree to sponsor her education in the U.S. Thus, by listening to and supporting her spouse's desire, she ensured that her dreams of practicing her profession would take shape.

On the other hand, for Sita bargaining with her spouse does not come easy. She is at a juncture where from one end she is facing the brunt of aggressions from her relatives. She is not contributing financially to her parents or towards her own household. It is evident from her narrative (as discussed in Chapter IV), that Sita deliberately chooses to stay quiet and give in to her husband so as to secure herself and her child's future. Sita has conceded to her husband's demands, and traded her independence in return for economic and social security.

She has also conformed to this so that she can remain and survive in the United States, a foreign land to her, because she knows that if she returns back to India without her spouse she will face social accusations as well as financial constraints—which will threaten her future.

Further, some women with children engage in a different kind of bargaining to create an identity for themselves that their children will look up to. While all participants agreed that they could be role models even by being a homemaker, they did not want their children to identify their mothers only as a homemaker. So women like Nitya, who has started a children's club in the neighborhood, exercise their own agency within the patriarchal framework by initiating subtle shifts in continuing to work independently (although without pay) and thereby change the perception of her spouse about her and her capabilities. By getting engaged in a project that aligns with her interests, involves her kids, and is independent of her husband and his income, Nitya is not only elevating her position within her household and family but she is also creating a space for herself to forge her own identity slowly over time. She is also working within the patriarchal constraints to change the societal perceptions about her as a dependent wife.

Another example is of Jayshree, who negotiated with her spouse to stay separately in a different state in the United States so as to be able to utilize opportunities and recreate her sense of self. As discussed earlier, because of her husband's professional commitments (long work hours) he was unable to give sufficient time to her. Jayshree used this as an opportunity to negotiate. She not only lived away from her spouse but also volunteered, managed to secure funds, and subsequently curated and hosted an exhibition all by herself, in the new

state that she claims her own. And this for her became an expression of her identity within the existing patriarchal structure.

Each woman has different strategies and reasons behind bargaining. While most bargain for emotional, economic and social security, some others do so for independence and individuality. Women conformed to existing patriarchal and social structures that exist in India as well as the United States, even if they did not want to. Whatever the reasons and the strategies employed, through bargaining women tend to negotiate and exercise agency in maintaining as well as balancing the tensions between their modern and traditional identities. Thus, my research shows how patriarchal structures operate in the lives of Indian women on H4 status, the influence transnational patriarchal culture has on women's lives in the United States, and how Indian women on H4 status strategize within constraints, striking "patriarchal bargains" in their path towards negotiating and reconstructing their identities as they transition from employment in India to being a dependent in the United States. And it is this that shows the manner in which patriarchy, gender, and culture overlap and intersect with identity.

Identity Reconstruction In the U.S.: A State of Flux

All research participants married and moved to the U.S. making a conscious choice to exit their past roles as the modern, working, independent woman to dependent woman. Although the results of this research indicate that the journey of these women to the U.S. is a story of patriarchal supercedence or tradition over modernity, the adverse implications are typified through the lived experiences of these women in the U.S. Isolation and depression seem commonplace, only mitigated by familial responsibilities like childcare and spousal support, with even those factors absent in some cases. Inactive social lives in a wider context

of the American and Indian immigrant society add to the hackneyed lives of these women with some mitigation for a subset of women due to cultural differences. The overarching theme remains one of struggle in stark contrast to their lives back home.

Even after the migration, the influence of the family (both native and matrimonial family) is not reduced. Participants' selection of what traditions to follow are very carefully made and balanced so as ensure emotional and financial security for themselves and their children in a foreign land. This also alludes to the fact that marriage is an important aspect of being an Indian woman, an image constructed by the nation that the women take pride in co-promoting. Further, women with children described incorporating into the bargain steps for the children's welfare as well as to avoid being labelled as a "bad mother" by the patriarchal systems.

So it is within such different structures that participants strive towards creating a sense of self, and thus an identity both personal and social. All of my research participants do feel that they should have strategized their exit from their occupations in India in a much better manner, so that they could have maintained their own status upon coming to the United States. They emphasized that they should have equipped themselves with resources that would have sustained their notions of freedom and thereby not stalled their "individualization." For instance, when in India, all participants exercised agency on their personal finances irrespective of whether they remained in India after marriage. While they did not have the complete power within the household to make financial decisions, the ability to exercise agency with their own finances for themselves meant a lot to these women and was a key attribute to their individual identities. However, on coming to the U.S. they seem to have lost even this aspect, which was very significant for their sense of self. The need for

employment is not driven by the need for finances, but is driven by the urge for an absolute necessity to feel the essence of the freedom that they experienced when employed in India.

For women in this research, the "first doubts" of their exit from occupational roles are presented when they arrive in the U.S. and begin to network with either their spouse's colleagues, friends, and/or their wives who may or may not be on a H4 status. As claimed by my participants, meeting a new individual comes with the questions of "what do you do for a living" or "do you work?" At this point, this network of friends, colleagues or other individuals is important as they are among the few that women are likely to interact with. Also, their immediate family members pose questions related to how these women spend their time at home. And, as Ebaugh (1988) notes, these exchanges lead to cuing behaviours and "serve as indicators of dissatisfaction of the current role" thus pushing the "exiters to reevaluate the costs and benefits to role performance" (182). Women begin to go back and forth with these thoughts as they spend more time in the United States and subsequently seek alternatives. And it is at this point that options such as taking the role of a mother or being a student are presented by the spouse and families; these options tend to provide interim emotional relief and motivation. For my research participants, what Ebaugh (1988) describes as a "vacuum experience" occurs, where the turning point stage and the creation of the ex-role happens simultaneously. That is, as the participants begin to realize they cannot possibly go back to their previous roles, they attempt to accept the new roles or the new possibilities overcoming the "vacuum experience" -- that is overcoming the feeling of uncertainty as it relates to sense of self – and push forward towards creating the ex-role, aspects of which they incorporate and later reminisce as they find new roles that aligns with their sense of self.

Sometimes these new roles are adopted based on necessity demanded by their current circumstance. And thus they get ready for re-entry.

For example, in this research, participants' pursuit of education or learning how to drive is inextricably linked to how long they have been in the U.S. on a dependent status and their personal circumstances. Wanting to pursue education or learning how to drive signifies women are looking to rid themselves of dependency or acquire the notion of "freedom" and, interestingly, it has a strong inter-temporal component. That is, women who have lived in the U.S. for four or more years almost unanimously either are planning to or already know how to drive in the U.S. It is likely that the first three years have women preoccupied with adjusting to a new life and culture and, in many cases, responsibilities to look after children. But in the fourth year, the need to learn how to drive indicates a consistent trend to be able to be and feel independent on a day-to-day basis. This is driven by the intrinsic need to be less dependent and the need to continue to support familial obligations.

That said, pursuit of education is perhaps a more telling picture of how these women try to negotiate and reconstruct identities. With a predominant number of participants already having advanced degrees, the pursuit of further education only suggests a sense of frustration with the status quo and the desire to return to the previous role that they once chose to exit. This too has an inter-temporal component to it. Similar to driving, by the fourth or fifth year of being in the U.S., a large number of women consider pursuing education (with exceptions of Nipa, Megha, Jayshree and Anita). In the case of the exceptions, whether they do so before the fourth or fifth year is plausibly linked to their struggles with adjusting to new lives, familial responsibilities or even comprehending their current situation.

Thus, women do exit roles as professional women at the time of marriage and move to the U.S., but at some point strive to re-enter roles that confer independence, exiting the incumbent roles or "traditional" roles. Therefore, the process of identity reconstruction really needs to be looked at, not in a static manner, but as a function of time and individual experiences. As Chaudhry (1998) eloquently puts it, "Flexibility becomes a key to survival, as women of color self-consciously take up and discard various identities for various lengths of time and in different contexts as an oppositional tactic to power structures" (47). While my findings support the claim of this constant renegotiation of identities for various lengths of time, they are not necessarily a tactic to oppose power structures; rather at times, they are an inadvertent support of existing power structures. And this is so, because the women feel a strong need to protect themselves and ensure individual security.

Further, while the findings of my research overlaps with that of Purkayastha (2005) and Banerjee's (2012) work on Indian women on H4 visas, the reasons behind specific findings differ and are distinct to this group of participants. Particularly, referring to the theoretical implications of the "complexities of shame and alienation," Banerjee (2012) states,

> …. it prevents the women from forming a bond of solidarity or even a social support system for each other because the shame and alienation catalyzes a coping strategy based on silence. The struggle to cope with or change one's situation immediately becomes an individual struggle, subject to one's own individual responsibility (P.127).

My research indicates that while the struggle to cope with the changes is one's own, the change is brought about by collective efforts, especially within the household. The change also takes place as a result of an effort to conform to the expectations of the culture, society and its social gaze. My research also shows that outside of the household, it is not shame or

alienation that prevents forming a bond among women on H4 status, but it is the apprehension of knowing only limited women on the similar status—and that these women are indirectly part of their husband's network. Another reason for not forming bonds is the lack of overlapping or similar interests. This is clearly evident from the criticism that participants (Sneha, Jayshree, Anita) of this research have about other women who do share similar visa status but belong to a different ethnic/sub-ethnic group. Although only three participants were vocal about their criticisms on women from different regions in India and the lack of similar interests, a majority of the remaining participants did refer to this difference in less critical, passing statements. This perception of difference by women about women from different regions in India seemed pretty consistent throughout my participants' narratives and demands further probing.

This research also finds that as women seek alternatives to creating their sense of self and/or identities, they set their boundaries, evaluate their belongingness to India and the United States, and cultivate new means to form and adopt new identities. Particularly, common patterns related to negotiation and reconstruction of identity that emerged through the data are *Setting boundaries, cultivating belongingness; Motherhood and nationality as an alternative to occupational identity; Exploring independence, pursuing interests, self-confidence and self-development; and New identities – a collection of values, traditions, culture and much more.*

Setting boundaries, cultivating belongingness: Participants constantly set boundaries with respect to whom they meet and interact with on a day-to-day basis. They also set boundaries within the household through bargaining, as discussed in the section above. While almost all of them had issues with forging friendship, they did also share the conflicts they

face with respect to claiming their belongingness to India. That is, almost all of the participants shared that they do feel left behind when compared to women in India, as women in India have progressed through time and modernity. Narratives of the participants also indicate the difficulty in reestablishing oneself back in India if need be. When they do not sense belongingness they reflexively look for alternatives to their identities. Therefore, while the women adjust to the lifestyle in the United States, they do feel disconnected to where they came from and as a result of this emphasize their roles as wives and mothers within the household – thus making these roles central to the new identities that they attempt to forge.

Motherhood and nationality as an alternative to occupational identity: As reflected in the results, 70 percent of the participants identify with their nationality of "Indian" as their top choice, followed by being a "mother". While their identification with their nationality or their role as a mother does not necessarily reveal much about the identities they forge, the mere fact that they chose "Indian" over wife, immigrant, dependent and other options does tell us women do associate a sense of pride with the nation. This sense of pride is quite possibly linked to the image of a woman that the nation has created, which all my participants abide to – that is being modern as well as traditional. For example, Nupur stated, "…telling people whom you meet for the first time that I am Indian….I think opens up conversations. Isn't that our identity… Indian. We never talk about it …when in India, but I have seen people say that many times here. That's when I thought ….I will also start telling people that…"

Secondly, with the exception of three participants, being a mother was not planned. Fourteen out of twenty research participants have children. More often than not, motherhood was introduced to them as an alternative to take advantage of the time they had in the U.S.

post migration. This finding overlaps with that of Banerjee's (2012) analysis on identity of Indian women on H4 status. This was true for women who had migrated immediately post marriage. However, for women who stayed in India and had kids there, motherhood was part of conforming to the norm of the society. Irrespective of whether women had children in India or the United States, all my participants expressed that being a mother did provide them the opportunity to move outside of their homes. That is, taking children outside at least during the evenings was part of their daily routine. Taking children to school was also an important routine. Women expressed that these opportunities to take the kids to school or to their playtime, though limited, also increased their social interactions and thereby helped develop some self-confidence after a period of lull. Women expressed that this new self-confidence has provided meaning to their sense of self.

Exploring independence, pursuing interests, self-confidence and self-development: Adjustments, struggles, conflicts all considered, throughout the narratives of participants a theme that was consistent was the urge to improve on self and create meanings. The positive attitude that women presented cannot be overlooked. All participants expressed their urgent need to explore independence again and pursue their interests, which they had not given thought to between their busy schedules and work towards rebuilding self-confidence. While some of them had limited resources to achieve these goals, others did not know where to begin and how to balance their personal aspirations without hurting anyone's position within the family given the constraints they face of being a dependent. Women expressed the need to have a choice to work, not for financial reasons but to attain their position within the family. Given their prior work experience, participants felt that working outside of the homes would help them in exploring their independence, initiating their pursuit of their interests,

126

and thereby contribute towards strengthening their self-confidence. Once these factors start setting in, their position within the household improves from just being a dependent wife. Some women shared that working for pay without doubt will instantly change their positions within the household and provide security, but may not necessarily provide them with the comfort with self that they are seeking for. They emphasized that their identity should not just be based on whether they are working or no, but with how comfortable they are with the identity that they take on for themselves consciously.

New identities – a collection of values, traditions, culture and much more: Throughout their narratives, women time and again reinforced the importance of and responsibility towards family and meeting expectations of the spouse and their family in India. They also emphasized the importance of cultivating and maintaining traditional values, with appropriate knowledge and rationality. For participants of my study, what they chose to do, even if it was recreating their own identities, was always spoken about in relation to their upbringing in India, family members, and their prior occupations. What women develop as an identity is reflexively constructed and is grounded in the aforementioned factors. And as stated before identity construction of women on H4 visas is a "collective project". Based on these emergent patterns, in the next section I map the process of identity construction to state how role exits shapes identities for Indian women in the United States on a H4 status.

How does role exits shape identities of Asian Indian Women

on H4 status in the United States?

Based on the findings of this research and the emergent themes, it can be summarized that identity negotiation and reconstruction of Asian Indian women within the United States

is a process that has its roots in their upbringing as well as the multiple exits that they face as they get married and subsequently migrate. For women on H4 status, their occupational role and exit from it becomes significant in the process of identity reconstruction. While occupational exit is not processed and understood by women immediately after the exit and/or when they arrive in the United States, the exit from the occupation does play an important role shaping the women's identities over a period of time. There are two key ideas that have arisen in answer to the main research question regarding how Asian Indian women on H4 status in the United States reconstruct their individual and social identities as they transition from employment in India to a dependent H4 visa status . First, the experience of women in India and second, their experience in the United States. The starting point is the identity of these women in India as that sets the core identity on which reconstruction may or may not occur. The overarching theme of the modern woman in the new middle-class of India is that she is independent, educated and a professional, yet tied deeply to her traditions; accordingly, she is trying to do both roles justice, and in the process trying to be a "superwoman." In other words, as a single woman, this demographic exemplifies the modern Indian woman who is independent, educated, growing in confidence and individualistic. When she gets married and she decides to come to the U.S. on a H4 status, she exits her prior role and her identity as a businesswoman or engineer or medical professional. Very few women realize that their occupation in India was actually central to their identities, when they give it up for arranged marriage and migration. It is only when they come to the United States on an H4 status that they begin to realize the significance of their occupation as central to their identity. While these women come to the U.S., their identities are constantly subject

to change and vary with time. They assume a role that gives rise to specific identities according to their convenience and needs for emotional and financial security.

Once they come to the U.S., the women go through various phases of identity construction which can be said to evolve over time, from year one of arriving in the U.S. After the individual exits from her past roles into a more dependent lifestyle, her life and identity go through rapid transition; many times, this leads to frustration and ultimately depression. At different stages, a woman either redefines her identity based on her life circumstances and, on occasion, actively tries to change those circumstances as well as her own identity.

This process is a function of time and is in a constant state of flux. The first year is a year of adjustments, including adjustment to a married life in the U.S. and adjustment to the U.S. itself (except one, in all cases in this research women have little prior exposure to living in the U.S.). While the woman transitions from an identity associated with growing self-confidence, professional growth, and continuity, her transition to a more traditional role happens with limited friction as she tries to absorb and understand her new domicile and role in the household. Even women who, for one reason or other, have been playing that role in India, would go through this period given their revised roles dominated by household chores, as well as a new host country and its cultural differences.

By the second year, frustrations begin to creep in. Some women jump into depression while for others, this is mitigated by the presence of children, family support in the U.S., and/or occasional support from the migrant community. While growing levels of depression are features of the second, third, and fourth years of living in the United States, they are typified by women trying to define identities through two channels: one, through passive

engagement – that is by following recommendations from family and conforming to the expectations of a married woman. "Being a mother" becomes a dominant identity for some and some others choose "nationality" as an identity to give meaning to their sense of self. In such scenarios their previous occupations and sense of independence take a backseat. Performing roles of a wife, mother, daughter-in-law and daughter become the priority, in that familial responsibilities take center-stage in the lives of these women and this contributes to their sense of self and identity. So while at this point their previous occupation or the exit from the occupation does not really add to the essence of their identities, their role as daughters, which they exit during marriage and the roles that they enter into (wife, daughter-in-law, mother), is given importance and nurtured so as to maintain stability in their personal lives. And this over a period of time becomes their sense of self and evolves into their identities; unless women actively step out of these roles to make some other role (such as their profession) central to their sense of self.

Second, through active engagement such as volunteer work, some women pave their way to attaining a sense of self that they are comfortable and/or satisfied with – thus sustaining their self-confidence and actively attempting to create new identities that mimic aspects of the occupational role they left behind. This could involve any number of vocational engagements and, in some cases, may serve as preparation for future career identities. While such engagements may not give rise to new identities, they most definitely provide hope to carve out an identity. Women keep shuffling around at different points in time between active and passive identities. Women realize that they cannot possibly return back to the same professional setting in the immediate future and feel the same sense of self; hence they begin to make sense of their occupational exit and develop this into a new sense

of self.

During this process, most women have gone through multiple identities, and at this point are well adjusted to their new home. They realize they are behind their Indian counterparts and also have a feeling of disassociation with the migrant community at large in the U.S. This is the time when most of these women are actively trying to regain their independence. In some case these women have evolved into new people and have found new purpose and identity – for example, spirituality. For those, who encounter strong conflicts in sense of belonging, they struggle with their identities as this affects their sense of self adversely in the context of negotiating their personal and social identities within the United States.

Therefore, with respect to my research participants, how role exits occur in India or how strong old identities are, how identity is reconstructed and at what pace, is not just something an individual does in isolation but is a product of collective influence by societal factors, family, culture, subculture etc. both in India as well as the United States, particularly Houston and its neighborhoods. At what pace identity is negotiated or reconstructed is highly dependent on external influences like city infrastructure (cars vs. public transport), migrant community, social gaze, and influence of patriarchy that varies across geographies. lso, the transition and adjustment is dependent on the individual woman and the resources she possesses, hence what each individual experiences in relation to their identity will not necessarily take place all at a specific time or in the same sequence. It is possible that women may seek alternatives, re-equip themselves, and find their freedom anytime after living in the United States post the adjustment phase. Until this materializes, identities like nationality take over what was arguably a stronger sense of self that was grounded in past education and

experience that is more personal.

Summary

As stated in the previous chapters existing literature is overwhelmed with themes of isolation and depression that Asian Indian women on H4 status go through as they struggle with their identities in the U.S. And these themes clearly come out in my research too. Just about every research participant I interviewed with has had feelings of despair and gloom, anxiety and in many cases episodes of depression. This research also confirms the results of prior research in that, the role Indian women as "custodians of tradition" as they juggle with individualism that is part of a growing self confident Indian middle class in an increasingly consumerist society. However, this research further clarifies that it is this tradition that makes women give up their careers thus pushing them to make a move to a more domestic role and subsequent change in their identity. Further I find that it is compliance to this tradition that women also use as a tool to get buy-in from their family to remake their careers as they endeavor to reconstruct their identity. Thus, my research shows that perhaps tradition and patriarchal themes are in some cases the same thing -- and thus when a woman defends tradition, she is, in effect, defending patriarchy. When a woman makes tradition a personal matter, she is, in effect, taking patriarchy associated with it out of public discourse to a private space. When she chooses marriage over career, she implicitly gives in to patriarchy where for instance a father might perceive marriage as the end goals of her education.

Further, how women endeavor to reconstruct and constantly change identities and how this identity varies depending on the circumstance of the individual clearly confirms prior literature that defines identity as situational and fluid. The role of the mother, the father, the Indian migrant community the husband and the support he provides, have played a big

role in a woman's perception of identity or her journey to reconstruct it and thus it is clear that this process is a collective process rather than one that rests solely with the individual.

While this study confirms current literature, it also contradicts certain claims like the one Belliappa (2013) makes that middle class women in India choose education and career over marriage. While this may be true of one segment, all of my research participants who had an arranged marriage by definition consciously chose marriage over career. Although an Indian woman might aspire to be a superwoman, balancing career goals as well as traditional roles, at the end some choose one and some choose the other.

The other claim made by Banerjee (2012) that the alienation of these women is caused by their sense of shame differs from what my research participants. In the narratives of my research participants, this sense of shame was rather conspicuous by its absence. This alienation seemed to be caused either because they just did not relate to the other women on H4 status or, even if they could relate, the common theme was the friendships or common workplace that their spouses shared. So while the women shared a common concern or dealt with similar issues, they also knew and feared that sharing might lead to problems. This seemed the bigger driver of a lack of solidarity than the sense of shame that Banerjee (2012) claims. And lastly, this research adds, that while negative episodes of sadness and depression are an overwhelming feature of the processes of identity reconstruction, there are positive forces like evolving sense of identity, that essentially drive to be something more, which in many cases play a significant role in this process of transitioning from being employed in India to unemployment in the United States.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The dependency of women on H4 status is transformative to the very identity of the new Indian middle-class women, since it is in such stark contrast to their comparatively independent yet traditional lives in India. The memory of the old identity, the reality and sheer helplessness of their current situation makes depression commonplace with this demographic. That is, the memory of a sense of freedom, independence, and an occupational experience; the reality of being isolated, having limited access to resources and constrained mobility; and the helplessness to engage in activities outside of their spouse or those of individual interest, the lack of intellectual stimulation, the fear of active participation due to unclear or misrepresentation of the visa regulations etc. have made women vulnerable to depression and related health issues. While the struggles are no surprise, a story of hope also emerges wherein these women shed old identities in favor of new ones largely as a function of individual circumstances and the collective influences within the household. This creates identities like mother, Indian, volunteer, or artist, based on what women choose to accept or reject. External influences like place of domicile and social gaze are arguably contributory factors to the shaping and timing of these new identities. That said, this constant reshaping is inextricably linked to time spent in the U.S. During this time, identities are negotiated and traded away actively in favor of new ones. The process of identity reconstruction is an evolved process culminating toward the tendency to revert to their old self-identity. In other cases, the new identities exemplify the evolution of the individual. While changes in recent immigration rules provide some comfort to this demographic, it still does not pre-empt long periods of dependency and identity reconstruction. In conclusion, the self-identity remains

complex and more importantly dynamic with time. While different women glide their own

path through this process, broad themes clearly emerge specifically in terms of either

renegotiating a new identity or correcting the older ones.

In summation, the narratives of women on H4 status bring together a body of

knowledge within sociology as well as advances in theoretical understandings. The

information produced on the day-to-day lives of these women in the United States, will be

useful to South Asian organizations and the community, researchers, policy makers,

advocacy groups and others who are actively working for the welfare of Indian women on

H4 status. This information is also useful to the South Asian community in Houston who

facilitate the integration of new immigrants and women into the larger South Asian as well as

the Houston community.

Recommendations

When I was attending a social gathering in February 2015, I described my study to an

individual in attendance. The individual responded, with sarcasm: "You should study the

successful Indian women in Houston.. like Renu Khator.. umm...the President of University

of Houston. Why are you researching these women…-- what did you say? Women on H4

status?.....They only sit at home and watch television all day…" The individual is an active

community member and an acquaintance, and I was meeting the person for the first time in

two years. While what the individual said is not representative of the larger South Asian

community in Houston, it does give a glimpse of the perceptions that many South Asians

and/or Asian Indians may have about women on H4 status. The findings and analysis of this

research, along with the above-mentioned statement from an individual from the community

gives a sense of the invisibility of Indian women on H4 status among the larger Indian

American and South Asian community. Rather than just being a research about the women on H4 visas, it is my aim that this study practically contributes to the benefit of this group of individuals as this research helps us see the reality of Indian women's live on a H4 status.

Therefore, it is within this context and from the analysis of my research that I see an urgency to sensitize the Indian American and the South Asian community towards the needs of women on H4 status. Accordingly, I recommend that there be initiatives by community organizations in and around Houston to include women as part of their community building and community support systems. Given the current circumstances of these women, there needs to be local and regional support that encourages and motivates these women to participate in reading, writing, or other intellectually stimulating opportunities so as support them in building and sustaining their self-confidence and personal development. This could include the facilitation of group reading and/ or writing workshops will bring together women, as well as serve as a platform for them to forge relationships without any apprehensions with other women who are not within their existing network.

Alternatively, appropriate intervention in specific communities where there is a significant presence of South Asian women will increase the likelihood of participation, as these women will not face difficulties commuting in the absence of a personal vehicle. This will also help build solidarity among Indian women from different ethnic groups. In addition, such measures will also encourage them to make some time for themselves from their existing schedules so as create their individuality irrespective of their visa status. It is only such self-sustaining engagements, along with community support, that could facilitate change for these women on the H4 visa status in a foreign land.

Last, but not least, such community building and support initiatives focusing on specific groups and needs of these groups will help pave the way for better integration of immigrants to the ethnic, national and American society. This group of women go through an ongoing and arduous process of identity negotiation and renegotiation, construction and reconstruction which needs active support from the wider Houston community. ,Solidarity and community support will go a long way in making the lives of these women a lot easier; the transition and process will ultimately be smoother. Thereby, through active and consistent engagement in the mentioned initiatives and through other means the ethnic, national and American society at large can assist in reducing depression among women on H4 status. While these are only recommendations, this should in no way be considered as a solution, as solutions are complex with respect to struggles in identity negotiation and reconstruction among this group of women.

Limitations and Future Research

This research was designed to provide an in-depth analysis of the complexities in identity negotiation and reconstruction among Indian women on a H4 status within the United States with emphasis on the city of Houston and its neighborhoods. Prior research has evaluated and established that the H4 visa regulations create a "web of dependence" and also lead to "reconfiguration of identities and notions of self" (Banerjee 2012). Prior research also indicates that highly qualified, women on H4 status are designated as merely "wives" by the law (Purkayastha 2005). However, it was unclear how these Indian women are working towards their sense of self and/or reconstruction of identity and what are the multitude of factors that are shaping this identity reconstruction. Through the stated explanation it is clear that identity reconstruction among this group of women is not only a "collective project" but

also is largely influenced by migration, role exits, patriarchal structures within and outside the household, class and gender among others. Thus, this research contributes to existing literature by expanding on theoretical understanding and presenting a small but diverse sample of research participants.

In order to obtain a more detailed understanding of this process, this research conducted in-depth interviews through purposive and snowball sampling. Since purposive and snowball sampling was used by the researcher, this may have limited the sample of women who participated in this study. While recruitment flyers and scripts were posted on social media as well as at different locations within Houston and surrounding neighborhoods, it still geographically limits the scope of recruiting participants. While this research is limited geographically and has a sample small size, it does provide a detail understanding of the process of identity negotiation and reconstruction, which can be utilized for future research and/or by organizations that work for the welfare of women.

Given the hetero-normative nature of this study, it would be interesting to expand on this aspect, by being inclusive of men on H4 status in future research. This research does not obtain perspectives of men as the primary visa-holders and their views of the dependent status. This would have added an additional dimension is evaluating how women constructed their identities in relation to their spouse and whether or not and to what extent the primary visa holder's views impact and/or influence the identity negotiation and reconstruction process.

Also this is research is time-sensitive. The mentioned limitations were known and accounted for during the research process and did not by any means impact the goals and findings of this research. Nevertheless, these limitations should be noted if the data from this

research is being used for any purpose within or outside of academia. Since this is an exploratory research, it does give rise to many themes and areas that can be further explored in future studies. Future research on Indian women and their identities may include a follow up on the participants of this research to further gain an understanding and document changes in their identity negotiation process. In light of the new regulation with regards to the eligibility of applying for an Employment Authorization Document, future research can focus on whether or not the new regulations have changed their living experiences in the United States and thereby their identities. Further research in this topic can also look into how each of the realm that is arranged marriage, social life, migration, and class among others interact with the identities that are situational and fluid to produce new identities for these women and whether or not these contribute to changes in the lives/ struggles of these women. It will be valuable for future research to examine how arranged marriage increases dependency – thus making and elevating the intensity of being a "dependent" among women on H4 status.

Finally, it is important to assess whether the identity negotiation and reconstruction of the women on H4 visas would be any different if there were no visa restrictions imposed and if all women on H4 were eligible to apply for Employment Authorization Document and/or women were presented with the choice to being employed. Also, how would these changes impact and influence not only identities but also the gender relations within the household. While this research shows that patriarchy, gender, culture, class and migration intersect while occurring simultaneously with identity of Indian women on H4 status, it also calls for more detailed understandings of each of these variables and its impacts on identities of Indian women.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: PROFILES OF WOMEN PARTICIPANTS

1. Nipa is in her late 20s. She got married and came to the U.S. in 2013. She is an Engineer (Masters from India) by profession and has three years of work experience in India. She is currently pursing her Masters and has no children

2. Megha is in her late 20s. She is an Engineer (bachelors from India) by profession and has four years of work experience in India. She got married and came to the U.S. in 2013. She is currently pursuing her Masters and has no children.

3. Jayshree is in her late 20s. She is a media professional and has seven years of work experience in India. She got married and came to the Untied States in 2005. She has one child. She has completed her Masters in the U.S. and has also switched between visa statuses (student visa, H1B and currently H4). She also does have about two years of work experience in the United States.

4. Sita is in her early 30s. She is an Engineer by profession with four years of work experience in India. She got married in 2005, has one child and came to the United States in 2013.

5. Priya is in her mid 30s. She is a management professional with a Masters degree from India and has a work experience of a year and half in India. She got married and came to the U.S. in 2006. She has one child.

6. Ritu is in her early 30s. She a Management professional with a Masters degree from India and has seven years (combined) of work experience in India and Singapore. She married (inter-caste) and came to the United States in 2013. She has no children.

7. Kusum is in her late 20s. She married in 2011 and came to the U.S. along with her spouse in 2013. She is a management professional (MBA in Human Resources) and has three years of work experience in India. She has one child.

8. Seema is in her late 20s. She married and came to the United States in 2012 along with her spouse. She is an Engineer (Bachelors from India) by profession and has a work experience of a year and a half in India. Feb 2012. She has one child.

9. Diya is in her early 30s. She married in 2009 and arrived in the United States along with

her husband in 2012. She is an engineer by profession (bachelors from India) and has two years of work experience in India. She has one child.

10. Sneha is in her early 30s. She is a dentist by profession with four years of work experience in India. She married and came to the U.S. alongwith her husband in 2010. She has one child. She has completed her Dental board exams in the U.S. and is waiting to hear from dental schools of her admits.

11. Amna is in her late 20s. She got married and came to the U.S. in 2014. She is an engineer with a Masters from India and a work experience of a year and half in India. She has no children.

12. Lata is in her mid 30s. She got married in 2006 and came to the U.S. in 2013 along with her spouse. She is a MD Pediatrics from India and has a work experience of five years. She has two children, one of whom she has left back in India with her in-laws. She is currently preparing for her exams for medical licensure in the United States.

13. Anita is in her early 30s. She got married and came to the U.S. in 2008. She is a Engineer by profession (bachelors from India) and has work experience for three and half years in India. She has no children. She has completed two Masters degrees in the United States. In addition to the H4 visa, she has been on a student visa as well (while she was studying)

14. Reshma is in her mid 30s. She is a management professional (MBA from India) with four years of work experience. She got married and came to the U.S. in 2007. She has two children.

15. Manvi is in her mid 30s. She got married in 2007 and came to the U.S. with her spouse in 2012. She has a Masters in English literature and four years of work experience India. She has two children.

16. Nitya is in her late 30s. She got married in 2004 and came to the U.S. with her spouse in 2011. She has a Masters in Computer Applications from India and also five years of work experience in India. She has two children.

17. Neetu is in her early 30s. She was brought up in the Middle-East and later moved to India for her college education. She has a Masters in International Business from England and has a work experience of four years combined in India and Middle –East. She got married and came to the U.S. in 2012. She has no children.

18. Nupur is in her mid 30s. She married in 2007 and came t o the U.S. in 2011 with her spouse. She has a Masters in Computer Applications from India and also six and a half years of work experience in India. She has one child. She started pursuing her Masters in the U.S. but dropped out before completing the program.

19. Sujata is in her early 30s. She married in 2009 and came to the U.S. in 2013. She is an Engineer (bachelors from India) by profession with three years of work experience in India. She has two children.

20. Sapna is in her mid 30s. She has a Masters in Engineering with two years of work experience in India. She married in 2008 and came to the United States in 2013 with her spouse. She has one child.

APPENDIX B: POSITIONALITY- THE INSIDER OUTSIDER DILEMMAS[*]

> I will give a few tips on how you can get women to talk to you and participate in your research. I am serious. When you come tomorrow, wear traditional salwar-kameez [traditional Indian clothes]. If you can get children…. That will be perfect. It will be way easier to strike conversations. Women will come and talk to you. In fact, you should get your husband. You are married right? ……So do you have a boyfriend, then get him with you. When men here see you as a couple, they will be more comfortable to let their wives talk to you. - Amna (late 20s)

Amna was so excited to share her experience and have conversations, that she took the liberty to offer suggestions for recruiting research participants, as we stood outside the community recreation center after I had finished conducting her interview for this research. This conversation was one of my classic moments of this research that will remain with me for a long time. It was this conversation with Amna that compelled me to think more deeply about my position in this research and its impacts on my respondents as well as my analysis. This was mainly because I saw the boundaries between Amna as the research participant and me as a researcher getting blurred as she took the responsibility to offer suggestions on my research.

My position and identity as an insider-outsider to this research was a challenge as I analyzed and interpreted the results of this research. Additionally, on field too, I found myself grappling with my insider-outsider status as I confronted different individuals, both men and women during the recruitment efforts for this research. I have had to shift my position constantly between an insider and an outsider in many instances throughout this research, be it for recruitment, interviews or with analysis of data. As an insider, I had the advantage and the liberty to access prospective research participants without any hindrances related to language and communication, culture, etc. Also, since I was engaging in conversations with

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[*] I have discussed the insider-outsider dilemmas to provide an idea of the implications of my position in this research. I plan to analyze and research this in-depth to develop a research note/article in future.

individuals who are from the same country that I am from –India – I was able to be sensitive while being critical during my interactions with research participants and their partners. However, despite being an insider, my differences did give rise to interesting and challenging situations. As stated in the methods section, what makes me an outsider is my current status as a student (independent visa status) and my experience in living in large cosmopolitan areas in India and the U.S. However, during my interactions with prospective participants, their spouses and other individuals, I quickly realized that my physical characteristics, field of study, and duration of stay in the United States were some of the other factors that made me an outsider. Below are specific situations that I was confronted with.

As indicated in the methods section, much of the initial response to the recruitment postings, advertisements and flyers were from men. Men provided references to potential research participants by way of spreading the word about this research among their colleagues and other individuals within their network. By first connecting me to the primary visa holder (H1B), men played an important role – thus enabling me to connect with Indian women on H4 visas. Specifically, I would talk to the H1B visa holder, the husband, first and based on his response/ permission I would connect with the women to set up interviews. In a few cases, the H1B visa holder, the husband would set appointments for me with their wife. Except in one case where the husband was present during the interview, in all other cases the husband was either at work or elsewhere.

It is within this context, that I had to negotiate certain aspects of my insider outsider position. First, my gender,that is being a female, had its implications. More often than not outside of the interviews with women, I have had to interact with men the most during the duration of this research. Therefore, be it during the recruitment efforts or before conducting

the interviews with women, men often subtly exercised their power positions on me. They also projected toughness and superiority through their speech and comments. For example, when I was speaking to women who were accompanied by their spouses about the research study, men often interrupted to state: "We can't give you more than ten minutes to converse." I also, found a lot of men telling me: "My wife is happy being at home. She has no problems. She does not want to work, so you will not get much information from her."

Men automatically assumed that I was documenting only the difficulties of being on a H4 visa status. In fact, there were men who even commented that all women on H4 status have only one problem, that is, not being able to work and hence it was not necessary to meet to conduct interviews one-on-one with so many different women. I was advised that I should only talk to one or two women and then state that all women say the same thing. While women offered suggestions to recruit more research participants, most men took the liberty to state what I should be doing or not doing as part of my research and what I should be writing or not writing with respect to Indian women on H4 status. Women were curious and enthusiastic to know more about the research, whereas men were more critical about it. However, while offering suggestions both men and women were often critical about ethnic groups within the Indian community. That is, men more than women referred to which ethnic group outside of their own will not respond and the amount/type of information they will provide if contacted for the research. By default, I saw my outsider status at play during such dialogues. These dynamics between different ethnic and regional groups within the Indian community, as presented either by my research participants or other individuals whom I contacted for the purposes of this research, is something that I point out as I present my results.

Second, my field of study – that is sociology and status of a student -- did not seem to go very well with the men. Most men equated me studying sociology to studying psychology. I was asked what I would get out of this research? Why was I doing it? I was also repeatedly told -- everyone has the same problem, so there is no need to study. In fact at times, I was asked, "What are you going to get by studying the psyche of women?" I not only found such situations to be extremely disturbing, but also found it difficult to negotiate in the context of my insider-outsider research status. Further, given that all men whom I came across were either engineers, medical and/or management professionals, I found myself having to not only work on my position in relation to them but also having to explain and justify me being in the field of sociology. In one particular instance, my performance in the sciences was questioned because I was pursuing sociology and not a science related field; I was asked: – "How come you are doing sociology, didn't you perform well to take up engineering or medicine?" Some men perceived my educational status as a threat, with comments such as: "Because you are currently studying sociology, you know about all the societal issues, is it?" Men also seemed to distrust the value and authenticity of the research, by undervaluing what I, as a student researcher, was engaging in. Men stated: "Oh… you are doing this just to graduate. We have all been there. .. No one is going to take this seriously." On the other hand, a few men and most women saw me as a successful student trying to do the research work so as to complete a Masters program, and expressed pride in the fact that being an Indian immigrant woman I was doing sociology - which is not a very common field. Many told me, "That's fantastic, you are doing something different and not stuck in the routine of things that most of us end doing - either an engineer, doctor or a MBA." These comments are a result of my gender, the Indian patriarchal culture and my insider status (being an Indian). At the same

time my non-conformity to the common educational path taken by the majority of Indians has pushed me to the position of an outsider in this research.

Third, my physical characteristics, which I had no control over, had an affect on how participants and their spouses responded to me both during recruitment and also during the interview. I felt judged by some men who I had interacted with, who viewed my appearance as being too American: "Did you cut your hair after you came to the United States?"; Are you born here—you don't look like you are from India?" One of my research participants during the interview stated:

> When you first spoke to my husband and me about the research, my husband thought you were like some of those women who only talk about women and their rights …. And talk bad about men…. blame men all the time …(giggles)…later when you spoke to us again, I think he feel more comfortable and that's why he told me to participate in the interview.

My physical characteristics, the duration of stay in the United States along with the specific focus of my research portrayed me as a feminist, which was often linked to the image of a "white feminist" who spoke differently about individuals from the "third world" by Indian men. It is quite a possibility that because of this notion, men came forward for conversation and felt that they were exercising their duties as husband by protecting their wife from the influence of western thought. It was not uncommon for me to receive personal questions on marital status and whether I lived alone or no. Women also were curious about my marital status and wanted to know about which particular region/place I was from in India, what brought me to the U.S., etc. Some women commented on how I looked, specifically my short hair, and also the manner in which I spoke. Almost all the women saw me as a successful student and woman who was pursuing her passion, despite the norm of pursuing a selected few fields of study as stated above. One participant said: "You are

getting to do what you like the most… that is wonderful. Keep doing the good work — despite restraints you might face culturally and from the Indian community, you have come so far in achieving your dreams. Don't stop for anyone."

Fourth, a disadvantage that I saw with my position as an insider, was the assumption among my research participants that I already knew certain things that they were sharing in their narrative, because of me being an Indian. While they create a certain level of intimacy during the interview, women would often ask "you know what I mean, right? " I don't need to say it, you are from India too, so you know how it is like?" In such scenarios, I did probe further to elucidate more responses by asking the questions in a different manner or expressing more curiosity. With some of my participants it came too very often and when I repeated the questions — they laughed away saying "How can you not know that — you are just asking, because you want a concrete response from me?". So at times, it was difficult for me to convey that I really did not know what they meant and I did not want to misinterpret based on what I feel they were saying. Another aspect was the duration of my stay in the U.S. I have lived in the U.S. for longer than almost all of my research participants, so during the interviews women alluded to the fact by stating "you have stayed here long enough, so you know what the difficulties are?" I envision that if I were an outsider, they would take the effort to explain things better. Here many things were left for me to interpret, because of me being an Indian and they assumed that I understand what they had to say.

Fifth, what was very interesting to me and did not strike me almost till the end of my data collection was this opportunity to be able to interview individuals who were from India, in a country that was foreign to them. I imagined that being in a foreign country many from India would be willing to engage in conversations/ participation without hesitation. However

this was not the case. As noted in the methods section and above, I did see and sense an increased level of hesitation and apprehension among both men and women to engage in conversation. Thus the process of getting individuals to participate in the research, in a place that is foreign to them was difficult and I attribute this to my insider status. At the same time, I would also like to mention that there were few individuals who connected quickly and responded with a sense of unity and community of both they and me, being Indians.

Lastly, the insider-outsider status posed dilemmas on how to portray Indian men and women in this research. So while analyzing and writing this research maintaining that balance became difficult and I found myself getting emotionally involved with how to represent and had to on a constant basis go back and forth with my interpretation and analysis. Additionally, my personal experience of being on a dependent status and also the reports/literature of women on dependent status and their experiences (which often only portray the negatives) also sometimes pushed me toward overanalyzing a particular scenario that the women would share regarding their spouse. There were moments, where I have had to distance myself from prior knowledge that I have gained through literature and other information related to this research topic so as to present an unbiased analysis.

Thus, the insider-outsider status has posed multiple challenges and I have constantly worked on these during the duration of this research study. Also, I must mention here that in spite of being an independent single immigrant Indian woman in the United States, with a feminist orientation — I have tried and made sure that I do not impose or influence the way the results and interpretations are presented because of the unique position that I hold as a "third world woman" within the U.S. academia and outside of the academic world. Even if my research participants essentialized much of the household work that they did, I do not do

the same. That is, I have tried my best to not essentialize or make assumptions on the little things and the household work that Indian women on H4 status engage in on a daily basis. I have also tried to maintain the authenticity of their narratives as I present my results, by using direct quotations used by the participants while addressing the area/sub-topics of this research.

It is important that as a reader, one keeps in mind and is aware of the above-mentioned dynamics of my position as an insider-outsider while reading and engaging with the results as well as the discussion of this research.

APPENDIX C: CONSENT LETTER

UNIVERSITY of
HOUSTON
A CARNEGIE-DESIGNATED TIER ONE
PUBLIC RESEARCH UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN GRADUATE RESEARCH THESIS STUDY

PROJECT TITLE: Identity Negotiation and Reconstruction among Indian Women on H4 visa status

You are being invited to take part in a research project conducted by **Praveena Lakshmanan**, Masters candidate at the Department of Sociology at the University of Houston. This research is a part of the MA thesis and being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Amanda Baumle, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Houston.

NON-PARTICIPATION STATEMENT

Taking part in the research project is voluntary and you may refuse to take part or withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also refuse to answer any research-related questions that make you uncomfortable. If you are a student, a decision to participate or not or to withdraw your participation will have no effect on your standing.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which previously-employed South Asian Indian women on H4 visa status construct and navigate their identity as dependent within the United States. In particular, this research examines how previous roles held in India affect the process of negotiation and reconstruction of identity and the daily experiences of living in the United States on dependent status. I will be interviewing Indian women on H4 status residing in and around Houston, Texas who meet the eligibility criteria for this research study.

PROCEDURES

You will be one of approximately thirty (30) subjects invited to take part in this project. If you agree to be a part of this study, I will interview you in person at a time of your convenience and at a public location of your choosing. The interview will be voice-recorded, and I will also take handwritten notes. Your participation will be limited to the individual interview that will last about 45 minutes to an hour and any subsequent follow-up, if necessary, for seeking clarification on data collected.

The interview will cover basic questions on demographics (age, birthplace, number of years married etc.) and questions on day-to-day activities, migration and living experience in India and the United States. I will not be asking any specific questions about your ongoing immigration process or current status. Questions will be focused on your views and opinions on your daily living experience in India and the United States. During the interview, you may choose to skip any questions that you are not comfortable answering.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of your participation in this project. Each subject's name will be paired with a pseudonym. This pseudonym will appear on all written materials. The list pairing the subject's name to the assigned pseudonym will be kept separate from all research materials and will be available only to the principal investigator. Confidentiality will be maintained within legal limits.

RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

I believe there to be minimal risk associated with participation in this research study. All identities of subjects will remain **confidential,** which thus addresses any unlikely risk from disclosure of identity.

BENEFITS

While you will not directly benefit from participation, your participation may help the investigator better understand the daily experiences of women on dependent H4 visas and provide insights on their struggles in leading an independent life in the United States. This knowledge will contribute to the understanding of the impact and influence of immigration policies, socio-economic factors and how previous roles held in India, help in negotiation and reconstruction of identity in women's lives.

ALTERNATIVES

Participation in this project is voluntary and the only alternative to this project is non-participation.

COSTS

The subjects/participants in this project will not incur any costs related to this project.

INCENTIVES/REMUNERATION

There are no incentives/remuneration or opportunities for extra credit for participation in this research project.

PUBLICATION STATEMENT

The results of this study may be published in scientific journals, professional publications, or educational presentations; however, no individual subject will be identified.

AGREEMENT FOR THE USE OF AUDIO

If you consent to take part in this study, please indicate whether you agree to be audio taped during the study by checking the appropriate box below. If you agree, please also indicate whether the audiotapes can be used for publication/presentations.

- I agree to be audio taped during the interview.
    - I agree that the audio tape(s) can be used in publication/presentations.
    - I do not agree that the audio tape(s) can be used in publication/presentations.
- I do not agree to be audio taped during the interview.

If you do not agree to be audio taped during the interview, you may still participate in the study.

SUBJECT RIGHTS

1. I understand that informed consent is required of all persons participating in this project.

2. I have been told that I may refuse to participate or to stop my participation in this project at any time before or during the project. I may also refuse to answer any question.

3. Any risks and/or discomforts have been explained to me, as have any potential benefits.

4. I understand the protections in place to safeguard any personally identifiable information related to my participation.

5. I understand that, if I have any questions, I may contact Praveena Lakshmanan at 713-743-3944. I may also contact Dr. Amanda Baumle, faculty sponsor, at 713-743-3944.

6. **Any questions regarding my rights as a research subject may be addressed to the University of Houston Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (713-743-9204). All research projects that are carried out by Investigators at the University of Houston are governed be requirements of the University and the federal government**.

SIGNATURES

I have read (or have had read to me) the contents of this consent form and have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received answers to my questions to my satisfaction. I give my consent to participate in this study, and have been provided with a copy of this form for my records and in case I have questions as the research progresses.

Study Subject (print name): _____

Signature of Study Subject: _____

Date:_____

I have read this form to the subject and/or the subject has read this form. An explanation of the research was provided and questions from the subject were solicited and answered to the subject's satisfaction. In my judgment, the subject has demonstrated comprehension of the information.

Principal Investigator (print name and title): _____

Signature of Principal Investigator: _____

Date: _____

Counseling Services

If you become upset or experience any discomfort while answering the interview questions, you can decide not to answer the questions or stop participation in the study at anytime. Also, you can choose to seek assistance by contacting any of the following services:

Mental Health Mental Retardation Authority (MHMRA): (713) 970-7000

Crisis Intervention of Houston: (713) 468-5463

Mobile Crisis Outreach Team: (713) 970-7520

Montrose Counseling Center: (713)-529-0037

If you have any questions as a research participant, contact :

Principal Investigator: **Faculty Supervisor**:
Praveena Lakshmanan   Amanda K. Baumle
MA Candidate   Associate Professor
Department of Sociology   Department of Sociology
University of Houston   University of Houston
plakshmanan@uh.edu   akbaumle@uh.edu
(713) 743-3963   (713) 743-3944

This project has been reviewed by the University of Houston Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (713) 743-9204

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE

DEMOGRAPHICS
1. What is your age?
2. When did you get married? (year)
3. Where in India are you from?
4. Is your spouse from the same city/region in India as you?
5. Do you have children? If yes, how many? When did you have your first child?

EXPERIENCE IN THE UNITED STATES
6. Had you been to the United States before your marriage? If so, when? Why? For how long?
7. When did you come to the United States for the first time after your marriage (year)?
8. How long have you been residing in the United States?
9. Do you have family in the United States?

LIVING IN INDIA
I would now like to ask you some questions about your life in India. To begin, can you tell me what a typical day was like in your life in India?

Probe questions about what education/work/socializing/and marriage are like:

- *Education: Can you tell me a little more about your educational background.*
  - » Where did you study in India?
  - » What degree did you earn? In what year?
  - » How did you choose that degree? What was appealing about it to you?
  - » Did you study in the same city where your parents lived?
  - » Did you live with your parents, alone, or with friends?
  - » Did you have plans to pursue additional education in India?

- *Work: I would like to know more about your professional career and experiences.*
  - » Did both your parents work? Where? Position?
  - » Did you work in the same city where you parents lived?
  - » What was your first job in India after you graduated? What position? How did you find that job? How many years did you work at that job?
  - » Did you have other jobs in India? What position? How did you find that job? How many years did you work at that job?
  - » I would like to know more about your experiences in India. Tell me about what a typical work day was like for you in India?
    - a. How many hours a week did you work? How did you get to work? What did you do at work?
    - b. Did you enjoy your work? What parts did you like? Was there anything that you did not like? Why? Can you give specific examples?
  - » When did you quit your job? Why? How do feel about quitting your job?

- *Socializing: I would like to know more about your social life in India.*

» How did you spend your time after work? In the evening? With whom (family/friends/workmates)?
» What did you do during the weekends? On holidays? (family/friends/workmates)?

- *Home/Marriage: I would like to know more about your home life and marriage in India*
  » How did you divide household chores? With whom (parent/in-laws/spouse)?
  » What role did you have in financial decisions?

- *Decision to move to U.S.: Can you explain more about your decision to come to the United States.*
  » Why did you and your spouse come to the United States?/ Why did you make the decision to move?
  » Who made the decision to move? Was it made jointly?
  » Did you want to come to the United States?
  » How much of a say did you feel you had in the decision to come to the United States?

LIVING IN THE UNITED STATES

I would now like to ask you some questions about your life in the United States. To begin, can you tell me what a typical day is like for you here?

» How did you feel when you first came here? How do feel now?
» Did /do you experience any difficulty in adjusting to the lifestyle/way of living here in Houston? If yes, what and how? If no, why do you think you did not face any difficulty?
» How did you adjust/cope with changes? (being a fulltime homemaker, immigrant etc.)
» Have you contacted family/friends back in India to cope with the change of living here?
» Do you like living here? If yes, why? If no, why?
» What do you do during the weekends?

- *Education: –Now I wanted to ask you some questions about education in the U.S.*
  » Before coming to the U.S., did you think of pursing higher education in the United States? How? Why?
    a. Are you studying here? Why? What program?
    b. If not: Do you plan to pursue education in the U.S. in the near future? Why? When?

- *Work: Did you know about the h4 visa and its regulations prior to coming to the United States?*
  » Was it your individual choice/decision to be on a H4 visa status?
  » How do you feel about being unable to work in the United States?

» Do you know about the possible changes in the H4 regulations about working prohibitions that President Obama announced? Would you/do you plan to go back to work? Or apply for employment authorization?
» What do you think about the current debate around the H4 regulations and the possible changes?

- *Socializing: Tell me about your social circle in the United States.*
  » Do you have friends here?
  » How did you make friends here? Where did you meet them?
  » Do you have friends that you knew from India living in Houston? Texas? United States? How many? How do you know them? How long have you known them for?
    o How often are you in contact with them? How many times have you personally met them/visited post coming to the U.S.?
  » Do you have friends who are from the United States and are not of Indian origin?
    o If yes, how many? How did you meet them? How often do you interact with them?
  » Are you in contact with friends/colleagues from your work place in India? How often?
  » How often do you talk/skype to your friends in India?
  » How often do you talk/skype to your family in India (parents and in-laws)?
  » How many people are you in contact with on a day-to-day basis?
  » Do you have your own car? Do you know how to drive?
  » Do you travel outside of Houston, Texas often? Do you travel alone/with friends/with spouse?
  » Do you think being on a H4 status affects how you interact with other individuals outside the home? How? Can you provide examples?

- *Home/Marriage: I wanted to ask you some questions about your home life and marriage here in the U.S.*
  » How do your household responsibilities here compare to when you were in India?
    o If yes, Why do you think that is?
  » Can you describe the division of household chores between you and your husband?
  » Cooking, shopping, bill paying, etc. Do you feel your lack of contribution to the finances of the household has affected your relationship/ with your spouse in any way?
  » Did you have any ideas about what your marital life would be like before marriage (in the U.S.)? Where did you get those ideas from?
  » What do you think about the status of women in India? Here in the United States? Especially, in terms of expectations from the family, friends and community?
  »

IDENTITY

10. What do you most identify with: Why? What does it mean to you?

a. Immigrant
b. Wife
c. Homemaker
d. Mother
e. Dependent
f. Indian
g. Something else

» When you think about your social class – do you think of :
  - Middle-Class/Upper Middle-Class/ Lower Middle-Class/Any other
» What do you think are your different roles within and outside the home?
» What activities outside of housework do you engage in? e.g. Blogging, volunteering? Why? How do you feel taking part/engaging in such activites?
» Do you think it is important to be employed? Why, other than financial stability? What does having a job or not mean to you?

What do you think about yourself and your career in comparison to –
o peers/friends/classmates in the United States
o friends and colleagues in India
o What are your future plans?

11. If someone asked you to introduce and describe yourself, what would you say? Why?
How do you introduce yourself:
» If you were asked to introduce yourself to your class --What is the most important thing that you would like your classmates/instructor to know about you?/How would you describe yourself? Why?
» If you meet someone socially for the first time? What is the most important thing that you would like that person to know about you?/How would you describe yourself? Why?
» If you meet your husband's work colleagues? What is the most important thing that you would like that person to know about you?/How would you describe yourself? Why?
» If you meet an individual who is not an Indian for the first time here? What is the most important thing that you would like that person to know about you? /How would you describe yourself? Why?
» If you meet a Indian for the first time here?/ How would you describe yourself? What is the most important thing that you would like that person to know about you? /How would you describe yourself? Why?
» If you meet a women who is on a H4 status/other Indian women for the first time? What is the most important thing that you would like that person to know about you? /How would you describe yourself? Why?

Now I would like to ask you some questions about how you think others view you.

12. How do you feel you are viewed by different groups here – husband's coworkers, strangers, friends, classmates etc.?

» Socially, when people ask you what do you do for a living, how do you respond?
   a. When people from home or relatives ask you about what you do for a living, what do you say?
   b. What about people here in the U.S.?
» Has anyone said anything about your not working here?
   a. People from home?
   b. People here?
» Do you think being unemployed affects how you interact in the U.S.? How?
» Do you ever consciously make an effort to not be identified as a dependent? Why? In what situations?
» What about the opposite – Do you ever consciously make an effort to be identified as a dependent? Why? In what situations?

WRAP-UP

13. What are your likes/dislikes about living in Houston/the United States?
14. Are there public spaces where you feel that you belong to a certain ethnicity/community or feel more at home?
15. How satisfied are you about the support available to you here in the United States?
16. In general, what would you say about the people you know here, support system available to you or the access that you have to these social groups (ethnic, religious, professional) here in Houston?
17. Who do you turn to for help assistance on a day-to-day basis?
18. Is there anything else that you would like to share?

APPENDIX E: RECRUITMENT SCRIPT FOR ONLINE CIRCULATION
(online posting on Facebook groups and other forums)

Participants Needed for Study on Indian Women on H4 Visas: I am writing to invite you to participate in my Masters thesis research examining the daily living experiences of women from India currently on an H4 status in and around Houston, Texas, United States. I am seeking participants who: 1) are Indian women currently on a H4 visa status; 2) have resided in the U.S. for at least a year on the H4 status; and 3) have a year or more of work experience in India or elsewhere prior to coming to the United States on the H4 status. Any information obtained for the purposes of this study will be confidential. This project has been reviewed by the Universityof Houston Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (713) 743-9204 (IRB No: 15224). My research advisor for this project is Dr. Amanda Baumle, Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Houston, akbaumle@uh.edu, (713) 743-3944. If you are eligible and interested in participating or have any questions or comments, please contact Praveena Lakshmanan by email at <plakshmanan@uh.edu> or call (713) 743-3963. Please pass on to others who might be eligible and interested in participating. Thank you!

UNIVERSITY of **HOUSTON**

COLLEGE of LIBERAL ARTS & SOCIAL SCIENCES
Department of Sociology

SOUTH ASIAN INDIAN WOMEN ON H4 VISA STATUS NEEDED

**Seeking participants to share everyday life experiences about living in the United States
for a research study on identity construction for Indian women on H4 visas**

SEEKING PARTICIPANTS WHO ARE:

- Indian women currently on a H4 visa status
- Residing in the U.S. for at least a year on the H4 status
- Have a year or more of work experience in India or elsewhere prior to coming to the
  United States on the H4 status

WHAT TO EXPECT:

- An in-person interview lasting no more than two hours that focuses on your day–to-
  day living experiences in India and the United States

If you are eligible and interested in participating or you have questions as a research participant, please contact Praveena
Lakshmanan, MA Candidate, Department of Sociology, University of Houston – Main Campus at plakshmanan@uh.edu or
(713) 743-3963. My research advisor for this project is Dr. Amanda Baumle, Associate Professor in the Department of
Sociology at the University of Houston, akbaumle@uh.edu, (713) 743-3944.
This project has been reviewed by the University of Houston Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects
(713) 743-9204

Email: plakshmanan@uh.edu Call: 713 743-3963	Email: plakshmanan@uh.edu Call: 713 743-3963	Email: plakshmanan@uh.edu Call: 713 743-3963	Email: plakshmanan@uh.edu Call: 713 743-3963	Email: plakshmanan@uh.edu Call: 713 743-3963	Email: plakshmanan@uh.edu Call: 713 743-3963	Email: plakshmanan@uh.edu Call: 713 743-3963

End Notes:

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[1] According to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (U.S. Department of Homeland Security) H4 category is for Spouse or child of H1A/B/B1/C, H2A/B/R or H3; H1A - temporary worker performing services as a registered nurse; H1B Temporary worker of distinguished merit and ability performing services other than as a registered nurse; H1B1 Free trade Agreement professional; H1C Shortage Area Nurse; H2A Temporary worker performing agricultural services; H2B Temporary worker performing other services and H3 Trainee

[2] South Asians comprise of individuals from the countries India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

[3] India Culture Center has about 35 registered member organizations, however, this is not an accurate representation as there are many more organizations that are not registered as a member with the India Culture Center. List of member organizations is available at http://www.icchouston.org/memberorganizations.html

[4] The Department of Sociology, University of Houston- Main Campus supported the purchase of the audio-recorder for interviews and the Atlas ti software for analysis of this research through the Department of Sociology Graduate Student Research Grants.

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