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Asian Americans and Women/Gender Relations

Key Words:

Asian Americans, Gender Roles, Culture Dichotomy, Political Attitudes and Behavior

Description:

This issue brief explores gender relations within the Asian American community, extrapolating how gender issues and the culture dichotomy experienced by Asian American women translate to their political attitudes and behavior.

Key Points:

- Asian Americans as a categorical group have been historically classified by the rest of American society as “alien” or “other,” making the comparison between political voting behaviors of Asian American males and Asian American females not extremely drastic.
- Asian American women face an intrinsic conflict between traditionally passive female roles of their culture and progressively independent female roles of American society. This conflict and tension contributes to some certain political attitudes and political behaviors that significantly differ from Asian American men.
- The ethnic patriarchal structure of many Asian American subgroups places pressures upon Asian American women to marry young and bear children, making higher education far more difficult. This, in turn, makes Asian American women less likely to become targets of political elites for political mobilization.
- In the study of Asian American gender relations, the independent variables effect the dependent variables in different ways when studying political attitudes and behaviors of Asian American women and Asian American men in isolation. This calls for further study in the mechanisms and effects of such factors as ethnic culture, citizenship status, educational context, and social networks on the political attitudes and behaviors of Asian American women and Asian American men in isolation.

Issue Brief:

Women and gender relations within the Asian American community can be characterized by an intrinsic conflict between traditional culture and American culture that causes tension within the Asian American community. Asian American women often may face making a decision between diametrically opposed gender roles as they try to reconcile cultural traditions and norms with a changing American culture. This internal conflict, however, does not contribute to drastically different political and voting behaviors between Asian American males and Asian American females, as historically the Asian American categorical group has been classified by the rest of American society as “alien” or “other”. Rather, this cultural tension concerning gender relations may contribute to more subtle political behaviors on the aggregate level.

In her book Dress, Gender, and Cultural Change: Asian American and American Rites of Passage, Annette Lynch explores changing gender construction within the Hmong American community. “Originally a Chinese ethnic group that fled to Laos escaping discrimination in the first two decades of the nineteenth century,” the Hmong entered the United States as refugees from the Vietnam War in the 1970s and received “some degree of economic and social assistance by the government” (Lynch, 1). During the course of interviewing some teenagers of this community, Lynch finds that Hmong women struggle with determining appropriate male and female gender roles concerning marriage, sexuality, and, most relevant to our discussion, definitions of success. Marrying young and bearing children remains important to Hmong women, as these achievements ensure acceptance and value within the community. However, these traditionally valued achievements conflict with American measures of success, as marrying young and bearing children makes obtaining higher levels of education very difficult. Those that do attend college find it difficult to reconcile the independent, progressive roles encouraged in college with the more passive, domestically oriented roles mandated by traditional culture.

Lynch’s analysis is not simply confined to this specific ethnic group. Karen Pyke, in her piece “Asian American Women and Racialized Femininities,” addresses how “disparities between ethnic and mainstream worlds can generate substantial conflict for children of immigrants, including conflict around issues of gender” within Korean American and Vietnamese



American communities.

Though levels of patriarchy vary between cultures, many Asian American women must juggle fitting into the “ethnic patriarchal structure” of family life and adapting to the greater sense of equality, power, and independence associated with American women (Pyke, 38). Meanwhile, Asian American males do not experience such a dichotomous crisis of identity, as traditionally male-dominant gender roles within the Asian American community are far more compatible with normative American measures of male success. How then does this gender gap translate into the political realm?

In The Politics of Asian Americans, Pei-te Lien concludes that “Asian American men and women differ in some aspects of their political attitudes and behaviors” (Lien, 205). Asian American women are less likely to adopt the panethnic self-identification of “Asian American” (Lien, 205). This may stem from the pressure for Asian American women to remain more entrenched in the traditional ethnic gender roles of their specific culture and origins. Also, Asian American women are less likely to be the targets of political mobilization “because of unequal efforts by political elites to shape and activate their political attitudes”(Lien, 181). This may stem from the conflictual nature between traditional gender roles of women within the Asian American community and the ability to achieve a higher education (as colleges are a prime breeding ground for political mobilization and a primer for political education in the future).

This, however, may only apply to recent immigrants and the children of recent immigrants given the recent trend of increased attendance in tertiary educational institutions by Asian Americans in general.

However, Lien holds that “the same independent variables may have very different effects in accounting for the dependent variables” (Lien, 2006). That is to say, some variables used in the study of gender relations in the Asian American community “are not equally useful in explaining the patterns of men’s and women’s political attitudes and behavior” (Lien, 2006). This calls for the search for different explanations concerning such factors as the effect of ethnic culture, citizenship status, educational context, and social networks in the political attitudes and behaviors of Asian American women.

Work Cited

Lien, Pei-te, M. Margaret Conway, and Janelle Wong. *The Politics of Asian Americans: Diversity and Community*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.

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Related Websites

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Images

“Hmong Women in Traditional Dress”

<<http://blog.travelpod.com/travel-photo/nybridge/1/1230561000/hmong-women-in-dress.jpg/tpod.html>>

“Indian Women...”

<<http://www.chagloo.com/cartoons/indian-women/>>