Issue Brief: Asian American Women & Gender Issues

Keywords: Sexism, Patriarchy, Double Minority, Exploitive Labor, Family, Immigration

Description: This brief will examine the gender issues that affect Asian women in the United States. It will specifically address issues that are unique to Asian American women within their families and in the workplace.

Key Points:

- Asian women often comprise the primary workforce of family-owned businesses.
- Asian American businesses are usually male-dominated in terms of representation of ownership.
- Asian American family organization is based on a historically patriarchal ideology.
- Foreign-born immigrants embody the majority of the Asian population in the U.S.

Issue Brief:

Asian American women have faced a well-documented history of institutionalized racism and a more obscured history of sexism in the United States. These two distinct histories of discrimination date back to the earliest waves of Asian immigration into the U.S. in the mid-19th century and reach an apex in the 20th century with the National Origins Act of 1924, which prevented the development of Asian families in the U.S. by barring entry of women from China, Japan, Korea and India classifying them as “aliens ineligible to citizenship”. The 1924 law allowed for a disproportionate number of Asian immigrant men to take up residence in the U.S. without wives, creating communities of majority male populations who sought to develop local economies around male-dominated businesses. The women who did manage to immigrate to the U.S. mostly found work in
domestic service or in the male-owned and operated businesses of the Asian immigrant community, including laundry businesses and brothels.

Those early communities would set a pattern of sexist practices that continue today as many lower-income Asian American women, both immigrants and second-generation citizens, have the same male-dominated system of employment imposed upon them. As more Asian women were granted permission to immigrate, the dynamic of the Asian community businesses changed. In a modern context, family-owned businesses and immigrant entrepreneurship would now place Asian American males predominantly in an ownership role while the women of the family assume the roles of employees. For example, in a Korean-owned business, the husband serves as the manager while the wife works as the cashier. The number of women in these employment positions is remarkably high. A 1997 survey of Koreans in New York City found that 38 percent of women who worked, were employed through family businesses.² Surveys in Chicago and Los Angeles found similar outcomes noting that wives are the most important source of family labor in Korean businesses.
There are also additional responsibilities placed on Asian American women as they are expected to preserve the family structure which is traditionally controlled by patriarchy. Since a strong and intact family unit is viewed as an important bastion of resistance to oppression, Asian American women in these families may accept certain components of the traditional patriarchal system. Yet, despite being labeled as subordinate, wives and daughters are integral to the development and success of these community and family enterprises. Many Asian immigrant women work in partnership with their husbands developing small family businesses and in doing so remove themselves from the larger racist and sexist American job market. However, the women who work in these family businesses often work unpaid hours in order to keep labor costs down, enabling the family store to stay open for extended lengths of time. Exploitive, unpaid labor is a fixture of many Asian American family businesses and the female members of the family are often the ones most exploited for time and money.
The majority of the Asian population in the U.S. is foreign-born, making immigration law and reform key issues for Asian Americans.

Family businesses are not the only economic area where Asian American women are exploited. In terms of wage-labor, the garment industry also manipulates the rights of its workers, a large number of whom are Asian immigrant women. Gender stratification is evident in the ranks of garment industry workers as Asian immigrant women make up a significant number of the underpaid assembly workforce while Asian American men work mostly as contractors. A 2000 economic roundtable study discovered that 41 percent of Southeast Asian women currently work in niche industries such as non-durable manufacturing or apparel jobs where earnings are 40 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL).
Organizations such as AIWA provide education and leadership skills to often unfairly treated immigrant women and youth in Asian American communities.

As a remedy for the turbulent working conditions of Asian women immigrant workers, groups like the Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA) seeks to address the needs of low-income limited English speaking Asian immigrant women. AIWA has created programs that provide education, leadership development and collective action, many of which have resulted in improvements in the living and working conditions of Asian immigrant workers. Indeed, for the majority of Asian American women, gender inequality persists in the division of labor at work and home, however with increasing awareness of these issues through organizations like AIWA, some of these inequalities are now being challenged.

References & Websites


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Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA)
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