From victims of domestic violence to determined independent women: How Vietnamese immigrant spouses negotiate Taiwan's patriarchy family system

Wen-hui Anna Tang, Hong-zen Wang*
Department of Sociology, National Sun Yat-sen University, Kaohsiung, Taiwan

Introduction

Many East Asian countries have experienced a rapid increase in cross-border marriages over the past two decades, and this has led to vigorous scholarship on associated gender, family and migration issues (Bélanger, Lee, & Wang, 2010; Constable, 2005; Fung, 2009; Piper & Roces, 2003; Suzuki, 2010; Thai, 2008). Women from less developed countries to more economically developed countries are often discriminated due to their class, gender and ethnic backgrounds. Going beyond the portrayal of victims, recent scholarship has paid more attention to how female migrants bargain with patriarchal structures to empower themselves (Brennan, 2005; Constable, 2009; Robinson, 2007). This paper focuses on the negotiation process used by abused migrant women in international marriages and interrogates the political, cultural and social structures in which gender relations and domestic work are embodied. It also shows how work is linked with self-empowerment experiences.

Since the 1990s, there has been a massive number of female marriage migrants moving from Vietnam to Taiwan. The more than 100,000 Vietnamese women married to Taiwanese men in the period up to the end of 2009 constitute an important part of the migration flows in the East Asian region (Bélanger et al., 2010). Some of these female immigrants have experienced unfulfilled expectations, differences in gender culture, domestic violence and divorce (Tang, Bélanger, & Wang, 2011). The stories of their unhappy lives are frequently reported in the mass media and leave an impression on the public of the women as victims (Wang & Bélanger, 2008: 97–102). These portrayals have led us to our main question: Are these women the poor and ignorant victims of Taiwanese husbands as portrayed in the mass
Vietnamese immigrants, Indonesian immigrant wife said after a public talk we gave on cannot be generalized, the social structures that they face are ors in response to Taiwan’s patriarchal family structure. Women of different cultural and class backgrounds might have different expectations and behav-

tion in the form of the Domestic Violence Prevention Act and tion data from 16 abused Vietnamese immigrant women and six Taiwanese husband abusers, we explore and delineate the dynamic social process experienced by these immigrant women to understand how they negotiate the Taiwanese patriarchal family system and ultimately empower them-

selves. We argue that employment, together with other advantageous structural factors, contributes to their ability to change their relationships with their husbands’ families. More specifically, we contend that Taiwan’s state interven-

ion in the form of the Domestic Violence Prevention Act and Taiwan’s economic structure based on flexible small- and medium-sized enterprises are bene-

Cial factors which have helped women leave unhappy marriages.

Immigrant women’s relationships with their patriarchal families are constantly changing. They each face different social conditions and use different strategies to empower themselves. The husbands’ families also use different strategies to cope with the challenges brought by the immigrant wives and to retain their power. This paper argues that it is through a dynamic negotiation process that these women are able to empower themselves sufficiently to walk away from the threat of domestic violence and avoid the pitfall of portraying themselves as victimized, poor and miserable.

We would like to stress here that not all immigrant Vietnamese wives in Taiwan are living under the threat of domestic violence. According to the research of one of the co-authors of this paper more than 90% of the Vietnamese wives of Taiwanese men said they were satisfied with their marriage (Wang, 2001). We do not intend to generalize our findings to cover all immigrant – or even Vietnamese – women in Taiwan. Women of different cultural and class backgrounds might have different expectations and behaviors in response to Taiwan’s patriarchal family structure. While the experiences of immigrant Vietnamese women cannot be generalized, the social structures that they face are common to all immigrants to some degree. Indeed, one Indonesian immigrant wife said after a public talk we gave on Vietnamese immigrants, “Hearing your talk reminds me of the experience I had in the first few years after I migrated to Taiwan.”

Method

This paper is drawn from a larger research project in which we successively interviewed female Vietnamese domestic violence victims and male abusers over three years. Between May 2008 and the end of 2009, we inter-

viewed 16 Vietnamese wives who sought help from the Center for the Prevention of Domestic Violence of a local city government in Taiwan, and six husbands who had been reported as abusers; three of the latter were husbands of the female interviewees. This research was partially sponsored by the local government, and one of the Center’s social workers was a member of the research team. Social worker casework records were available for our analysis. Permission to conduct interviews in the Center was obtained from the director of the Center. Both authors are committee members of the Center for the Prevention of Domestic Violence of the city government, and after conducting our research we recommended policies to streamline the bureaucratic process for immigrant women (including the recommendations that the children of abused immigrant women be given priority for admission to public kindergartens).

Intensive interviews were conducted from May to August 2008; follow-up interviews were conducted subsequently. The Center’s social workers casework interviews were observed by the researchers, after which we followed up with some questions. Of the 16 interviewees, three cases, who had been to the Center before, agreed to be interviewed by the researchers without social workers present. All inform-

ants knew that we were academic researchers and not social workers. At the outset of the interview, the researchers assured the interviewees that what they said would only be used for research purposes. We are aware that the power relationship between the authors and interviewees is not equal. The authors remained in contact with these interviewees mainly by mobile phone but also from time to time, visiting them to help with some issues (for example by explaining the ID card application process, finding a better child care center and listening to their complaints about bureaucracy). Some interviewees have invited the authors to their homes when their husbands were present, and some interviewees and researchers have become friends. One of the ultimate goals of this research is to influence the government’s policy regarding domestic violence and the granting of citizenship to immigrant women, currently under discussion by the National Immigration Agency.

On average, each case took one and half to 2 h of interview time, but some cases took about 3 h. All interviews were voice- and video-recorded and conducted with the permission of the interviewees and subsequently transcribed into Chinese; extracts cited in this paper have been translated by the authors into English. All conversations were in Mandarin, with a few words in Vietnamese, as most interviewees could speak fluent Mandarin (the longer their working experience, the better their command of the language). The ability of one of the authors to speak basic Vietnamese helped build trust between the interviewees and researchers.

The average age of our informants was 25 years (see Table 1 for a summary of the interviewees’ backgrounds). The oldest was 33 and the youngest 22. At the time of the inter-

views (2008), they had lived in Taiwan for an average of 5.3 years. The longest period was 10 years and the shortest two. Six of them had Taiwanese identification documents (IDs) while the others had only resident permits. Six of them were applying for Taiwanese IDs. Four of them had no idea of the importance of an ID card and had not even thought about applying for one. All but one of the 16 interviewees lived with their in-laws. Six of them not only lived with parents-in-law but also other relatives. All our informants had relatives or
A Chinese (1972) proposed the concept of mother-in-law often holds the main power in the family. Wolf band, deliver a son, and serve the husband's family, and the triarchy, the young daughter-in-law has to serve her husband's family and brothers-in-law or the husband's children from a former marriage. Five of the husbands were unemployed, and six of them had unstable incomes.

All interviewees faced psychological or physical abuse at home. The abusers included husbands, mothers-, sisters- or brothers-in-law or the husband's children from a former marriage. Five of the husbands were unemployed, and six of them had unstable incomes.

**Theoretical framework: dynamic patriarchal family negotiations and relative resources**

This paper does not explore the causes of domestic violence in cross-border marriages, but seeks to understand under what circumstances these Vietnamese female immigrants exercise their agency to empower themselves and escape from patriarchal domination. To do so, we review two strands of literature: patriarchal family negotiations and the relative resources hypothesis.

First of all, we would like to emphasize that even the most disadvantaged women, including our interviewees, are able to exercise some degree of their agency to negotiate patriarchal domination. In different patriarchy modes, there are different types of negotiation. As Kandiyoti (1988) mentions, the main feature of patriarchies is male domination, but it is important to recognize that there are at least two types of patriarchy, viz, Sub-Saharan patriarchy and classic Asian patriarchy — and they have different practices. In her analysis of Asian patriarchy, the young daughter-in-law has to serve her husband, deliver a son, and serve the husband's family, and the mother-in-law often holds the main power in the family. Wolf (1972) proposed the concept of 'uterine family' to explain the dynamic development of Chinese family cycles. A Chinese woman expects to have sons to consolidate her power in the family and to counterbalance the power imposed from her mother-in-law who also has her uterine family, including the daughter-in-law's husband. Different uterine families compete for limited resources and have conflicts, and in the end this leads to the division of the extended family into many nuclear families. Wolf admits that the Chinese woman, on the one hand, is consolidating the patriarchal system and, on the other hand, is simultaneously exercising her agency to fight for her and her uterine family's rights.

Recently more scholarly attention has been paid to disadvantaged women's exercise of agency to work themselves out of their oppressed situation and resolve family conflicts (Brennan, 2005; Constable, 2009; Robinson, 2007). In Syria, an Islamic country, low-income women also try to negotiate with males in the patriarchal family to gain working opportunities to empower themselves (Gallagher, 2007). In the context of local gender and religious culture, they have to follow the gender dependency schemas and domestic gender norms and stay at home lest they get a bad reputation for the family and their future marriage. However, they also need to work to supplement the income of their families. With the help of national economic policy which encourages females to participate in the labor market, Muslim women in Damascus have developed strategies of their own to escape the constraints of gender and religious culture on employment. By earning and saving money, a woman can improve her economic security and not be totally dependent on her husband (Gallagher, 2007). Gallagher's research brings us to two implications: first, even religion-constrained Muslim women can find a way to escape patriarchal domination by getting work and earning money for themselves. Second, it supports the relative resources hypothesis that the amount of capital involved affects the rights as well as the division of labor in a family.

---

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year of birth</th>
<th>TW ID</th>
<th>Protection issued</th>
<th>Work experience</th>
<th>Family structure</th>
<th>Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mai</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Attendant at VN restaurant, sell betel nuts</td>
<td>With mother-in-law</td>
<td>2 sons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oanh</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Attendant at VN restaurant</td>
<td>Only with husband and children</td>
<td>1 son, 1 daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Van</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Attendant at VN restaurant</td>
<td>With parents-in-law, brothers-in-law</td>
<td>2 sons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chui</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Attendant at a hot pot restaurant</td>
<td>With mother-in-law</td>
<td>1 son, 1 daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nhan</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Pending</td>
<td>Pending</td>
<td>Assistant at wet market</td>
<td>With mother-in-law</td>
<td>1 son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nga</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Pending</td>
<td>Attendant at VN restaurant</td>
<td>With mother-in-law</td>
<td>2 sons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hua</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Pending</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Attendant at fast food shop, part-time painter</td>
<td>With parents-in-law, siblings-in-law</td>
<td>1 daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truong</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Pending</td>
<td>Pending</td>
<td>Worker at a factory</td>
<td>With mother-in-law, sister-in-law</td>
<td>1 daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anh</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Pending</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Sell betel nuts</td>
<td>With parents-in-law, brother-in-law and his children</td>
<td>1 daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khoa</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Worker at a factory</td>
<td>With mother-in-law</td>
<td>1 son, 1 daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linh</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Pending</td>
<td>Assistant at a lunchbox restaurant</td>
<td>With mother-in-law</td>
<td>1 son, 1 daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Pending</td>
<td>Pending</td>
<td>Attendant at fast food shop</td>
<td>With mother-in-law, brother-in-law</td>
<td>1 son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minh</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Hairdresser</td>
<td>With husband, and his children</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ngoc</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Pending</td>
<td>Attendant at fast food shop</td>
<td>With mother-in-law</td>
<td>1 son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luan</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Pending</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Attendant at VN restaurant</td>
<td>With mother-in-law</td>
<td>2 daughters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nhu</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Seller of betel nuts, laundry helper</td>
<td>With mother-in-law</td>
<td>1 son</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Yet the relative resources hypothesis is static and does not pay attention to the changing dynamic relationship between wife and the patriarchal family. We make the argument that dynamic changes in power relationships are a long-term process, with different situations in different periods; as such, we cannot easily determine the causal relationship between work, income and empowerment. Although the resources held in a spousal relationship are important, they change over time in the course of a marriage. With a job, which enhances financial independence and broadens social networks, the resources a Vietnamese migrant woman have, as well as her relationship with the extended family, will change after several years. Thus, we argue that research needs to focus on the dynamic changes experienced in family relationships in cross-border marriages in the course of a marriage.

In addition, researchers have found that there is no linear positive causal relationship between income and gender relations in a family. Espiritu has pointed out that it is easier for Asian immigrant women to find a job than it is for men and this shift of resource and capital has challenged the traditional concept of the patriarchal authority of Asian men. Yet it is also striking to note that these female wage laborers, who see their work as an obligation and a way to raise the living standard of the family, are actually “preserving the traditional family system and are not able to challenge this traditional patriarchal structure” (Espiritu, 1999: 640). Echoing the above studies, Menjívar and Salcido (2002) also found that a working woman, on the one hand, may improve her financial status but, on the other, may also reinforce her role as family housekeeper. In other words, extant research suggests that even when women assume the economic burden of providing for the family, they continue to bear the pressure of the patriarchal family structure, in which women are inferior to men.

These viewpoints deserve further clarification in at least three ways. First, most of the earlier studies focused on spouses with a shared ethnicity and culture and who have migrated to Europe and the US. In our study, however, Vietnamese women marry men from a different culture, and the women might not accept willingly the Taiwanese patriarchal pressures imposed on them. Aside from the studies by Menjívar (2000) and Zentgraf (2002), there is still very little research which analyzes the difference between gender cultures in different countries. So, this study will explore the conflict between gender culture in Vietnam and the patriarchal structure in Taiwan.

Second, much of the existing research seems not to have discussed the dynamic social process between a working woman and gender relations in a family, in which the negotiation processes change over time and under different circumstances. While employment enhances empowerment in different ways, including through improved language ability, social networks and financial independence, it might also lead to increased family tension (Bui & Morash, 2008) and domestic violence, or even to the breakdown of the family unit.

Finally, in studies related to domestic violence and female migrants, social relations within migrant groups play an important role. On the one hand, community coherence, which is the aggregation of migrant family experiences, may act as a form of group pressure to restrain domestic violence. On the other hand, some cultures emphasize the image of a woman as a good mother and wife and the dignity and masculinity of a man, and this might permit or even encourage domestic violence, both physically and mentally (Midlarsky, Venkataramani-Kothari, & Plante, 2006). Other studies which discuss and analyze the role of society in helping abused immigrant women from the perspectives of social movement organizations (Abraham, 1995) and social organization pressure (Kibria, 1993) suggest that ethnic communities can be beneficial for immigrant women when they encounter marital conflicts, as the women tend to seek help first from a network of the same ethnicity. Cases of domestic violence involving female migrants within an ethnic community are easily spotted and aided (Nah, 1993; Preissier, 1999; Rhee, 1995). Indeed, social groups and NGOs play an important role in helping domestic violence victims escape from abuse.

Based on the literature reviewed, we offer our theoretical framework for the Taiwanese case (Fig. 1). In the first few years after arrival in Taiwan, female immigrants are constrained by many disadvantageous factors, including limited language ability, scarce financial resources, Taiwanese patriarchal culture and immigration regulations. Under Taiwan’s immigration law, a woman marrying a Taiwanese man needs to obtain the consent of her husband for her annual residency application. If the husband refuses to sign, she has to leave Taiwan (Wang & Bélanger, 2008: 94–97). The women find it difficult to escape these structural constraints. However, a distinguishing feature of Taiwan’s labor market – its small- and medium-sized company economic structure – facilitates finding a low-level entry job. Most immigrant wives are eager to find work, no matter what type; they can readily do so under this economic structure. A general quality of life survey of immigrant spouses in 2008 found that 45% of marriage immigrants from Southeast Asia worked as “unskilled manual labor” and another 26% worked as “clerical and salespersons”; that is, about 71% of the employed immigrant spouses worked in the low income and unskilled labor sector (Ministry of Interior, 2008: 74, Tables 6–7). Another official research report found that about 63% of working migrant women earned less than the minimum wage (US$530 per month), while another 30% earned between the minimum wage and US$900 per month (National Immigration, 2009: 83). Getting a job provides immigrant women with broader social networks and enables them to gain financial independence from their husband’s family. Under these circumstances, immigrant wives arguably have an increased chance of walking away from an abusive family, rather than staying to face domestic violence.

Cross-border marriages between Vietnam and Taiwan

One common explanation for why a Taiwanese man might seek an overseas bride is his disadvantaged socio-economic status in the domestic marriage market (Wang & Chang, 2008). Yet it is also striking to note that these female wage laborers, who see their work as an obligation and a way to raise the living standard of the family, are actually “preserving the traditional family system and are not able to challenge this traditional patriarchal structure” (Espiritu, 1999: 640). Echoing the above studies, Menjívar and Salcido (2002) also found that a working woman, on the one hand, may improve her financial status but, on the other, may also reinforce her role as family housekeeper. In other words, extant research suggests that even when women assume the economic burden of providing for the family, they continue to bear the pressure of the patriarchal family structure, in which women are inferior to men.

These viewpoints deserve further clarification in at least three ways. First, most of the earlier studies focused on spouses with a shared ethnicity and culture and who have migrated to Europe and the US. In our study, however, Vietnamese women marry men from a different culture, and the women might not accept willingly the Taiwanese patriarchal pressures imposed on them. Aside from the studies by Menjívar (2000) and Zentgraf (2002), there is still very little research which analyzes the difference between gender cultures in different countries. So, this study will explore the conflict between gender culture in Vietnam and the patriarchal structure in Taiwan.

Second, much of the existing research seems not to have discussed the dynamic social process between a working woman and gender relations in a family, in which the negotiation processes change over time and under different circumstances. While employment enhances empowerment in different ways, including through improved language ability, social networks and financial independence, it might also lead to increased family tension (Bui & Morash, 2008) and domestic violence, or even to the breakdown of the family unit.

Finally, in studies related to domestic violence and female migrants, social relations within migrant groups play an important role. On the one hand, community coherence, which is the aggregation of migrant family experiences, may act as a form of group pressure to restrain domestic violence. On the other hand, some cultures emphasize the image of a woman as a good mother and wife and the dignity and masculinity of a man, and this might permit or even encourage domestic violence, both physically and mentally (Midlarsky, Venkataramani-Kothari, & Plante, 2006). Other studies which discuss and analyze the role of society in helping abused immigrant women from the perspectives of social movement organizations (Abraham, 1995) and social organization pressure (Kibria, 1993) suggest that ethnic communities can be beneficial for immigrant women when they encounter marital conflicts, as the women tend to seek help first from a network of the same ethnicity. Cases of domestic violence involving female migrants within an ethnic community are easily spotted and aided (Nah, 1993; Preissier, 1999; Rhee, 1995). Indeed, social groups and NGOs play an important role in helping domestic violence victims escape from abuse. Females can also utilize different structural factors to achieve self-empowerment without the intervention of social groups. For example, Ong (1996) found that Cambodian female immigrants utilized America’s Domestic Violence Protection Law to change the behavior of alcoholic husbands and, by securing better incomes than their husbands, changed their status in the family.

Based on the literature reviewed, we offer our theoretical framework for the Taiwanese case (Fig. 1). In the first few years after arrival in Taiwan, female immigrants are constrained by many disadvantageous factors, including limited language ability, scarce financial resources, Taiwanese patriarchal culture and immigration regulations. Under Taiwan’s immigration law, a woman marrying a Taiwanese man needs to obtain the consent of her husband for her annual residency application. If the husband refuses to sign, she has to leave Taiwan (Wang & Bélanger, 2008: 94–97). The women find it difficult to escape these structural constraints. However, a distinguishing feature of Taiwan’s labor market – its small- and medium-sized company economic structure – facilitates finding a low-level entry job. Most immigrant wives are eager to find work, no matter what type; they can readily do so under this economic structure. A general quality of life survey of immigrant spouses in 2008 found that 45% of marriage immigrants from Southeast Asia worked as “unskilled manual labor” and another 26% worked as “clerical and salespersons”; that is, about 71% of the employed immigrant spouses worked in the low income and unskilled labor sector (Ministry of Interior, 2008: 74, Tables 6–7). Another official research report found that about 63% of working migrant women earned less than the minimum wage (US$530 per month), while another 30% earned between the minimum wage and US$900 per month (National Immigration, 2009: 83). Getting a job provides immigrant women with broader social networks and enables them to gain financial independence from their husband’s family. Under these circumstances, immigrant wives arguably have an increased chance of walking away from an abusive family, rather than staying to face domestic violence.

Cross-border marriages between Vietnam and Taiwan

One common explanation for why a Taiwanese man might seek an overseas bride is his disadvantaged socio-economic status in the domestic marriage market (Wang & Chang, 2008).
Another important factor is Taiwan’s gender culture of masculine domination. Those men who marry Vietnamese women would like to find a subservient wife for the family, and to reproduce their masculinities in this cross-border family formation process (Wang & Tien, 2009).

The patriarchal Taiwanese family system puts a greater emphasis on the parent–son relationship than the husband–wife relationship. An unmarried single woman suffers from not being recognized as a whole person in Taiwanese society (Lee, 2009). The roles that a woman plays in this system include wife, mother and daughter-in-law. She is expected to be a subservient wife, a servile daughter-in-law, and a son’s mother. A woman in a Chinese family marries not for her future life with a husband, but for the husband’s family; she has to learn how to serve her parents-in-law in the name of filial piety (Wolf, 1972). It is commonly believed that a married daughter is ‘water that has been poured out’ and should not return to her natal family. Therefore, a newly-wed woman in Taiwan needs to learn how to negotiate new, multiple and complicated patriarchal family relations to survive. Although this family system is not fixed and without change (Lin, 2007), it is difficult for married women to escape the patriarchal norms. When Vietnamese women come to Taiwan, they are expected to follow the norms set by this patriarchal system, but since they are from a different gender culture, and have different norms or expectations, it results in tension between the two social norms.

Global hypergamy, that is, people from the poor ‘third world’ desiring to marry those from the ‘first world’, is commonly used to explain cross-border marriages. However, such an economic explanation model ignores that the migration of women through marriage is the outcome of mixed motivations that are embedded in very different social structures, which cannot be reduced to only economic factors (Constable, 2005; Robinson, 2007). Interviewed Vietnamese women often say: “I want to work in Taiwan to send money home to my parents”; such a statement reflects a mixture of the roles of filial daughter and working woman, which should be understood in Vietnamese social cultural contexts. No matter what their lives are like in Taiwan, most Vietnamese wives will send money home to support their natal family. Chien and Quang (2004) found that 90% of the Vietnamese families in their study have a better economic life after their daughters marry Taiwanese men. Showing filial piety to parents should not be regarded as only a materialistic goal. Caring for their natal family is a life-long duty for these women (Fung, 2009).

In addition, compared with Taiwan’s low female labor participation rate (49.6% in 2009) (Directorate General of Budget, Accounting & Statistics, 2010: 75), Vietnamese women are highly involved in the labor market (their labor force participation rate was 74.2% in 2008) (Encyclopedia of Nations, 2010). Vietnamese society is more supportive of female labor participation than Taiwanese society (Barbieri & Bélanger, 2009). Nhu said, “Before I came to Taiwan, I imagined that I could work after marriage like my friends [in Vietnam]. But later I realized that my husband wanted me to stay at home, to take care of the baby, and I had to stay home.”

Because of this, however, when Vietnamese women migrate to Taiwan, they face a totally different gender culture expectation as the latter encourages females to stay at home to care for the whole family. On the one hand, Vietnamese immigrants cannot understand why their husbands are so concerned about their desire to work; as Oanh observed, “When I went to work to wash dishes in a restaurant and came back late, he looked very unhappy.” On the other hand, Taiwanese husbands cannot understand why their wives are so determined to find a job, a behavior which contradicts the Taiwanese image of a traditional wife (Thai, 2008; Wang & Tien, 2009). As one husband complained, the Taiwanese
government never “teaches” these immigrant wives that “in Vietnam it is the female who goes out to make money, while in Taiwan it is the male who goes out and the female stays at home to care for children... These women should understand Taiwan’s custom. They should not leave children alone and do whatever they like when they are in Taiwan.”

All the female interviewees, except one who lived in Ho Chih Minh City and whose father was a businessperson, were from poor rural areas in Vietnam where they helped their families make a living from farming. They imagined they would find a job in Taiwan through marriage and be able to contribute more to their family’s finances. As Khoa said, “I didn’t care if my husband was old or ugly. Even though he was 34 years older than me, it was still fine with me. My father worked so hard and my family was still very poor. What I really wanted was to help my family by marrying a Taiwanese man”. There are both cultural and economic reasons to marry a Taiwanese, i.e., by improving the family’s economic circumstances to fulfill the duty of a filial daughter. It is too simplistic to say that a woman from a less developed country who marries a man in a higher income country is motivated by economic factors only, as the hypergamy thesis describes. Besides, for these women work is not only the pursuit of financial gain, but also a search for independence and a means to broaden their social lives in their new environment; as My said, "It is very good to have a job. I can talk to friends, to buy drinks without asking money from my husband.”

In addition to the gender cultural barrier, a migrant woman attempting to find a job in Taiwan also faces a language problem. Most of the migrant women are not ethnic Chinese, and cannot speak Mandarin or Hokkien, the languages commonly used in Taiwan. They find it hard to get work without a good command of the language. Although they learn the language quickly, and usually can speak basic Taiwanese within a year of their arrival, most of them would have become pregnant by this time and, after they have had their baby, would within a year of their arrival, most of them would have become pregnant by this time and, after they have had their baby, would be required by the husband’s family to take care of the baby. Even if they can find a job, the monthly income is normally less than NTS15,000 (US$450); from the husband’s perspective, it is not economically rational to send the baby to a full-day childcare center or hire a part-time nanny, which costs around NTS10,000 (US$350) a month. Furthermore, many of them live with their in-laws and are expected to look after sick or elderly relatives and do the domestic work. It is almost impossible for them to get a job outside the family.

In Taiwan, it is regarded as appropriate for a daughter to work and send money home to help her family before marriage. However, if she were to do this after marriage, it would be regarded as being unfaithful to, and a betrayal of, her husband. Some women save money secretly and remit it stealthily, which could cause a serious dispute if the husband’s family found out. Such a conflict is especially serious in a transnational family where the husband’s family and the Vietnamese wife have different expectations of the use of income earned by the wife.

In the following sections we will explore the life changes that immigrant women undergo after they arrive in Taiwan. Faced with different social conditions, they choose different strategies to negotiate the patriarchal family system. Step by step, they are able to free themselves from their controlling environment by availing themselves of beneficial structural conditions, which in Taiwan are the Domestic Violence Prevention Law and the small- and medium-sized enterprises based economy.

**Structurally constrained work options**

Luan got pregnant as soon as she arrived in Taiwan, but she still had to do all the domestic work, including looking after her bedridden father-in-law. In the first year, her husband and mother-in-law abused her physically, and her husband wanted to divorce her. One night she had a fight with her husband’s family, and she asked her sister’s husband for help. He came and teased Luan’s mother-in-law, “Is she your daughter-in-law or a foreign domestic worker?” She replied calmly, “Both daughter-in-law and foreign worker.” Her reply vividly portrays the dual role of the immigrant wife in Taiwanese families. As a daughter-in-law, she has to deliver a son, to serve her parents-in-law and her husband; as a foreign worker, she has to do all the household work like an imported domestic helper.

On average, Vietnamese women are pregnant within 6 months of arriving in Taiwan; some 73% said that child care responsibilities are undertaken by themselves, and only 9% said it was undertaken by both the wife and the husband (Wang, 2001). In other words, the husband’s family expects that child care should be shouldered by the immigrant wife. Nhan complained, “When the baby cries, he begins to blame me for not being capable of caring for it. He scolds me, beats me.” Their daily work also includes house cleaning. Minh described what she did in the first week of her marriage in Taiwan: “Their house was a big mess. When I entered, I thought that I had stepped into the wrong place. It seemed that no one had cleaned it before. It was messy, disorderly, dusty and dirty. I spent a whole week cleaning it.” All the domestic work is regarded by the husband’s family as a ‘wife’s work in the name of love’; as Nhan complained: “All the domestic work was done by me, and from time to time my father-in-law gave me NTS1000 (US$30) a month. One month was only worth US$30! I was pregnant and did all the work, and it was worth only US$30?”

Most of the Vietnamese women live in an extended family. Truong, for example, lives with ten people including her parents-in-law and sister- and brother-in-law. She does all the domestic work, including cooking and laundry. Once she told her sister-in-law that “I can help to wash your coats or skirts, but the underwear, can you wash that by yourself?”, but her sister-in-law declined and complained to her husband about Truong’s laziness. Most husbands’ family members regard such work arrangements as ‘normal’ and ‘natural’. Another issue is sexual harassment from male family members. When Nhan and her father-in-law were alone at home, it was the most terrible time for her. Sometimes he asked her to ‘take a rest in the bedroom’, or when she was hand washing clothes he would embrace her from behind.

Domestic violence normally occurs in the first or second year after Vietnamese women arrive in Taiwan. Mai described the physical abuse from her husband: “Sometimes he came home around two or three o’clock in the morning, and quarrelled with me. He started to beat me around the third month of my pregnancy. He beat me when I was pregnant. My parents-in-law knew it, but they did not help me.” Quite often
when a baby comes into the family, family relations become more complicated, and if the husband and wife do not know how to handle such stress, it exacerbates the problem of domestic violence. These Vietnamese women marry at the age of 18 or 19, and they have no one to ask for guidance on how to care for a baby, and therefore are under great stress. As Ngoc said, “I was only 19 years old, and had never had a baby before. I did not know how to take care of a child and no one helped me. My natal family was not with me and when the baby cried, I did not know how to cope. I was very tired, but my husband never gave a hand. He even beat me!”

Heavy domestic work, quarrels with in-laws, domestic violence from their husbands, and sexual harassment by other male family members in some cases, all contribute to the women’s horrible situations. Living in such a patriarchal family, without any support from family members, makes these women want to escape from their unhappy situation. However, they have very few alternatives and are not able to move freely. Minh, who did not go out in her first year as her lunch was brought home by her husband every day, said, “I was not able to go out. When he was away, I watched TV on the fourth floor, and he brought me lunch.” Asked what she could do if she was hungry, she said:

Endure it, unless I called them and asked them to bring me food. He did not let me go outside. If I went out, and he knew it, he would be mad and say ‘you went out to meet your boy friend!’ I could not even open the balcony door. If I opened the door, he would say that I was looking at men.

Luan was introduced to her husband by her brother-in-law. But her fate was totally different from her sister’s. Comparing her life with her sister’s, she noted the most important difference was in the freedom to move:

My sister’s husband is not rich, but they are happy. She has freedom, and goes anywhere she likes. Her husband does not control her. My life is different. After marriage, I had to stay at home to take care of my bedridden father-in-law. My mother-in-law made me cook and clean. I was not allowed to go out. My mother-in-law prohibited me from meeting friends. She does not like my Vietnamese friends.

The legal regulations associated with their residency status are an important structural factor constraining their freedom. Some researchers have pointed out that the procurement of citizenship greatly affects the immigrant’s status in the family and society (Erez, 2000; Nayaran, 1995). Taiwanese Immigration Law demands the renewal of residency status every year with the spouse’s consent. These women come to Taiwan under a ‘dependent’ status, and therefore their residency visa will not be renewed if the marriage has ended, or if the husband withholds his consent. Such regulations enhance a husband’s power to restrict the free movement of these women, and they have to conform if they want their residency status renewed.

Thus in the first few years, most Vietnamese women cannot do much to change the gender relations preset by their new family and Taiwanese society. They have little choice but to follow the roles assigned to them: to be a dependent wife, to be an obedient daughter-in-law, and to follow the rules imposed on them by Taiwan’s patriarchy. The language barrier, incomplete citizenship, and lack of social support in Taiwan, all contribute to their predicament. They are not able to resist openly, and all they can do is to endure it, and find possible outlets for their future life. Such a situation is shared by other Southeast Asian immigrant women in Taiwan’s context (Sheu, 2009).

Work, self-empowerment and family tensions

Like most other Vietnamese wives, when Nhan started to work outside the family, her life also started to change. From her perspective, it was the starting point in her self-empowerment process. Nhan’s first job was working in the family business. She worked for her brother-in-law selling pork in a traditional wet market. She woke at 3 am every morning and worked until 2 or 3 pm, almost 12 h a day. Her brother-in-law only gave her about one hundred US dollars per month, but the wage was not regularly paid. Later, when Nhan wanted to save more money, she secretly went out to find some part time work in her spare time. This was when Nhan’s husband and mother-in-law felt that Nhan had changed, becoming less obedient and conforming. In particular, when Nhan had her own income, her husband thought she was more confident and would speak out for her rights at home. Sometimes she even fought back. According to Nhan, her mother-in-law asked her: “Why were you willing to do anything for the family when you arrived in the first few years, but now you aren’t?”

Some scholars found that women’s violence against men increased in contexts of women’s greater political and economic empowerment (Anderson, 2010; Archer, 2006). There is no case of violence by woman against man in our research, but their findings confirm the situation that we found: when Vietnamese wives work outside the family they start to raise their status in the family, but also quite possibly the work increases conflict and tensions within the family. From the husband’s perspective, he wishes his Vietnamese wife would stay at home and fulfill her traditional gender role. From the perspective of the wives, as they gradually gain more self-empowerment through economic independence, social connections and, most importantly, self-respect and dignity, they no longer are willing to remain as just housewives. As a result of the relative decline in the authority of their husbands and in-laws, there may be an increase in domestic violence. Just as some studies demonstrate that employment can increase women’s bargaining power and control over resources, others show that participation in the labor force does not always translate into an increased status for women or a decrease in domestic violence (Menjivar & Salcido, 2002).

Getting work outside the family improves the Vietnamese women’s fluency in Chinese, both Taiwanese and Mandarin, which enables them to communicate more with people outside the family. From the beginning of the marriage, many husbands scolded their wives and used abusive words, but the wives did not really understand what was said. However, the more they understood Mandarin or Taiwanese, the more they understood how negative their husbands’ abusive attitudes toward them were, which again reinforced their determination to leave their unhappy environment and seek a better life.
In terms of social networking, Taiwanese employers, neighbors, and Vietnamese friends and relatives are important in teaching them to report domestic violence. Oanh, for example, went to report domestic violence accompanied by her Vietnamese close friend. This can explain why the husband and his family believe that when the wife takes a job, she becomes morally corrupt. As one husband, A-Fa, complained: "They [Vietnamese wives] fool around during the day and learn bad things from each other. For example, they compare how much money each husband gives his wife to spend without asking her to do any housework." When these wives work outside for a long period, they have more social interaction with outsiders and these friends become important connections to help them resist family violence.

The immigrant wives find jobs more easily than their unemployed husbands owing to Taiwan's gendered labor market structure. There is a labor shortage in “3D” (dirty, demanding and demeaning) industries, such as barber shop assistants, waitresses, dish washers and elderly care, which have long working hours and low pay. Employment in these service sectors is available to Vietnamese wives because they are more willing to work in such jobs than most Taiwanese. In our sample of 16 wives, there were five unemployed husbands and six husbands with unstable incomes. Owing to the inadequate and unstable income, the wives felt the need to work outside for economic security and to save for the children's future education. They said that if they didn't work hard to save money, their children would soon face difficulties. However, we found that an important reason for wanting a job is to earn their own money which they could decide how to use. Most of them want to remit money to their parents in Vietnam without the knowledge of their husbands’ families. As Ngoc said, "Is it wrong that I work and save money for my natal family?"

Husbands gave many reasons for their opposition to their wives working outside the home. One reason was that they hoped their wives would be more involved in the role of family caregiver. A husband set a pre-condition for his wife working outside: "She can go out to work, but she needs to put care of the children in first place. She has to pick up the kids when they finish their school, and come home to cook for the family." The second reason was that they thought their wives were too hungry for money and the purpose of their work was primarily to remit money to their family in Vietnam. One wife, Truong, said: "Sometimes my husband told me that he wished I had the same goal for our family in Taiwan. He disliked it that I remitted money to Vietnam for my parents. He wished I could show more obedience to my mother-in-law." However, for these wives, they also feel they have the right to send remittances to their parents. Many wives said that before marriage, their future husbands had promised to help their parents financially but this did not come true, and therefore they had to earn money on their own to help their parents.

The remittances which the wives sent back to Vietnam always generated conflict between wives and husbands. Husbands felt uncomfortable about their wives' income because the latter now had their own economic power. The husbands expect that wives with income should share more of the responsibility for household expenses, and leave a large part of the household expenditure burden (such as food, clothing and education expenses) to his wife to shoulder. They have disputes about whether the money the wife has earned is part of the family income or remains her own.

The most common reason for opposing a wife working is the accusation that she is doing sex-related work. One wife, who had insisted on working and paying a nanny US$600 a month for childcare, eventually ran away. Her husband said angrily:

Don’t you think it is very strange that she could make so much money? In addition to the US$600 she pays the nanny, she also needs money for daily expenditure, which could reach US$1000 a month. If she is not working as a prostitute, or has a man to feed her, how could she earn so much without a Taiwanese ID?4

Another husband complained that the government does not clamp down on Vietnamese restaurants where Vietnamese immigrants gather:

These restaurants may seem like places for them to relieve their homesickness, but many restaurants are doing something else. They are the sources of our social disorder. Vietnamese women are coming to Taiwan to be good daughters-in-law, but they are seduced and do immoral things and create a pile of social problems.

Nhan works 15 h every day, from 5 o'clock in the morning till 8 o'clock at night. She takes any kind of job, including work in a breakfast fast food store, saleswoman in a clothes shop and dish washer in a noodle shop at night. In the first 2 years it was fine. But after the third year her husband began to suspect she was engaging in adultery, and went to her workplace to harass her. He frequently checked her mobile phone to search for evidence. Nhan complained: “I don’t know why he always suspects I have boyfriends. He checks my mobile phone, and tells me that someone sent me an SMS. How can it be possible? I don’t even know any Chinese character.”

To counteract a wife's autonomy, stronger physical or psychological abuse is commonly adopted by the husband's family to maintain the patriarchal order. For example, when Hien started to work her husband began to harass her. She said:

I really want to find a job, but whenever I get one, he comes to the workplace to harass me. Or when I come home after work, he gives me piles of work to do. He pulled out the drawers, dumped all the things on the floor, and told me, 'You have too much free time. Do you like to work? Here you go!'

Husbands also threaten not to consent to the renewal of their residency status. Nhan said:

He always uses the renewal of my residency status to control me. For example, he did not let me go to the police station to apply until the last day, and said, ‘I won’t let you apply, you fucking shit.’ When I wanted to apply for naturalization, he threatened to divorce me and said, ‘Then you will have to leave Taiwan and will never be able to see your son’.

Such aggressive responses from a husband’s family demonstrate that Vietnamese brides are no longer the same as
they were when they arrived. Compared with their first few years in Taiwan, their language ability is better and their connections with local society are extended. Their Vietnamese culture, which encourages them to be working women and filial daughters, encourages them to try hard to find work so that they can save some money for themselves and their natal families. Having some money empowers them to be independent from their husbands. Going out to work helps them build up social networks with Taiwanese people, who can support them when they walk out of the shadow of domestic violence. A knowledge of Taiwan’s domestic violence law enables them to use it as a weapon to defend themselves. It is a self-empowerment process. No longer are they obedient daughters-in-law, deferential wives, or hard-working domestic helpers. They put more emphasis on work, on social networking outside the family, and they also find a new role: citizen of Taiwan under the protection of the Domestic Violence Prevention Law. However, during this process, the husbands and their families use more violent ways to maintain their perceived masculinities and to repress the rebellious strength which these women have gained from employment outside the family. Such a change in gender relations in the transnational marriage families is like Robinson (2007: 483) said, ‘women can be seen as active subjects in a transnational (marriage) space that allows them to act outside, to certain degrees, of kinship-based power’ (italics by authors).

**Becoming a determined and independent woman**

Like most other abused immigrant women, Khoa became pregnant in her first year in Taiwan, and has been abused by her husband since then. In the beginning she had to endure the violence. But she started to collect medical proof of her husband’s physical abuse. In April 2008, she sought government assistance. She still lives with her children and husband. The social worker warned her: “You have to be very careful if your husband knows you report domestic violence”, but Khoa replied calmly: “I am not afraid of it. I am well prepared. I don’t want to live with him. I want to divorce him. I want to stay in Taiwan, to work and to bring up my children.” Wives, such as Khoa, who cannot tolerate domestic violence any more may decide to leave home. However, to leave or not to leave is a decision which depends critically on their children.

Some researchers have found that immigrants are at greater risk if they are disembedded from their new family or community of origin, and that the ethnic community gender culture prevents abused women from leaving their families (Midlarsky et al., 2006; Peng, 2005; Supriya, 1996). However, we found that immigrant women respond differently to different structures imposed on them, and that their responses are a dynamic social process. Vietnamese women are more vulnerable in the first few years of their arrival in Taiwan when they have not yet established their social networks and are without independent income. But when they gain financial independence and become more familiar with Taiwanese society, they have more ways to tackle domestic violence. They are even able to divorce their husbands without fearing social pressure from the Vietnamese community, and do not need to consider their parents’ loss of “face.” In front of their parents they pretend to have a happy family life in Taiwan, while at the same time they actually seek a solution to their deadlocked marriages (Wang, 2007). What worries them the most about leaving their family is their children.

There are two advantageous structural factors that facilitate abused wives leaving their husbands in the Taiwanese context: the Domestic Violence Prevention Act and the small- and medium-sized based industrial structure of Taiwan’s economy. The Domestic Violence Prevention Act, enacted in 1998, includes physical, verbal and psychological abuse as offenses, and in such circumstances the state apparatus – police and social workers – is required to intervene. In Vietnam there is no such law. One Vietnamese wife, Oanh, said, “Beating wives in Vietnam is nothing. But I know it is not allowed in Taiwan. The police will intervene and help wives... How do I know? My female boss told me when I started work.” Under the law a husband can be ordered to stop abusing his wife and can be prevented from harassing his wife in her workplace. A protection order issued by a court can ensure that an abused wife keeps her job without fear of her residency status expiring or of harassment by her husband. For example, one abuser went to his wife’s workplace to argue that the employer should not hire his wife. The employer called the police who detained the abuser at the police station for one night because he had violated the protection order. Since that time, the abuser has not been to his wife’s workplace. However, we are aware that state intervention does not guarantee a happy ending, and even if a woman leaves her husband’s family, she still has to face the disadvantageous gender culture of Taiwan’s labor market. Besides, the custody of the children is a thorny issue and largely influences a woman’s decision of whether to leave or stay with her husband.

For example, Linh has lived away from her husband with her daughter for more than a year. She sends her daughter to a private child care center during the day and picks her up after 5 pm. She works regularly until 2:00 pm, and then occasionally works as a house cleaner. Her average monthly wage is NT$25,000 (US$780), which is enough for her and her daughter. But many women are not as lucky as Linh who could leave her husband and his family and be independent. Ngoc has gained Taiwanese citizenship, and lives alone away from her two sons and husband. She does not want to divorce her husband, because she worries about the negative impact this might have on her children. Nor does she want to live with her husband because “there is always fighting between us, and it is not a good solution.” She has considered divorce, but her husband insisted on having sole custody of their two sons. This angered Ngoc who went to court to ask for a Violence Protection Order so that she could have a stronger legal position to win guardianship. Truong’s husband is long-term unemployed, and beats her whenever he is unhappy. She works in an electronics factory to support the whole family financially. Her mother-in-law helps take care of her daughter. She once moved into a friend’s home to escape her husband’s physical abuse, but her husband went to court to divorce her on the grounds that she had “not fulfilled the obligation of living together” (according to Article 1001, Taiwan’s Civil Law) (Lawbank, 2011). Later, Truong agreed to her husband’s request to leave Taiwan, provided she could take her daughter with her, but he declined. She had no choice but to return to her husband and attempt to use the Domestic Violence Protection Law to obtain guardianship of their daughter.
We can see that after a long social process of learning local knowledge and building social networks, Vietnamese wives are no longer silent, and are determined to walk out from the shadow of violence. Beyond the advantageous social structural factors to help them out of abusive patriarchal families, the main supporting factor is employment, which can help improve their language ability, build up their social ties, and give them economic independence (Menjivar & Salcido, 2002; Sheu, 2009), leading to changes in the gender relations in their families, like the Cambodian women in California, using the advantageous structural factors to change the behaviors of their husbands (Ong, 1996). The immigrant women change from helpless domestic violence victims to independent women, constantly negotiating and challenging the patriarchal family (Bui & Morash, 2008). The only worry they face is their children's guardianship, the key point of conflict between them and their husbands' families after they walk out of a situation of domestic violence.

Conclusion

This research explores the effects joining the labor market has on immigrant Vietnamese women under the shadow of domestic violence. There is an emphasis on how marriage and gender relations in the family are transformed by employment. Contrary to stereotypes of victimization depicted by the media and in some reports (Desyllas, 2007), these immigrant women have revealed themselves as diverse and transforming figures. In the dynamic social process of participation in Taiwanese social life, they can attain a higher degree of autonomy and independence. Gradually breaking away from abusive relationships, these immigrant women start to enter into Taiwanese society and learn Taiwanese culture. No longer limited by the expectation of the Taiwanese traditional gender role, they demonstrate that they are independent women, who have used different strategies to negotiate the patriarchal family. Table 2 summarizes the gaps in gender role expectations between husbands and wives.

There are several theoretical implications arising from this research. First, for immigrant women in transnational marriages, getting a job brings not only economic benefits, but also a process to self-empowerment which changes their relationship to their husband's family. Our case studies partially support the relative resources hypothesis, but not in the sense of increasing financial resources. The broadening of social networks through work experience is critical to the accumulation of social capital, and Vietnamese women can find more social resources to tackle problems with their husband's family. Second, we have refined Kandiyoti's (1988) ‘Asian patriarchy negotiation’ model. Although Taiwan and Vietnam are both influenced by Confucian culture, they have had different social and historical developments and have different gender cultures. This has resulted in a gap in expectations between the Taiwanese husband and Vietnamese wife, and makes it difficult for a woman to leave her home to participate in the labor market. Immigrant Vietnamese women in Taiwanese social context need to negotiate a different Asian patriarchal family system. Third, negotiating the patriarchal family is a dynamic social process that we should pay more attention to. Although constrained by Taiwanese gender culture and patriarchal family, Vietnamese immigrant women constantly use different ways to cope with the difficulties they face in different situations.

Endnotes

1 Using the databank of four major Taiwanese newspapers – Apple Daily, Liberty Times, China Times Daily and United Daily, we found 242 cases of Taiwanese family domestic violence and 40 cases of Taiwanese–Vietnamese family domestic violence during the period January 2005 to August 2010.

2 Conversation held on November 5, 2008 at the Kaohsiung Open University, Kaohsiung, Taiwan.

3 Lin (2007) found that women with different class backgrounds had different ways of taking care of children in Taiwan. Women with better economic resources can give money to mothers-in-law to care for the children, so do have expectations that the children are looked after based on their (rather than the mother-in-law's) criteria of child-rearing. Women without economic resources to compensate their mothers-in-law have limited power in terms of how their children are raised by their mothers-in-law.

4 In Taiwan, a newly graduated diploma student earns about US$850 a month.
References


Chien, Tran Van, & Quang, Dinh Van (2004). Tim hieu thuc tran phu nu ket hon voi nguoi Dai Loan: tai khu va cong bong song Cau Long (Understanding the real situation of the women marrying Taiwanese in the east part of Cau Long River). Hanoi: Uy Ban Dan So, Gia Dinh va Te Em (Committee of People, Family and Children).


Sheu, You-Huey (2000). Yu yu xiongzhang: xin yimin funu de shehui ziben renbing (Understanding the real situation of the women marrying Taiwanese in the west part of Cau Long River). Hanoi: Uy Ban Dan So, Gia Dinh va Te Em (Committee of People, Family and Children).


