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Migration, Individualism and Dependency: Experiences of Skilled Women from the Former Soviet Union in Silicon Valley

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MIGRATION, INDIVIDUALISM AND DEPENDENCY: EXPERIENCES OF
SKILLED WOMEN FROM THE FORMER SOVIET UNION IN SILICON VALLEY

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Sociology

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Ievgeniia Zasoba

May 2018

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ABSTRACT

MIGRATION, INDIVIDUALISM AND DEPENDENCY: EXPERIENCES OF SKILLED WOMEN FROM THE FORMER SOVIET UNION IN SILICON VALLEY

by Ievgeniia Zasoba

An academic dialog concerning the intersectionality of national origin, economic class and gender, as mutually constitutive elements of migration, set the context for my inquiry into the experiences of wives who are barred from paid labor by their restricted visa status. Guided by grounded theory, I conducted seventeen semi-structured qualitative interviews to examine ways in which a move to Silicon Valley under a restricted visa class changes the self-image of women, and how they evaluate this change. I found that the ambiguous agency constructs of women socialized in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras facilitated their choice to migrate despite the visa restrictions. After emigrating, the women tended to embrace values of individualism and self-reliance, which reinforced their professional ambitions. However, the absence of professional options created a split between the women's lived experiences and their self-representation. In addition, I found that a visa that prohibits employment creates a homogenizing effect on women's self-images, putting them on similar personal and professional tracks and making their legal and economic status less predictable. These findings suggest that structural strategies might be adopted to help these women reclaim their self-images and exert more control over the selection and pursuit of their goals.

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With sincere gratitude towards each of the seventeen study participants - members of the community of emigrants from countries of the Former Soviet Union I dedicate this thesis project to all women-migrants, as I hope that the findings may point towards communal and policy changes that will benefit my own and similar migrant communities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As some authors have pointed out, an institutionalized preference for highly skilled immigrants is a relatively new addition to American immigration policy (FitzGerald & Cook-Martin 2014). For most of the 20th century, Eastern Europeans came to the U.S. as refugees or the government granted them admission to allow family reunions. At present, scholars identify work as one of the primary reasons that immigrants come to the U.S. (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003; Robila 2008). Today, many Eastern Europeans come as skilled laborers, motivated by “the gap between available salaries and work conditions in their own countries and those regarded there as acceptable for people with their education” (Robila 2008:548). Academia has become interested in the experiences of working migrants, their mobility in host countries, and ties with their home countries. However, as legal scholars have pointed out, there is an apparent gap in the social science knowledge about spouses of skilled immigrants who are barred from participation in paid labor (Balgamwalla 2014). Spouses of skilled workers who obtain an H1-B class working visa are prohibited from employment in the U.S.; they and their children come as dependents of the H1-B visa holders. The holders of H4 class dependent visas, are allowed to obtain working permits only when their families are granted permanent residency in the U.S. Approximately 33% of all H1-B visa workers and their families eventually obtain permanent residency after the companies they work for petition for a change in their immigration status (Zamora 2016). While the largest number of skilled immigrants come from India (Iyengar 2017), many arrive from countries of the Former Soviet Union (FSU). Silicon Valley (SV) gender distribution statistics suggest that approximately 70%

of all H1-B visa holders are male, and about 80% of all dependents are female (Swanner 2017). Although economic dependence on a spouse affects most married women in the U.S. (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics n.d.; Alkadry 2006; Blackburn 2006), the potential consequences of economic dependence can be severe for immigrant women, due to the social capital they left behind in their home countries (Ryabov 2016) and immigration laws that limit legal and economic rights (Bragun 2008; Balamwala 2014). Legal scholars note that “the dependent spouse visa category imposes restrictions on the ability of these women to control their immigration status, work outside the home, obtain a divorce, retain custody of their children, and escape domestic violence” (Balamwala 2014:29). An immigration reform initiative under President Obama lifted the employment ban for a small number of dependents. Effective May 2015, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) extended “eligibility for employment authorization” to “certain H-4 dependent spouses” of “certain H-1B nonimmigrants” who have started the process of seeking employment-based permanent resident status (The Department of Homeland Security. n.d.). However, this policy change was discretionary, and the present executive branch has signaled that it may seek to reverse the policy and therefore reinforce gendered dependency within immigrant families. Currently, the group “Save Jobs USA” is challenging the lifting of the ban in court, and the U.S. Department of Justice requested additional time to consider the matter (Iyengar 2017).

As Park (2009) suggests, immigration leads to a reshaping of an immigrant’s previous identity. Therefore, I formulated the following research question: “In what ways does the experience of immigrating to SV under a dependent visa class change the self-image of

women from countries of the FSU, and how do they evaluate this change?” In my analysis, I first demonstrate that women-immigrants from the FSU have an ambiguous and contradictory agency construct that facilitated their choice to migrate under a dependent visa class. Secondly, after immigrating to SV, many endorse values of self-reliance, individualism and independence, and these values reinforce their professional ambitions. However, an absence of options for professional development creates a split between their lived experiences and their self-representation. Finally, I show that the H-4 visa has a homogenizing effect on the women’s self-image, since it makes their future legal and economic status less predictable, and because they react to its restrictions by following similar personal and professional tracks. In some cases, current or former holders of dependent class visas participate in “coerced volunteer work” (Baines 2017; Keleman 2017), or they are paid symbolic wages as workers performing “aesthetic labor” (Williams & Connell 2010).

Following the literature review which I divided into three sections, I discuss the methods used in the research. Next, in the findings section, I synthesize emerging themes into three major points of analysis and I place each of them in the context of existing sociological scholarship. In the discussion section, after summarizing my findings, I argue that these findings could point towards structural solutions that may help this and similar communities to reclaim and redefine women’s identities in a way that will add more meaning to their lives.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *The Specificity of an Origin from the Former Soviet Union*

2.1.1. *Soviet and post-Soviet agency construct.* The specificity of originating from one of the FSU countries has been recently acknowledged by academia. For example, Goldfarb (1997), Dimun Yost & Lucas (2002), Temkina & Zdravomyslova (2003), Zherebkina (2003), Aroian, Norris & Chiang (2003), Remennick (2004), Savkina (2009), Penn & Massino (2009), Logan & Rivera (2011), Ryabov (2016) note that immigrant women from countries of the FSU are less likely to have been stay-at-home wives compared to immigrant women from other regions. A majority were well educated under the Soviet system, were expected to work for money, and had pursued occupational goals while maintaining full household and childcare responsibilities (Fitzpatrick 1999; Aroian, Norris & Chiang 2003; Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2003; Remennick 2004; Penn & Massino 2009; Utrata 2015; Ryabov 2016). The unpredictability of punishments and rewards in Gulag times, and the “schizophrenic” (Fitzpatrick 1999) nature of Stalinism form some of the historic roots of the complexity of women’s agency in the Soviet-era. As Fitzpatrick (1999) mentions, Soviet society combined a discourse of voluntarism and a belief in luck, with an *I’m just a small person* discourse. For example, she mentions the movement among the wives of the Bolshevik elite, and the Soviet ban on abortion in the 1920s and its subsequent legalization. Both steps on abortion law were portrayed as part of a nominally genderless Soviet agenda. Other scholars explain that the socialist system subjugated and treated men and women equally badly, creating a new type of people: the so-called “Homo Sovieticus” or Foucauldian “biomass” (Savkina 2009). The concept of

Homo Sovieticus denied biological and sexual dimensions of identity because the construct of gender was assumed to be anachronistic in a society of “emancipation and equality” (Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2003; Remennick 2004; Savkina 2009). There is, therefore, uncertainty among scholars on the concept of agency among post-Soviet women.

Ryabov (2016), in his study of transnational marriages, mentions a debate among academics over whether women from the developing world who become marriage immigrants are lacking in their capacity to develop agency. He notes that the self-representation of these women is often inconsistent and contradictory, because their agency was constructed through different and contradictory norms, practices and discourses. But Penn & Massino (2009) argue that the welfare system, which delivered high levels of educational attainment and minimal poverty, provided apparent (albeit restricted) agency to many Soviet bloc women in both the domestic and public spheres. Ghodsee (2001: xiii) agrees that “something very important was lost with the passing of the communist era.” Remennick (2004:99) notes that those who left countries of the FSU in the early 1990s were “socialized in the relatively egalitarian gender culture.”

Furthermore, scholars see the double burden of professional and domestic work as a “harsh training” that helped women to manage better “within the unstable micro-economy” (Remennick 2004; Utrata 2015). They note that the imposed working mother gender contract considerably reinforced the position of women. The women became more resourceful and adapted to dealing with bureaucratic institutions, while male identity in the liberal Soviet and post-Soviet discourse became marginalized and reduced to the role

of a “bread winner” (Utrata 2015). This relative futility of the male role has been articulated in terms of “weak men,” “crisis of masculinity,” “failed masculinity” and “infantization” (Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2003; Remennick 2004; Utrata 2015). For example, Utrata (2105) in her study of changes that occurred within families after the dissolution of the USSR, stresses the high importance of motherhood for the Russian female identity in comparison to the relatively low importance of marriage. Goldfarb (1997) questions Marody’s (1993) suggestion that post-communist married women gained autonomy through their protection of the private domain against public invasion, as married women became more concerned with the health and freedom of their families (which was strongly politicized under the Soviet regime) and less concerned with injustices within the family itself (Marody 1993). Temkina & Zdravomyslova (2003) give this argument methodological consideration by stating that Western concepts need to be reinterpreted in the concrete local context. For example, the role of house wife can be interpreted within a Russian context as a “liberation from the impositions of the state gender order” (Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2003:60). The debate over the meaning, interpretation and degree of women’s autonomy is ongoing, but a majority of scholars agree that contrary to Soviet propaganda, there was significant gender injustice under the Soviet system which only intensified after the fall of the USSR (Goldfarb 1997; Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2003; Remennick 2004; Savkina 2009; Penn & Massino 2009; Utrata 2015).

2.1.2. Race, class, gender and emigration. Scholars emphasize post-Soviet emigrant women’s intersectional characteristics. Studies report that the categories of language,

gender and economic status of women immigrants interplay to their disadvantage. By virtue of being women and being immigrants, these people are at a double disadvantage (Sassen-Koob 1984; Ryabov 2016). Post-Soviet women immigrants are also more likely to suffer psychological distress compared to men (Aroian, Norris & Chiang 2003); being visually privileged by whiteness, they constitute a “vocal minority” (Ryabov 2016) and often suffer downward social mobility as a result either of coming from middle class households or having had strong professional identities and future aspirations (Barajas & Ramirez 2007; Robila 2008; Ryabov 2016). Researchers have challenged the perception of post-Soviet women as similarly advantaged compared to other European women. Scholars have listed a lack of English proficiency, culture shock, loss of status, and involved family dynamics among the general adjustment issues that affect employment for immigrants from the FSU, regardless of their gender (Dimun, Yost & Lucas 2002). In another study, focused on refugee work force incorporation, researchers found that post-Soviet origin poses general disadvantages compared to other white immigrants, and that women originating in the FSU are less likely to be employed and more likely to rely on public assistance compared to both men from the FSU and other white women immigrants (Logan & Rivera 2011).

Scholars note that the post-Soviet women’s gender construct is rather complex, ambiguous, or that it might not be even fully constructed, lacking biological and sexual dimensions (Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2003; Savkina 2009). However, the lack of political rights under the Soviet regime led women to develop their civic identities and led them to incorporate unique strategies in response to or in spite of institutional

pressures (Penn & Massino 2009). Additionally, scholars argue that most post-Soviet and Eastern European woman immigrants, although seeking a more egalitarian division of labor, do not question existing power relationships and social institutions and do not see their status as discriminatory compared to that of men (Goldfarb 1997; Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2003).

This paradox clashes with the fundamental notions of liberal Western feminism. Contemporary Western scholars emphasize the importance of challenging all power relations and all social institutions with a continuing task of gender reconstruction. Gendered men and women are seen as hostages of gender production (Rosenberg & Howard 2008). However, while there is apparent agreement among scholars of critical theory regarding the notion of the social construct of gender, and of decoupling “biology and social location” (Rosenberg & Howard 2008), some scholars from the FSU emphasize a need to build a gender theory in its own political and cultural context (Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2003; Savkina 2009; Hrycak & Rewakowicz 2009). For example, they question whether “victim feminism” (Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2003; Savkina 2009) is a productive categorization for post-Soviet practices. Zhrebkina (2003) argues that the Soviet annihilation of biological existence, where reproductive biology was “obscured behind the model of social reproduction” (Zhrebkina 2003:67) resulted in a missing feminine identity, so women from the FSU might be facing a need to construct and structure, rather than deconstruct their woman-ness.

Furthermore, researchers working in recently established gender studies departments in the FSU, have faced difficulties when advocating resistance to the current Russian

revival of the Foucauldian biopower concept, and to the victimization of women produced by the naturalization of gender roles under state dominated biological determinism (Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2003). There are additional divisions among post-Soviet critical feminist scholars. For example, the Ukrainian Kiev school of “national feminism” (Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2003) emphasizes the role of the grassroots micro-public and online virtual communities in developing gender studies, while Russian liberal thought tends to position itself broadly, bridging both liberal Western and Russian contexts, insisting on a reformulation and re-interpretation of the content of Western gender concepts (Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2003; Hrycak & Rewakowicz 2009). Scholars also emphasize the analytical potential of the intersectionality of race, class and gender as mutually constitutive elements, applying it as a methodological approach (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003; Rosenberg & Howard 2008; Chun, Lipsitz & Shin 2013; Ryabov 2016;). For example, Hondagneu-Sotelo (2003) emphasize that, through awareness of the intersectionality and “the recognition of gender as a set of social practices shaping and shaped by immigration,” scholars make gender a key element in immigration, examining how it is incorporated in global institutions and daily practices. Some mention anti-categorical and intra-categorical conceptualization as revealing frameworks for eliciting women’s authentic self-representation and agency presentation within a nonhomogeneous community of post-Soviet woman immigrants, especially given the growing diversity within their groups (Ryabov 2016).

Finally, various gendered effects of skilled immigration to SV, particularly in relation to restrictive immigration law, are severely understudied by scholars (Balgamwalla

2014). Although the authors of several legal reviews and magazine articles have championed the cause of Asian and East Asian women, who have suffered the adverse effects of H-4 visa restrictions (Chaudhry 2001; Devi 2002; Shah 2007; Bragun 2008; Chun, Lipsitz & Shin 2013) there are apparent gaps in the sociological body of knowledge surrounding women's experiences with these visa restrictions, some of which I intend to cover by this study. For example, all of the above cited scholars concerned with the immigration experiences of post-Soviet women, studied the wave of immigration that spanned the 1990s to the early 2000s and was driven by refugees, family reunions and transnational marriage. Legal scholars argue that the H-4 visa is fundamentally gendered and forces dependency among professionally qualified women, bringing them mental anguish (Shah 2007; Banerjee 2012). They note that this visa perpetrates a gendered division of labor and leads to family breakups; in part, because the visa exacerbates domestic abuse creating a dilemma between seeking assistance and preserving immigration status (Bragun 2008; Banerjee 2012). Scholars add that such covering of the spouse under the legal status of an immigrant worker comes from the coverture doctrine (laws that put women under the protection of their husbands), which was abolished in respect to U.S. born women in the middle of the nineteenth century but continues to apply to immigrant women (Shah 2007).

In contrast, studying women employed in tech, some scholars (focusing on the experiences of Asian women) note that structural opportunities within SV industry have enabled them to gain advantages and circumvent bias by job-hopping (Shih 2006). Others state that working East Asian women H1-B visa holders and women H-4 dependents are

similarly disadvantaged within the current global tech market. They argue that, on one hand, the industry assumes the ideal worker is young, has no family and is willing to work a frantic schedule, while, on the other hand, immigration law bars other professionals with high aspiration levels from work (Devi 2002). A number of scholars stressed the need to re-evaluate the emancipatory potential of the current SV labor market (Devi 2002; Barajas & Ramirez 2007).

2.2. Individualism, Independence and Immigrant Employment

Literature suggests a consensus among scholars that immigrants are more likely to believe in the American Dream than those who are native born (Clark 2003; Escobar 2006). For example, Suarez-Orozco (2012) indicates the high level of optimism that immigrants have when they come to the U.S. Suarez-Orozco (2012:17) emphasizes that immigrants often come to the U.S. because they cannot translate their willingness to do “impossible jobs that natives refuse to consider” into their vision of success in their home countries. Women immigrants embrace the American Dream as much as men, but, as Logan (2010) points out, they often approach their optimism from a household perspective. Therefore, they are often willing to sacrifice their own individual prospects to advance the career of a husband who is the presumed bread winner. The fact that most immigrant women are willing to subordinate their career prospects to those of their husbands is not surprising given that they were likely to adopt the same tactics in their home countries (Logan 2010). In a study of immigrant women from Eastern Europe, Crizan (2012) interviewed immigrants to the U.S. or Western Europe after the fall of the Soviet Union. The study frames migration as a path to empowerment for Eastern

European women. The author states that, for most of her interviewees, emigration moved them from the more rigidly patriarchal societies of their home countries to more liberal and egalitarian societies where the women enjoyed expanded job opportunities and more comprehensive legal protections. She quotes one of her interviewees: “If in America a man beat up a woman, you call the police; at home we call this tradition” (Crizan 2012:177). She concludes that changes in the power dynamics between spouses could be attributed to increases in the women’s economic independence (Crizan 2012). This narrative conforms to the concept addressed by Bellah (2008) that to embrace American culture is to accept individualism as an ideal form of modern life. Bellah (2008) explains the American impulse towards ever-increasing individualism as an absolute commitment to individual dignity and a condemnation of the inequalities that can be imposed by cultural, political, economic and religious authorities. However, the author refers to Tocqueville to add that “individualism also weakens the very meanings that give content and substance to the ideal of individual dignity” (Bellah 2008:144). The literature demonstrates that the cult of individualism is not unique to the immigrant experience in the U.S. Joseph (2013) found that Malaysian women who had emigrated to Australia adopted workplace identities emphasizing “self-management, life-long learning and individualism” (Joseph 2013:35). At the same time, they continued to exhibit identity markers that revealed their commitment to a collective culture and a sense of community within safe spaces: religious or other gatherings within the Malaysian immigrant community.

Park (2009) provides a more complex picture than Crizan (2012), in which the experience of migration and employment after migration can be both empowering and un-empowering. In his study, some women found that the opportunity to work gave them a more positive self-image while contrasting themselves to non-working women (Park 2009:118):

My friends in Korea do nothing. When I meet them, all they talk about is how they enjoy going to gyms, and saunas. That's their lifestyles. But I cannot identify with them. Even if that kind of lifestyle symbolizes their wealthy statuses, oh, I could not live like that.

In contrast, many found the experience of working (often in service jobs) to be humiliating, or an imposition (brought on by spousal, family, community or economic pressure) that prevented them from assuming more personally meaningful roles as full-time mothers.

As Park (2009) observes, migration leads to a renegotiation of identity. The extent to which migrants experience a shift in their identities and their positive and negative perceptions of these changes depend on intersections between gender, class, home cultures, and host cultures. Isurin (2011) mentions a less recognized way in which cultural individualism and collectivism are exhibited. Newly arrived immigrants from Russia were pleased to find that American strangers smiled at them on the street. This contrasts with the more serious expressions that people adopt among strangers in Russia. The researcher attributes this difference to cultural norms of individualism vs. collectivism: Russians tend to form strong bonds with a small network of close friends (treating others with some suspicion until they earn friendship), while Americans form looser bonds (sometimes stating that they have 40 or more friends) and are comfortable

smiling at strangers who are fellow individuals and not far removed from their definition of a friend. Isurin (2011) describes a linguistic analysis in which English-speaking Russian immigrants to the U.S. who were asked to describe events from the near and distant past, were found to produce more self-oriented narratives over time. The results suggested that immigrants took on a more individualistic self-image as they assimilated into their new home culture.

According to Remennick (1999) and Logan (2010), in the officially gender-blind society of the Soviet era, women were expected to work while remaining responsible for household and care-giving tasks. Logan (2010) also points out that women often work in professions that are predominantly staffed by men in the rest of the world. Although, the women are generally paid less and are less likely to be promoted compared to their male counterparts. Bragun (2008) explains that, in addition to having reached high levels of educational attainment, many H-4 holders had active careers before they emigrated from their home countries. Balamwala (2014) details the parallels between the legal restrictions on H4 visa holders and the restrictions that were placed on the wives of immigrant Chinese laborers under the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (wives were allowed to follow husbands who had already been admitted, but they were prohibited from working). Furthermore, Korpela (Benson 2014:27) states that lifestyle migrants often adopt personal narratives in which they present themselves as “active agents who have improved their lives by way of their own unmediated choice; they have taken their destiny into their own hands by escaping unsatisfactory circumstances.” Scholars suggest that this is true for the large number of H1-B visa holders who work in IT. As Shih

(2004) mentions, the ideology of the IT industry in SV casts workers as entrepreneurs who are individually responsible for their own careers, thereby justifying the expectation that programmers will work extraordinarily long hours.

Given the expectation (in both the home and host cultures) that women should work for pay, and an almost universal pattern of extensive work experience in their home countries, women immigrants from the FSU express a need to be seen as “more than housewives” (Ryabov 2016). This tendency to define themselves in terms of an antithetical other echoes the ongoing debate over whether liberated feminist women should be defined as the antithesis of the “happy housewife” (Johnson 2000). Remennick (1999) reminds that the family remains the basic social unit in the FSU, so that immigrant women from that region are often ambivalent about the notion of feminism as a path to emancipation from their husbands. Remennick (1999) emphasizes that cohesion within the husband and wife unit was essential to surviving in the Soviet state and is important for navigating day to day corruption in the post-Soviet states. Park (2009) points out that some immigrant women define wage-earning work as an extension of their roles as mothers rather than a rejection of motherhood. They saw their contribution to needed household earnings as a substitute for traditional tasks such as preparing snacks after school.

For H4 visa holders, who are barred from work, volunteering and continued education take on great importance. Ng (2010) describes the need for lifelong education (outside of the workplace) as an ideological construct that acts to externalize the burden of retraining workers in an environment where needed skill sets are changing rapidly. Workers are

made responsible for deciding what to learn and finding somewhere to train. Ng (2010) argues that immigrant women are drawn into a particularly burdensome cycle of lifelong education by a need to improve their language skills and to be re-credentialed (since employers and credentialing authorities often devalue their previous training). Baines (2017) and Keleman (2017) present similar framework that categorize volunteer work as either voluntary or coerced. In the case of immigrant women, much of their volunteering matches definitions of coerced unpaid labor. As Baines (2017) observes, the skills that coerced volunteers are prevented from using in paid jobs are used to fill unfunded gaps in needed social services. Both authors point out that coerced volunteer work is most commonly carried out by women, because feminized tasks such as teaching and caregiving are more likely to be poorly funded.

2.3. The H4 Visa in the Historical Context of American Immigration Policy

Although U.S. public discourse has always included fears regarding the danger of admitting foreign radicals, the U.S. maintained relatively open immigration policies until the mid-1870s (Ettinger 2001). In the history of U.S. immigration law, explicitly racist policies of the late 19th century (e.g., the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and a mandatory literacy test) gave way to a quota system by the beginning of the 20th century. The mandatory literacy test was “the preferred technique for restricting the entry of southern and eastern Europeans” (FitzGerald & Cook-Martin 2014:99). Influenced by the development of “scientific racism” and eugenics, the government introduced quotas targeting Asians, Latino and Blacks, but “primarily filtered Europeans” (FitzGerald & Cook-Martin 2014:102). Although president Wilson vetoed the bill, the next president

(Harding) signed “The Emergency Quota Act” into law in 1921. The only opponents of national-origins quotas for Europeans were those politicians and organizations, “whose constituents were targeted for restriction” (FitzGerald & Cook-Martin 2014:101). In 1952, Truman’s immigration commission produced a report titled “Whom We Shall Welcome,” which became an outline for the 1965 demise of the quotas (particularly the racist provisions against Asians and Caribbean Blacks). However, the focus on family reunions discriminated against Europeans who had no relatives to invite them. Policies of ethnic selection changed into the policies that favored European refugees and Asians at the time of Cold War. In 1990, in addition to family reunification and employment visas, a new diversity visa program established a lottery system that gave visas to countries that had been underrepresented or adversely affected by the 1965 immigration act. It seemed that this program did not benefit prospective immigrants from Eastern Europe. In 2010, for example, only two countries of the FSU – Ukraine and Uzbekistan – were among the program’s top ten (FitzGerald & Cook-Martin 2014:128). In 1986, The Immigration Reform and Control Act legalized 2.7 million unauthorized immigrants, mostly benefiting Latino immigrants and agriculture workers. More recently, the criteria for selection was shifted towards a point-based system that rewards potential immigrants who are English speakers and deemed to be highly skilled. FitzGerald & Cook-Martin (2014) suggest that this new system would most likely benefit educated, English-speaking Asians.

Calavita (1994) and Ettinger (2011) identify the competing interests of employers and labor as the main source of inconsistency in U.S. immigration policy. Employers are

eager to allow immigration to maintain production and minimize wages (weakening unions), while workers want to exclude immigrants who could compete for their jobs. Calavita (1994) suggests that the U.S. federal government generally takes actions that favor the employers' side in this dispute, but that elected officials feel a need to appease workers by passing symbolic legislation that has no real impact on the flow of immigrants; and that the main consequence is an increase in the number of undocumented immigrants. The symbolic restrictions have real consequences for migrants, but they offer no protection for U.S. workers. The need for democratic governments to project symbolic opposition to immigration while favoring the needs of employers extends to European Union. Geddes (2016:7) writes: "During elections there might be 'tough' rhetoric about controlling immigration; but, in government, other pressures such as the interest of the business community can lead to more expansive labour migration policies." Burawoy (1976) explains that legal constraints often segregate migrant workers into a subclass that cannot be integrated into the broader population and is therefore more vulnerable to exploitation. Legal low-skilled migrants are limited by the requirement that they work for the employer who sponsored their entry into the country, putting them in a powerless situation similar to that of undocumented migrants (Burawoy 1976). Geddes (2016:4) discusses the creation of categories of migrant workers in Europe: "being labelled a 'high skilled migrant' leads to an entirely different relationship to the host society compared to that experienced by an 'asylum seeker' or 'refugee'." Balgamwalla (2014) concedes that there may be legitimate reasons for restricting certain rights of non-citizens, conceding the superficial logic of preventing

ordinary wives from competing on the U.S. job market when they have only been admitted into the country as companions to their highly skilled (and therefore indispensable) husbands. Geddes (2016:27) mentions that British immigration policies of the late 1960's followed a similar logic, when only 20% of employment authorization vouchers were issued to women under the assumption that "men were the breadwinners and women were dependents who would follow their husbands." However, Bragun (2008) and Balgamwalla (2014) provide substantial evidence that this premise for prohibiting H4 visa holders from working is flawed, arguing against unjustified or arbitrary differences in the treatment of similarly situated classes of nonimmigrants. Bragun (2008) reports that wives are allowed to work if they accompany their husbands under various other types of non-immigrant visas (e.g. L-type visas awarded for intra-company transfers). Bragun (2008) also points out that the number of H4 visas issued each year is relatively small (approximately 136,000 in 2017 according to U.S. Dept. of State Statistics 2017). H4 visa restrictions also ignore economic conditions that dictate most households to have two wage earners to maintain a middle-class standard of living in the U.S. (Warren 2016). Research by Miller (2016) found that stimuli suggesting economic threats (for example, reading an article on the "failure of the American Dream") led survey respondents to express more conservative social views about gender. The researchers used questions related to the ideology that men and women are best suited to separate social and occupational spheres, and threatening stimuli made them more likely to agree that men should earn more than women and that women are happier

staying at home. These findings help to explain why the prospect of competition from H1-B visa holders might require symbolic restrictions on their wives.

Burowoy (1976) argues that the availability of transient migrant labor shifts the costs of workforce renewal (costs incurred from birth until one reaches working age) onto the country of origin, so that the host country receives the full value of this labor while paying only to maintain the workers while they are engaged in the work. Stuart Anderson, an advocate for increasing the number of H1-B visas, made the following statement during a congressional hearing (Anderson 2006:47): “It is worth noting that America also gains considerably from foreign nationals educated outside the United States. Such individuals bring with them substantial human capital that America essentially receives without cost.” Bragun (2008) and Balmawalla (2014) argue that it is wasteful to postpone the ability of highly trained women who are H4 visa holders to participate in the work force, particularly when most intend to file for (and more than 30% receive) permanent residency. When these women do not return to the workforce, or when they re-train for downgraded positions, the women’s home countries receive no benefit from their investment in the women’s education, and the benefits to their new communities in the U.S. are reduced. A highly qualified woman whose job skills have deteriorated while under the H4 visa work restriction, is likely to become overqualified competition for lower-skilled workers in the U.S. once she receives her work authorization (Bragun 2008). In May 2015 the Obama administration issued a policy change that allowed H4 visa holders who had reached an advanced stage of the green card application process to apply for temporary employment authorization or “EAD”

(Rajan 2017). However, the Trump administration has filed a motion to reverse this solution, threatening to end the practice of issuing EADs to H4 wives and to strip these authorizations from those who have already received them.

Williams (2010) and Crain (2016) describe the phenomenon of aesthetic labor, where employers seek employees that have a particular look and pattern of behavior that fits the brand image. This type of job requirement is prevalent in the retail and service sectors; although similar considerations extend to call centers, where telephone operators are expected to speak in a way that sounds appropriate to clients. On the upscale retail side, specifically, employers tend to recruit front-line sales staff from among their customers, or at least the more attractive ones whom other customers might wish to emulate by using the brand's products. Since income from these jobs is often supplemental (pocket money), more affluent employees are often willing to work for low wages, encouraged by the promise of employee discounts and by the fact that they are flattered to be selected to represent one of their favorite brands (Williams 2010). Crain (2016) argues that aesthetic labor often involves unpaid work and out-of-pocket costs for the employee, since these workers must buy their own uniforms and spend significant time preparing to look good for their shifts. In other words, employers save the costs that would be associated with training, outfitting and adequately compensating less affluent employees.

3. METHOD

Based on contentions in the literature, women from the FSU may experience complex and ambiguous effects on their sense of agency after immigrating to the U.S. as the dependents of highly skilled husbands admitted under the H1-B visa program. This complexity is a product of the intersection between their socialization experiences in post-Soviet culture and their developing perceptions of the legally limited options available to redefine themselves in the U.S. Shah (2007) and Banerjee (2012) mention the mental anguish experienced by H4 visa holders. Ryabov (2016) brings up categories based on “double disadvantage” and “vocal minority.” Logan & Rivera (2011) and Utrata (2015) argue that motherhood has a deep meaning and also a large impact on post-Soviet women immigrants’ incorporation into the work force. Thus, my overarching research question was: “In what ways does immigration to Silicon Valley under a dependent visa status change the self-images of women from the FSU, and how do they perceive this change?”

In order to conduct this research, I obtained IRB approval on November 8, 2016. In 2016-2017, I carried out seventeen 2 to 2.5 hour long qualitative, semi-structured interviews with women from post-Soviet countries (mostly from Ukraine and Russia). Participants were women from the FSU, ages 18-65, who were married to IT professionals (also from the FSU), and who were either still experiencing or had experienced restricted visa status in the past twenty-five years (Appendix A). The large time span allowed me to refute some of my emerging theories and to identify the persistency of agency transformations (Burawoy 1998). Saturating the sample in this

way has also increased the experimental validity of the findings. I conducted these interviews based on theoretical sampling. I used nonrandom multiple snowballing for recruiting, because random sampling is not feasible for this type of research. To find the initial participants, I drew upon my personal ties within the community.

There was a minimal risk of distress due to the personal nature of some questions. I used the multiple snowball method to select the participants to reduce risk to the participants' confidentiality. I assured each participant that she was allowed to use a code name. Any identifying data is not reported and is kept in a file on a password-protected computer that is only accessible by me. Identifying data is kept separately from any transcripts, audio recordings, or resulting publications. All identifying characteristics were changed in this paper. With permission, the interviews were audio recorded. All participants signed a consent form. They were also encouraged to follow up on the resulting research.

The interviews were conducted in English, using a questionnaire (Appendix B), at a time and place of the participant's choosing. I negotiated the choice of the language with the interviewees and most of them preferred to speak in English as they perceived our interviews as an additional opportunity to practice their second language. My preference for using a non-native language was mostly a matter of meeting a research timeline and avoiding misinterpretations that might develop from translations. Those who were shy to speak in English at first, found it easier after I assured them that my own proficiency is a work in progress since I only began to speak English eight years ago. On occasion, some interviewees used Russian words to provide clearer explanations. Sometimes, I

paraphrased or translated confusing questions or words into Russian. Use of a non-native language by both the researcher and the participants could be a main weakness of this research.

The questionnaire was designed to explore meanings that the participants attach to topics that included their move to the U.S., unpaid labor, motherhood, English language proficiency, visa status and social well-being. A small sample and qualitative methods helped to develop explanations of agency transformation at the level of the immigrant community from the FSU in Silicon Valley. Academia has acknowledged the benefits of gaining a qualitative understanding of communal experiences (Luker 2008; Choo & Ferree 2010) and scholars have utilized this understanding in research on migration experiences through the lens of gender (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1992; Remennick 2004; Ryabov 2016), and in research on gender and employment in a host country (Menjivar 1999; Shih 2006; Chun, Lipsitz & Shin 2013).

My approach was to locate people within the community to which they belong in order to access a process of agency transformation not from a pre-specified preferred or undesirable point of view, but according to what individuals in this community may perceive to be *good* or *bad*. Gildea (2002:10) cautioned that there are still existing schools of thought that dismiss oral interviews as an unreliable source. But he argued that individual stories are never personal, they are shaped by a particular discourse. Reflecting on their experiences, people seek to align their lives with a particular mode of existence. People build life narratives according to the dominant discourse, any rupture of the narrative, contradiction or inconsistency, reveals a hidden transcript, a dominated or

secondary discourse. Therefore, once transcribed, the interviews were coded applying anti-categorical and intra-categorical conceptualization and analyzed using grounded theory and Critical Discourse Analysis (Gibson & Brown 2009). Inductive analysis helped to establish indigenous categories, find emergent themes and identify dominant discourses.

A prior literature review shaped the preliminary framework for the initial data coding. Once themes emerged and indigenous categorization was achieved, I corroborated my findings with a review of additional migration and employment literature. Sufficient theoretical saturation was achieved once no new categories, patterns and themes were emerging, but those emerging rather corroborated those already known (Ryabov 2016).

This research is socially significant because it has the potential to yield a better understanding of the barriers that immigrant women face when they seek greater autonomy or economic independence within the skill-dominated economy of the host country. The study has an objective of consciousness-raising by applying anti-categorical and intra-categorical conceptualization with the respect to women's diverse self-representation (Smith 2005; Ryabov 2008). Subsequently, research insights may be logically generalized (Luker 2008) and point to communal and policy solutions.

Possible weaknesses of this research design are its time-consuming nature, a risk of misinterpretation of meanings due to the use of non-native language by both the researcher and the participants, and power effects (Burawoy 1998) caused by various ways my positionality may have been perceived by the participants.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. The Ambiguous and Contradictory Post-Soviet Agency Construct

4.1.1. An Opportunity Born of Good Luck, Unquestioned and Unplanned. As scholars suggest, immigrants are generally optimistic people. The impulse to pursue the American Dream is stronger among immigrants (regardless of their gender, ethnicity or economic status) compared to native born Americans (Clark 2003; Escobar 2006; Suarez-Orozco 2012). The fundamental idea is that one will be relatively free to define goals and that hard work will allow one to achieve these goals. On the other hand, the obvious everyday truth is that we do not calculate our futures carefully, and neither can we accurately predict them. We do what seems a good idea at the time (according to shared values, popular images and our own limited knowledge and expertise), and deal with the unintended consequences later. Sometimes, what upsets us the most is the unravelling of our own false assumptions. Or, as one woman-interviewee put it while reflecting on her first impression of SV “we all go through the process of disillusionment here.” For the women immigrants I interviewed, this growing personal expertise coexists with the American Dream mentality in a complex and peculiar way. In the early Soviet era, many practiced self-censorship as a strategy to cope with discriminatory state policies concerning the purity of the worker and peasant classes. As Fitzpatrick (1999) suggests, people tended to diminish their agency and verbalize it in ways that did not seem threatening to those in power (or were not suspicious to those who could potentially write a denunciation – meaning, anybody). *I’m just a small person, nothing depends on me* was a common mentality among Soviet citizens. As one old-timer said, reflecting on her

family's move here twenty years ago: "Moving was a logical decision, it was just a matter of time." However, this discourse was coupled with voluntarism, a belief in fate (or luck), and a stress on the crucial role of personality. It seems that women who immigrated under restrictive visa classes, share such a coping strategy. This strategy might seem contradictory from an outsider's perspective, because those who adopt it appear both decisive and submissive, strong and weak, at the same time. To put it simply, the *this just happened to me* discourse is coupled with *we won a lottery*, and this means that people are actively utilizing available strategies to seek better lives without fully acknowledging their decision-making processes.

The middle class living standard differential between the U.S. and the FSU is one of the reasons why people in post-Soviet societies perceive the working visa lottery to be a chance to win a better life for one's family. As the interviewees discussed, in many cases it was actually they who insisted on their fiancé's or husband's participation in programming contests, talent fairs or H1-B visa lotteries. One young woman admitted that, compared to other men, her fiancé was a "hot shot" in their small town in central Russia, because he was an aspiring programmer and had a chance to be invited to SV. Therefore, his wife and children would have a safe and comfortable living, and she would "see the world." A shared lottery mentality and the attractiveness of the new liberal idea of being selected based on merit (on one's intellectual ability or special talent, like in case of the O class visa), makes the agreement to move to SV akin to accepting a once-in-a-lifetime award. Once a family wins its ticket to a better life, they normally have less than a month to make their final decision. So, some of the interviewees explained that they felt

as if the move to SV was something that simply happened to them, that it was beyond their control. They did not question what they perceived to be good luck. As an illustration of a superficial decision-making and information-gathering process prior to the move, one woman explained how her family ended up in SV:

At first, they wanted to buy the company... And then they wanted him to work for them, but we thought it might be in Ukraine, but then it was here.

Another woman, who was a former IT developer, explained that she was happily preoccupied with her ongoing pregnancy, so she did not do research into the area to which they would be moving. In other words, the common image of a decent mode of living in Soviet and post-Soviet discourse celebrates a courageous leaping towards the unknown, or a risk-taking emigrant mentality, as some might frame it. This voluntary decision to participate in a lottery, and to accept the offer, becomes an uncontested way to be selected for one's best personal and professional life option. Obviously, this does not mean that the women were unaware or uncritical of the brain drain effect. On the contrary, many talked about being commodified by the corporations. For example, one woman called the middle-man consulting firms that organize IT workers' moves to SV "body shops." Perhaps, it is because professionals are painfully aware of global processes that they choose not to be left behind when all of the smartest people appear to be leaving their nation state. In a common Russian-Jewish joke from the nineties, a poster at the airport reads: "The last one to leave the country, please turn off the lights." This joke appears to describe the mood of many educated workers who have emigrated. Every woman I spoke with reflected on the emotional pain of parting with her family and friends, and on fears of giving up their civic identities. For example:

So that was like the most difficult part of immigration here. My family, they did not want me to move, so...(…) Because when we lived there we were both working, and we had the good jobs, and so...It was not the money that was brought us here. (...) For my husband, it was the career.

It is evident that, particularly for those who came right after the dissolution of Soviet state, interviewees attached their best hopes to these visa contests. A dominant image of a desirable programmer-husband included his potential for future professional growth in SV. Once in SV, women sometimes criticized the lack of a local welfare system, homelessness, housing issues, the shabbiness of neighborhoods, and a shallow cultural life, complaints that made them sound nostalgic for their Soviet lives. Perhaps, for post-Soviet women emigrants, their image of social normalcy includes a better developed safety net: available housing, job security, day care, health care, cultural life. It is true that the FSU's outdated institutions do not enjoy much political legitimacy among the post-Soviet generation, but as a young women programmer who is barred from work for money explained, she "discarded of" her illusions about SV communal support too. She and her husband were hit by a car (without major physical injuries) while riding bikes to the school where she volunteered as a math tutor:

I like, when this happened, I expected to...er...I expected some reaction from the authorities, I expected some reaction from the police, from the high school where I was commuting to...Like, I was expecting some reaction from the people around me and everybody was just like: "OK, we are so sad to hear that, we are sorry but..."

In this case, the young woman immigrant was clearly not accustomed to the relatively superficial ways of engaging with members of her new community. Some researchers attribute this difference to cultural norms of individualism v. collectivism, explaining a difference between American and Russian ways of engaging with the community (Isurin

2011). In many other instances, interviewees agreed that the absence of a paternalistic state and bureaucratic control is evidence of SV's focus on entrepreneurial potential. For example, a few were impressed at how fast the local DMV processed their documentation, or how fast people could open new businesses. On the other hand, some felt that they were not benefitting from this efficiency as they should. As in the above quote, the idea of normalcy was shaped by value vested in communal support, so women perceived the absence of a vital safety net as an obstacle that could block their own potential.

4.1.2. Push and Pull to Migrate and the Commodification of Spouses. A scholar, who carried out an ethnography of everyday life after the dissolution of Soviet state called her work "a story of human resilience in the face of adversity" (Ghodsee 2011: xiii). At that time, the success of women's tactics in adapting to the new capitalist context was particularly important for family survival, as Utrata (2015) discusses in her study of single motherhood in Russia. In my interviews, many mentioned a *run to safety* as a reason to emigrate after the dissolution of the USSR in 1990s, or more recently from the war in Ukraine, or Russian autocracy. A need to *run from poverty* is another point they made. The women described a shortage of basic food and goods in the 1990s-2000s, or a small-town life with no prospects of good employment and/or marriage. Although the economic situation in the FSU may have been more severe in the early nineties, this respondent's assessment of the challenges of life back in her home county were echoed by some of the women who arrived more recently:

I don't know if you remember how it was in 92? Stores were empty, absolutely empty. There were two kinds of stores. One that didn't have anything, and another

that had things, but was very expensive, so you didn't have money for these stores. When you were looking for a job, you had to take anything that was offered to you. You didn't have any choice.

The final statement is an acknowledgement that greater flexibility in choosing one's own career was one of the reasons to leave the FSU and move to the U.S.

Most reflections from women who had working experience under the Soviet state revolved around their critiques of incompetence, corruption and the informality of power relationships under the communist system. A Russian-Korean interviewee provided the following clear reasons for her desire to leave Russia: she described in detail the process that kept her from attending one of the top music conservatories. Although she trained in music for eleven years at a special boarding school, she was given a failing score on a violin performance test that could not be contested, in order to keep her from competing with others who had paid bribes to be on a list of students to be accepted. She also described facing intrigues in her job as a manager of a team of programmers in Russia because other less qualified people wanted her salary (being an ethnic minority, she mentioned that her non-Russian appearance played a role in these intrigues). In addition, she mentioned that there was “no life” for her older daughter who suffers from a severe mental disability (although there were some special schools and programs for people like her daughter, they were mostly nominal and kept her daughter from developing more skills and abilities). She also believes that the quality of university education in Russia has declined since she studied:

It was really good education. Not like now. At Russia now, it's different story. But when I graduated, I graduated in 1995, it was really good education.

Evidently, her decision to emigrate was influenced by her perception that life in Russia was becoming harder and more uncertain.

As Utrata (2015) suggests, motherhood is an intrinsic part of Russian feminine identity. Pulling towards a new better life, a visa also becomes a ticket that gives access to better medical services – women reported a sharp contrast between their child birth experiences in the U.S. and those in Russia, for example. The literature suggests, that highly skilled immigration pulls those individuals, who are already relatively advantaged by having access to vital networks linking them to the U.S. (FitzGerald & Cook-Martin 2014). While this might be true for their spouses, for women dependents the commodification of their spouses sometimes became a key survival tactic that helped them to escape poverty. Since common law marriage is a normal practice in many Soviet and post-Soviet societies, some registered their relationship right before they emigrated: “We married because it was time to move,” as one woman explained. Even more so, one woman mentioned that, although she is happy with her choice, she had met her husband recently and married him a month before emigrating, as her main goal was to escape from her small town in Russia.

4.1.3. Elite emigrant wives (or the illusion of being one). As analysis of the interviews suggests, curious and educated people within the post-Soviet discourse became paralyzed by their own advances. Although the states of the FSU continue to cultivate universal higher education (as a part of the former Soviet Union’s intended civilizing mission) and still invest in human capital, these states also continue to misuse and abuse this human capital by practicing corruption, nepotism, elevating incompetent but loyal workers,

exerting state censorship on the media and so on (as described by a number of sources). In the context of a corrupt system that values connections over talent and effort, the “extraordinary ability” O visa class is seen as a way for special talents (athletes, artists, and media or public figures) to actualize their potential in the U.S. The wives of such immigrants are commonly seen as elite wives. The assumption is that, although they are prohibited from employment, they are either so wealthy or such bohemian types, that a two-income middle class life style does not really apply to them. However, two cases of current O3 visa holders demonstrate that the notion of elite wife of a special talent could be disputed, as the women consider retraining and employment to be necessary for them. A recent arrival from Russia, who gave birth to her second son shortly after coming here, shared the better life discourse with the other interviewees. However, she explained that they had been living with no income and only expenses for about a year (because her husband was trying to start his own company in SV). She found the cost of living to be unexpectedly high, even compared to her experience in Moscow, so she was concerned for their future.

Another woman was from Ukraine and she had a PhD in physical education. She had enjoyed what she described as a high-status job in the Ministry of Sport (“There I was a big person, and here I’m just a house wife,”- she commented bitterly on her move to SV), but she followed her husband’s career as a fencing coach. She shared her frustration about being banned from work for money and what she experienced as a misperception of their status:

I’m such angry a little bit because this visa uhm...like “extraordinary” for him and it means like he earn a lot of money, but it’s not true uhm...

Compared to an elite expatriate transfer (an international move of executives and their families arranged within a transnational corporation), a move with an O type visa has no elite perquisites, and no hardship-compensation packages. On the contrary, to qualify and obtain an O visa, many utilize expensive American legal and business counseling services. These women spoke about a significant drop in their economic and social status. For example, a wife from Moscow said that she cannot afford a maid or a nanny, as she could have done in Moscow. She had no time to develop the English skills that would be needed for possible career re-education. The comments about her apartment revealed an expectation for a relatively high standard of living. Despite her many references to the high cost of rent, and the fact that they were living off savings while her husband worked on several start-up ideas, the family had decided to rent a big house in the San Francisco Bay Area:

I clean. and I'm not really happy about our three bedroom and three-bathroom apartment... It's so much for me. In Moscow we could afford a maid... I would love to have one here ... but it's costly.

The desire to have a maid to clean her large house highlighted her conception of her status as elite. After all, her husband did not move to the U.S. to be an employee, but as an aspiring entrepreneur. On the other hand, she had made the transition from being a temporarily and voluntarily unemployed professional woman in Moscow, to being a stay-at-home mother with burdensome housekeeping responsibilities and no clear path to return to a working life. This drop down the social ladder, though a matter of perception and relative, reinforced a doubt that regaining her pre-emigration social status is likely in the future.

As scholars who studied the post-Soviet female agency construct agree, although the Soviet state had apparent gender injustices, women in Soviet era were well educated, they worked in several areas that were traditionally staffed with men in the rest of the world. Women developed their civic identities as they socialized in a relatively egalitarian society (Penn & Massino 2009). Motherhood was also an intrinsic part of Russian feminine identity (Utrata 2008). Because women were concerned with the autonomy of their families and the protection of their family domain from the impositions of the state order, the role of house-wife could be interpreted as a protest against the mandatory working mother Soviet gender construct (Marody 1993; Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2003). After the fall of Soviet state, a rough transition to the capitalist system and prospects of better life abroad created strong push and pull effect. Women immigrants embraced the American Dream as much as men (Logan 2010) and they approached their optimism from a household perspective, so accepting a visa with restrictions was a logical step for many. Some of them sacrificed their own individual prospects to advance the career of a husband who is the presumed breadwinner. For many women the only practical solution was a commodification of their spouses. Upon arrival, many started feeling the economic and social burdens of their dependent status, more so as they came to embrace cultural norms of individualism.

4.2. Self-Reliance, Individualism and Independence Reinforce Professional Ambitions, But with an Absence of Options for Professional Development

4.2.1. Is there anyone to empower? As Shih (2004) and others mention, the ideology of the IT industry in SV casts each worker as an entrepreneur who is individually responsible for his or her own career. Generally speaking, social pressure to become successful and independent in the U.S. is high, according to Bellah (2008), and there are substantial barriers that immigrant women face on this path. While legal restrictions set barriers for H4 visa holders, and hand their husbands power over their life decisions, most of those I interviewed were eager to portray themselves as prospective or regretfully unrealized American-style strong and independent women. Values of self-sufficiency and individualism are cornerstones of American culture, as Bellah (2008) argues. However, women immigrant H4 visa holders are excluded from the current empowerment discourse by not being considered material worthy of empowerment. All my interviewees reported that they had not received any corporate training or counseling. However, some had heard that a few of the largest tech companies in SV provide English classes and child care options for the spouses of H1-B visa holders.

The American celebration of self-sufficiency, and the value placed on career development and entrepreneurship, clearly clash with the dependent status of these women immigrants. This creates all sorts of interpersonal and psychological conflicts. Some said they hated having the word dependent attached to them. However, as their histories show, this was not the case back in the home country, where human interdependencies were acknowledged or, perhaps, the traditional female economic

dependence on a spouse was less stigmatized. Some women spoke about societal and spousal pressure to continue their study or work, worrying that they would be judged to be less interesting. Failure to conform with the *strong and independent woman* narrative targets female attractiveness and creates marital insecurity, as one woman explained:

He's (husband) supporting of work...and he feels like...I feel that I can become (pause) a more interesting person to him as well, if I can work and I can...Like when he comes home, and he asks me what I did today...and I tell: "Nothing!"

The women normally established a child-based circle of friends, but the low social status assigned to motherhood in the U.S. (which manifests itself in the absence of maternity leave and professional child care institutions), made them downgrade the importance of such communications. Some moved towards the other extreme in the mothering discourse. They tried to professionalize their child care duties, so they did not have to be pushed to work outside of the home, particularly since they lacked feasible options for doing so. In these cases, mothers' care work was performed at its extreme. For example, one woman (a former Moscow psychologist) said she had never considered even part-time child care services in SV, as only she could provide safe and adequate care. She was pregnant with a second child at the time of the interview and was considering home schooling for both of her children in the future.

The participants' stories showed that they had been receiving conflicting social messages. They were indeed accustomed to deriving deep meaning from their family and community care work, but it seemed that this care work had less social prestige in the U.S. compared to their home states. In other words, some women felt societal pressure to work outside of the house, but they had neither a personal desire to do so, nor a feasible

opportunity. For some of them, a visa that restricted employment was a tool to resist forced emancipation (e.g. religious women, the wives of those who were relatively wealthy; however, all shared some financial insecurity due to the cost of living or reliance on a husband's good will, as I will discuss later). These women were spared meaningless jobs (in the sense, that certain kinds of jobs seem meaningless to them) but some could not afford to aspire to a meaningful occupation for various reasons – the lack of institutional and structural support for motherhood, the high price of reeducation, or the lack of cultural or social capital. In such cases, after obtaining their working permits, they felt pressure to take lower status jobs (for example, a former project manager felt pressure to become a QA tester, now that she was allowed to work).

An apparent dilemma arose, because, on one hand, due to the visa restrictions a woman did not have to conform to normative American middle class thinking, and she became an outlier who had an opportunity to be what she chose to be. Her choice to come to SV with an H4 visa put her in this unconventional situation and provided a potential for her to exercise agency in a way that insiders could not achieve. But, on the other hand, the modern narratives in her new culture did not fall in place to actualize such an opportunity. On the contrary, her dependent status was considered to be not only a real structural policy failure, but also a personal weakness, or a shortcoming to overcome. This made her a victim of a paternalistic society, but someone who would nonetheless be seen as lacking a healthy ambition to overcome her oppression as soon as her ban on employment was lifted. The study participants attempted to enhance their agency in ways that are less controlled by the cultural and market expectations of SV, but they were

pressured to verbalize notions that fit the mainstream narrative of being ambitious women, a so-called *strong and independent woman* narrative. A clear example of such a cultural narrative can be found in the following quote from a woman who had recently received her permission to work and was trying to establish her small business:

I see this place as the place of opportunities... I don't buy this total BS that America keeps someone from doing something... This is total laziness... I don't know... I will just sit here reading books, spending time with my family.... I don't know, I totally support someone deciding to do that, but don't tell me that America is keeping you from achieving your dreams...while at the time you want to lay around and read books.

Such a common perception not only confirms a cultural celebration of the self-made go-getter, but also shows a split between the women's accustomed (or even truly desired) way of living ("reading books, spending time with my family"), and the appropriate ambitions that middle class women living in SV should have. This evokes the *the other happy woman* tale, which I will discuss further.

4.2.2. *Bifurcated Consciousness: Needed Workers, Wives Who Threaten Local Jobs and the Other Women who are Happy Dependents.* Dorothy Smith defines bifurcated consciousness as a split between personal experiences and a dominant perception. Scholarship on American immigration policies suggests that dominant perceptions of emigration effects, rather than real economic effects, shape policies (FitzGerald & Cook-Martin 2014:12). On the level of individual consciousness, these dominant perceptions are mostly formed by the narratives that come from the business side, not from the labor side. The following is an example of the split between actual experiences and common perception. In a liberal individualistic discourse, the H4 visa's restrictions on the spouses of highly qualified workers are perceived as economically justified and socially fair

American government policy. However, the women's personal experience with it is seen as an unfortunate case of maladjustment to a new society. Women identify the reason for such maladjustment as a personal shortcoming: either a previous lack of focus on a particular field of study and work, a lack of talent, or shyness and low self-esteem. As one long time immigrant (and the only participant without a University degree) explained, H1-B husbands as "naturally gifted and well-educated people," are needed in the SV economy, and that is what landed their families here. But as a spouse, who could compete for a low-paying job, she is a legitimate threat to the local economy, so it would be unreasonable to implement any policy protection for such people. For this interviewee, her family's green card application process lasted unusually long, keeping her from paid work for twelve years, and the family had to go back to their country to start a new application process. But she did not argue that the visa is unfair (to women, in particular):

Rules are not made to be fair. Rules are made to keep society in some sort of order. No one asked if it was fair for us to have to move back to Ukraine. But that's the rule. I think more it became because of the job opportunity. If only one person came here with the work visa, because inside the U.S. they are not able to find that man... But we, as a part of the family, are probably blue collar which will take the work from the blue collars here. So, we will just intrude too much in the economy and take too many jobs from the U.S. citizens already.

Q: Do you think that H1-B visas might take jobs from American programmers? Some argue that we have those programmers, but you just have to pay them more.

If there is the opportunity to come for that job, for that money and you are willing to come for that job, for that money, why not? If there will be not opportunity you will not come and some American will work on that place for higher salary. It's just, I don't know. I don't see the logic of the question. If there is on the table, yeah, somebody will take it.

Q: But who puts it on the table? That is the question.

Companies...

For this interviewee, like for many others, and particularly for those women who were less career-focused, the H4 visa's work restrictions were seen as a price they were willing to pay for the opportunity to move to the U.S. They assumed their husband's career prospects and their own quality of life would improve. This is similar to the fact that a truly hungry person is unlikely to refuse food served on a dirty plate. While this woman was willing to accept the rationale that wives who immigrate to the U.S. as the dependent wives of H1-B visa holders might compete with locals for jobs, she was reluctant to agree with the idea that the H1-B visa holders themselves might be low cost competitors for qualified Americans.

This working visa program has somewhat absurd aspects. While it is nominally a program for temporary workers, it brings in highly trained individuals who only become more valuable to their employers as they gain experience. Almost all of the H1-B visa holders in this community expected (as they were promised) to be on a path to permanent residency. While the impact the H1-B workers have on the labor market is minimized, their spouses are treated as if they represent a serious threat to locals' jobs. The strange solution provided by the H4 visa, is to prohibit skilled and ambitious women from working. Consequently, their skills are likely to deteriorate before they gain permanent residency and enter the workforce. However, it could be argued that the dependent category is filling positions of unpaid or symbolically paid aesthetic labor in the U.S. in order to drive total labor costs down (which I will discuss later). After all, although most of the study participants were unhappy about the H4 visa's work prohibition, they generally accepted that rules are rules. Although it is probably not a unique attitude

among immigrant communities, immigrants from the FSU appeared to follow a Soviet coping strategy of accepting and even defending absurd rules, ignoring policy issues that are seen as being above their heads, and focusing on adapting to any near-term practical consequences. However, a few other women spoke of brain drain or of the commodification of workers as one of the structural reasons for their precarious status (“a slavery visa,” as one said).

Despite their stated rationales for accepting the H4 visa’s restrictions, many of the women were eager to explain that they felt more dissatisfied than others who shared their situation. The ongoing academic debate over whether liberated feminist women should be defined as the antithesis of the “happy housewives” (Johnson 2000) has its illustration in the *othering* discourse. During the interviews, quite a few voiced a myth about *the other, happy dependent*. Interviewees frequently highlighted their own ambitious identities by the use of othering. The common story included other women-H4 holders, who were less complex than the interviewee and more materialistic, because they had married a talented spouse in order to be parasites on their husbands’ income. This other woman immigrant was happy in SV as she was satisfied with her dull and dependent life, according to the speakers. But the speaker was not happy, because she was different. The speaker just followed her destiny, had no better options and explained that she “played the cards she was dealt.” The following quote is from one of several study participants who expressed a negative judgement of stay-at-home wives:

I know a lot of women who are very happy staying at home and spending the husband's money. And it's not my case. I'm not comfortable.

This shared opinion generally emerged when the interviewees wanted to distinguish themselves from other non-wage-earning women. They presented themselves as women with strong ambition, who desired to work for money but who were prevented from doing so because of their visa status. Perhaps, the women looked on themselves through the dominant American discourse of individualism (and, perhaps, a past Soviet discourse that glorified strong female workers) and found it unsettling to be stereotyped and not represented in human terms, as complex individuals. So, they rejected the stereotype by separating themselves from the common misperception, ironically reinforcing it for other women.

While it may be tempting to conclude that immigrant women from the FSU have assimilated elements of Western feminist ideology, Remennick (1999) states that family remains the basic social unit in the FSU countries. So, immigrant women from that region are often ambivalent about the notion of feminism as a path to emancipation from their husbands. In such a case, it is not clear if the speaker was happier with her overall emigration experience than she wanted me to believe (because, being happy would mean that she was one of those demonized *other* women), or she was a believer in the tale about the other happy immigrant woman. I also see othering as related to the previously mentioned Soviet survival strategy by the use of a *nothing depends on me* discourse when being questioned about decisions for the purpose of protecting the women's relative autonomy in decision making.

4.2.3. *Paid and unpaid work: is income a path to gender equality?* As I mentioned in the previous section, due to the high cost of living many study participants complained

that they simply cannot afford a one income household anymore. But, as Crizan (2012) suggests, female employment also has a symbolic value as a part of a middle-class woman's identity construct. All the women I talked to identify themselves as a lower-middle, middle or upper-middle class, which means, at least, that they strive to adopt such discourses. As they are mentally assuming middle class values, most of them realized that their self-image requires them to pursue further professional development and a transition to a two-income household. The women reluctantly admit that they are not really socially engaged with natives. For example, one young Ukrainian woman initially said that she began to meet English-speaking people through Berkeley Extension, later she went on to say that most of the students she met were international. She met local people (mostly over forty) through a Boot camp exercise class:

Some of them, I feel they are part of my family. Because they are older than me and they gave me advice...I can talk to them about my questions, struggles, they're like distant family. And they do as well.

Q: So, you met each other's spouses, children?

Yes...well, I didn't meet their children...only in supermarket once with a guy...But I met their spouses, we went for happy hours several times.

Naturally, many of these women have only had the opportunity to form very superficial understandings of what is acceptable within the modern American middle-class discourse. Some of the interviewees saw personal income and status as the only path to equality in the U.S. What also becomes clear is that the women did not shape such discourse themselves, they were not a part of it yet, but rather passive recipients.

The following passage from a mother of two shows a dichotomy in the woman's self-image. Even though she states that she is comfortable with her choice to be a full-time

mother while her youngest child is still less than one-year old, she certainly believes that she needs to demonstrate something beyond this to feel comfortable:

Now I feel like I'm twenty-eight and everything I have to be proud of is my children. But I want to be proud of myself too.

Q: What would make you be proud of yourself?

I want to do something different...I want to use my intelligence. I want to obtain some success, maybe in learning, maybe in university, maybe a job... Now I don't have anything like this and I feel very uncomfortable about this. I can't say – Oh, I have a degree from an American university, or – Oh, I have a good job.

Q: Is this more something you want, “to be more than just a mother,” or something that you feel pressure for from society?

I don't think it's from society, it's from me, because no one really appreciates the role of mother... Even I have a friend here, a Russian speaking friend with kids, and she is a stay at home mom like me... And when I am thinking about her, I think - why doesn't she go to work? But I understand why, because she wants to be with her kids, she wants to see how they grow... But it's hard to explain why there are these conceptions in my mind, maybe because kids do not involve intelligence, you don't have to calculate something or make some research...Except to do some research on Amazon to find the right bib.

Her comments reveal the importance of motherhood for many women in this community. Indeed, as Utrata (2015) found in her study of single mothers, motherhood is much more important for Russian women's identity than marriage: “motherhood is must, marriage is maybe” (Utrata 2015:220). Thus, the interviewee's quote can be seen as an expression of woman's agency, but the words she used to describe motherhood also revealed the low status she assigned to her current role. In addition, while she claimed that this conception of motherhood was based on her own internal feelings rather than the fact that she felt judged by society, she immediately undermined this explanation by expressing her own disapproval of a friend who remained a stay-at home mom despite the

fact that she had a work permit and children who were all old enough to be in pre-school. She acknowledges the value of being with one's kids to "see how they grow," but she reduced the task of motherhood to searching for highly rated bibs on Amazon. Some women complained that their husbands had started to respect them less because of such a transformation of narratives. Naturally, if a person's value is judged based on job related success and income, then he begins to see himself as the only one who generates something of actual value. Although, prior to immigration, both spouses had agreed to this arrangement, with time, the husband became like a cart horse that was keeping the family farm running.

Many women shared fears of moving down in the social hierarchy. In their home state, the promise for both spouses was to have better opportunity in SV with less corruption. Some said that they still preserved remote employment back in the home country, but most performed family work full time. In one of the few examples of women who continued to work for money despite being on an H4 visa, the solution was to work for a job based in her native Ukraine. During the years when she was restricted from employment, she started her food blog and found a way to work remotely by writing for the Ukrainian edition of "Marie Claire:"

So, I got a lot of articles and I had my blog...I got to interview a lot of famous people, because when they heard I was writing for "Marie Claire," they said – "Alright."

As I started this project, I expected to find that many of the interviewees had tried this approach, however it appears that the internet-based economy in SV has not created as many opportunities for trans-national employment as one might expect. Another woman

said that although she had not worked while subject to the H4 restrictions, she knew of cases of others doing so. But she does not provide specifics:

I even know of people who worked for a lot of cash. Well, like I know people who worked remotely for their home country, and they just don't report. It was something like they worked the job before, then they moved but they kept those connections. Also, I know one case where someone worked in a bit of a shady arrangement, full time, for cash. Not some illegal business, but that she was paid under the table. And I then know a lot of cases, I don't know, of baking cakes and selling them, or watching kids.

The advice this woman would give to a prospective H4 visa holders was telling and is clearly informed by her own experience and her awareness of how vulnerable she was to others' decisions due to the power imbalance created by her dependent status:

I would say, have a good stack of your own money. Learn to drive. The money has to be not the family money, it has to be your own, in your own name, you have to have access to it and, like, there shouldn't be any double meaning, like – “yeah, it is your money and your account, but remember how we worked for it together,” or it's because we sold something that belonged to both of us...and everybody should be very clear about this. It's rather a pre-move agreement.

As literature suggests, Russian male identity within the family is often reduced to the role of a bread winner (Utrata 2015) and articulated in terms of a “weak man,” “crisis of masculinity,” and “infantilization” (Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2003; Remennick 2004; Utrata 2015). The interviewees often said that all care work, family logistics and house work was performed by them. In such cases, the women talked about a passive search for employment, with nominal support from a spouse (who makes no effort to make it practically possible). But quite a few engaged in almost everyday labor in various settings (schools, educational or cultural centers, tech hubs) in order to maintain existing skills or to develop new skills and to build a network. To illustrate this, I return to my interview with a Russian-Korean woman, a trained musician and a programmer, who was unable to

be employed for six years. In order to do something that she considered to be real, she joined a community symphony orchestra as a violinist. Although she loved this activity, she described it as a high-effort professional-level job that she does with no pay. In fact, she had to pay a membership fee:

I had H4, so I stay home... and I went to college for ESL, two and one-half years. My English was pretty good. After two and a half years I decided to stop. Because I am a perfectionist, not straight A, I want straight A plus! And because it is college, at higher level, there is more homework, there is much writing and more time is consumed, and after two and a half years I decided that it is not worth it... And I go to orchestra, because at Cañada college main theater is a base for Redwood symphony, and because my first education is music. I had like some minor for USA in music, I am violinist. I decided to, like, do something real. But it's community orchestra, but high level, very high-level community orchestra, but you have no salary. Yes, and you have to pay membership. Not high, but still... It takes from you pretty much all time for preparing, because we play repertory like San Francisco Symphony. It is very difficult, very high level. Very hard, especially because our conductor is so ambitious and he loves modern music... It's hard to listen, right? But much, much harder to play. I enjoy this because I love music, frankly, more than math and computer science.

In this case, immigration of a trained musician who performed for no salary and no state protection improved the cultural life of SV. Her emphasis on the level of effort required and on the talent level of the orchestra made it clear that this was more than a hobby.

Baines (2017) and Keleman (2017) demonstrated that unpaid work, in the case of women who were barred from a paid employment, might not always be volunteering as we normally think of it - a conscious choice to give back to the community or to help underserved communities, which was also common for my interviewees. For example, women volunteered in community gardens or churches. But it seems that professionally trained workers were needed in different settings, for example as full-time math teachers, or activities organizers, or violinists, and that dependent visa holders fill some of these

positions. Some women programmers mentioned a service that some tech courses provided that involved helping the participants to write faked working resumes (they reported that this was an expensive service). A few women went on local job interviews but were unsuccessful due to their visa status. In one case, a woman was able to obtain an entry level position and her own H1- B visa – but underpaid, with no benefits, and no promise of an immigration status change.

Once again, as in the previous example, cultural engagement was a frequent tactic that the interviewees used not only to overcome the social confines of their restricted working status, but also to participate in an activity that was highly meaningful to them.

As this woman explained:

Once every 3 or 4 months I organize home recitals. Two types of recitals, music and poetry. I started with a friend who is a poet. A famous poet (with many online followers) who lives in Colorado. I can't describe why I am doing this...but after two or three months I miss it and I am doing it again. It is different setting from typical concerts and recitals, different atmosphere, different energy between people.

This form of unpaid work provided the interviewee with some real sense of accomplishment. The success of this type of tactic may also highlight the relative lack of social activities in SV when compared to other high-income areas (both in the U.S. and in major urban centers in the FSU). Evidently, the community of immigrants who have come to SV from the FSU see a real need for these types of cultural events.

To conclude, although some of the women interviewed, who care deeply for their children, family and community, found that their new dependent identities allowed them to choose jobs that were outside the normative middle class expectations; the demands of SV's culture of ambition and success devalued their work, directed women into unpaid

work in poorly funded areas, and influenced them to seek greater economic autonomy within the family (a goal that was usually out of reach due to their H4 visa restrictions). As the previously mentioned woman suggested: “have a stack of your own money.” Indeed, the researchers suggest that changes in relationships between emigrant spouses could be attributed to increases in the women’s economic independence (Crizan 2012) and that to embrace American culture is to accept individualism as an ideal form of life (Bellah 2008). As is evident from the interviews, Tocqueville’s insights are still correct. Embracing the impulse towards increasing individualism as an absolute commitment to human dignity destroys the content of word dignity. In other words, if the only way to fit into the modern middle class cultural narrative is to demonstrate personal business ambition, those who are committed to their children, families and communal work are destined to lose the meaning of their work. Or more likely, as Joseph (2013) found, they split into two identities. One that embraces individualism publicly, and another that preserves a commitment to collective culture and a sense of community (but one that can be only displayed within safe spaces). The study participants pushed to enhance their status by assuming personal individualistic narratives, but also by othering. This, unfortunately, created confusion between their meanings and social expectations: “I don’t think it’s from society, it’s from me, because no one really appreciates the role of mother...”

4.3. The Homogenizing Effect and Unpredictability of a Future with an H4 Visa

4.3.1. Coerced Volunteering and Paid Work. From the legislative point of view, H4 visa holders are seen as one unit with their H1-B spouses – highly skilled workers.

Defined as a non-immigrant visa, the H1-B visa creates a very specific category of worker, who is vulnerable to exploitation by sponsoring businesses that hold the key to their work permits and their permanent residency applications. As Calavita (1994) argues, the American government generally acts in the interest of business, passing symbolic legislation that has no real impact on the flow of immigrants. While these laws fail to protect U.S. born workers, they do impact immigrants' rights. Some of these impacts are apparent in the homogenizing effect that H4 visas have on women's self-images and the unpredictability of visa holder's future. I took a snapshot of a very unusual time in people's lives. Everything was different for them before – work, culture, language, family life - and everything will change radically for many of them in the future. And yet, my interviews with long time immigrants (more than twenty years) and with women who had an H4 for more than four years, yielded insight and helped me to synthesize a few distinctive trends.

To begin with, notwithstanding prior differences in the women's calculations, motivations, personal or career paths, and levels of familiarity with the American life; H4 visa holders seemed to be following a similar track after immigration. The women tended to have a more traditional household arrangement with a tendency to have two or more children. They had very few or no social interactions with natives, and those interactions were mostly of a utilitarian or service nature – retail, child care. After a change in their visa status, many remained unemployed, some struggled to find positions commensurate with their pre-emigration training, and some retrained. Those who became employed usually worked at low paying, low status jobs. Many volunteered or did hobbies. As

Balgamwalla (2014) suggests, even without the added burden of H4 visa restrictions, limited access to training, costs, and time constraints (including childcare responsibilities), lead immigrant women to retrain in fields that are downgrades from their previous professions. But in the case of the H4 visa holder, the need to maintain some level of professional activity for future job opportunities, combined with the desire to present themselves as more than housewives, lead immigrant women to volunteer. For example, one study participant would have liked to work for money when she first arrived in the U.S. because she could have contributed to the household at a time when her husband's salary was low, and the cost of living was high. Later on, she did not seek a paid job as a career, but rather as a practical but unplanned necessity. Given her long and complicated residency application process, she was unable to work for money for more than ten years. In the meantime, she studied photography, and she actually worked as a volunteer photographer for a local Russian-language newspaper. She was once offered a job at a photography studio, but she could not accept it because of her H4 status. Asked how she felt about this missed opportunity she said:

Oh, angry, I believe, angry. I believe, that actually turned me out of photography, because at that moment I understood that I am big enough to be paid, and I am not allowed to be paid. So, photography is not for me anymore because I don't want to volunteer anymore. So, I dropped photography and found something else for myself, and that was quilting. I learned how to quilt.

Once she was finally authorized to work for money, she found a job as a cashier at a hobby store.

Most of the women I spoke with had experienced long periods during which they navigated between developing new skills, doing unpaid work (including internships and

volunteering) and developing new hobbies. One woman said that she helped teachers at her son's school almost every day during the week. She was glad that they always needed her. She was grateful that they had something for her to do and that they did not have an adequate supply of volunteers. I located only one woman who managed to obtain her own working visa by persistently attending job interviews and asking prospective employers to provide her with an H1-B visa. Naturally, when she found a willing employer, it was in exchange for a significant step back in her pay level and position relative to her pre-emigration work. Most importantly, all of the women admitted that they could not expect to rely on their own salaries as the sole household income.

As literature suggests, some retail stores hire middle-class workers that embody a certain style or class in exchange for low salaries and no benefits (Williams & Connell 2010). As the interviews reveal, after receiving their working permits, many women found their first paid work in their favorite retail or hobby stores, performing aesthetic labor (Williams & Connell 2010). For example, this interviewee was a frequent customer in Macy's and she decided to apply for what she referred to as a "backstage" opening, but the employer offered her a customer-facing position as a cashier:

I applied to Macy's for the seasonal job because I was shopping there at the beginning of the Christmas season. It would be a low paying job, low expectations, but it was a first job, because I had no experience working in America before... So, I went to my first interviews. I wanted to work backstage job, but when I came for the interview I was told that that job was no longer available but that I could work as a cashier. Because I told myself that I would work in those months I accepted the job as a cashier and I got lots of experience and I got to know people that was interesting.

Q: So, did you like that?

Oh yes, because I know what it is to be a good customer now, and I know what it is to be a cashier. It was eye opening, actually. Everybody needs to work as a cashier just a few months, really. It will improve quality of your life.

So, this type of employment had a symbolic value for many women in the community as it became their first paid job in the U.S. and the only one they could be easily hired to perform due to their perceived style and class.

Not surprisingly, many of the women whose visa status remained restricted for longer than they expected, suffered or continued to suffer from a loss of meaning and structure. Some received counseling, and many complained of having less voice in family decisions compared to their pre-emigration experiences. It also appeared that, recent younger immigrants or short-term visa holders (one or two years) tended to have better English skills and fewer or no children. Women in this category appeared more likely to find employment in their pre-emigration field of work and did not consider SV as their final home.

4.3.2. Gender as a continuing process. The limited scholarship concerning the rights of women immigrants who are barred from paid labor highlights the public invisibility of this group. Often, H4 visa holders are invisible to local protective services, human right groups, women's organizations and for the state. The following long exchange with a woman, who used to work for a Russian non-governmental agency and then followed her husband to SV on an H4 visa, yields some theoretical insight into limits immigration policies put on the rights of women. This interviewee also discussed the apparent connection between the invisibility of H4 visa holders and the patriarchal nature of social norms in their home countries:

Yes, and I'm glad that you're working on it, because there hasn't been too much attention. This visa doesn't get a lot of visibility, and...if you think of all the visibility about illegal immigration...

Q: Why do you think there are different images of immigrants? Maybe "stealing" or "terrorist," "illegal immigrant," or the model immigrant, who comes here with three dollars in his pocket and builds something, and, maybe, invisible immigrants like wives on H4? Why do you think they may be invisible?

I think it's because, O.K. One of the options could be it's because the three main countries which bring in them, you know, the H1-Bs, well, it's India, it's China, and then a lot come from the former Soviet Union, from what I know. And in all of these countries the position of women has always been subservient, more or less. There's a lot of patriarchy in these societies. So maybe these women don't feel empowered to speak about their experience?

Q: What do you think about this society? Do you think that this visa is also a sign of patriarchy here, in the U.S.?

M-mm. It reinforces it, it definitely reinforces the feeling of inferiority of females to males, yes it is... So, maybe, it's just waiting for its leader. Maybe, the conditions are not as bad. It's like a golden cage, you know.

Q: But do we know how bad?

Yes, invisible... Like how it all started with Cezar Chavez here, because it was just unbearable for those people to work here for very little money, so we'll see. Maybe it's just waiting for some leader who will lead the others.

Q: What would be your expectation? You know, this is just a study for my thesis. But if someone would work on this from the political, from the political sphere. What would be your expectations?

To lobby for getting the right to work for the spouses. This is the ultimate goal. There have already been steps, because I remember about the work permit thing now it has changed, it was mostly driven by the Indian community. I'm speaking of the H4, specifically. So now after the 485 is filed, the "green card" petition is filed, they can file for this EAD and get it much faster. This is particularly important for the Indians because they wait for their priority date and they might wait a long time. And I think it was driven by some Indian lobby. Because nothing here happens because of the good will of some politician. We're not a constituency, we can't vote. So, no politicians are interested in us. We don't have an H4 lobby.

Q: Wouldn't it be hard to build support for helping these middle-class women?

Yes, because there is no political rationale to do this, because they are not escaping dangerous conditions or something.

Here, she highlighted the challenges for someone wishing to influence government policy on H4 visas. Gender norms in women's home countries may make H4 visa holders more willing to accept the work restriction, and the relatively high earning potential of their H1-B spouses may provide enough comfort and security to make it reasonable and desirable for women to remain non-wage earners for a short time. Given the expectation that the situation would be temporary, these women did not refuse to make the move because they would be barred from work, and they had no impact on the ability of companies to recruit H1-B workers. Therefore, the companies that employed their husbands had no incentive to consider their arguments. As the interviewee mentioned, the fact that non-citizens cannot vote reduces their importance to elected officials. As is true for many immigrants, newly arrived H4 visa holders are generally optimistic and only somewhat engaged regarding the fairness of their legal status. Those who have finally received employment authorization (even after a long wait), are unlikely to protest a process that no longer impacts their lives. So, they are only likely to speak up at all in severe cases, such as someone whose green card application is still being delayed or someone who may have to separate from her husband due to abuse or a threat of divorce. The image of a golden cage seems a spot on, because few of these women are likely to complain openly, and few on the outside are likely to empathize with them due to their middle-class status.

In the fast-moving IT industry of SV, there is a known tendency to celebrate high levels of self-sacrifice on the part of workers, including the expectation that workers will routinely work long hours. Of course, this expectation extends to the offshore operations of SV companies. In what may be a contradiction to the assumption of my previous interviewee that H4 women will not share their experiences, the following woman speaks openly about the unspoken rules in her field of work. She said that she had a long and successful career as a programmer and supervisor of programmers in Russia (she also worked as a college-level mathematics professor and even as a restaurant musician). Although she loved programming, she had given up on going back to work as a programmer because she had been out of the job market for eight years (six years under the visa restriction). At the time of the interview, she was a math teacher. She said:

We worked together [with her husband] in the same company and we were software engineers, and this company was part of company from Bay Area, and main office was in South San Francisco. And because he was, of course, better programmer than I...

Q: Why “of course”?

Because I have to take care of about our children, right? So... (laughs). And I can't work as he, ten-eleven hours every day. Because I have to take care of children. And he received the H1-B visa, so I and my children had H4.

In other words, she considered her husband to be a better programmer because she had the additional gender-specific task (one she admittedly enjoyed) to take care of her children. Interestingly, during our long interview she never provided any rationale for her husband's superior value as a programmer beyond his availability to work unreasonable hours.

Like some of the other women I spoke to, the next interviewee, who had arrived in SV from Moscow just one year before, said that she was comfortable with traditional gender roles in her marriage. In order to explain why she did not aspire to a future in which she might earn as much as her husband, she said:

This is a traditional form of marriage, not one of these, that I read about on internet, about feminists... Traditional, is when women have enough time and money and security to grow kids. Three years for each kid, and she don't think of any problems at all. This is the best way, I think, in marriage. But when kids are grown enough to attend pre-school, I think women have to do something that she likes, that makes her confident in herself and helps her develop, to use mental skills and not to develop Alzheimer's... What I read on the internet, is that in America it is hard to stay at home with kids, companies don't allow a new mother to stay out more than two months.

One might argue that these comments represented a woman who was exercising her agency quite fully, choosing to assign most of the responsibility for the family's financial security to her husband as a bread-winner. This is a middle-class family ideal within the Soviet and post-Soviet discourse, as literature suggests. However, it is worth mentioning that she had not really emerged into a middle-class life in SV. Her perceptions were shaped by the internet, as she admitted. Although she was relatively young, in her twenties, she had a specific opinion about the number of years a woman should stay at home with a young child - about three years. This is the exact amount of time allowed for maternity leave under the Soviet state and in some FSU countries today. Her closing comment regarding her understanding of the maternity leave policies of American companies, shows that she saw the full-time mother role as a temporary break from a more work for money-oriented identity. Since it was made in the context of a question on income equality, her negative reference to feminists is telling. She explicitly rejected the

need to rebel against broad male dominance in society, or within her own marriage. But she was concerned about the question of maternity leave. This apparent contradiction underscores the fact that being dependent on her husband's income was her main practical option for pursuing her dual goals of spending meaningful time with her children while maintaining the stability she will need to go back to her education or job in the future (whether or not she remains in the U.S.).

An apparent shift in family dynamics for less female autonomy results in a more traditional division of household duties, and less communication and respect. Reflecting on their pre-emigration socialization into gender as young girls, the women noted that they were not expected to be the main bread-winners for their families. But they were not expected to be full time house wives either (as one women sighs: "All house work is on me, actually"). My next interviewee was one of the few women who was explicit in discussing the influence of the H4 visa on the power dynamics in her marriage. She explained that she had been happy to move to the U.S. as a dependent because she was not eager to return to work for money immediately, preferring to take care of her son. But she expected the green card process to take about two to three years (a common perception due to the at times misleading information about working visa programs). However, she was still on an H4 visa six years later. While discussing how it was difficult for her not to be working for money for so long she said:

It is difficult, yes, but I would say not for the career reasons. But rather other reasons. But it is difficult.

Q: Which reasons, if you can specify?

Yeah sure, what is difficult, is not the career per se, but mostly that I don't have my own independent income... the dynamics in the relationship with my husband is shifting, slowly but surely it is shifting, and I think it's related to my not having the independent income. What else? Generally, feeling that I have less influence over my life decisions than I would prefer. I am a very. I like to be in control of my life. And it's just the loss of control. I'm not talking about the typical abused. I'm luckier than most. I have a social security number. I don't know. Credit cards, my bank account. I drive, I have a car. But it's the feeling that you're a kept woman. You know what I mean? You cannot really make major decisions. I don't know. I have to run a lot of things by my husband. It is very different. When we first met, I felt that he's a very agreeable, mild personality, wise person. And that's what I liked about him, because I am bossy. I like to make my own decisions and I don't like anyone to tell me what to do and what not to do. And he seemed to be OK with it. But now, as we live here. It didn't happen overnight of course, but now it's more, and more, and more, it's like he wants, he wants to have a say, and I guess, there's nothing wrong in wanting to have a say... Maybe it's my control issues that are kicking in, and also this is something that I didn't agree on early on. I didn't agree to that. But I was like that little frog, you know, when you warm up the water very slowly and then the frog gets lethargic and now it cannot jump out and it boils. It, basically, boils alive without noticing it. Because if the temperature of the water changes drastically, then the frog jumps out. But if it increases slowly...and that's how I feel. And now I am just to, just jump out and change my life drastically. So, now I am waiting for my work permit and they recently prolonged the wait times for the green card, so at least my work permit. To slowly start changing things. Because I know if I get a full-time job it will change, eventually change the dynamics in the family, and then we'll see how it goes.

Even though she was articulate about her need to be independent from her husband, she apologized for being bossy or having control issues. She also felt the need to confess that she is not motivated by a career, she was actually looking forward to being on H4 visa for a short time, mentioning that this would prevent her from being pressured to go back to work before she was ready. So, she initially accepted the H4 visa status as a short-term tactic to help her exercise her agency. Her acknowledgement that she was luckier than most minimized her predicament. This need to confess and apologize came in the context of asserting that she was controlling by nature. Therefore, there was a clear conflict

between the strong and independent woman narrative she wanted to live up to and her feelings of guilt about asserting some control in her marriage.

She offered her apology before describing a situation that give her a strong case for wanting to share decision-making power. Her experience demonstrated that the dependent status of H4 visa holders makes them vulnerable to unilateral life-altering decisions by their H1-B-holding spouses:

And my husband didn't think things through, and got angry, and said he was going to quit the company, and that was the time when he had stopped listening to me, so he made the decision on his own. So, he found another job and he switched companies. What he didn't think through, and what I had no idea, was that he had to wait there at the other company for more than a year. They couldn't continue (the original green card application process), they had to reapply, but they didn't want to do it right away, they wanted to wait. And so, this whole tedious process started again. We went back to zero. Back to square one. Now, he has learned his lesson, and now we waited, waited, waited. And now we are in the final stages, it's called "adjustment of status."

Immigration policies, the SV company's manipulative tactics and her husband's unilateral decision kept her on an H4 visa for at least three additional years, yet she led into the conversation by apologizing for being bossy.

4.3.3. Between two cultures. Lifelong education. In the past, the Soviet Union created its own version of modernity (Fitzpatrick 1999). Under this colonial vision, Russian culture, literature, and language was a key to importance and prestige, but this capital appeared to shed its value in the context of the transition to capitalism. Along with this, a new post-colonial discourse developed, with a high value placed on cultural capital. On one hand, demands of full emancipation by new nation states divided some immigrant groups and shaped relatively new communities. For example, there are new Ukrainian nonprofit organizations in SV. On the other hand, russification dominated the

modernization discourse in the conglomerate of the Soviet colonies of Russia (like Belorussia, Ukraine, or Baltic states). This translated into a complex role for Russian language and Russian culture among post-Soviet communities abroad today. The past russification (Fitzpatrick 1999) of liberal arts education in particular, might explain why a vast majority of women in the FSU countries do not speak English (similar to the persistence of English in post-colonial India). However, Russian remains the first language for many non-Russians in the FSU. For example, in this study a majority of participants indicated that Russian was their primary language (thirteen out of seventeen interviewees). But only four of the women reported that Russia was their country of origin. Nonetheless, in any post-Soviet field of study or work, what became most marketable usually involved proficiency in English.

In addition to the russification of education and employment in the FSU, women were organized into feminized professional categories within their fields of study or work. Meaning, they worked in areas with low earning expectation and relatively low decision-making power, compared to male dominated sub-fields. However, most of the women were highly educated (thirteen of the seventeen participants had earned Master's degrees) and many reflected on previous work that was perceived to be high status (voicing, perhaps, pressures from the strong and independent women discourse). A lack of English proficiency or an ongoing deterioration of language and professional skills puts women in a process of a lifelong education. As one insightful interviewee remarked: "knowledge of language is coming with the culture." Almost all my interviewees took, were taking, or were planning to take classes in community colleges (a most popular, available and

highly valued option), online courses, driving lessons, career retraining and so on.

Reimagining ones professional and cultural identity requires communal support.

The high pre-emigration value of their Russian language education and their previous professional identities were clearly burdens to overcome. An accountant was training to be a programmer, and a programmer was becoming an artist. For many, Russian-centric cultural capital became an obstacle to professional growth or building a social circle. Generally, woman found it easier to communicate with other immigrants than with locally born people. As one woman reflected on her past: “I was shy to make new friends because I was shy of my English.” However, while living in isolation and not making U.S. born friends all of the women describe Americans as more friendly, more relaxed and happier than people in their home country:

And I look at the American people and they are so happy, ahh! (laughs)
And I think with my friend: Maybe it will be in ten years, or twenty, and I will be so happy like this people.

As Isurin (2011) mentions, Russians often perceive Americans to be more friendly than they actually are because they exhibit public behaviors that reflect the American cultural norm of individualism. When women spoke of specific positive cultural experiences during their first years after immigration, it normally meant that their social engagements were mostly confined within stable immigrant communities or still tied to communities in their home countries, despite the move. For example, a young recent graduate who spoke fluent English, did not have children and continued to work remotely in her country despite her H4 visa, thought that her experience was happy because she was a “naturally happy person.” Throughout the conversation, she said that her friends

were mostly from the Russian speaking community. However, she voiced an opinion that Americans are generally friendlier:

People here are nice, very-very nice, they are smiling, they are willing to help you, and everything here is much-much easier than in Ukraine.

She added that the company her husband works for made an effort to assimilate the couple here, but that people in the international community do not stay in one place. Newly met friends moved, so she also met people through her volunteer work at a community garden project.

Language proficiency seemed to be one of the key factors that helped cultural integration. Another recent college graduate explained her difficulty in communicating with those whose only language is English:

They are losing a point of talking to you...because it's harder for them. They have to, they have to put more effort into understanding you, that...then for understanding to average person whose primary language is English.

The long-time immigrant Russian-Korean woman I have previously mentioned, who used to teach at a university, was, after long gap in her professional life, working as a math teacher at the "Russian school of mathematics" - a private after-school program with several locations. She mentioned that she had to work as an assistant teacher for a year because her English needed to improve. She had not practiced her English since the main language she spoke at home was Russian and because all but one of her friends in SV was from the Russian speaking community. She described her situation:

I feel good in America. But I feel not so good about one thing, my career. Because to be teacher is not equal at all to be teacher at college...To teach kids is so hard. Because it's discipline questions. I don't know how to teach students in America, because I had no experience, I had experience with students in

Kazakhstan where you would give lecture, talk for one - one and half hour...and they would listen, ask questions, it was calm.

The next interviewee had been in the U.S. for less than a year, but her plans for her future education and work already conformed to the pattern followed by most of the other study participants. She was considering the option of changing her area of focus, but she was also preparing herself for the likelihood that she would have to accept a lower status career path. Looking forward to beginning school once her small child entered day care, she would study ESL, but she dreamed of studying biology:

Yes, it would be the ideal way, but if we would not have enough money for me to do that, I am thinking of learning some programming.

As was typical for most of the interviewees, she was planning to wait until her children were older before beginning her retraining with a focus on her English language skills. She then hoped to study biology or (more realistically, according to her) programming. Although her dream goal of studying biology included earning a graduate degree, she stated that would accept the idea of studying programming online. Of course, (as demonstrated by the accounts of interviewees who have been in the U.S. longer) these plans could not account for the uncertainty she was likely to face in terms of her ability to work legally and her financial situation.

To sum up, the common pattern for my interviewees was trading relatively low pay, long maternity-leave, feminized fields of study and work (in the home society); for unpaid or low paying work, no maternity leave, full time childcare duties, and lifelong education (in the host society). Overall, there is an economic and cultural push for a more

practical choice of employment (programming, market research) despite one case of a woman becoming an art-teacher.

4.3.4. Divergent Social Needs and the Separation of Sources of Community Support Between Spouses. After immigration, some of the study participants started building separate social circles within families that previously had overlapping and coherent social circles. If both spouses had previously studied and/or worked in the same field, after the first years of an H4 visa holder's life outside her professional network, overcoming the gulf between two separately gained communities became a significant challenge. As I previously mentioned, upon arrival the women received no structural or corporate support, nor did they expect any. So, they started to participate in various communities. For example, some participated in meetup groups, some joined the *Women Who Code* community, and some attended a Ukrainian Catholic Center. Several of the participants indicated that they became active in online communities such as the Russian language *Девчонки Bay Area* ("Girls of the Bay Area") or an international group specifically for H4 visa holders. For full time mothers, building a child-based social circle was vital, and their introduction into American middle-class culture started with meeting American moms on a playground. The women also continued to rely on home country resources (on grandmothers as childcare providers; sources of extra income from abroad). Some go back on vacations to seek emotional support, staying physically or virtually home until their immigration status changes. In one case, a woman described taking counseling sessions via Skype.

The women stated that they had previously shared their hobbies and social circles with their spouses. Indeed, many of the interviewees married people from a similar social circle (they had either studied or worked together). During their first years in a new place, not many of the couples took vacations, following a heroic immigrant narrative. Meaning, they were proud to make time sacrifices for the future of their families. Since corporate culture in SV portrays every worker as an independent entrepreneur, who nonetheless has to accomplish tasks and meet deadlines, at the level of individual, this discourse often harbors a contradiction: “he works a lot, but it depends on us,” as one interviewee said. In other words, it is as if no one insisted on husbands working long hours, but they freely choose to do so. According to women who had long experiences under an H4 visa in SV, their husbands started to value working time more than before. So, they did not build a common circle of friends and no longer participated in common hobbies. For the working husbands, their jobs became centers of routine social interaction that their wives could not enter. Although the women would have been at the center of their spouses’ communal social lives (including their common friends, relatives, coworkers) in their home country; in SV, a spouse working in the IT field was sometimes described as a hermit, working long hours and wanting to stay at home and sleep in his free time. As this quote from a young recent immigrant suggests, many women had not fully expected the loneliness that might come from leaving their home communities:

The problem was, my husband didn't realize that I needed someone to talk to except of him. That's his issue, he's busy, he's introvert and he didn't think that me, being extrovert, I need more communication than he does. But finally, we talked about it and the next day he invited some friends over and through that friends we met some.

Q: How long did it take for you to have this conversation with him?

Two weeks, because I couldn't wait longer. Because he started his job and he would return at 7-8 pm and I was alone at home, and we didn't have a car for some time.

This quote is one example where a woman discussed the fact that she had not planned ahead to meet her need to socialize. The quote also highlights the transition from her urban life to a new place where a car is needed to get out of the house and socialize. The women perceived this process of splitting the sources of community support as an unavoidable feature of their marriage to a workaholic programmer. They adjusted to this new routine by continuing to build new social connections separately. However, some young wives complained that they became lonely and isolated within their relationships abruptly after the move to SV: “I started to feel like I’m out of life” as one woman, who was staying at home with a small baby at the time, said.

4.3.5. The Absurdity of Prohibiting Employment for Future Citizens. The current anti-immigrant political climate has only added unknowns to the already precarious status of H4 visa holders. Many of the women I spoke to had become experts in American immigration policies, waiting to see if the next, even more unbalanced, restrictive or irrational proposal became law. Even in the past, the H1-B and H4 programs did not fulfill immigrants’ expectations of being fast tracks to permanent U.S. residency, despite the typical verbal assurances from SV employers. It seems that companies made this promise a part of the compensation negotiation. Therefore, in many cases, actual pay did not match the workers’ expectations of an upgrade from their pre-migration income (taking the relative cost of living into account). Once an H1-B holder changed employer,

he had to restart the process for obtaining permanent U.S. residency. For the dependent H4 visa holder that meant a delay in obtaining her working permit.

According to the study participants, many of their families had been caught in a vicious circle of changing employers, starting new applications and waiting through uncertain review and audit processes. Discussing the green card sponsorship and application, one woman provided what seems to be a typical example of the unpredictable barriers that can face an H4 visa holder on their path to return to paid work:

[My husband] changed companies after 4 months because the salary and financial situation were not good. The company promised, but had not started application process, and salary was not so good, financial situation was not so good... Went to work for HP... Was a transfer of H1-B, so I stayed H4. And HP started the green card process.

This study participant went on to explain that her husband's department was terminated at Hewlett-Packard, so he found a job at Texas Instruments, and their green card application process started again. Then, his department was terminated at Texas Instruments and he went to work for his current company. The green card process was started again, and she finally moved from H4 status six years after her arrival in the U.S. She explained that six years was the maximum limit for an H1-B visa. Therefore, if they had not received green cards by then, her husband would have had to participate in another visa lottery.

Although six years is the legal limit for how long one can hold H1-B status, in some cases, families experienced up to twelve years of delay in their status change due to numerous audits or changes of employer. Salaries below the market rate or hostile work environments were some of the typical reasons given for switching jobs despite visa-

related risks. The looming fear of a future without legal status or any personal income run as a leitmotif throughout a majority of our conversations with women. As this woman explained:

It's impossible stay home for such long time, especially for me, it was really difficult....For the first two years, it was O.K, it was beautiful, because I could spend time with the baby. But after two years, I started to worry that I had to get back to work so I wouldn't lose my skills. Plus, it's much safer when two adults working. Because life can be so difficult, so different. You have to have work.

In other words, life without personal income and with precarious legal status became a clear personal security issue for many. As we continued the interview with this woman, she reflected on another aspect of the problem. dependent legal and economic status exacerbated the fear of losing a spouse and the father of her children (one of the children is a person, who is living with a disability and needs full-time family support):

My husband is much younger than me, and he is so good, and so smart. But what if something changes? And we have two children, one small and the other that is "forever" small...so I need some work. My husband wants me to work because of my personality and because of my anxiety about one salary.

It is not surprising that when a needed worker and his family are kept from obtaining a coherent legal status, serious strain can develop within marriages. As one woman explained:

Yes, we went through rough patches in the relationship when we would scream and fight and saying – "I'm going to divorce you, I'm moving out!" – but then we, sort of, thought it through and worked it out, let's talk. But yes, there was a source of divorce.

Q: Do you think if you would be completely financially independent, you would divorce?

I'm not sure. Because - how independent? If I had a job? No, I'm not sure that the only thing that keeps me in marriage is the status, there is a whole host of other issues, but it would take off this one consideration. Maybe others would be

important, I mean, maybe, love or something, I don't know.... I won't hide it, you know, I thought about going back and what I was thinking of starting first to my hometown just to recoup, and then, maybe, back to Moscow. Yes, and he was, in fact, which I took as not supportive, but rather harassment, he was supporting me in my decision, saying – “If you feel better there, maybe you should, really...” He should've say “no!” I think he's struggling with certain issues in his life and, maybe, he's taking out these struggles on me.... Of course we did have fights before, before moving to the U.S., but we were on equal footing then... Even in the worst-case scenario I could move in with my brother. The main fear, is that my husband would go through with the divorce and I would not get my green card.

Q: Would he?

I hope... it doesn't seem like morally. But I think if really, he gets really mad, he can go and somehow file for divorce, but, I mean, that's some sort of extreme.... But this is the problem, if we would divorce how would custody work? Even if we would divorce here and we would be awarded joint custody, since he is not a bad parent, would my son live half the year here and half the year in Russia? And I would have to go back, because once the divorce goes through, I could not stay on the visa, and even if he pays child support, again, he would pay child support voluntarily anyway. It doesn't change a lot, maybe, I would be awarded more, but he can only pay what he can afford. It's not like he would have to live on the street. And I don't want him to do that. It's more that I wouldn't be able to stay here. Mostly for my child, but also for me. The situation in Russia has changed, it is worse than when we came.

In other words, she had not decided that she wanted a divorce, she mentioned that love might still be a reason not to divorce. However, she had clearly thought about it seriously, and she had discussed the possibility of divorce with her husband. Although the decision had not been made, it is clear that her dependent status made her relatively powerless if her husband chose to divorce. Balgamwalla (2014) lists some of the consequences that this lack of legally-defined personhood can have for H4 visa holders. In addition to being barred from work, H4 visa holders have no right to stay in the U.S. without the primary (H1-B) visa holder or in the case of divorce. Absolute dependence on a spouse for legal residency translates into severe disadvantages in the case of domestic violence or custody

proceedings in a divorce, a divorced wife might be deported while custody of her children could be awarded to a husband who retains the right to stay in the U.S.

It would be reasonable to conclude, that the rights restrictions placed on H4 visa holders is a symbolic punishment that distracts American public from the broader debate over the H1-B program.

5. DISCUSSION

As I have discussed in the literature review, according to legal scholars who studied H4 visa restrictions, the American legislature sees the dependent wife and her highly skilled H1-B husband as a single legal entity (the so-called *couverture* doctrine) and this provides an outdated, gendered, and unjust, but clear legal rationale for visa restrictions. However, this view limits the understanding of how categories of immigration are defined and how they fit within a coherent policy. Reflecting on Geddes & Scholten's (2016) general description of migration policies in the EU, it could be argued that the U.S. promotes economic liberalization and entrepreneurship for highly skilled workers, but strictly limits rights of others. Based on such an understanding, it becomes evident that the case of visa categories like the H4, O3, and others that limit spousal rights, is not so much a rudiment of the outdated legal *couverture* doctrine that discriminates against women, but an application of some of the general principles of contemporary American immigration policy. The fact that the limitation of spousal rights is deeply rooted in the history of U.S. immigration policy speaks in support of this idea, as Balgamwalla (2014) asserts in describing the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. This understanding helps to

reveal assumptions that inform definitions of highly skilled or dependent in the American immigration discourse.

Perhaps one could think of an H1-B and H4 family as being a showcase of a social construct of contemporary labor migration. Here, within a single immigrant family, we have the typical *good* and *bad* immigrants; one is invited and encouraged to succeed, and the other is limited, strictly regulated, and exploited. Congressional testimony defending the H1-B program (Anderson 2006) demonstrates the value that is attributed to H1-B visa holders. My inquiry into the experiences of H4 visa holders, who face an indefinite number of years in patterns of unpaid work, aesthetic labor or coerced volunteer work, demonstrates the low value that is assigned to the companions of H1-B workers. Naturally, because of the existing gender imbalances in the countries of the FSU that provide highly skilled labor to SV, the highly restricted H4 visa holder is most likely to be a woman.

The overarching question guiding this research was: “In what ways does immigration to SV under a dependent visa status change the self-images of women from the FSU, and how do they perceive this change?” After a few initial interviews, during which the women reflected on their lives, I realized that my line of inquiry led them to question their arrangements, negotiations, and plans. Keeping in mind their precarious economic and legal position, I did not want to challenge them, metaphorically speaking, to saw the beams at the foundation of their own houses, unless I was proposing a more reliable solution, better suited to their lives. This study could be a first step towards building a better living structure. It is true that after listening to seventeen interviews, it became

obvious that many had not attempted to reclaim or redefine the identity that was given to them by the broader societies in their home and host countries. They adjusted to their peculiar circumstances in the absence of any state support and learned how to negotiate rules and navigate the system.

My interviewees used to have a part in the mainstream narratives of their home countries. Many such narratives are shaped by strong movements against the bureaucratic control of Soviet times (and its enduring residues) and against the corruption that has characterized the post-Soviet transition to a capitalism (Fitzpatrick 1999; Savkina 2009). So, people were likely to adopt a more individualistic world view, in which the individual is responsible for her or his success or failure. In the main middle-class narrative, a traditional Soviet survival strategy *nothing depends on me* and a risk-taking mentality and voluntarism become fused together. This dynamic was manifested during the interviews in the discourses I have labeled *this is just happened to me* and *we won the lottery*.

It could be argued that post-Soviet intellectual elites, upon their arrival to SV, become what Bellah (2008) called, citing Robert Reich, an “anxious class” (a group that fears dropping lower on the social ladder). In some ways, the late Soviet and post-Soviet *run from poverty* and *run to safety* echoes Lewis’s concept of “glorious placelessness” (Bellah 2008) among transnational intellectual elites that form communities based on common shared advances, not based on belonging to one particular geographical location. But scholars of labor migration have suggested one serious distinction between Western and post-Soviet skilled workers. However well educated, in the late Soviet or post-Soviet context people became paralyzed by their own advances and the conditions

they were escaping were not much better than in any other countries in the developing world. Apparently, these conditions created a push effect. The interviews show that the women's decision to emigrate for a better life for their family, was not even a matter of serious deliberation. As many explained, the desirability of the move was a given for them. The shift in American immigration policy in the 1990s towards de-ethnicization and towards a point-based system rewarded highly skilled and English-speaking immigrants (FitzGerald & Cook-Martin 2014:129). This policy transition created a strong pull effect among English-speaking programmers of FSU origin. As FitzGerald & Cook-Martin (2014) suggest, this new immigration policy disadvantaged potential immigrants who were not English speakers. The work of scholars (Logan 2010) aligns with my finding that women from the FSU were immersed in Russian language-centered, feminized fields of work and study, guided by dominant Soviet cultural and gender norms. Therefore, with the transition to capitalism, a shared tactic for potential women immigrants included the commodification of English speaking and highly skilled spouses, while acceding to a future under the unclear status of dependent. After moves that were based on shared family impulses to live in a more just society with less corruption and more potential for personal development (a normal impulse according to the culture norms of their home countries), many women went through an individual adaptation to acquire a new personal identity as a dependent. This identity is not-normal in the host society of SV that values female independence. In other words, the immigrant categories of highly skilled and dependent were almost meaningless in the women's home countries because the goal was to escape poor conditions and to achieve a stable

middle-class status for the family. Many women were unaware of the number of years they would be prohibited from paid labor and of the complete absence of state support. The immigrant categories became meaningful to them on American soil. In particular, my interviews helped to uncover the homogenizing effect of the H4 visa and to uncover the assumptions that inform the dependent immigrant category. The women find that they commonly encounter difficulties in transforming their cultural capital in the absence of structural support, and in the context of split sources of social support within the family. This separation of the spouse's social circles often led to interpersonal barriers within marriages, and to a more gendered division of labor.

One member of the online community *Девчонки Bay Area* (“Girls of the Bay Area”) joked regarding what she misses most from her pre-emigration life: “the feeling that we have to get out of here.” Naturally, these women missed the time when they hoped for better future, even though they did not miss the realities they escaped. Indeed, some of my interviewees would encourage others to emigrate, following the American Dream. However, quite a few said that this was a personal choice and that they were not in the position to make suggestions. Therefore, the transition to the new identity of dependent immigrant wives created personal and interpersonal conflicts. Again, judging from the interviews, the women do not have any reliable long-term strategies or a shared political consciousness. They use the tactic of *othering*. In one way or another, they are receptive to the *strong and independent woman* narrative and reproduce *the other happy woman* tale that acts to diminish agency and reinforce the stereotypical host culture perception of

their community as a community of either poor victims of patriarchy or materialistic Russian women.

Furthermore, however contradictory it might seem, the fear of the mainstream feminist rhetoric within emigrants' new culture is understandable. The liberal values of individualism and self-sufficiency celebrated within the dominant discourses of both cultures, still seems foreign to many of the women, and therefore - threatening to their traditional ways. The ideas of Western feminism may seem riskier to them post-migration, since there are few feasible options for emancipation and continued reliance on their husbands may appear to be their least uncertain path towards their goals. Many of the interviewees constructed two seemingly contradictory self-images, because their immigration status prevented them from conforming with modern middle-class values. They understood but could not participate in dominant social narratives that promote career ambition, competitiveness, and achievement and devalue care, parenthood, and interconnectedness. For example, one woman speaks happily about her experience of motherhood, but minimizes its importance while claiming that this is her own perception. These women feel a need to distance themselves from the unambitious identity of dependent. And yet, the master-narratives collapsed, and contradictions revealed a subservient discourse that manifested itself in many ways. Some women spoke of a need for vital communal infrastructure (e.g. professional daycare facilities), while others emphasized the long hours their spouses work, their own unpaid work in various settings, a lack of respect for their mothering role, and the unpredictability or even the absurdity of their immigration status. Upon further questioning, each of them shared specific tactics

to mitigate either the effects of the restrictions on their growing professional ambition, or to match host culture expectations of how they should feel about such restrictions. Some of the common tactics were: lifelong education, coerced volunteering, work with no pay, participation in aesthetic labor, work for cash under the table or remote work based on pre-emigrant connections, minimizing the value of parenthood, or the opposite – the professionalization of child care duties.

Lastly, the demonstration of these shared tactics could open up public and community discussion in order to answer the question of whether or not such tactics could point to a long-term strategy for this and for similar immigrant communities. The experiences of the community of unemployable immigrants in SV also reveal the normative limits on how women's agency should be exercised within the current capitalist economy. In other words, establishing a pattern of women's participation in unpaid or underpaid labor in various settings (home, schools, educational centers, cultural venues, tech-hubs, professional meet-ups, retail stores etc.) helps to understand how the categories of highly skilled and dependent are shaped by the immigration policies that regulate labor migration in the U.S. Most importantly, it helps to identify where the dependent workers are directed and what social functions they are regularly asked to perform.

In the minds of many women who are barred from paid work, the strong and independent woman narrative echoes the celebrated highly skilled immigrant category. Meanwhile, the other happy woman is stigmatized as a category of dependent who does not deserve a husband's, the community's or the state's support. With this in mind, developing structural strategies based on lived experiences could help the community to

reimagine and reclaim these women's self-images. The objective would be to increase the social coherence and purpose in their lives, making them happier without robbing them of their true personalities and distinctions.

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Appendix A

I interviewed seventeen women between 2016 and 2017. The women had been admitted to the U.S. under visa classes that prohibited them from participating in paid work (fifteen were admitted with H4 visas and two with O3 visas); but nine of them had subsequently applied for and been granted permanent residency (“green cards”). Most of the women interviewed (eleven of seventeen) had been living in the U.S. for more than two but fewer than ten years. However, I interviewed two women who were relatively recent arrivals and four who had been in the U.S. from ten to twenty-five years. All of the interviewees had emigrated from countries of the former Soviet Union (eleven from Ukraine, four from Russia, one from Kazakhstan, and one from Belarus). I used the multiple snowball method to recruit the interviewees, beginning within the Ukrainian community. Therefore, the high proportion of Ukrainian women in the sample was expected. Thirteen indicated that Russian was their primary language. Ten of the study participants were between twenty-five and forty years old, three were less than twenty-five years old, and four were over forty. Fourteen of the women were mothers, fourteen had completed university degrees at the Masters level or higher. Thirteen had stated annual household incomes above one hundred thousand dollars.

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Discussion Guide

Immigration

1. Would you please describe for me some highlights of your immigration experience: what was your first day in the U.S. like?

1.1 How did you make your decision to move to Silicon Valley?

Family and friends

2. Tell me more about your family, children and parenting, please.

3. Tell me about your in-laws, your extended family and friends.

4. Tell me more about how you socialize with locals or within the local community of people from your native country.

Education

5. How would you describe your English language proficiency?

5.1. In what ways do you enjoy or not enjoy speaking English?

5.2. Were your English skills very strong when you moved to the U.S.?

6. Whether or not your English skills were strong when you arrived:

6.1. Has your English improved since you have been here?

7. Tell me something about your education.

7.1. What kind of education did you complete in your home country?

7.2. Have you, or do you plan to continue your education here in Silicon Valley?

7.3. What would you like to study?

Work

8. Tell me more about working outside the home before leaving your home country.

8.1. Was the decision to work or not to work a personal choice?

8.2. If the decision to work or not was not your choice, what would your preference have been?

8.3. If you did work, tell me more about it. How was this job related to your educational background, and did you have long-term career plans?

9. Please, tell me about your current job situation.

9.1. Was the decision to work or not to work a personal choice?

9.2. If the decision to work or not was not your choice, what would your preference have been?

10. If you want to work, please describe how you would imagine your dream job.

Free time, volunteering

11. Tell me, please, what do you enjoy doing in your free time.

11.1. What makes you happy about doing it?

11.2. What are your hobbies?

12. Do you volunteer?

12.1. If yes, tell me more about your volunteering: what is the cause, why is it important to you?

Overall experiences, closing

13. Please tell me more about following:

13.1. What are some of the ways that your move has made your life easier or happier?

13.2. What are some of the ways that your move has made your life more difficult or less enjoyable?

13.3. Are there some ways in which the move has made you more free to make choices and decisions that are important to you? Please describe some examples.

13.4. Are there some ways in which the move has made you less free to make choices and decisions that are important to you? Please describe some examples.

14. Are there any questions or other topics that you would like to talk about that might help me understand your experiences and feelings about your move to Silicon Valley?