

Valuing “Good” Motherhood in Migration

The Experiences of Indian Professional Wives in America and Peruvian Working-Class Wives Left Behind in Peru

This paper examines the experiences of motherhood by middle-class Tamil professional immigrants in America and working-class Peruvian wives left behind in Peru. We argue that both value certain elements of Tamil and Peruvian ideologies of “good” mothering to develop practices of mothering that respond to the specific structural challenges encountered in migration. For Tamil women these include providing and cooking, while for their Peruvian counterparts, being child-centered mothers and honorable wives. Being mothers in this way is an act of power accompanied by advantages which, for Tamil women, are the continued engagement with professional work, the upward mobility of their families, and cultural preservation for their children—all while being validated as “good” mothers. For their Peruvian counterparts, the ability to create the perception of being upwardly mobile, avoiding the stigma of single motherhood, and being good wives through “good” mothering ensures their husbands’ commitment through continued flow of remittances. However, the personal costs of this are borne by Tamil and Peruvian women evinced in the former’s physical tiredness and loss of personal leisure time and in the latter’s lack of social life, the privatizing of motherhood, and becoming asexual. We thus demonstrate the dynamicity of motherhood in migration.

In the process of international migration, both immigrants and those left behind experience transformations in familial and gender systems, including that of motherhood (Carranza; Hewett; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila; Moon; Parreñas). This paper attempts to understand this issue by examining the experiences of motherhood by two under-researched immigrant groups—middle-class Tamil¹ professional women who emigrate as wives and/or families to the United States, and working-class Peruvian wives

left behind in Peru as the other half of the predominantly male-dominated emigration to America. Our focus on Tamil and Peruvian women is guided by two factors. First, both belong to cultures that are stereotypically imagined to be oppressive patriarchies (see Mohanty) and where motherhood is perceived to constrain and disempower women. This makes them interesting cases in which to uncover women's agency in the practices of mothering that they espouse. Second, the different class statuses of Tamil and Peruvian women, and their locations at the two ends of the migration chain, enable us to account for the specific structural conditions that emerge from these statuses within which women's power in determining their experience of motherhood is grounded, contextualized, and historicized. By theorizing the simultaneous diversity in mothering arrangements and the similarities in their practice, our paper responds to the call for more comparative research on immigrant families.

We argue that both Tamil and Peruvian immigrants employ certain elements of culturally-specific ideologies of "good" mothering to develop practices of motherhood in response to the structural challenges encountered in migration. For Tamil women these include providing for the family and cooking meals, while for their Peruvian counterparts, the focus is on being child-centered mothers and honorable wives. Being mothers in this way then is an act of power accompanied by advantages. For Tamil women, this includes the possibility of their continued engagement with professional work and of facilitating the upward mobility of their families and cultural preservation for their children—while being validated as "good" mothers. For their Peruvian counterparts, the ability to create the perception of being upwardly mobile, avoiding the stigma of single motherhood, and being good wives through "good" mothering ensures their migrant husbands' commitment through the continued flow of remittances. The personal costs of this are borne by Tamil and Peruvian women evinced in the former's physical tiredness and loss of personal leisure time, and the latter's lack of social life, the privatization of motherhood, and increasing asexuality.

The findings presented here are based on a year-long ethnography (2007–2008) in the Tamil community in Atlanta, Georgia. In addition to participant observation at festivals, gatherings in Tamil community sites, and in the household arrangements in participant homes, Namita Manohar conducted 33 multi-part, feminist life-history interviews with first-generation Tamil professional women who immigrated to the U.S. between 1971 and 1995. The research on the Peruvian wives left behind is informed by four years (2006–2010) of ethnographic research among immigrant men in a large Peruvian ethnic enclave in Paterson, New Jersey, with families left behind in several regions of Peru. In conjunction with participant observation in

wives’ homes, Erika Busse-Cárdenas conducted 84 in-depth interviews with multiple members of the same family, including 13 middle- and working-class wives left behind in Peru.²

The article begins with a review of Tamil and Peruvian migration to the U.S. and of ideologies of “good” motherhood within these two cultural contexts and its experience in immigration. Next, we present our findings: the salience of providing and cooking to Tamil women’s experience of immigrant motherhood; and for Peruvian women, being child-centered mothers and honorable wives. Lastly, we present our conclusions about the dynamicity of Tamil and Peruvian motherhood in migration.

Background: Immigration by Tamil Professionals and Peruvians to the United States

Middle-class, Tamil Brahmin (upper-caste) professionals are an important component of the increasing number of Indian professionals who have migrated to the U.S. following the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 that created a preference for highly skilled and family reunification migration from Asian countries (Rumbaut).³ Tamil Brahmins, who occupy the upper echelons of the caste hierarchy in Southern India, have historically been the educated and land-owning caste. Commencing with British colonialism, they have transitioned into an urbanized, English-speaking, professional, middle-class group, overrepresented in occupations such as banking, education, administration, and information technology, the basis of their professional international migration (Fuller and Narasimhan). Like other Indian professional immigrants of the time, Tamil Brahmin immigration was motivated by the greater economic and employment opportunities in the U.S., as compared with the high levels of unemployment, competition for jobs, and poor salaries that characterized the socialist economy of post-colonial India until it liberalized in the early 1990s (Khandelwal; Madhavan).⁴ Additionally, Tamil Brahmin immigration was gendered such that independent migration was a masculine domain bolstering men’s status as providers, while the movement of women was sanctioned only through their roles as wives and mothers in married migration (Fuller and Narasimhan). The majority of my sample had immigrated to an array of American cities prior to relocating to Atlanta in the mid-1990s and early 2000s, drawn by the growing economic opportunities for professionals and the Tamil cultural presence in the city (Odem).

International migration by Peruvians to the U.S. commenced after World War II, becoming more pronounced from the 1980s until the present, largely motivated by the economic need of improved job opportunities (Altamirano

2001). This was due to the economic hyperinflation and social devastation that accompanied the civil war in Peru in the 1980s and the consequent structural adjustment programs implemented in the 1990s and early 2000s.⁵ Paterson, New Jersey emerged as a Peruvian ethnic enclave due to the employment opportunities available in the New Jersey silk industry and subsidiary plants established there in the beginning of the twentieth century. Many Peruvian immigrants there include professionals who took low-wage work in the U.S. where their Peruvian credentials were not recognized (Altamirano 2006). A significant proportion also includes working-class Peruvians, especially men who emigrated in search of work opportunities that would enable them to “earn money for subsistence” and thus perform urban masculinity (Fuller 3). In this gendered migration, wives were left behind in Peru, and it is these women who I focus on.

Ideologies of Tamil and Peruvian Motherhood & Immigrant Mothering

Immigrant women, whether middle-class Tamils or working-class Peruvians, experience motherhood at the nexus of mothering ideologies in their countries of origin and the “specific historical contexts framed by interlocking structures of race, class, and gender” (Collins 56) within which they are positioned as immigrants or wives left behind. Despite the social changes transforming the gender systems in India and Peru, there is a continued dominance of a culturally-specific hegemonic ideology of motherhood. This narrowly defined ideology represents the lived experience of a segment of society, but is codified as the “real, natural and universal one ... the only ‘good’ motherhood” (O’Reilly 88).

In India, this ideology emerged in the colonial and post-colonial contexts with particular reference to upper-caste, urban, middle-class group like the Tamil Brahmin community who glorified “good” mothers as the “guarantor of purity of progeny and authenticator of historical continuity” (Lakshmi 1984: 73). Accordingly, motherhood is constructed as obligatory for all women—a normative component of their social biography and a “sacred duty” (Riessman 112) integral to the social fabric of the community. It is physically located within the domestic realm (posed opposite the public world of work where men are located) so as to be the only (and ultimate) source of their identity and their primary responsibility as women (Dutta; Krishnaraj). It also embodies women’s “unstinting affection and undying spirit of self-sacrifice for their family” (Bagchi 65), evinced in the necessity for their education and for being “keepers” of “authentic” Tamil culture. This enables them to ensure the success of their children in the modern world and to preserve the sanctity

of Tamil culture correspondingly, thereby justifying their worth as mothers (Lakshmi).

In Peru, the ideology of “good” motherhood is defined within the ideology of Marianismo (femininity)—of women being “self-negating and martyrs for their children because they are spiritually and morally superior to men” (Dreby 2006: 35). Along with these elements, the ideology emphasizes the value of domesticity, denying sexuality and carrying the honor of the family. Motherhood, then, must occur within a marriage, as single-motherhood is highly stigmatized (Sara-Lafosse). Marianismo assumes a middle-class who can afford to be stay-at-home mothers in the urban area, while the men (fathers) focus on providing. Additionally, there is a continued appreciation of this ideology even among working-class women who are driven into the workforce by the financial needs of their families (Kogan). Through a careful weaving of their participation in the labor market and their caregiving roles, these women have expanded the ideal of the “good” mother to incorporate working outside of the household while avoiding stigma from their spouses and families.

In both contexts, the power of these culturally-specific motherhood ideologies lie in their exclusivity and corresponding valuation as the “standard model of mothering” (O’Reilly 89) against which *all* women are judged. As a result, multiple experiences of motherhood generated by varied social locations (class, caste, migration status) are not only perceived as transgressive, but more importantly characterized as “deviant” or “bad,” and in turn maintain the hegemony of a singular motherhood ideology. Nonetheless, not much is known about the actual motherhood practices by which women engage with, transgress, and/or sustain these ideologies in different contexts—one of which is the process of international migration.

Recent evidence suggests that motherhood assumes increased salience in the context of immigration as a source of survival, power, and identity often in response to marginalization (see Collins), challenging women to go beyond their “traditional” mothering roles. Accordingly, a variety of mothering arrangements emerge: incorporating paid employment into their mothering responsibilities as they struggle to ensure the physical survival and upward economic mobility of their families (George; Glenn, Chang and Forcey; Moon; Segura); and becoming “gate-keepers” (Carranza 88) of their culture and family values by using their mother work (story-telling, socialization etc.) to retain the same in their households and for their children. Others include: engaging in transnational “supermothering” (Parreñas 103), reverting to a privatized form of mothering by giving up work and returning to homemaking, and centering lives on children in an effort to combat aspersions to their chastity given their migrant husbands’ absence. In this paper, we examine the experiences of Tamil and Peruvian motherhood by centering our analysis on the interaction of the

ideologies and practices of motherhood in the context of migration thereby demonstrating its dynamicity.

Mothering by Tamil Women: Providing and Cooking

For Tamil women, the experience of motherhood in the U.S. is defined by the practices of providing for their families and cooking their meals, constructed in relation to the structural challenges of economic insecurity and cultural loss they face as immigrants.

Economic Providers

The majority of my participants began their work lives in the U.S. rather than in India. Engaging in paid labor in America becomes salient when framed by the economic uncertainties emergent from the structure of the post-1970s American labor market, where job security is not assured, the commitment between employers and employees (especially in non-unionized white-collar work) is weaker than in India. In addition, they lose extended kin networks in migration that, in India, buffer against economic adversity. These elements combine to potentially threaten the attainment of the upward economic mobility which was their original reason for emigrating from India (Sweet and Meiksins). Divya Chandrashekar, a 40-year-old Corporate America Executive explains:⁶

I think that your life is very [economically] volatile here. And back home you know, I would have the support of my family. Here you are kind of on your own. Back home... if you've been working for 15 years, they [the company] would feel an obligation. Here it is not like that. Your performance needs to be good. And [still] you can just be cut off. And we lack family support... back home I think my brother would come out and help [during economic hardship]. You are by yourself here and in this society... you are only as good as you perform.... So my working is very important. Because if he [her husband] loses his job, I'm providing insurance for the family.

Tamil women like Divya weave work and motherhood to be mutually supportive, constructing themselves as co-breadwinners who, as equal financial contributors to their families, provide economic security—what they call “insurance”—countering the threat of downward economic spirals that often afflict single income families while consolidating their position in the upper-middle class group in the U.S. (Garey; George).

In particular, they point to their financial contributions affording their families a quality of life associated with the purchase of large homes in up-

scale, white-dominated northern Atlanta suburbs—which they confided was only financially possible once they were working, preparing for retirement, and traveling for leisure. A more important facet of this class position is their enhanced ability as dual income professional families to provide stellar academic and cultural opportunities for their children (Moon). These include attendance at private schools; American university education; participation in extracurricular activities such as soccer, band, track, etc.; and Tamil cultural training through music, dance, and language classes. Vidya Pillai, a 39-year-old IT professional notes:

You see, both my children studied in Montessori school and [we] never had any problems paying about \$1000 per month for school fees. I could send them to music class, dance class, Bal Vihar [Sunday School at the Temple]. You need money for everything. I can put them in ten classes rather than just two classes. Everything is hourly based...for one hour of dance you pay \$20, for one hour of music it's \$20. All that I couldn't have done if my husband was the only person earning.

Work also integrates Tamil women into professional networks with like-minded American mothers from whom they learn the academic opportunities available to upwardly mobile families in the U.S., better enabling them to maximize these for their children. Kamakshi Swaminathan, a 44-year-old IT professional with a son in middle school, explains this in the context of learning the importance of extracurricular activities and sports in the college admission process in America and correspondingly enrolling her son in a variety of sporting activities.

To become providers, Tamil women appropriate elements of the ideology of “good” motherhood—particularly that of motherhood being women’s only source of identity—in order to integrate professional work as a workable domain of motherhood. Thus, being a professional is not merely individualistic, or an identity distinct from their normative ones, but intrinsic to it, enhancing their mothering—what Kamala Vivek, a 46-year-old scientist identifies as being, “strong moms ... self-reliant, independent, self-confident, [and] role models for their children.” These mothers are more capable of facilitating their families’ and children’s success in the U.S. Reworking this ideology enables them to continue to position themselves as “good” mothers who, as (co)providers, facilitate their families’ life chances in the jeopardous context of the U.S. and thereby avoid possible critique for challenging hegemonic ideologies of Tamil motherhood that locate it within the domestic realm. They affirm this by reinforcing traditional elements of motherhood especially in their choice to cook for their families.

Cooking

Despite their busy professional lives, Tamil women claim the gendered responsibility of cooking for their families, arguing that it is one of their core responsibilities as mothers in the U.S. and exclusively performed by them regardless of how other household labor is divided. Neelakshi Arunachalem, a 42-year-old scientist acknowledges:

I make sure I prepare the dinner. Even though he [her husband] does a lot of other [household] work, I still cook and so I take care of the food part of it. I pretty much do most of the cooking.

By appropriating the gendered responsibility of Tamil mothers being “the traditional food givers,” (Dutta 87) they are validated as “good” mothers especially by their spouses and the larger Tamil community who uphold the traditional model of Tamil motherhood. Tamil women thus feel the need to prove that they have not abandoned traditional arenas of mothering even as they assume new ones in migration. This is especially evinced in their sense of guilt and of failing in their roles as mothers if they do not cook for their families. Divya, quoted earlier, epitomizes this when she notes:

I would feel very guilty if I don't cook. It's like I didn't do my job or something. And I hate that feeling, but it always comes. And my husband makes fun of me... he might mean it as a joke, but he's being sarcastic sometimes, “Oh, you didn't even go into the kitchen today!” ... even if it is not even two meals [that I missed cooking].... Yes, I would say that they [Tamil women who do not cook at home on a regular basis] would be stereotyped. They [Tamil community] would just say, “Oh, they're just taking advantage of working and being lazy, and not doing their role.” Definitely yes! I think it's expected as Indian women [for us] to be the primary [person] taking care of meals.

Through cooking, Tamil women fulfill their responsibility, as women, of preserving culture and raising “authentically” Tamil children (Kurien; Purkayastha). By recognizing that food is a signifier of group affiliation and a marker of ethnic identity, Tamil women cook to socialize their children into Tamil culture (Srinivas; Vallianatos and Raine). Correspondingly, the heightened salience of this practice in the immigrant context⁷ has to be contextualized not only in their engagement with work, but also by their fears of the second-generation losing their culture. This becomes especially important when considering that their upward economic mobility has resulted in their inhabitation of white-dominated spaces (upscale neighborhoods, private schools, etc.), where, as racialized

minorities, their children encounter pressures to assimilate by denying their ethnicity, which might reflect badly on them as mothers (Purkayastha).

Therefore, Tamil women act as gatekeepers of their families’ food choices by preparing South Indian and/or Indian food at home.⁸ They deem this cuisine the most appropriate for “family” meals as opposed to the American cuisine (pizza, pasta, burgers, sandwiches) which they characterize as being insufficient in feeding their families in the long term. Arundhati Chandran, a 45-year-old entrepreneur explains:

With the kids ... it's not that I make them something else [non-Indian food] because there is only Indian food [at home]. I have always fed them Indian food.

Through the food they cook, they teach their children what it means to be Tamil, conveying pre/proscriptions such as being strictly vegetarian and respecting sacramental foods. They socialize their children into culinary practices such as eating neatly with fingers and identifying the various components of a South Indian meal like rice, lentils, vegetables and yogurt, and about foods consumed to mark the religious calendar (Appadurai; Srinivas). Importantly, as described by Revathy Venkatesh, a 32-year-old Corporate America Executive, referencing memories of her own mother’s food embodying care and comfort, they cook to build similar bonds with children that serve the dual purposes of anchoring children to their heritage, while also demonstrating that as mothers, work has not prevented them from being family centered.

For me, comfort was eating my mother's rasam-sadam, and aloo curry ... and I just want my kids to have that. It's a huge deal. So I have to make sure that I cook for them. It takes up a lot of my energy. So my husband says, "cooking takes up time. Let's get someone to cook for us." I cannot handle the thought of my children eating somebody else's food other than my own. I cannot handle it! That is the only thing that is preventing me from doing it. Because for me ... that is such a strong bond between mother and child ... for a child to remember mother's cooking.

Appropriating cooking and providing into their immigrant mothering is not conflict free. Cooking comprises a mandatory component of household labor,⁹ which they have to manage alongside their busy professional schedules (Shah). Being in the U.S. enables Tamil women to embrace “newer” (for them) cooking methods not yet acceptable in India—such as cooking in bulk on weekends, storing food, preparing only staples (rice, *roti*, *dosa*, etc.) on a daily basis as explained by Janiki Parthasarathi, a 44-year-old Professor, below:

I do a little bit more heavier duty cooking in the weekends to make sure that some staples were stocked in the fridge and then just cooking some rice or vegetables in the evening, as needed basis.

Despite this, it carries the personal costs of substantially increasing their social reproduction work. Cooking requires the mental work of planning meals and organizing their work schedules to prepare them, and the physical labor of grocery shopping and cooking in a regular, planned fashion both of which are time consuming. As a result, Tamil women acknowledge being mentally drained, physically tired, and continually anxious about managing these responsibilities and lacking personal leisure time. Being mothers in this way is, however, accompanied by the advantages of their continued engagement with professional work, upward mobility of families, building strong bonds with children, and cultural preservation—all while being validated as “good” mothers.

Mothering by Peruvian Women: Honorable Wives and Child-Centered Homemakers

Peruvian wives experience motherhood through their roles as honorable (faithful) wives and child-centered homemakers who are solely responsible for their children. By being full-time mothers through these practices, they are responding to the vulnerabilities they encounter as wives left behind especially regarding the threats of economic and emotional abandonment by their husbands and the possibility of being stigmatized as single mothers (Sara-Lafosse).

Honorable Wife

Fidelity is a critical issue wives left behind face upon their husbands’ emigration. In response, they craft themselves as honorable wives by emulating aspects of the cultural model of Marianismo centered on women controlling their sexual impulses. This involves wives not only denying their sexuality, but also avoiding open confrontation with their husbands on the issue of faithfulness by rarely raising the issue. In contrast, men check on their wives openly and systematically after migration. Wives recount the number of times their husbands have shown their jealousy when women worked or went out with friends by calling them three or more times a day. Cecilia, a 50-year-old former restaurant cook, reports:

Now Pepe calls me [at] home and, if he doesn’t find me here, he calls me on my cell. My own sister-in-law, the late one, used to say that Pepe was annoying with all those phone calls. I used to say that Pepe needs to know where I am, I always tell him where I go. If I go to a gathering, I tell him

so he always knows where I am. Telling him avoids arguing with him. Yeah, if I don't tell him where I am and he cannot find me, he will keep calling me until he finds me. There is a fight after that for sure. Sometimes he doesn't want me to go out so I stay. I stay because I know he is going to call me and I have to pick up the phone.

Peruvian women think their husbands call them at set times or randomly as a way of controlling them. However, as honorable wives they do not openly challenge their husbands about it, but tend to make a joke of it rather than complain (see Mahler). This is because the spousal relationship after immigration revolves mainly around communication. Phone calls become critical for transnational couples to keep their relationship alive and as a gauge of the husbands' commitment and fidelity. In turn, wives fear that upsetting their husbands with their complaints might jeopardize husbands' financial responsibility toward their children as well as the possibility of reuniting.¹⁰

As faithfulness is a complex topic when men live in the same country—it is more difficult when spouses are separated. In these cases, women resort to trust. This is how Karen, a 46-year-old former beauty products seller, explains it:

I think that being jealous indicates lack of trust. I tell them, if your husband wants to cheat on you, he would do it here or over there. A man is a man, he can have another woman...but you will always be the wife.

Karen points to a double standard for men and women concerning fidelity, one in which men can be unfaithful because it is a “physical need,” while women are expected to be faithful. Needless to say, both husbands and wives were hesitant to discuss faithfulness with me. Only once, and in a very private conversation I had with a husband in the U.S., did he tell me that it took him five years to be with another woman. His admission came along with a sense of pride because he had been able to wait that long. In his comment there was also a sense that it was more a matter of a physical need than of emotional connection. By contrast, women never mentioned, or implied, the possibility of seeing another man in Peru. Since immigration eliminates face-to-face interactions between spouses, this virtual disappearance of women's sexual activity is another dimension of their faithfulness and yet another sacrifice wives left behind make for their families. By denying their sexuality they also avoid the stigma of being labeled “single mother,” which is often a metaphor for a sexually promiscuous woman.

While women are crafting how to be honorable wives, physical separation also gives them latitude to contest their husbands' decisions. They hold their motherhood and honor over their husbands to make their own decisions guided

by what they think is best for their families. This is particularly true when the decisions are related to household needs and children's education (school fees, food, home improvements etc.). Susy, a 48-year-old former maid, explains:

Once my refrigerator broke so I asked Joe to buy a new one, and he said no. He said I should repair the old one. The old one was broken and it was big. He sent the money to repair the old one and I used it to purchase a new one, but small. I didn't tell him until he came back last December. He questioned me about it and I said that I just did it ... he didn't say more.

In deciding on her own to purchase a new refrigerator, Susy avoided direct confrontation with her husband. This seems to be a common practice among wives that are left behind suggesting that women exercise a certain degree of autonomy in deciding how to spend the money their husbands send as remittances. Men most often send money to pay specific bills. However, because they are not present to monitor the expenditures, wives have room to make their own decisions about the way the funds are deployed. Wives left behind also extend their decision-making capacities to earning pocket money without telling their spouses. However, decision making over remittances also has a down side. Although women seem to have greater freedom to decide what to do with husbands' remittances, they lack the freedom to contest their primary role as homemakers who nurture their children. Thus, as honorable wives, Peruvian women keep their own and their husbands' honor by reinforcing the ideals of being chaste (and asexual) and of Marianismo in response to a number of vulnerabilities they face related to the dynamics of their spousal relationships.

Child-centered Homemaker

A second element from Marianismo that wives draw on is being full-time mothers, which was unavailable to working-class women prior to their husbands' emigration. At the time of my fieldwork in 2007, I found all of the women out of the labor market, spending long days at home, and organizing their lives around their children as their primary activity. This is an unusual experience for working-class wives who combined breadwinning and caregiving prior to their husbands' immigration, often relying on extended family support to assist them in their disproportionate performance of household labor and child rearing.¹¹ Cecilia, quoted earlier, notes:

My in-laws used to help me taking care of my girls in the summer (December-March) so I could go to work. That's the high season for my mom's restaurant so I would help her. I would stay home the rest of the year raising my girls. Sometimes I would do handicrafts, knitting, right?

Some, like Monica, a 35-year-old former hairdresser, below remember taking their children to work:

You know, when I got married I kept working. Even when Natalie was a baby, I opened a new hair salon [This was a booth in the open market]. I used to take her to the salon and work. She was always next to me.

Considering their working-class status, women’s work was needed for families’ financial survival. However, following their husbands’ emigration and the financial security provided by remittances, wives no longer needed to work and gave it up. Importantly, this was also because of their husbands’ preference, or requirement, that they stay at home and take care of the children (Aysa and Massey). Despite their ambivalence about giving up work and social contacts outside of the family, wives conform to this pressure because they feel guilty that their children are growing up without a father. Wives left behind often conceptualize their husbands’ immigration as a sacrifice being undertaken to assure their children’s wellbeing and the family’s future. Accordingly, fathers are perceived to be working hard all the time in the U.S. The corollary of this perception for mothers is the enhancement of their own responsibilities. They feel a sense of guilt for being a single parent. They thus become child-centered homemakers by becoming the sole caretakers of their children and by organizing their lives around their children. Further, in constructing motherhood as being child-centered, these women no longer accept the extended family assistance they had previously relied upon and argue that mothers are the only ones who can help their children. Alice, a 32-year-old ex-seamstress for instance explains how her day revolves around her son: getting him ready for school, taking him there, making his lunch, picking him up and doing homework with him, and being emotionally available to him.

I have Carlos, and I have to help him with his homework—who else is going to do it, right? I have to be there [with him] . . . [to] check his notebooks, make sure that he had taken notes properly, or if had done his homework. There are times that he doesn’t understand and asks me. . . . My mother-in-law has offered to babysit Carlos if I work. She won’t understand if Carlos has a question or things like that. She [mother-in-law] says that her other sons are there to help Carlos out if needed. But, it won’t be the same, I know my son. She [mother-in-law] says that I need to help Juan [her husband] by working. I don’t know what to do. Juan says that I shouldn’t listen to his mom. . . . And if we decide something, it will be the both of us. [He says] “You take care of Carlos.” [Juan] knows Carlos. Sometimes Juan calls me and I’m sitting with Carlos while he is doing his homework. Juan calls

me again and we're still doing the same. He is surprised. I have to explain to him that Carlos gets tons of homework. I told Juan that every year the amount of homework increases. I have to be there with him because things are for the following day.

In the process of centering their lives as mothers on their children, Peruvian wives admit that they have little time for themselves. This is often a source of conflict with their husbands because, despite their perception that the latter's work causes the exclusion of all else, wives are aware that their husbands spend time with friends after work, which contrasts with their own lack of leisure time.¹² Centering their lives on their children allows Peruvian wives to claim that they are working as hard as their male counterparts in the U.S. and demonstrates their devotion and dedication to their families.

The physical separation of spouses in the immigration process causes children to assume primary importance in the new spousal relationship. For instance, women like Alice express concerns about the affect of spousal arguments on their children. Thus, they often choose to compromise rather than fight with their husbands.

Being on bad terms with Juan for two weeks has made me learn. First, this kind of situation affects my son a lot because he knows what is going on. That's silly on my part. That's why I apologize. In general, I avoid arguing with Juan.

By centering their lives and spousal interactions on the children, Peruvian women's contact with their husbands is reduced to being "good" mothers sacrificing for the family, for the husband, and for the children. Being child-centered mothers also bolsters them as honorable wives. This allows them to keep their husbands connected with the family in Peru by treating them as authority figures in the family and thereby mitigating the chances of abandonment. By performing full-time mothering in this way they also do gender appropriately in complying with some elements of the ideal of Marianismo and they simultaneously experience upward economic mobility through the continued commitment of their husbands through remittances (Menjivar and Agadjanian).

Conclusion

This paper examined the experiences of motherhood by middle-class Tamil Brahmin professional immigrants in the U.S. and working-class Peruvian wives left behind in Peru when their husbands immigrate to America, as illustrated

in the practices of motherhood they develop relational to hegemonic ideologies of “good” mothering specific to Tamil and Peruvian cultures and to the context of immigration. We argue that for both Tamil and Peruvian women, motherhood becomes a resource for responding to the specific structural challenges encountered in migration. Further, our comparative analysis identified the mechanism by which this occurs: namely, their valuation, albeit in different ways, of certain elements of Tamil and Peruvian ideologies of “good” motherhood into their practices of mothering in the context of migration.

For Tamil women, these elements included the notion that motherhood is the only source of women’s identity and that mothers are keepers of culture (Dutta; Lakshmi 1990). In response to the economic uncertainties emergent from the structure of the American labor market, Tamil women weave work and motherhood in order to position themselves as (co)providers, such that their professional work is not individualistic but oriented toward their families’ mobility in America, making them “better” mothers. In this way, they expand the ideologies of “good” Tamil motherhood beyond domesticity. Additionally, by emphasizing their feminine responsibility of feeding their families, especially in the cooking of South Indian food through which they transmit culture and build strong bonds with their children, which is salient in the face of the threat of cultural loss due to their racialization in America, they continue to be validated as “good” mothers vis-à-vis their spouses and the Tamil community—those who have not abrogated their traditional responsibilities even as they assume new ones in migration.

For working-class Peruvian women, husband’s migration brings about a retrenchment from their earlier transgressions of ideal motherhood, in an effort to retain their husbands’ commitment to the relationship and the corresponding flow of remittances. Accordingly, they strive to be “good” mothers which also position them as good wives. To do this they embrace the self-sacrificing aspect of Marianismo by giving up their personal development for their children and centering their lives on their children’s by privatizing the child-rearing practices. They thus relinquish working outside the home and accepting child-care assistance from extended family members, both of which reduce their social life. Being “good” mothers in this way, enables them to present themselves as honorable to their husbands in the U.S. and their extended family in Peru. These practices, however, open room for women to challenge their husbands’ decisions when pertaining child rearing or household decisions.

Therefore, both Tamil and Peruvian women construct practices of motherhood specific to their culture, social class, and structural challenges in migration, making this experience of motherhood an act of power on their parts. However, this is accompanied by personal costs. For Tamil women, these include: cooking becoming a mandatory component of household labor that has to be managed

alongside their professional work, substantially increasing their social reproduction responsibilities; being physically and mentally tired, continually anxious, and lacking personal leisure time. For their Peruvian counterparts, the personal costs are the lack of a social life and reduced leisure time, becoming asexual, motherhood becoming privatized (especially as they leave the workforce), and being non-confrontational with husbands about sexual (in) fidelity. On the other hand, being mothers in these ways is accompanied by advantages. For Tamil women, this is the possibility of their continued engagement with professional work, facilitating the upward mobility of families, building strong bonds with children, and cultural preservation—all while being validated as “good” mothers. For Peruvians, it is their ability to indicate upward mobility as they can be stay-at-home mothers, avoiding the stigma of single motherhood, and being good wives through “good” mothering and thereby ensure their husbands’ commitment to them evinced in the continued flow of remittances. Thus, in conclusion, through this comparative analysis we demonstrate that culturally specific ideologies of mothering are not static, but dynamically deployed and engaged with, as migrant women develop practices responsive to the contexts in which they are located.

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¹Tamils are an Indian regional group defined as those having Tamil as their mother tongue (see Velluppillai). The Tamil language is a member of the Dravidian/South Indian family of languages and in addition to the other Dravidian languages, is spoken in the four southern Indian states: Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh on the east coast of India and Karnataka and Kerala on the west coast. Further, Tamils are internally stratified along caste, class, religion, and place of residence in India (rural/urban, Southern/Northern India), resulting in varied histories of migration. British colonialism in India witnessed the emergence of a Tamil diaspora through the indentured labor migration by lower-caste Tamils to work plantation economies in the former British colonies in the Indian sub-continent, South-East Asia, Southern and Eastern Africa and the Caribbean (Sivasuprmaniam). The sample for my study only includes middle-class, Tamil Brahmin immigrants from India and not those from these diasporic communities.

²These Tamil women are engaged in a variety of professions as listed by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, range in age from 31 to 65, with the bulk comprising families with toddlers and school going children, and the rest with

college bound and/or married children. The Peruvian women who constitute the sample range in age from 30-50 years old and have one to four children (and some grandchildren). All had lived with their husbands for at least three years prior to their emigration and had been separated from them for three to eight years.

³This is reflected in the increase of Indian immigration to the U.S. from 31,214 between 1961-1970 to 176,800 between 1971-1980 and 262,900 between 1981-1990 (Devi).

⁴For Tamil Brahmins like my participants, this economic migration was complicated by affirmative action policies enacted in post-colonial India, creating a “reservation (quota) system” in public and government supported/aided educational institutions and workplaces for members of the lower-caste who had experienced historical discrimination (Madhavan). As members of the upper-caste, Tamil Brahmins perceived these policies as disenfranchising them and hampering their economic advancement, resulting in their desire to emigrate.

⁵Structural adjustment programs implemented by the Fujimori administration with the assistance of the World Bank significantly cut government expenditures and reduced salaries and created an increased demand for job creation which did not occur rapidly. As a result of this, large numbers of Peruvians immigrated with close to one-third (30.9 percent) of them settling in the U.S., thereby comprising the largest Peruvian population outside Peru (De Los Rios and Rueda). These migrants joined the small Peruvian community already established in the U.S., who most of them migrated between the 1950s to the late 1970s. (Bedoya; Paerregaard).

⁶In both the Tamil and Peruvian cases, we have used pseudonyms to protect participants’ identities. In the case of Tamil women, age and profession are as reported. The professional group titled “Corporate America Executive” refers to women who worked in a variety of capacities as management professionals. For Peruvian women, their age and former activity are as reported.

⁷Especially indicative of this heightened salience of cooking to their immigrant mothering is their admission that they rarely performed this activity in India, as it was done by their mothers/mothers-in-law, or by the domestic workers that their class status had afforded them. They correspondingly feel a greater urgency to master it in America.

⁸When discussing food in particular, I noticed that Tamil women collapsed the category of Tamil into the larger category of Indian or South Indian in their effort to inculcate an appreciation of ethnic, as opposed to American, food in their children. As Arjun Appadurai notes in the context of India, the variety of foods signal caste or sect affiliation. Thus, although my many meals with them involved partaking South Indian food, foods from other regions in

India were also represented in their family meals.

⁹This is framed by the fact that in middle-class families in India, even while mothers are “food givers,” the actual labor of cooking might be performed by domestic workers, leaving mothers responsible for planning the menu and ensuring families are fed. Alternatively, as attested to by my participants in the case of their mothers who cooked themselves, they were not engaged in professional work. In the U.S. however, the option of outsourcing cooking does not exist because there is no guarantee that culture can be preserved. This combined with women’s professional work, contributes to their increased social reproduction work.

¹⁰Even though communication technology has made it more affordable and easier to be in contact in real time, access to it is asymmetrical. Some women have cell phones and yet the use of them is very restricted (“only in emergencies”). Most, however, have landlines. Contrastingly, their husbands in the U.S. have access to cell phones, which gives them more mobility. Thus, husbands are less tied to being in their homes to receive phone calls compared to their wives, which acts as another form of control.

¹¹When these women could not have their children around at work, extended family members helped them. This was in the form of babysitting, which was possible in part because relatives, whether siblings or in-laws, lived within walking distance.

¹²Women, however, deal with this very carefully so they are not suggesting that their husbands are spending time with other people—particularly women. This is closely related to avoiding challenging their husbands about fidelity as explained earlier.

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