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The experiences of foreign-born female academics (FBFA): a photo-elicitation analysis

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a study that examined the lived experience of 15 foreign-born female university faculty members through the qualitative research methodology called photo elicitation. The article investigates ways in which intersectionality, social marginality, and resilience offer a framework for understanding the participants' lived experiences of being foreign-born, female, and academic in the United States. Findings demonstrate that as non-native-born women, the faculty members faced multi-faceted challenges in both personal and professional realms. Implications for the role of social work advocacy and higher education policy advocacy are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Immigrant and refugees; intersectionality; resilience; higher education policy

The social work value and principle of social justice (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017) encompasses advocacy for marginalized populations and working toward equality of opportunity for individuals and communities who face oppression. One such group is foreign-born female university faculty.

The number of foreign-born academics in United States' colleges and universities has been steadily growing. From 1993 to 2004, foreign-born academic staff at four-year higher education institutions in the United States increased from 14.3% to 18.5% (Webber & Yang, 2014). However, foreign-born faculty members, especially those who are female, face complex challenges such as acculturative stress, ethnic discrimination, immigration status, and gendered domestic expectations. It is important to understand the lived experiences of these highly educated women through an integrative lens, not just because they are female, not just because they are ethnic minorities, not just because they are immigrants, and not just because they are minority scholars. Rather, it is the unique nature of their marginality by virtue of the intersection of all of these variables that warrants attention, both in research and policy implementation. The acculturative stress highlighted by Berry et al. (1987) is pertinent for these women because they are dealing with not only pressure to conform to the White mainstream professoriate in the United States, but are also under pressure to conform to a traditionally male-dominated academia. In addition, ethnic discrimination based on accents and physical features, as well as visa status, leave foreign-born female academics (FBFA) particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of marginality (Hernandez et al., 2015). Furthermore, the gendered domestic role expectations faced by women in their own family networks, can serve as barriers to their professional advancement in the United States (Webber & Yang, 2014).

This article reports on a photo elicitation study of the lived experience of FBFA within the complex intersectional natures of their lives. This qualitative research shares rich data regarding academic life, FBFA expectations from themselves and others, and the ways that they try to meet these expectations. The research study used an intersectional framework to show how multiple dimensions of inequality

interlock to impact the lives of FBFA. Guided by reflexivity, the authors drew on the analysis of categories that participants made relevant through their interviews (Cronin & King, 2010; Taylor, 2009).

Literature review

Intersectionality

The intersectionality perspective was originally developed to illuminate the disadvantages which African American women experienced due to the combined effects of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1991). The idea was born from criticism of a feminist perspective that originally relied wholly upon the experiences of White women (McCall, 2005) to describe the social experiences of women. This explication of race and gender would develop into a demand for the understanding of individuals whose social locations required them to navigate the expectations of multiple groups simultaneously (Minow, 1997). Crenshaw's (1991) original terminology came to encompass race, gender, economic class, sexuality and ethnicity (Collins, 1999; McCall, 2005). Additionally, the intersectional perspective has been used to examine personal experiences of foreign-born female faculty (Hernandez et al., 2015).

Social marginality

Social marginality originally conceptualized a marginal person as one who lived with one foot in two different cultures (Antonovsky, 1956; Dickie-Clark, 1966; Green, 1947; Kerckhoff & McCormick, 1955; Park, 1928; Wright & Wright, 1972). This person, because of the lived experience emanating from walking in two distinct ethnic cultures, cannot ever fully belong to either culture because social pressures do not allow it. That is, the harder one presses to fully belong to either culture, the further one moves away from membership in the other. As a result, they are placed in a marginal position, a "no man's land" of sorts, where they can never fully return to their native culture nor can they ever fully be accepted into their non-native culture. The marginal person was one that would learn to negotiate two cultural perspectives while answering the demands that came from both cultures for a successful navigation of a marginalized status (Park, 1928). Mahalingam (2006) suggested that in the example of foreign-born women, intersecting social locations (race, caste, class, and gender) places them in a marginal position that forces them to navigate both cultures while never being able to fully return to their own. Further, non-native-born and American-born minority women are held to a higher moral, academic, and professional standard than White women in the U.S., which creates a stress unique to female immigrants (Mahalingam & Leu, 2005).

Resilience

Resilience is not only an ongoing process deeply intertwined in social context, but also a dynamic process achieved through a daily regimen of social experience (Lenette et al., 2012). Thus, resilience is both an internal trait that enables one to succeed in the face of challenge as well as the capacity for one's environment to provide adequate support and resources to overcome challenges (Ungar et al., 2007). Immigration researchers have applied the idea of resilience to immigrant and multiethnic communities (Jackson et al., 2013; Lenette et al., 2012; Raffaelli et al., 2012). Adversity met by immigrants in developing resilience includes factors such as ethnic discrimination (Williams et al., 2008) and acculturative stress in which pressure to conform to both ethnic and White cultural values is present (Berry et al., 1987). Furthermore, the increasing capacity for resilience is associated with protective factors that accumulate across the life cycle (Luther et al., 2000). Protective factors such as academic achievement and supportive relationships, both socially derived, support resilience in individuals (Fraser et al., 2004). For immigrants, educational level, English language proficiency, and knowledge of US context also provide protective factors (Dozi & Valdivia, 2008).

Interaction of intersectionality, social marginality and resilience

Drawing on multiple sources, Mahalingam et al. (2008) note that intersectionality is grounded in three tenets. First, there is no homogeneity within social groups. Second, people must be considered within the confines of the power relations housed within social structures. Finally, individuals that identify with more than one social group experience unique effects because of the intersection of those memberships. Collins (1999) notes that how marginalized groups are treated depends on how gender, race, and class intersect. Immigrant status is another factor. In fact, continued omission of immigrant status as an intersectional component of the lived experiences of FBFA ignores the complexity of their lives as well as the ways that powerful resilience is manifest. This article addresses the gap in the literature and demonstrates that FBFA do indeed have unique intersectional lived experiences that necessitate an explicit exploration of their needs within academe.

Methodology

The study used the photo-elicitation qualitative research methodology, in which photographs and semi-structured interviews are used to gather data from research participants, to capture the lived experience of FBFA. Photo interviews give participants the opportunity to become active and reflective participants (Kolb, 2008).

Research design

Study participants included 15 adult females, born outside of the US, but currently working as faculty members at US universities. The first author, a foreign-born female faculty member, contacted foreign-born female faculty members at two different universities in Texas. Twenty FBFA were invited to participate. Three of the faculty said they could not participate because of time constraints while two others did not want to participate.

Participants were asked to take photographs that illustrated significant events representing their lives as foreign-born academics. They were instructed to take two photos each day for seven days. Then, each participant was interviewed about her 14 photos. During the interview, participants were asked to arrange the photographs by order of importance, explain the ordering, and then explain the meaning and significance of each photo. At the end of the interviews, each participant was asked two final questions: what she would change about her life if she had a chance to do so and what she would retain.

The interviews were conducted and audio-recorded by the first author, and then transcribed by a trained research assistant. They lasted approximately 70 minutes each. Participants received \$75 for their time. The study was conducted in two parts from March 2012 to December 2013, following approval by the authors' institutional review board. The participants' names have been changed to pseudonyms in this article.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using a hybrid of grounded theory in which theoretical implications are grounded in participant voice rather than preconceived notions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and directed content analysis based on a preexisting category (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This hybrid approach recognized the inductive nature allowing themes to emerge from the participants' experience, as well as acknowledging the researchers' prior knowledge about the preexisting category of "othering" in both the literature and their own personal experiences.

The first and second authors simultaneously read and coded the interview data using Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software. First, researchers generated initial codes (Charmaz, 2006) within participant transcripts and based on their reading of the literature. Second, researchers created focused

codes which identified relationships within the first initial coding step. Third, the photos were grouped into categories that followed the emergent themes and subthemes in the interview data (Kolb, 2008). Decisions about initial codes, focused codes, themes, and subthemes were reached after discussion at each step of the process.

Findings

Demographic data

Fifteen FBFA from two large size American universities participated in this study. They had a mean age of 42 years. Twelve were married. Seven of the participants were born in India, five were born in China, one was born in Korea, one was born in Jamaica, and one was from Romania. Eleven of the participants had children; seven were associate professors, six were assistant professors, and two were full professors. They were in varied fields of study from engineering to linguistics. They had lived in the United States for a mean number of 15.33 years. They all received their terminal degree (PhD) in a US institution of higher education except one who did her doctorate in Canada. They had been working at their current universities for a mean number of 7.3 years.

Intersectionality

Gendered expectations and academia

Nine participants mentioned at least one issue related to gender role expectations that was rooted in their native cultures. These narratives depicted role conflict consistent with being a professional woman, mother, wife, instructor, and productive scholar, forced to expend valuable mental energy attending to multiple identities simultaneously. Many were resentful, feeling that their native gendered expectations were time consuming, not in line with U.S. culture, and ultimately yielding decreased scholarly activity as a result. They spoke of the kind of help that would have been extended to them by their mothers, had they been in their native countries. Some also mentioned hiring external help in their home countries – but only because that was a far more affordable option there (compared to the United States).

However, a few reported being able to bring their parents or in-laws to the United States for an extended period of time to help with domestic chores and childcare as they would have back in their own countries. This brought its own challenges, as one participant, Yuying, noted with her own visiting mother who expected her to be traditionally feminine and subservient to her husband because “she is from an older generation.” Also, those who were able to fund the expenditure of flying their parents or in-laws over, often found relief in the help that they provided. Another participant, Meiying, expressed a kind of resilience in her ability to increase scholarly productivity when her in-laws would visit from China, but she also noted the extreme expense involved.

Some participants reported that their productivity, especially with regard to scholarship, had been negatively affected by gendered expectations at home. Participants felt forced to leave R1 universities – schools designated as achieving the highest level of research activity by the [Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education \(IUCPR, n.d.\)](#)—because they knew they would not be able to meet the intense research expectations required for tenure. However, being at their current R2 universities, they did not believe their productivity, especially regarding scholarship, was up to par with their potential. For example, Krta (52 years old) and Sabi (41 years old), both from India, used to work at prestigious R1 universities in the US. However, they felt they had to leave these institutions for their current ones as the research demands were too intense for the familial expectations required of them as women within their native cultures. Krta used a photo of her toilet bowl to illustrate her situation ([Figure 1](#)).

She revealed that her in-laws had been living with them for years because it is customary for aging Indian parents to live with their son and his wife. Other family members often came to see her in-laws, creating strain on Krta to meet her academic demands. She explained:



Figure 1. Photo of toilet.

Unexpected visitors who are family members just call from the airport and said, I am here at the airport. Or they call to inform you that they are coming tomorrow. So what do I do for the next eight hours? I am cleaning the guest room and doing this and that. And by the time I am done with everything, you know, I literally feel like shit . . . Here is the thing, if people tell you that they are going to show up unexpectedly, last minute, even if you call for professional house cleaners, nobody has time in the last minutes. And when my visitors are here, I am so stressed out. Like this is how I feel [pointing to the photo], I feel like shit . . .

When asked how often this happens, she explained:

Oh, several times during the year. And then when my visitors come, they are all family members, you know. When they come, they tell me on the phone that they will be staying for two days. But then they stay and stay for days. I am like don't you have work to do? I mean how do you take off from work like that? You know because none of them is academic. They have no clue as to what it is to be an academic. I mean, all of my husband's family, for them whatever work they do is from 8 to 5, you know. For them, you do your job and come home and the rest of the evening is with family . . .

Sabi also felt the difficulty of extended family impositions on her scholarly pursuits, noting that "my husband has a lot of siblings . . . and they come to visit when they want . . . while I love interacting with them . . . they just take too much of my physical and mental energy." Such familial infringements, the type of which are unannounced and culturally acceptable, were often seen as unavoidable events that participants had to accommodate in their schedules, regardless of their professional activities. Sabi also described extended family as "what pulls me down."

Another participant, Yuying, who was from China, had become a mother 14 months prior to the study. Her comments emphasized the intersection of gendered expectations for mothers in her culture as well as the pressure she felt as an academic to produce scholarly work. She described a picture of a diaper box and a potty-training box as symbolic of her life now as a mother, with the intense traditional expectations that come along with that status in Chinese culture, and ways having a baby has interfered with her academic work. She explained:

I have a 14-month old baby, and this is a part like a challenge but also a great deal of joy . . . She has become the center of the family, but you have to reshuffle your schedule because the need is just there and you cannot ignore that. Yes, it does take away a lot of your research time, and you may even have to teach part time as a mother.

Immigration issues

Immigration-related problems such as having visas extended or changed also added to the difficulties presented by the intersectional nature of their experiences. While participants overcame some of these challenges, they were unable to overcome others. They tried to adjust themselves to these challenges by either acquiring a new philosophy about life or embracing the challenges as best as they could. For example, three women talked about immigration-related difficulties that they endured as non-native born. Although the process of having their visas extended or changed while they were in the US was exhausting, they went through the process and tried to meet daily professional obligations as best they could. Niral, a 49-year old who had been in the United States for three and a half years prior to the study, was born and raised in India but immigrated to Canada and subsequently to the United States. These moves created enormous amounts of bureaucratic red tape as she attempted to file the necessary paperwork for status changes in each country. She illustrated her ordeal by taking a photo of a box full of papers to explain the effect that this had on her scholarly productivity in the United States (Figure 2).

She reported:

I came to the United States from Canada and I had a Canadian passport. I spent a lot of time on the immigration process. Every document was copied and filed. It was a lot of documents. There were electronic versions and paper versions. A lot of time was spent getting my status changed. Also, I could not apply for a lot of grants until I had my status changed to a permanent resident status. So, it all became tied up and if I wanted to apply for some of these defense grants I had to wait until becoming a permanent citizen. Also, I had to find an immigration lawyer. The lawyer explained to me that I may have a Canadian passport and thus a Canadian citizen. But I am



Figure 2. Photo of box of papers.

not a Canadian national. I am an Indian national with a Canadian passport. And this is a complex situation for an American worker . . . She advised me to apply as an Indian with special skills and not apply for the traditional H1B visa because as an Indian national, I will have to wait for a long time to get the visa since there are so many Indian nationals that apply for this type of visa. However, if I were a Canadian national, I would get the H1B visa in no time because not too many Canadians are applying for it. The catch with applying for the special skills category was that I had to ask people, my colleagues, to write letters to prove that I am a person with special skills . . . It is what it is, and I understand that, but at times, it was very, very frustrating. I often asked myself: what am I doing here?

It is important to note that although Niral had to undergo all these challenges, she did her best to meet the demands of her department. She received positive evaluations on her third-year review process. However, as a tenure-track professor who was on probation, she was greatly troubled by not being able to apply for some of the federal grants in her field. Furthermore, as shown in Niral's comments, the significance of structural differences between the United States and their homelands and how these differences amplified the level of difficulty that they endured was a recurring theme in the narratives of the women.

Social marginality

Twelve of the participants' narratives revolved around feelings of marginalization, especially in the form of social isolation that led to immense feelings of loneliness. Additionally, participants complained about not having immediate family members in the US. The isolation that this created led three different women to present photographs of an empty chair to describe the emotional difficulty they experienced as a result. Da-Xia noted her frustration with her place in both the United States and China, lamenting:

[I'm] not belonging to anywhere . . . Here, I feel like a foreigner when I go back. [In] China, people are different in their thinking and behaviors . . . than the time I was in China. And I don't belong to any country.

Da-Xia felt isolated from both the American culture in which she was now immersed, as well as her native culture in China. She felt marginalized by both cultures primarily because her Chinese upbringing had given her certain perspectives that did not mesh with typical American behavior. Simultaneously, her time in the US as a professor had forever changed her understanding of the intersection of gender, work, and family, creating a clash with her Chinese upbringing, family, and friends.

Hyori, a 32-year-old Korean had lived in the US for nine years prior to the study, but still dealt with feelings of loneliness and isolation. She captured her feelings in a photo of a departing airplane. She explained while trying to hold back tears:

I live near the airport. I see airplanes, I see Korean airlines. When I go to Korea, I fly Korean airline. So, when I see the planes, they remind me that I am kind of away from home and I miss my family. It kind of gives me that weird feeling, especially these days. Do you remember the day when there was storm and hail? It was the day before when I took this picture. It was dark clouds and it was about to rain, and there was thunderstorm coming too. This plane is not a Korean airline though. This plane was flying right through it all. So it kind of makes me think about my life. You know this may be my life. It is not like a sunny sky and it is not going to be peaceful and happy all the time. There could be thunderstorm, there could be dark clouds, but I will still fly through. So it was a mixed feeling when I was taking this picture.

When asked about her feelings when she saw planes flying by, she replied:

Because a part of me wants to go back to Korea, Korea is my homeland. But again, a part of me still wants to stay here because I have been living here for such a long time. I have my husband here and I have my work here. So it is like I want to go but I don't want to go kind of feeling. [. . .] I have my friends and family in Korea. Sometimes, I feel lonely here (Figure 3).

Others complained about not having a social life apart from their professional life. Meiyong said that she "wished she could spend more time with [Chinese] friends . . . but there is not time in the academy,"



Figure 3. Photo of a departing airplane in the clouds.

highlighting the immense pressure that she felt to perform academically, publishing scholarly work while pursuing grants and administering research projects, and thus, the necessity of being marginalized from others. Krta also explained that, while in her US doctoral program, she felt she “had to constantly prove that I was just as capable as some of the native doctoral students in the program . . . [even though] I am better than many of them when it comes to . . . technical skills like research.”

Resilience

Participants discussed the process of assimilation with the difficulties of adjusting to academic and social life. In general, assimilation was a difficult process to go through as foreign-born. However, the female academics’ resilience emerged as a theme as they did enjoy some opportunities that America had to offer once they had adjusted to the American culture.

Kira, who also had a doctorate in India and had been working for years before migrating, explained that assimilation had been a very brutal process. She illustrated her original experiences as a tree that was cut down and was dying. She explained:

I spent my life in India. So when I came here (US) it was a very overwhelming feeling for a long, long time. It was pretty stressful because I did my PhD in India and was working at a university. And then when I came here I could not continue in the same way. Suddenly, I had to stay home and I did not have permission to work. It was a complete reorientation; everything that mattered in my world prior to migrating did not matter in this world (US). So I felt like I had reached the end and it was extraordinarily stressful. I was offered a job very young and



Figure 4. Photo of chopped down tree.

I left it all and came here thinking that it would transfer, but it did not. So a lot of it, especially professional and personal networks, everything was lost. So that is why the first feeling I had was being uprooted. This picture symbolizes my experiences (Figure 4).

When asked how she was able to finally adjust she replied:

For one thing, I think, it is related to time and the effort that I made to be familiar with being part of this world (US). So I had to literally give up my former identity and everything, expectations because they did not transfer. So pretty much, I needed to start from scratch, which is why I did my second doctorate here.

Unlike Kira, who after obtaining a second doctoral degree in the United States, was able to integrate into American society, other female academics had language difficulties. They elaborated on the difficulties of not having English as their native or national language and how they had to work extra-long hours writing papers. Also, the language challenge emerged at times in meetings where they could not express their ideas orally with colleagues. To overcome these challenges, some used professional editors for proofreading or their native-born American children for help. Still others complained about being thrown into academia with no mentors to guide them through this complex system. They managed; however, and were able to understand the intricacies of teaching, doing service, and research. However, they all emphasized that the struggles they had to endure (and are still enduring, in some cases) made them better people.

Successes and accomplishments in the professional arena were also important events in the lives of our study participants. Most of the women discussed how being professionally successful has afforded them material accumulation. Three female academics used photos of their home to highlight their success in America. Teofila from Romania took a photo of her home and explained:

I think this photo is about having a lot of things here that I would not have otherwise; like I have a nice house and a nice car. I would not have this standard of living, to be honest, back home. I am enjoying it. That is one of the things that I like here and probably could not afford back in my homeland. And I am grateful for having all of these things. Sometimes I think about my closest friends; and my family and I am thankful that I ended up here, having everything that a lot of them don't have (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Photo of a home interior.

Finally, while participant narratives highlighted significant challenges in migrating to a foreign country, they also all emphasized that migrating to the United States was a good decision. Respondents discussed how their diverse experiences had given them new insights about life. They also talked about how these experiences had made them more tenacious and confident in their professional lives as well. Different illustrations and metaphors were used to express these characteristics, including Kira's photo of music. She explained:

This is just a music paper, and I took it because it is a sheet from my daughter's music book. It has different tempo. It has the fast and slow, the high, the low, and sometimes all in the rush. I think all of that makes it beautiful to hear. And I think this is the same with life. And I feel like ultimately if I can understand that then it is a beautiful life. All the ups and downs, all the limitations, all the good things, sometimes things happen in a rush, sometimes things move slowly. In one's life, nothing is stable. And I think everything is beautiful that way. Ultimately, your life is like a symphony . . . I think all those things define or make those moments precious. So they make you better. So it is like there is a purpose for all those things . . . And sometimes, a person may think that he/she cannot be the answer to everything and just want to give up. Again, when I was uprooted, when I left my country (India), I felt like it was a dark period in my life and I could not do that much about it. My mind was shut down. It was like darkness in my head. But I could not let that define me and become bitter. But I think, moving to America was good because I have different perspectives and see things differently now. And I feel like people have not stepped out of their boundaries, cities, or countries. If you live in the same location all your life, you will never appreciate different things or get a wider perspective about life. Having been transplanted into a completely different environment, now, I can see the good in here (America) and there (India) as well as the bad (Figure 6)

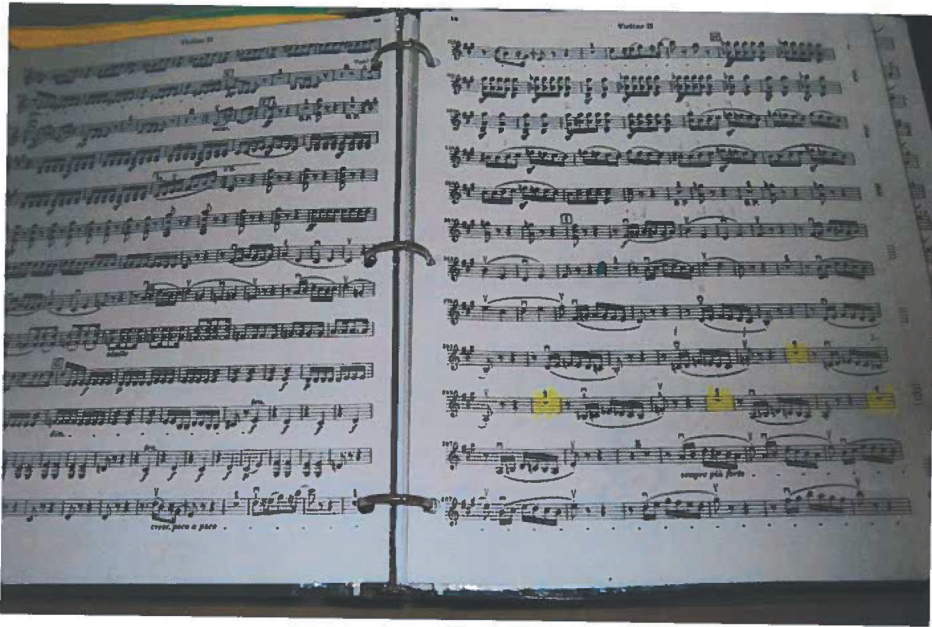


Figure 6. Photo of sheet music.

Discussion implications for social work and higher education policy advocacy

The findings of this study highlighted how intersectionality, social marginality, and resilience provide insight into participants' lived experiences of being foreign-born, female, and academic. The gendered expectations that participants reported were founded in traditional eastern cultures such as those of India and China, in which women are expected to single handedly helm the home while also raising their offspring, regardless of their occupational status (Blair & Mafigan, 2016; Dasgupta, 1998). The findings from this study illustrate how gender expectations hinder productivity and drain energy out of participants.

Participants also experienced loneliness and isolation, a finding that has been reported in previous research as well (Lim & Herrera-Sobek, 2000; Manrique, 2002; Skachkova, 2007). As these women try to meet the demands of academia in a traditionally White male-dominated sphere, they must also deal with marginalization as a non-native born person inside and outside academia. In fact, these women face “multiple whammies” as suggested by Manrique (2002).

Participants faced multiple challenges including their own cultural expectations regarding household chores, visa hurdles, and feelings of marginalization attendant to being foreign-born in the US. However, a theme of resilience emerged as participants struggled to meet both the tenure demands of the academy as well as the gendered expectations in their native cultures

A few limitations need to be reported. Some study participants were concerned about not taking the “right” photos; social desirability may have been a factor in their apprehension. These women were assured that there were no “right” or “wrong” photos, and only photos that reflected their experiences as FBFA should be taken. Also, because of the small sample size, the findings are not representative of all FBFA in the United States. Additionally, all participants were from R2 universities (IUCPR n.d.). Further studies should examine the experiences of FBFA in both R1 and R3 universities as well as community colleges because the lived experience of FBFA in each type of institution may be different.

The intersection of being foreign-born, female, and academic creates a unique kind of marginality for FBFA that demands an integrated approach for policy solutions. An ethnic/racial difference places

FBFA on the fringe of their academic units while simultaneously on the edge of their own ethnic culture by virtue of their gender status in the academia. Specific policy recommendations that institutions of higher education should consider include the following: 1) Employ immigration lawyers who work on behalf of immigrant scholars as an employment benefit (Philipsen, 2010); 2) Provide faculty workload reduction or “tenure clock stoppage” similar to that for female professors that give birth (Manchester et al., 2010) for faculty with particularly onerous immigration battles; and 3) Facilitate faculty mentoring programs (Adams, 1997; Heinen & O’Neil, 2004; Thomas, 2001) for FBFA faculty.

Social work educators at colleges and universities are poised within their institutions to advocate for these policy recommendations. They hold positions on faculty senates, faculty grievance committees, and human resource committees. They have voice on hiring and promotion decisions and can change policies on promotion and tenure through participation in committee work. In addition to this formal policy influence, social work educators should use their social work skills and macro training in community organizing and coalition building to raise awareness and call for institutional changes in ways that fulfill their ethical mandate to advance equality of opportunity for marginalized groups.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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